

The Political and Ethical Force of *Bastion*, or, Gameplay and the Love of Fate

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Abstract

Videogames often take the form of power fantasies, symptomatizing a societal inclination towards control, calculability and digitality, and a fear of their constitutive opposites. *Bastion* initially seems to fit this mould: for the majority of the game, the player learns its systems and masters its controls, travelling the post-apocalyptic world to set it aright. At the end, too, the player seems to have the power of choice: they may “Restore” or “Evacuate,” returning to a pre-apocalyptic moment or accepting the end of the world and moving on. Through a gentle but ineluctable feature of the game’s design, however, *Bastion* imposes Evacuation on the player. It thereby advances an argument about the nature of contemporary society and a claim about the ethical and political disposition that might be equal to this technological epoch, and it does so through its mechanics: *Bastion* invites the player to *experience* a choice on Nietzsche’s eternal return.

Keywords

Bastion; control; eternal return of the same; Nietzsche; sovereignty

Videogame Control

Rules structure games, and algorithms structure videogames. This means that players of videogames often comport themselves differently than players of games. Players must “accept” a set of arbitrarily defined but absolutely binding rules in order to play a game (Suits, 2014, p. 33), which means that all games require players to demonstrate some minimal understanding of the rules. Videogames, however, bind players by way of algorithms established by digital technology as well as by social convention, and they thereby require players to establish a relationship to these algorithms that is often, and by necessity, unconscious and indirect rather than deliberate. More or less opaque, these coded procedures for carrying out player commands govern player action, and the power that players feel derives in part from their ability to master these algorithms. The “power fantasy” of the videogame, then, has less to do with wielding a big gun, crushing enemies, mastering the globe, or attaining a high score than with achieving an intuitive relation to a particular set of rules.

While videogames might tend towards this algorithmic form of power fantasy, they do not necessarily push the player there. Both Heckner (2013) and Wysocki and Schandler (2013), for instance, argue that games often put players in a passive subject position rather than an active one (and that this passivity does not need to be viewed pessimistically), while Simkins and

Steinkuehler argue that roleplaying games can inculcate a “descriptive, critical ethics” that is derived from some of the philosophers I take up below (2008, p. 334). Moreover, many recent games deliberately put the player in an impotent, frustrated, or even guilty position. For instance, *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012) uses players’ familiarity with first person shooters to have them mindlessly murder opponents while slowly introducing narrative elements that unsettle the legitimacy of these actions (Payne, 2014; Holmes, 2016). Similarly, the frustrating gameplay of *Papers, Please* (2013) results from the ambivalent way in which the console or computer becomes “animated,” taking on a life of its own (Johnson, 2015). Game designers and critics often agree with these observations. Portnow et al. (2014), for instance, argue that while “almost all games impart [a feeling of control] simply by their nature as part of an interactive medium,” designers can deliberately break with this tendency to make players feel disempowered. Koster (2013) makes a similar claim, suggesting that designers can foster a critical conversation between games and players about the affordances of the medium despite the limitations imposed by these affordances.

Despite contraventions of control like those analysed by academics and applauded by designers, most videogames valorize it. This valorization can threaten totality. When game designers build a means of achieving mastery into the game, and when players exploit that means, an uncritical relationship between players and gamespace can take root. This allegorithmic relationship (Galloway, 2006) can grow into a general attitude towards the things of the game world, or the things of the world outside the game. As the analog becomes divided from and subsumed by the digital – a division and subsumption which is itself a binary (or digital) operation – we see a form of ontological violence: “a transformation not merely in forms of communication or entertainment, not even in forms of power or of topos, but a change in being itself. The digital appears, finally, to install topology in the world – except in the process it has installed the world within topology” (Wark, 2007, §81). The political valence of digital ontology, or digitality, is discernible in cultural phenomena like digital games.

The drive towards mastery may be related to the digital game, but digitality is not a feature exclusive to digital technologies: it is tied to what Heidegger describes as the *essence* of modern technology, according to which all things are revealed as mere means to human ends that stand in reserve and await use and disposal (1977), but it is not necessarily tied to videogames as a particular technological form.¹ Since digitality is an important means by which the world is rendered comprehensible, controllable, and disposable, we might find better tools for understanding it in the work of Heidegger’s most immediate precursor, Nietzsche: he addresses the political and ethical implications of this digital modality of control more directly than Heidegger, which makes his work surprisingly relevant for game studies.

Nietzsche is, however, rarely invoked in game studies, and his doctrine of the eternal return of the same, which I describe and employ below, even less frequently. When scholars do use it, they sometimes offer misinterpretations. For Winnerling (2014), for instance, the eternal return denotes that which occurs “again and again in due time” in a finite system governed by hidden but discernible forces wherein “agents... competitively try to achieve self-conquest.” This reading applies to videogames, he argues, insofar as they are sets of algorithmic processes that can be executed again and again, “this time taking a new turn and thus (hopefully) surpassing your old player-self” (p. 154-155). Winnerling gets videogames right but Nietzsche wrong: the philosopher is not an advocate of liberal self-improvement, the eternal return is not a model, and the world is

not something that can be laid bare. Insofar as videogames work in the ways in which Winnerling describes, and they do, they are in fact clear examples of the avoidance of the challenge of the eternal return.

In his *Genealogy of Morals* (1967), Nietzsche connects the comprehensible and controllable vision of the world with a comprehensible and controllable human being. There could be no promise-making – no certainty with regard to the future, and therefore no trust in and trade with other people – without a predictable human being dwelling in a predictable world:

To ordain the future in advance... man must first have learned to distinguish necessary events from chance ones, to think causally, to see and anticipate distant eventualities as if they belonged to the present, to decide with certainty what is the goal and what the means to it, and in general be able to calculate and compute. Man himself must first of all have become *calculable, regular, necessary*, even in his own image of himself, if he is to be able to stand security for *his own future*, which is what one who promises does!

(p. 58)

There can be no “animal *with the right to make promises*” (p. 57) without an understanding that this human animal will dwell in a future that is similar to the present, and that he – “man” – will remain selfsame. Because we can predict how he will act, we can calculate what it is that we should do. And what better way to predict and calculate than to “compute”?

While Nietzsche’s genealogical work can be deployed to understand the extent to which slave morality, *ressentiment*, nihilism, and so on map onto contemporary digital phenomena, the question of the political and ethical ramifications of videogame design in particular is best answered by a reading of his doctrine of the eternal return of the same. In this paper I deploy phenomenology and existential philosophy to suggest, with Wark (2007, §23), that videogames present not only the entrenchment of a violent digitality, but the means by which it might be challenged. Furthermore, I argue, with Nietzsche, that embracing this challenge is significant not only for the gamer as a gamer, but for the gamer as an ethical being in the world. While gamers themselves are capable of contravening controlling attitudes no matter the games that they find themselves playing, game designers have a role to play in this attitude as well: they can create worlds in which players live out experiences that contravene control and calculability, even though the players remain in the digital frame that so readily enables these virtues, and they can do so via narrative and mechanics alike.² Rather than “expelling quality” (Wark, 2007, §8), game designers can bring it back into the world in a new form, and they can compel the players of their games to experience something of this qualitative vision.

This is what Supergiant Games has achieved with *Bastion* (2011): it contravenes control at the level of its design. And it does so experientially: rather than simply giving the player the chance to read a narrative account of the loss of control – of the desperate attempt to turn back time that *Bastion* thematizes – and rather than giving the player an option to elect that loss, the game puts the player into an experiential position wherein he or she has no such choice, but where that lack of choice seems like a wonderful thing. It teaches the player the love of fate.

Bastion

An indie game released in 2011 to strong sales and universal critical acclaim, *Bastion* is an isometric Action Role Playing Game (ARPG) that distinguishes itself from other hack-and-slash games with a distinctive visual and auditory style. Visually, the game is lush: the varied environments and enemies are painted with a vibrant and variegated colour palette appropriate to the beauty of the game's general setting – a series of islands in the sky – but standing in stark contrast to the sobriety of the game's central event – an apocalypse that killed off the people and sundered the land. Although the setting is beautiful, it is also devastated and perilous, partially destroyed and constantly threatening the player with death by falling. Moreover, the tiles that make up the landscape do not appear until the player walks towards them, pulled back into place by the geological magnetism of the magical city crest that he wears strapped to his back. The pulling-into-place of the tiles is, as videogame critic Franklin points out, “a visual metaphor for [the main character] trying to piece his life back together – to get his bearings, to find his stable footing in life.” Not only visual, this metaphor is ludic: “[s]ince the floor doesn't appear until you step on it, the player, much like [their character], is uncertain about where to go next, what the proper path is, or how to get themselves out of this situation” (Franklin, 2011). The visual style of the game suggests that the player is actively but shakily constructing their world simply by being in it, and the ludic toolset reinforces this suggestion.

If *Bastion*'s visuals are striking, its soundscape is unique. The game features a distinctive score that supports its changing moods, and is narrated in a Sam Elliott-sounding voice that accompanies the player wherever they go, describing major plot points and minor mistakes alike. Greg Kasavin's text is written with conviction and economy and Logan Cunningham speaks in a southern-poetic cadence, with his narration sounding out over top of the gameplay rather than interrupting it. The narrator in fact plays a central role in the plot, meeting the player's character – whom the narrator dubs “the Kid” – at the end of the game's brief first act, and then guiding him through the game's events.³ His voice provides an accompaniment to the player's actions that is simultaneously masculine and friendly, melancholic and warm. This connection between the player and the narrator makes the complications of the narrator's involvement in the Calamity, and his later-revealed desire to literally turn back time, all the more affecting.

As the Kid moves through Caelondia, the narrator explains the events that brought him there. Before the Calamity, Caelondia was a rich, industrious city-state populated by the technologically-minded Caels. They generally distrusted their dark-haired neighbours, the Ura, and protected themselves by purchasing their land “on the cheap” (*Bastion*, 2011, Burstone Quarry) and by erecting the Rippling Walls. The Walls offered Caelondia protection from a nebulous set of external threats, as the narrator notes: they “kept Caelondia safe from whatever's out there. The elements, the Ura. You name it” (*Bastion*, 2011, Who Knows Where (Kid's Dream)). They were, however, an ultimately insufficient response to a generalized fear of the unknown outside and an uncontrollable future. As the City expanded, the Caels terraformed the surrounding wilds and built a rail line to the east, but the rail disturbed the underground-dwelling Ura, and the two city-states found themselves at war. The colonizers' technological superiority led to their eventual victory and an unsteady peace: the Ura retreated to their Tazal Terminals, but the Caelondian rulers ordered that those Ura who had taken refuge in Caelondia during the war were to remain. The xenophobia of the Caels compelled them to fortify the City, both by building the Walls and by

attempting a pre-emptive “securitization” of the Uras’ home: the Caels developed a weapon that would let them “seal the Ura tunnels shut... in a flash” (*Bastion*, 2011, Urzendra Gate). The attempted genocide backfired when one of the engineers associated with the project pointed the Caels’ weapon to Caelondia. The resulting Calamity fractured the ground and killed nearly everyone.

At the beginning of the game, the Kid seems to be the only one left alive. He wakes up to discover the devastation and makes his way to the Bastion, “where everyone agreed to go in case of trouble” (*Bastion*, 2011, Rippling Walls). There, he finds only the narrator, Rucks, who tells him, over the course of the game, that the Bastion is more than just a sanctuary: if its construction could be finished, it could “undo the Calamity” (*Bastion*, 2011, The Monument), “fix everything” (*Bastion*, 2011, Urzendra Gate). In the beginning, Rucks does not specify exactly how it is that the Bastion could put things aright, only saying that it is in a state of terrible disrepair, its Core broken into pieces and scattered across the ruined landscape. Rucks therefore tasks the player with going out into the wilds and retrieving the fragments of the Core. From here, the player explores the land, acquiring and upgrading weapons, meeting and saving two Ura “refugees,” and gradually restoring the Bastion to its former functionality. *Bastion*, in other words, operates in much the same way as any other power fantasy, offering the player the chance to learn and master the game. But *Bastion*’s ending demonstrates just how different its operation is.

The Eternal Return of the Same

The game’s ending, I argue, should be understood in terms of Nietzsche’s philosophy, the heart of which is the eternal return of the same.⁴ Nietzsche’s most succinct definition of eternal recurrence can be found in his notes from August 26, 1881, where he describes it as the “desire to experience it all once again, an eternity of times” (quoted in Heidegger, 1991b, p. 11). He articulates it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1969), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1966), *Twilight of the Idols* (1968a), and his autobiography (1989a), but the first published reference to it is made in *The Gay Science*. In a section titled “The Greatest Weight,” he describes a demon who “[steals] after you in your loneliest loneliness and [says] to you: ‘This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more’” (1974, §341). How would you react to this statement?

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth...? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?” would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight.

(1974, §341)

Here, the eternal return of the same is figured as a terrible existential challenge. Could you relive your life? Could you meet each event – each decision made, each chance encounter, each twist of fate – with levity and affirmation? Even the worst terrors and injustices: could you embrace them?

The challenge makes sense in the context of Nietzsche’s confrontation with nihilism. While nihilism appears at the center of many of Nietzsche’s writings – perhaps most concisely in *The*

Will to Power, where the nihilist is described as “a man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it ought to be that it does not exist” (Nietzsche, 1968b, §585) – he articulates it in the context of eternal recurrence in the parable of “The Vision and the Riddle,” where Zarathustra relates the tale of his ascent of a mountain in twilight, in which he struggles against “the spirit of gravity” personified as a dwarf clinging to his back. The two climb their way to a gateway marked “Moment” from which one path stretches infinitely into the past and another stretches infinitely into the future:

“Observe,” I continued, “This Moment! From the gateway, This Moment, there runs a long eternal lane *backwards*: behind us lies an eternity.

“Must not whatever *can* run its course of all things, have already run along that lane? Must not whatever *can* happen of all things have already happened, resulted, and gone by?

“And if everything has already existed, what do you think, dwarf, of This Moment? Must not this gateway also – have already existed?

“And are not all things closely bound together in such a way that This Moment draws all coming things after it? *Consequently* – itself also?

“For whatever *can* run its course of all things, also in this long lane *outward* – *must* it once more run! –

“And this slow spider which creeps in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and you and I in this gateway whispering together, whispering of eternal things – must we not all have already existed?

“– And must we not return and run in that other lane out before us, that long weird lane – must we not eternally return?”

(Nietzsche, 1969, p. 179)

Growing quieter, Zarathustra hears a dog howling. He notices that the dwarf, the gateway, and the spider are gone, and finds himself “in the dreariest moonlight.” The moonlight reveals a young shepherd lying nearby, choking on a black snake; the snake has crawled into his mouth and bitten fast. Zarathustra attempts to pull the snake from the man’s mouth, but fails. Zarathustra then cries out, urging the shepherd to bite off the head of the snake. The shepherd bites it and springs up, “[n]o longer shepherd, no longer man – a transformed being, a light-surrounded being, that *laughed!*” (Nietzsche, 1969, 179-80).

The vision of the shepherd and the snake figures the eternal return and the confrontation with nihilism alike. The shepherd is incapacitated by the snake’s bite: he cannot speak or move – he is lying, not standing – and neither he nor anyone else can pull it off of him. In Heidegger’s reading, the meaning of the snake is indisputable: “[t]he black snake is drear monotony, ultimately the goallessness and meaningless of nihilism. It is nihilism itself” (Heidegger, 1991b, 179). Like the

insinuations of the ascetic priest (Nietzsche, 1989b), the snake has stolen upon the shepherd while he was sleeping and taken hold, preventing him from contemplating anything other than the snake, and compelling him to see it with “disgust and pallid horror” (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 180). But the snake does not kill or tranquilize him or inject him; it works its way *inside* the shepherd, *incorporating* itself into him. So, instead of falling asleep and dreaming of a world free of pain, or longing for an afterlife where his sufferings would be compensated, the shepherd wakes up and confronts his fear.

The shepherd’s confrontation with nihilism is not a destruction of it. It does not come from the outside, and it never can,⁵ since there is no overcoming finitude – the historically grounded, agentially limited, and death bound condition of the individual, as well the concealed, groundless, and mutable condition of being.⁶ Because there is only this finite world, and because we are always already losing it, there can be no ultimate, decisive destruction of the nihilism that regrets this world or wishes for another – only an identification with it (the awakening to the horror of the “*it is all alike*” (Heidegger, 1991b, p. 182) and a crossing over it (the transformative convalescence that follows the sickness). Zarathustra, then, is “Zarathustra the Godless” because he wants to live without appeal to a foundational outside, “cheerfully” confronting the vicissitudes of fate. If he is “the advocate of life, the advocate of suffering, the advocate of the circle” (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 233), this is because it is only by electing suffering – over and over again – that he can elect life. This is what the shepherd does when he bites off the head of the snake: he embraces existence without denying its suffering. He becomes “a transformed being, a light-surrounded being, that *laughed*” (Nietzsche, 1969, p. 179-80) by rising to the demon’s challenge with gaiety and affirmation.

Safe States

The eternal return of the same can be characterized in a range of different ways – as a doctrine, a thought experiment, a myth, a cosmology, and so on. Considered in ethical terms, however, it is a *challenge*: it demands that its subject develop an attitude of equanimity, accepting and embracing existence as it is – *amor fati*⁷ – even when that means accepting its end. The eternal return is a confrontation with finitude that demands joyful resignation and promises radical transformation. *Bastion* can be understood as a ludic instantiation of this ethics of recurrence: it situates the player in a position where he or she has no choice but to affirm that which is. First, though, it demonstrates the dangers of doing the opposite.

At the end of *Bastion*, the game presents the player with a binary choice. Rucks tasks the Kid with retrieving the final Shard from the Ura, and as goes about retrieving it, Rucks fills in some background detail: he designed the Bastion. When the Kid returns, Rucks announces that it is finally complete, invites the Kid into its “heart,” and provides the player with a choice: the Bastion can be used – as Rucks has insisted throughout the game – to restore the Old World, “undo[ing] the Calamity here and now.” But it also has “another function, strictly speaking”:

If ever the Monument blew out and we couldn’t repair it, we could still... evacuate. First we’d round up as many folks as we could carry. Next we’d detonate the Cores... and we’d take off. Away from here. Of course that would mean no going back. Ever. But then again, that way all of us could leave the City – together. (*Bastion*, 2011, Tazal Terminals)

The choice, then, is between Restoration and Evacuation, and Rucks leans hard towards the former, asking the Kid and the player to set the world aright. Rucks is not alone in this ambition, either: the game itself has been working to ensure that the desire that Rucks and the Kid feel for the Restoration option is shared by the player. The glimpses the player catches of the Caelondia-that-was reveal it to have been an idyllic place, and the player might understandably want to try to save the people who died in the Calamity.

Restoring might seem, at first, like an embrace of the eternal return: the player would be electing to relive the past as it happened before, answering the demon's challenge with the certainty of a binary choice. But the choice to restore the Old World is the opposite of an affirmation: it is a denial that this moment of the choice, which is a moment of radical uncertainty in the face of finitude, be lived again and again. In seriously considering Restoration, the Kid is casting about for security and assurance in the midst of his "loneliest loneliness," witnessing the devastation wrought by the Calamity and fervently wishing it away. He is expressing the impossible longing to return home – a *nostos algein* for a reality that never was – deploying technology in order to establish a post facto security in a world where that dream was killed long ago.⁸

This existential security crisis generates immensely problematic political effects. From the beginning, Rucks was working to safeguard Caelondia from the ravages of the wilds, and after the war, Caelondia set him to work providing a safeguard against the Ura: "At the heart of the Calamity was a simple idea: we never wanted to go to war again. Wanted to rule it out" (*Bastion*, 2011, Urzendra Gate). The intention was to write political contingency out of the picture, making uncertainty impossible by ordering the world in such a way that nothing – and particularly no external population – could threaten it. This intention is, for Nietzsche, ignorant of the actual functioning of politics and destructive of its practitioners and their worlds: "A legal order thought of as sovereign and universal... a means of *preventing* all struggle in general... would be a principle *hostile to life*, an agent of the dissolution and destruction of man... a secret path to nothingness" (Nietzsche, 1989b, p. 76). No surprise, then, that this technological attempt to create the perfect legal order – the goal of a certain branch of political theory dating back to Hobbes' nominalist dream of a safe state (1998) and stretching forward to Foucault's description of the state racism of biopolitics (1990) – backfires.

Rucks, as it happens, feels partially responsible for the Calamity: "We put a lot of folks against that problem – scientists, soldiers, spies. Even me" (*Bastion*, 2011, Urzendra Gate). A guilt-wracked narrator as well as an unreliable one, Rucks desperately wants to undo his contribution to the Calamity, and in that desire to undo it, he claims to feel no concern for the beasts and the people who need to die because they are in the way. The colonial violence of this attitude is clearly demonstrated by Rucks' comments on the animals of "the Wild Unknown." Although they are only setting up their own homes, they are standing in the way of radical renewal – so they can be ethically destroyed. In fact, killing them is *good* for them:

The creatures of the Wild... they've been building a Bastion of their own. [But the] best thing we can do for those beasts right now is put them down quick and clean. Look at it this way: it's either them, or us. There's only one kind of mercy left these days. Takes a lot of convincing, and our mortars have to do the talking. But if we

win, they win too. Our Bastion is everybody's gain, not just our own. Unfortunately, there's no explaining that to a simple beast.

(*Bastion*, 2011, Mount Zand)

In this narration, the game is giving meaning to the killing of enemies – a set of actions so commonplace in brawlers as to be meaningless. Because the Bastion will fix everything, giving even these beasts a better life, this slaughter can be applauded. It works, biopolitically, in the service of life. Rucks knows, though, that certain listeners might have differing opinions on this biopolitical project. After the Kid puts down the last of the animals barring his path to one of the shards, the narrator reassures his interlocutor and himself: “He’s done what’s best for them, don’t you worry. Don’t you worry” (*Bastion*, 2011, Mount Zand). The parallels to settler attitudes to indigenous populations – the rationalization of slaughter; the declaration of intellectual and ethical superiority; the disregard for alterity in the extraction of world-improving resources – are clear.

The colonial violence of the Kid’s actions is even more obvious from the murder of the Ura warriors, committed using a miniature version of the very device that caused the genocide. Called the “Calamity Cannon,” it both kills the warriors and destroys their homes. As with the beasts of the Wild, however, the game directly and indirectly comments on the problematic character of what is being done. Towards the end of the game, the Kid brings home an Ura child’s drawing, and Rucks demonstrates that he feels qualms about the murders: “I don’t need to see what happened to the Ura. I’m trying to undo it, remember?” (*Bastion*, 2011, Zulten’s Hollow). When the player kills an Ura warrior, his or her body remains lying on the ground, suggesting that the Kid distinguishes human from animal, and that he is disturbed by his task.

That Rucks’ calamitous desire to “fix things” is not restricted to the Calamity alone is apparent from another extended quotation, voiced as the player is committing this reluctant slaughter:

Things will go back to the way they used to be. That’s the power of the Bastion. This whole place is a living record of the times before the Calamity. The way things were before this story. Good times, right? You’d be your old self again. Think of all those times that didn’t go your way. All of life’s little setbacks – imagine if you could have another go at them. No mistakes. Anyone you’ve ever hurt... everything you’ve ever done... you could do it over. And wouldn’t that be grand? Well... I guess there’s nothing more to say.

(*Bastion*, 2011, Tazal Terminals)

The fantasy of Restoration begins with the desire to prevent the Calamity, but extends to “all of life’s little setbacks” – all of those moments of imperfect control – and its fantastic quality doubles down on its nihilistic coding. Even if the Bastion were to work as Rucks hopes, enabling the nostalgic return to a glorious past by way of a technological abrogation of the devastated and devastating present, it would still entail the devaluation of this present. Rucks’ desperate desire to fix the past, articulated during a portion of gameplay in which “the world as it is” is literally falling to pieces underneath the Kid’s feet, shows that Rucks perfectly fits Nietzsche’s description of the nihilist as the “man who judges of the world as it is that it ought *not* to be, and of the world as it

ought to be that it does not exist.” Worse, Rucks knows it. He delivers some of his lines – “Good times, right?” – with a heavy dose of irony, and others – “Well... I guess there’s nothing more to say” – with weary exhaustion.

Rucks is clearly all too aware of the pointlessness of his enterprise,⁹ but unable to stop himself from pursuing it, or from attempting to convince the Kid to complete his designs and correct his mistakes. In these attempts at conversion, he resembles the ascetic priest whom Nietzsche describes in the *Genealogy of Morals* (1989b): a resentful shepherd attempting to convince his flock to do his bidding by installing a fictional but superior reality in place of an existing but dissatisfying one. And the scope of this mission is immense: Rucks wants to answer a failed technological attempt to securitize the City with an even grander technology – one that would sanitize not a people or a species, but a time. This ambition expresses what Kroker, following Nietzsche, calls “the will to technology” – that which has replaced the will to power in an age in which God has been replaced by technology as such:

Nietzsche said that the ultimate frustration of the dynamic will is that “it cannot turn time backwards,” that the will to will is ultimately frustrated by the passing of “time’s it was.” As digital reality, this successor to the exiting of the Christian God, projects itself forward in the accelerated language of light-time and light-space, as the will to universal space defeats, indeed humiliates, the reality of particular time, might there not also be heard in the command language of digital futurism a perceptible hint of *ressentiment*? Could it be that digital futurism... has about it the familiar scent of revenge-taking?

(Kroker, 2004, p. 80-81)

Save States

One of the principal themes of *Bastion* is the complicated relationship of people, games, and nation-states to temporality. At the beginning of the game, the first words of narration are these: “A proper story’s supposed to begin at the beginning. Things ain’t so simple with this one” (*Bastion*, 2011, A Rock in the Sky). That this point of narration refers to the game seemingly beginning *in medias res* is the least of its complications. If the player chooses to use the Bastion to restore Caelondia to a time before the Calamity, the game ends with a picture of the characters fading from view in front of a world swirling with green energy, apparently putting itself back together and erasing them from history. Rucks’ last words to the player are explicitly nostalgic: “Caelondia, we’re comin’ home.” His penultimate words, however, are: “So long, Kid. Maybe I’ll see you in the next one” (*Bastion*, 2011, The Monument). The player is then given the option to try a New Game +,¹⁰ which starts off, differently than the first time, with a distorted echo of the “see you in the next one” line sounding in the background. As the player moves through the game a subsequent time, the narration changes. When entering the Sole Regret, Rucks experiences déjà vu: “He sets foot inside one of Caelondia’s famous watering holes. Wait – haven’t I...? Anyway, Rondy’s place just brings back memories” (*Bastion*, 2011, The Sole Regret). When first encountering one of the Ura survivors, the original narration is replaced with, “Something so familiar about that man” (*Bastion*, 2011, The Hanging Garden). And when moving through Ura territory, the narrator says, “It’s strange – feels like I told this part a thousand times” (*Bastion*,

2011, Urzendra Gate). The game strongly suggests, then, that Restoration fails to prevent the Calamity. The Bastion can indeed rollback time, but the events that led to the Calamity always play out in the exact same way.

The temporal structure of *Bastion* is therefore cyclical, but not simply so. To begin with, there is no repetition during the first play through: each line of narration is spoken only a single time, and each area, with the exception of some challenge areas, is visited only once. Additionally, the game's save is under limited player control: there can only be one play through happening at a time. If the Kid's life is cut short, the game sends the player back to the beginning of the level. Not an instance of the game being restored, *Bastion* rationalizes death as a narrative tangent or a mistaken recollection on the part of Rucks. The only control that the player can in fact exert over *Bastion*'s temporality is in the choice between Restoration and Evacuation. And – vitally – this choice is precisely about the *relinquishment* of control rather than its exercise. When the player chooses Evacuation, Rucks expresses dismay while a picture of the Bastion untethered from its former moorings and drifting off into the sky is displayed: “You want to stay? In a world like this?” His dismay turns to admitted confusion – “I gotta admit, Kid, I ain't put much thought in that idea. Of carrying on. With you here” – and then to something in between resignation and excitement: “We can't go back no more. But I suppose we could go... wherever we please” (*Bastion*, 2011, The Monument). Evacuation, then, frees Caelondia's survivors from the impossible fantasy of returning to a better time. It grants them freedom by depriving them of control.

As Chun (2011) argues, the fiction of “the Internet” brought with it a set of axiomatics, including the notion that freedom and control are synonymous. But there is a greater sense of freedom to be found in the embrace of vulnerability. The fact that this is a claim commonly made in the digital era (e.g. Turkle, 2011) suggests that there might be a tendency operational in the technology, but the fact that a similar answer was given well over a hundred years ago by Nietzsche – for vulnerability and *amor fati* are not far from one another – suggests that the problem to which this answer is given predates contemporary technology. Freedom becomes control by way of protocol (Galloway, 2004), yes, but this was a shift we might have noticed long ago. We only see the problem in such stark relief now because protocol is so readily comprehensible.¹¹ Relatedly, but perhaps more profoundly: the digitality of modern technologies themselves enable us to more easily discern Heidegger's *essence* of modern technology. In this context, *Bastion*'s final decision is one of the sites in which the ethical and political stakes of this tendency become apparent.

Where Restoration signifies the denial of the eternal return, Evacuation signifies its acceptance. When the player decides to move on, they choose to accept their fate, acknowledging that they do not in fact have a choice. So, while the game does not *enforce* Evacuation over Restoration, I am suggesting that the Evacuation ending is the canonical one. It is an ending proper. Restoration only ever ends in Calamity, but Evacuation moves the survivors into an uncertain, imperfect future. Insofar as the game *guides* the player to an eventual Evacuation, it mirrors life itself – striving for control and seeming to attain it for a period, but then facing a situation that demands its relinquishment. The game manages to coax the player's hand without moralizing, unlike other games that do something similar. *Bastion* does not claim that the player is a bad person for playing the game or desiring control, and it refuses to openly castigate Rucks for his nostalgic and disastrous pursuit of a world that probably never existed. PC and NPC alike are treated with

understanding and empathy even while being criticized, and the game does not insist that the player make “the right” choice – at least not in that very moment. It models in gameplay the sort of forgiveness of the unforgiveable and acceptance of an uncertain future that the storyline presents.

Evacuation, Not Escape

Along with the eternal return, the confrontation with nihilism, and the ineluctable danger of nostalgia, *Bastion* drives its thematic focus home with commentaries on groundlessness, *ressentiment*, and forgiveness. We see these concepts in the ludic metaphor of the game’s difficulty system and in the complicated narrative deployment of the two Ura refugees: the game’s difficulty is adjusted through the ornamental invocation of the idols, only faintly discernible in the twilight, and the stories of Zulf and Zia, unfortunately too complicated and rich to explore here, make it clear that the former represents Nietzsche’s “last man” while the latter represents the *Übermensch*. *Bastion* thus offers the player an experience rich with metaphor and laden with difficult questions about the ethics of living in a finite world.

Even the small things of the game reinforce these questions. When the player finds the Bronze Spyglass, for instance, Rucks’ and Zia’s comments on it express conflicting answers to the question of eternal recurrence. When the player offers the Spyglass to Rucks, he says, “We could always see the stars – we could just never reach ‘em. No matter how high we built” (*Bastion*, 2011, The Sundown Path). An indirect commentary on the futility of building one’s way out of a political mess or out of the complexity of interpersonal relations, it is also a commentary on the desire to escape choice, politics, and, ultimately, finitude by way of technology.¹² In the stars, Rucks sees the moment when he committed a great wrong, and the sight of them makes him feel he can build his way back to it. The stars are the burst of the Calamity, and the Bastion is the edifice built to get there. Zia, however, offers a different perspective: “Sure the world’s all gone t’ pieces farther than the eye can see... but leave it to this gal to point out the amazin’ view” (*Bastion*, 2011, The Sundown Path). Zia, a figure of transformation, willingly ignores the fantastic return to the moment of choice in order to inhabit the world around her. Where Rucks wants to build up an edifice that would allow people to alter their fate by taking back a calamitous choice, Zia wants to move forward.

But how does this desire to move forward not fall back into the fantasy of escape? In choosing to Evacuate, how is the player *not* expressing yet another fantasy – this time, the nostalgic fantasy of establishing a fresh beginning? As the Bastion sails off into the sky, away from the thousands of Caels, Ura, and animals that Rucks and the Kid have murdered, how could it be that the player is *not* disavowing responsibility? From a narrative perspective, the answer is straightforward: all four survivors are living in a broken world where the ashes of the dead still remain in the air, and they know it. They have all lost loved ones, and three of them have blood on their hands. The survivors are willing to acknowledge the loss of the dead and the persistence of their memory.

This thematization of loss plays out in the different ways that *Bastion* concludes. In the Restoration ending, the player is treated to pictures of the survivors before the Calamity: Zulf gazes into the eyes of his fiancée, Zia plays her harp, Rucks pores over blueprints, and the Kid works with his hammer; all of them lead the same lives that led up to the Calamity. In the Evacuation ending, however, the pictures express a different set of attitudes. More mournful than melancholic, Rucks

and Zulf, the figures of *ressentiment*, have begun to grieve. Zulf prepares a meal in thoughtful reflection, and Rucks looks out on the world rather than down at his work. Zia the “Yes-sayer” stands at the bow of the ship, smiling at the horizon, having seemingly moved beyond mourning and melancholia both: “[l]ooking away” from the Calamity is her “only negation” (Nietzsche, 1984, §276). Unable to live in the Tazal Terminals with the Ura, and lacking both the colonial technologies that would enable them to make a home in the Wilds and the will to displace the animals yet again, the survivors do the only thing that they can: they sail away. This is a new beginning, but it is not the fantasy of a fresh start in some impossible state of nature. The Calamity destroyed the security state of Caelondia, but it left the rest of the world untouched, with all its history and complications. The survivors have to live in that world, just as we have to live in ours.

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Notes

¹ For Heidegger, the essence of technology is a way of revealing the world: the world is always understood in the terms of some ontological pre-understanding. The essence of modern technology reveals the things of the world as *Bestand*, or “standing reserve”; the generalization of this revelation to all things (including the human) is *Ge-stell*, usually translated as “enframing.” For more on the essence of modern technology, see Rojcewicz (2006).

² Sicart, for instance, suggests that designers can encourage play to “matter personally” by “reducing safety” through restricting players’ ability to save and reload (2013, p. 102-103).

³ As videogame critic Jeffries (2012) points out, however, the narration does not so much direct the player’s actions as accompany and enrich them: “It’s completely possible to understand everything going on and plow through the game without hearing a word of the story.... In many ways, it reverses the formula of systems narrative by having the design slowly come to represent the content. I perform an action, the narrator elaborates. For the first few hours of play I tuned the narrator out.... By the end, I was more engaged with the story than I was the design.”

⁴ For Heidegger, the eternal return is not only the heart of Nietzsche’s philosophy – it is connected to the most fundamental question that philosophy can pose, namely the question of Being: “[w]ith his doctrine of eternal return Nietzsche in his way thinks nothing else than the thought that pervades the whole of Western philosophy, a thought that remains concealed but is its genuine driving force. Nietzsche thinks the thought in such a way that in his metaphysics he reverts to the beginnings of Western philosophy” (Heidegger, 1991a, p. 19).

⁵ For Heidegger, “nihilism cannot be overcome from the outside. We do not overcome it by tearing away at it or shoving it aside – which is what we do when we replace the Christian God with yet another ideal, such as Reason, Progress, political and economic ‘socialism,’ or mere Democracy” (1991b, p. 179). For Nietzsche, nihilism is a basic condition of human existence: “how could there be an outside-of-me? There is no outside!” (1969, p. 234).

⁶ Krell notes that being changes just as ineluctably as the human: there is a “history of the oblivion of being and the abandonment by being” (1991, p. xviii). For more on this aspect of finitude, see Stambaugh (1992).

⁷ “I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer” (Nietzsche, 1984, §276).

⁸ On the connection between nostalgia and nihilism, see Bryan, 2012. See also Baudrillard, 1983: “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (p. 12). For Baudrillard, “the real is no longer what it used to be” because it has been preceded by simulacra: it is a metaphorical-but-absolute loss of reality. In *Bastion*, the opposite is true: “the real is no longer what it used to be” not because the world that the Caels knew has been replaced by a model, but because it has literally been destroyed. In this context, the nostalgia that takes hold is intense in its longing, and therefore vicious in its nihilistic tendencies.

⁹ Rucks' awareness of the futility of Restoration may not be only hypothetical. The aesthetics and the narration suggest that Rucks and the Kid might be the same person. They both sport shock-white hair, and they both wear red bandanas. In the game's first challenge section, in which the narrator describes the Kid's history, he says of the Kid's arrival in the Bastion, "Well he finally arrived at Caelondia's vaunted safe haven. He, and no one else" (*Bastion*, 2011, Who Knows Where (Kid's Dream)) – this despite the fact that Rucks was there to greet him. Later, during the Ura siege, the narrator says, "I couldn't stop 'em alone. I ain't a kid no more" (*Bastion*, 2011, The Bastion (Siege)). Later still, he says that the Kid "reminds me of myself when I was his age. I ever tell you about those days?" (*Bastion*, 2011, Tazal Terminals). Rucks could be the Kid from another timeline – stuck repeating the same hopeless dream of putting things aright.

¹⁰ A fairly standard feature for games like this one, New Game + lets the player try playing through the game again, but with a few things changed. Among the many reasons that a player might want to play the game a second time is the desire to know what would happen if the other option were chosen. As popular videogame reviewer Croshaw puts it, "if you are going to have two endings based on the last decision we make in the game, for fuck's sake put a save point before it" (Croshaw, 2011). His frustration – pointing, as it does, to the desire to maintain control over the temporal flow of the game world – is instructive.

¹¹ As Jameson puts it, "the technology of contemporary society... seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself" (1991, p. 38).

¹² This is an attitude discernible today most clearly in Silicon Valley (e.g. Thiel, 2009), but also more broadly – anywhere that the will to technology holds sway (Kroker, 2004).