

PROOF

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Videogames and the Digital Sublime

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Introduction

The following discussion examines the notion of the digital sublime by reflecting on the videogame as an aesthetic form. It does so not with the intention of categorizing videogames as art (or not), but in order to examine what sublime affect might mean in the context of contemporary digital technologies. It draws on Kant's classical formation of the sublime as laid out in the *Critique of Judgement*, as well as later accounts of the technological sublime, the contemporary 'posthuman' sublime, and the more recent concepts of 'stuplimity' and flow. Although the remarks below are concerned specifically with contemporary electronic entertainment, the arguments could be extended to a broad range of digital technologies – the mobile phones, home computers, cameras and other electronic devices that feature in the daily lives of an increasing number of people worldwide.

Aesthetic discourse first emerged, in the eighteenth century, as an inquiry into the subject and its experience of the sensual world. Less concerned with questions of art than with the reckoning of subjective boundaries, aesthetics was a discipline of the body, a way of reconciling the domain of the sensible with that of reason (Ashfield and De Bolla, 1996: 2). It dealt with affective experience, with the limits of the self and of human sensibility, with 'the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world' (Eagleton, 1990: 13). 'Aesthetic form' and 'aesthetic experience' mean something quite specific in the following discussion. Aesthetics, as I understand it here, is a cognitive category, concerned

1 not just with what cultural forms *are*, but with what they *do*, their effect
2 on an embodied subject.

3 The videogame is an aesthetic form incorporating software (which gov-
4 erns game content such as narrative, artwork, character development and
5 gameplay mechanics) and hardware (the game console and player inter-
6 face). Rather than insisting on hard boundaries between the two, however,
7 I will be approaching the notion of sublime affect from the standpoint of
8 media ecology, considering the hardware interface as functionally insepa-
9 rable from our encounter with the game content. Software, as Thrift and
10 French write, represents a 'new kind of phenomenality' – consisting
11 of intangible sets of instructions that manifest themselves in the real,
12 software is 'a means of sustaining presence which we cannot access but
13 which clearly has effects, a technical substrate of unconscious meaning
14 and activity' (2002: 312). For game designer Jenova Chen, the interface
15 represents the 'body' of the videogame, tasked with communicating its
16 'soul' (the game content, the 'specific experience the game is designed to
17 convey') (Chen, 2006: 9). The distinction between hardware and software,
18 body and machine, visual, material and conceptual artifacts is deliberately
19 unsettled here, as it is in the following discussion, which posits that a
20 feature of the digital sublime is the absence of a consistent and uniform
21 boundary between the self and the machine. The digital sublime also
22 finds expression in a pairing of affects that is unique to modernity and
23 postmodernity: the embedding of elevated emotion in the banal.

24 The category of the sublime is complex and nuanced. For the
25 Enlightenment imagination, sublime affect was classed as a 'negative
26 pleasure', and this amalgam of positive and negative emotion, pleasure
27 and anxiety, is also typical of contemporary formations of the sublime.
28 As well as a certain kind of affective experience, however, sublime sen-
29 sation, as it was originally conceived, also involves an awareness of the
30 limits of the self – an aspect that is less thoroughly explored in con-
31 temporary formations of the sublime. This study is concerned with the
32 combination of these two elements – with the way that the experience
33 of an external stimulus (sensory presentation) is implicated in defini-
34 tions of subjectivity. With this in mind, the cluster of terms – affect,
35 sensation and experience – that I use to refer to sublime encounters
36 should all be understood to take account of these two dimensions.

37 38 **Aesthetics, the subject, and the digital sublime** 39

40 The contemporary digital sublime incorporates a number of different
41 historical formations of sublime affect, notably that set out in Kant's

1 *Critique of Judgement* (1790). For Kant, judgements of the sublime were
 2 free of any interest in the purpose or function of objects. Sublime sensa-
 3 tion arose where the imagination was unable to resolve particular sense
 4 presentations – on those occasions when particular objects or situations
 5 exceeded the limits of the understanding. As such, it was not sensible
 6 forms or ‘things of nature’ in themselves which were the source of sub-
 7 lime affect, but the sensation of the failure of the imagination to grasp
 8 such things in their entirety.¹ The sublime, as Kant framed it, was a
 9 problem of the subject: ‘Sublime is what even to be able to think proves
 10 that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense’ (Kant,
 11 1987: 106). Sublime affect was a means of testing subjective boundaries,
 12 of exploring and affirming the limits of the human self and its relation-
 13 ship to nature.

14 Kant divided sublime experience into two orders, the mathemati-
 15 cal and the dynamical. Both arose in encounters with natural objects.
 16 The dynamical sublime was experienced in those aesthetic judgements
 17 where nature’s power inspired fear, while simultaneously allowing the
 18 subject to see in itself a ‘match for nature’s seeming omnipotence’
 19 (ibid., 120). Although nature’s power reminded the subject of their
 20 own relative weakness, the mind and its capacity for reason allowed
 21 them to ‘assert [their] independence of natural influences’ (ibid., 129).
 22 In declaring their independence from nature, the subject affirmed their
 23 superiority both to external nature, and to the ‘nature’ within them-
 24 selves. The mathematical sublime dealt with the feeling that resulted
 25 when the imagination ran up against the incomprehensibly large in
 26 nature. Here again, the notion of the infinite or ‘absolutely large’ was
 27 not a property of any sensible object, but a concept lodged within the
 28 human mind. Both the mathematical and the dynamical sublime dealt
 29 with the discovery, within the self, of a power of reason and a moral
 30 vocation that set the human subject apart from the domain of brute
 31 nature.

32 Kant also commented on the temporal span of sublime experience.
 33 The sensation of the sublime, he wrote, ‘is a pleasure that arises only
 34 indirectly: it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of
 35 the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that
 36 is all the stronger’ (ibid., 98). Sublime emotion did not come upon the
 37 subject in an instantaneous surge; rather, it developed, it was phased
 38 and nuanced, unfolding over time. For Kant, sublime experience
 39 had duration; it was understood as a process, hybrid by nature, and
 40 incorporating a number of different emotional registers. Typically, the
 41

1 trajectory of sublime experience begins with a loss of human agency, as
2 the subject feels itself overpowered by a greater force.

3 While drawing on the Kantian model, the concept of the technologi-
4 cal sublime is framed by David Nye as a modern, American formation,
5 emerging around the 1820s, free of the cultural aspirations of European
6 philosophy, and more representative of the social and political concerns
7 of an emergent middle class. In place of an abstract philosophical idea,
8 the American sublime was submerged in practice, as early settlers bat-
9 tled with a hostile environment. Here, the sublime was not a disinter-
10 ested aesthetic judgement, but took on a more vernacular form, shot
11 through with social, political, religious and technological values.

12 In its classical form, sublime experience is found only in nature and
13 not in human conceits. For the American sensibility, however, technol-
14 ogy and nature were equally potent sources of sublime experience. In
15 transforming the American landscape from wilderness to civilization,
16 'both natural and man-made objects became part of the discourse of
17 Manifest Destiny. Those who praised Niagara Falls and a new railroad
18 did not see any inconsistency in embracing both' (Nye, 1996: 39).
19 Where the European Enlightenment regarded nature as something to
20 be admired from a distance, early American settlers saw it as an obstacle
21 to be overcome, and public works like dams, canals and railway bridges,
22 which demonstrated humanity's control over natural forces, were power-
23 ful sources of sublime sensation.

24 The technological sublime incorporated both mathematical and
25 dynamical registers of its Kantian forebears, while collapsing some of
26 the finer distinctions between the two. Typically, sublime sensation was
27 simply equated with elevated emotions such as terror and awe, rather
28 than closely analysed as a philosophical concept. Visual presentation –
29 awe-inspiring size or complexity – came to replace self-reflection as
30 the key dimension of sublime experience. Though emptied of some
31 of the nuance that characterized earlier definitions, sublime sensation
32 continued to be thought of as a heterogeneous process – an emotional
33 state characterized by duration, instability and transformation. Sublime
34 affect was understood to begin with a disruption or discontinuity in sen-
35 sory experience (Kant's 'momentary inhibition of the vital forces') and
36 developed as an amalgam of pleasure and pain, excitement and terror.

37 As in Kantian formations, the technological sublime incorporated
38 both positive and negative affects. For the Enlightenment subject,
39 these contradictory sensations arose out of the subject's relationship
40 to Nature, which was perceived as both the matrix of all human life,
41

1 and as something radically other. At once sublime and dehumanizing,
2 technology came to occupy a similar place in the nineteenth century
3 imagination, perceived as

4
5 the corollary to an expansion of human power and yet simulta-
6 neously [as] evoking the sense of individual insignificance and
7 powerlessness ... as an extension and affirmation of reason or as the
8 expression of a crushing, omnipotent force outside the self.

9 (Nye, 1996: 285)

10
11 For the Enlightenment imagination, nature was both a generative force
12 and a state from which the subject must distance itself were it to be
13 truly human. In nineteenth century America, the measure of subjec-
14 tivity shifts to the uncertain distinction between the human and the
15 technological. Here, the subject's distance from nature is assumed; it
16 is humanity which serves as the generative matrix for technology, and
17 humanity which is ultimately exceeded by its own creation.

18 Present-day formations of the sublime are routinely linked to the
19 idea and appearance of digital technology. Fredric Jameson suggests
20 that technology can only be theorized through the category of the sub-
21 lime. Technology, he writes, is a 'distorted figuration' of contemporary
22 society's other: a representational shorthand for the unimaginably vast
23 global network of power and control that is the present-day system of
24 multinational capital (Jameson, 1991: 38). Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe identi-
25 fies the contemporary sublime with technology as both self and other,
26 'terrifying in the limitless unknowability of its potential, while being
27 entirely a product of knowledge ... at once unbounded by the human,
28 and, as knowledge, a trace of the human now out of the latter's control'
29 (Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999: 128). Gilbert-Rolfe situates present-day technology
30 within the context of the posthuman – a form of non-organic being
31 that bears no relation to nature and the natural.

32 As I posit it in the following discussion, however, the contemporary
33 digital sublime is characterized not only by its association with technol-
34 ogy, but by its proximity to an equally potent sort of twentieth-century
35 affect: that of the banal. Banality is linked historically and semantically
36 to boredom and *ennui* – the latter term originating in the twelfth century
37 and originally used to express both petty vexation and profound sorrow
38 (Kuhn, 1976: 5–6). The category of the banal draws together these two
39 antithetical meanings, combining trifling irritation with deeper spir-
40 itual distress. If boredom and *ennui* are emblems of early modernity,
41 born out of shifting labour patterns and the novelty of unfilled time,

1 the banal is both an engine and an effect of post-industrial culture,
2 feeding on an endless cycle of desire for the new. Banality and the banal
3 are descriptive of the ways we satisfy this desire, and of the objects and
4 rituals with which we satisfy it. Where boredom and ennui are about
5 too much time, banality is about *too much stuff*. As a cultural condition,
6 it is the existential and material corollary of excess. Bound up with the
7 material processes of commodity production, the banal goes hand in
8 hand with superabundance, consumption and waste.

9 In part, the alliance of the sublime and the banal is a consequence
10 and a reflection of the ambivalent position of technology in contem-
11 porary culture. Technology is both a posthuman other and a part of
12 everyday life;² it should come as no surprise then, to find that the banal
13 and the sublime find their most fluent expression, and their closest
14 association, in the allied categories of entertainment and the machine.
15 The next section will examine the sort of circumstances under which
16 this convergence takes place.

17 18 **Gameplay: Stuplimity or flow?**

19
20 A videogame itself represents an almost incomprehensibly complex
21 technological achievement. In the past decade, the amount of work that
22 goes into producing a commercial 3D game has increased by a factor of
23 about eight (Pulsipher, 2007). A typical first person shooter or adventure
24 game takes over two years of work to develop, with staff teams num-
25 bering in the hundreds, and budgets running well into the tens of mil-
26 lions of dollars. It involves the creation and animation of thousands of
27 game assets – such as textures, models, environments, lines of dialogue,
28 sounds and animations – and the incorporation of increasingly complex
29 core components or ‘engines’ that provide functionality within the
30 game. The full extent of the code that goes into the average commercial
31 3D game is itself a kind of mathematical sublime – an ensemble well
32 beyond the grasp of any single individual.

33 It is the job of the interface to hide these complex inner workings
34 from the player. The extensive gameworlds, dazzling graphics and
35 sophisticated gameplay that players experience are a reduction and
36 a representation of the underlying code. Even the game form itself is
37 rarely available to the player in its entirety. Instead, it is encountered as
38 a series of finite elements, experienced as ‘extended cycles of exhaus-
39 tion and recovery’, as tasks are repeated over and over again in order
40 to progress. Rather than a confrontation with the infinite, experience
41 of the game form involves an extended and, at times, deeply tedious

1 engagement with ‘the mechanical operations of a finite system’ (Ngai,
2 2005: 277). This experience – one of aesthetic awe intertwined with
3 boredom – has been termed *stuplimity* by Sianne Ngai, and in many
4 respects, it is an apt description of the player’s encounter with the game
5 form. Stuplimity, as Ngai defines it, is an amalgam of two ‘paralyzing’
6 affects – shock and boredom – that ‘confront us with the limitations of
7 our capacity for responding in general’ (ibid., 262). Binding together
8 tedium and excitement, frustration and astonishment, stuplimity
9 ‘reveals the limits of our ability to comprehend a vastly extended form
10 as a totality, as does Kant’s mathematical sublime, yet not through an
11 encounter with the infinite but with finite bits and scraps of material in
12 repetition’ (ibid., 271) .

13 Repetition is the quintessence of gameplay. Time is erratically paced,
14 only behaving in a reliably linear manner during cut scenes. The rest
15 of the time, temporal flow is hampered by constant interruption of the
16 game narrative as the player attempts and reattempts particular tasks
17 or levels. Narrative moments are repeated over and over with minimal
18 variation. This uncomfortable prolongation of simple actions is also
19 characteristic of stuplime affect. Especially in action-based games, these
20 stretches of suspended time are punctuated with intervals of frantic
21 activity where boredom is replaced by shock: ‘high levels and steep
22 gradients of neural firing’ interspersed with ‘low and continuous levels
23 of neural firing’ (ibid., 261). Both states involve a kind of paralysis, an
24 impedance of normal actions and responses.

25 Stuplime affect makes no claims for spiritual transcendence or ironic
26 distance, relying instead on a paralytic tedium: ‘Instead of emerging
27 from existential or phenomenological questions ... this boredom resides
28 in relentless attention to the infinite and small’ (ibid., 278). It proceeds
29 differently from classical formations of the sublime – in stuplime experi-
30 ence, the initial dysphoric affect is not overcome by a competing one
31 affirming the self’s superiority, or concluded in a euphoric dissolution
32 of self. Instead, stuplimity draws together boredom and astonishment,
33 it fuses awe to its opposite and holds these opposing affects in tension –
34 an indefinite state without resolution.

35 If gameplay is indeed an instantiation of stuplime sensation, this sug-
36 gests that we situate videogames in the context of the general waning
37 of affect that is said to characterize postmodern experience: a cultural
38 moment where depth is replaced by surface and real affects by simu-
39 lated ones.³ In the videogame, technology is used superficially – not to
40 control nature, but to simulate it. Nye uses the term ‘consumer sublime’
41 to describe situations such as these, where technology is divorced from

1 use value and employed instead to enact fantasy. Places like Las Vegas
2 and Disneyland, he argues, simulate the sublime as a form of diversion:
3 '[their] epiphanies have no referents; they reveal not the existence of
4 God, not the power of nature, not the majesty of human reason, but
5 the titillation of representation itself' (Nye, 1996: 291). Sublime affect,
6 in this instance, does not reveal and affirm the boundaries of the self,
7 nor does it act to situate the subject in relation to the radically other.
8 Instead, it is treated as a product. Stuplime affect suggests a similarly
9 shallow kind of engagement: rather than a challenge to subjective
10 boundaries and an affirmation of the powers of reason, the subject
11 experiences an attenuation of self in the guise of entertainment.

12 This line of argument is countered, however, by those who maintain
13 that the repetitive activity of gameplay brings about not boredom, but
14 a semi-hypnotic state, described in recent theory as 'flow'. Increasingly
15 significant in game design and game theory, the concept of flow – a
16 term originally developed by psychologist and researcher Mihaly
17 Csikszentmihalyi (1991) – characterizes gameplay as a process of discov-
18 ery, a meaningful creative activity. In Jenova Chen's 2008 game *fIOWer*,
19 the player glides over a vast open world, transforming parched desert
20 into a pastoral landscape. Gameplay is simple, requiring the player to
21 do little more than move through the landscape and touch flower buds
22 to make them bloom. *fIOWer* offers a more tranquil experience than
23 many commercial videogames, and foregrounds a growing tendency
24 within game design – a concern not just with the visual, technical and
25 narrative elements of a game, but with the way it makes the player *feel*.
26 Along with his 2006 release *fIOW*, Chen's games encourage the experi-
27 ence of flow states, rather than offering more commonplace experiences
28 of competition, violence and destruction. In fact, flow is now widely
29 recognized as a characteristic of nearly all gameplay experience, includ-
30 ing adventure games, strategy games, vehicle and life simulations, and
31 role-playing games, as well as the first person shooter games against
32 which Chen positions his own designs (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005; Polaine,
33 2005).

34 Flow describes a state of total physical and psychic immersion in a
35 task. Flow states occur in activities that offer clear goals and immedi-
36 ate feedback, and that present challenges without introducing undue
37 frustration. In a flow state, the individual is fully focused on what
38 they are doing – distractions are ignored, and the sense of time is dis-
39 tortored. The task at hand becomes autotelic – an end and a source of
40 pleasure in itself – the fear of failure is reduced, and self-consciousness
41 vanishes. As Csikszentmihalyi remarks, 'we might even feel that we

1 have stepped out of the boundaries of the ego and have become part,
2 at least temporarily, of a larger entity' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991: 112).
3 Although flow states may not necessarily involve moment-by-moment
4 mastery of a task, overall they indicate a correspondence between the
5 user's capabilities, and the chance of completing the task successfully.
6 Balancing the expectation of success with the temporary suspension of
7 subjective boundaries, a flow state is simultaneously one of release, and
8 of control.

9 Can stuplimity or states of flow be properly described as sublime
10 affects? Flow states challenge subjective boundaries by encouraging a
11 dissolution of self. However, they do this in a way that suggests they are
12 more properly associated with experiences of the beautiful than the sub-
13 lime. For Kant, a beautiful object has a kind of purposiveness – it assists,
14 from the side of the senses, in the formation of empirical concepts for
15 the understanding. In this sense, the concept of flow, inasmuch as it
16 proposes the game form as something that has been designed to assist
17 human consciousness, offers a clear parallel with Kant's notion of the
18 beautiful.⁴ Perhaps more importantly, both stuplimity and flow imply
19 uninterrupted ludic activity in which the technology itself – software
20 and interface – disappears into functionality, and in which the merger
21 between player, interface and game content appears seamless. In neither
22 case is the technology itself the direct source of the affective charge –
23 instead, the latter is an effect of the gameplay experience. If we are to
24 understand sublime affect in the ecological terms outlined earlier, then
25 we need to look for it somewhere else – at those points in gameplay
26 where the player becomes aware of the technology that lies beneath
27 the game form, and where the consequences of this encounter present
28 a challenge to the self.

30 **Failure events and the loss of the self**

31
32 Neither stuplimity nor flow can properly be described as experiences
33 of the digital sublime. The latter, I suggest, is a function of a collapse
34 of control and meaning, and it is felt when gameplay is brought to an
35 abrupt halt by the *failure* of the interface. Failure events in videogames
36 can take the form of minor hardware malfunctions like bugs, glitches,
37 slow running, poorly designed artificial intelligences (AIs), and so on.
38 Such 'flow entropies' (Chen, 2005: 5) may disturb a flow state tempo-
39 rarily; more serious flaws on a macro level (defective core mechanics,
40 plot arrangement, level of difficulty and progression) may mean a game
41 simply fails to engage the player.⁵ The sort of failure events of interest

1 here, however – such as crashes, random memory corruption and irre-
2 coverable hardware failure – are more catastrophic in character, and
3 they have more serious consequences for the subject.

4 Playing a videogame involves a kind of Faustian bargain with the
5 technology, a handing-over of real-world agency in exchange for agency
6 within the gameworld. We exist in reduced form in the gameworld:
7 our senses dulled, our choices and actions limited, and we are bound
8 to the terms of engagement of the interface as a visual system and a
9 material artifact. In exchange, the game offers a different reality, one
10 of spectacular scenography, enhanced abilities, and more or less eternal
11 life. The job of the interface is to maintain this alternative reality by
12 supporting a perceptually coherent gameworld. A properly function-
13 ing interface ‘humanizes’ the technology, acting as an extension of
14 the body and enabling the technology to function as an affirmation of
15 reason. It sustains a subjectivity that is ‘posthuman’ in Hayles’ (1999)
16 sense of the term: that of a subject that is seamlessly articulated with an
17 intelligent machine.⁶ Catastrophic failure events rupture this bond with
18 the technology; they bring about a loss of control, a loss of meaning,
19 and a consequent loss of this sense of a posthuman, technologically
20 enabled self.

21 When the interface fails, the envelope of perceptual experience is rup-
22 tured, and the subject is disabled and dispersed – no longer part of the
23 gameworld, its virtual capabilities have no meaning and no effect in a
24 real-world context. Player and technology no longer form an articulated
25 whole; the flow of the game is violently disrupted, as is the player’s
26 agency in the gameworld. What confronts the player in the face of a
27 catastrophic failure event is not a meaningful game form or an exten-
28 sion of reason, but an inexpressive intelligence, a pure, depersonalized
29 power, a technological other. Failure events introduce a sense of the
30 incommensurability of the technology with the subject’s own powers
31 of reason, and the jarring affect they give rise to is a visceral response
32 that elides reason – it is an estimation of magnitude through intuition,
33 a subjective rather than an objective determination.

34 In a failure event, the unimaginably large, extroverted, operatic
35 sublime – which many videogames attempt to simulate visually – is
36 replaced by an unimaginably complex ‘introverted’ sublime, which is
37 incapable of presentation to the senses. Here, sublime sensation incor-
38 porates some of the complexity to be found in Kant’s use of the term:
39 it is not the object that is the source of sublime sensation, but our
40 inability to comprehend its inner workings. Sublime sensation is both
41 mathematical (in the sense of the extent of code) and dynamic (in the

1 sense of the dissolution of the technologically enabled self in the face
2 of a 'higher power'). Here, however, the terms of the dynamical sublime
3 are inverted in a manner similar to that of the American technological
4 sublime – nature, rather than a generative matrix, is staged as a rep-
5 resentation emerging from a matrix of data. In a further reversal, the
6 realism of this representation of nature is typically measured against a
7 theatrical and/or filmic paradigm.

8 Earlier formations of the sublime resolved the negative affects that
9 initiated the process of sublime sensation by compensating with vari-
10 ous forms of affirmation – of the superiority of the self, of humanity's
11 power to subjugate nature. As it is experienced here, however, the initial
12 disruption of perception is followed by a breakdown of meaning that is
13 neither relieved nor overcome. In failure events, both the game and the
14 technologically enabled posthuman self cease to exist as such. Instead,
15 the subject is confronted with a mute technological artifact – a feature-
16 less surface that bears no decipherable relationship to the unimaginably
17 complex workings that it conceals. Contemporary digital technology
18 lacks the capacity for representation that allowed nineteenth-century
19 artifacts to function as sources of awe in and of themselves. As objects,
20 contemporary digital technologies are destined for obsolescence, their
21 production driven less by a wish to celebrate human ingenuity than
22 by the late capitalist imperatives of novelty and innovation. They are
23 designed not to signify, but to disappear into functionality; the compu-
24 ter's outer shell, as Jameson writes, 'has no emblematic or visual power'
25 (Jameson 1991: 37). Here, the terms of the digital sublime are

26
27 blank and static activity, intelligence without gestural expression,
28 encoding without inflection or irregularity, pure measurement, and
29 pure power. It is found in machines which resist personification but
30 nonetheless interact with the human.

31 (Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999: 142)

32
33 Following the initial, fleeting glimpse of technology as an inhuman
34 other, the subject is faced with a sense presentation – a banal, quotid-
35 ian object – which demonstrates neither awesome power nor infinite
36 magnitude. Here, the process of sublime experience is emptied of the
37 transcendence that the term originally comprised; the initial glimpse of
38 technology-as-other is followed by nothing more elevating than frus-
39 tration. The latter is an emotional state that is born out of the tedium
40 of the everyday; it signals a kind of brute return to a world where bod-
41 ies and artifacts share in a mute and mundane – but fundamentally

1 dissimilar – materiality. As a source of frustration, the videogame is
2 no longer the ‘locus of a being with which humans interface’ (ibid.,
3 134), but a consumer object embedded in daily life, and as resistant to
4 deep meaning as any other mass-produced artifact. The dissolution of
5 the technologically enabled self is both catastrophic and utterly banal:
6 marked by a profound sense of rupture and loss, and situated in the
7 mundane reality of the consumer everyday.

8 9 **Conclusion**

10
11 As Bruno Latour (2002), Andy Clark (2003) and others have argued, the
12 empire of the human has always been implicated with that of technol-
13 ogy. Technological artifacts have evolved alongside the human brain,
14 and have been ‘enrolled’ into cognition by human subjects throughout
15 history, contributing in an active way to the processes of consciousness.
16 Latour views technology as a mode of existence; a ‘particular form of
17 the exploration of being’ (2002: 1). In developed nations, digital tech-
18 nology now intervenes in all aspects of our daily lives, and the bounda-
19 ries between the human and the technological are becoming less and
20 less distinct. Gamers often speak of a sense of being completely at one
21 with the technology. Although our day-to-day technological encounters
22 differ in kind and intensity, this kind of investment is becoming more
23 common, as digital technologies grow more sophisticated and more
24 ubiquitous.

25 Ngai (2005) argues that the sublime and the banal are collapsed into
26 a single sensation, that of ‘stuplimity’. In the case of the digital sublime,
27 however, these two affects are not collapsed into one another but con-
28 tinue to exist, in tension, as discrete categories. The experience of the
29 digital sublime, as it is outlined above, depends upon a merger with the
30 artifact that can be described as ‘posthuman’ in Hayles’ (1999) sense of
31 the term – a seamless bond between the technology and user. It is also
32 contingent upon the breaching of this bond, and a return of the tech-
33 nology to the realm of the banal. Mutually embedded in one another,
34 but held apart – the banality of the artifact as a mass-produced con-
35 sumer object, and the sublimity of its distance and difference from the
36 human – the sublime and the banal are linked here not by their amalga-
37 mation into a unique sensation, but by their existence as effects of capi-
38 tal. Both are a consequence of the endless production and consumption
39 of ever more sophisticated and ubiquitous technological artifacts.

40 Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe writes that ‘the sublime becomes identified
41 with the idea and image of technology ... at the point ... where the

1 technological is seen to have become the origin of ... a kind of thought
 2 and a kind of body which wasn't there before' ... and that this identifica-
 3 tion cannot take place outside the context of capitalism as 'the surprised
 4 beneficiary of technological production at the same time that it's the
 5 source' (Gilbert-Rolfe, 1999: 127). It's clear that we're dealing here with
 6 a subtly different kind of posthuman from that described by Hayles,
 7 who conceptualizes the latter as a condition in which embodiment
 8 is less and less significant in the constitution of the human subject.
 9 Gilbert-Rolfe's 'body that wasn't there before' is that of a technologi-
 10 cally enabled subject for whom the experience of the digital sublime is
 11 both an existential hazard and a daily reality: a body whose encounters
 12 with technological objects are both necessary to its being, and casual
 13 to the point of indifference. In the contemporary digital sublime, the
 14 experience of the limitless potential of human ingenuity is lodged
 15 within artifacts whose material existence is fleeting and insignificant.

Notes

19 This chapter first appeared, in a slightly different version, in *Tate*
 20 *Papers* Issue 14 (Autumn 2010), available online at [www.tate.org.uk/](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/)
 21 [research/tateresearch/tatepapers/](http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/).

- 22 1. 'What is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained
 23 in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though they
 24 cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very
 25 inadequacy, which can be exhibited in sensibility.' (Kant 1987: 99)
- 26 2. 'Software is part of the paraphernalia of everyday ... life revealed by the turn
 27 to the noncognitive. It is one of those little but large technologies that are
 28 crucial to the bonding of ... time and space ... which in their very ubiquity
 29 go largely unnoticed' (Thrift and French 2002: 330).
- 30 3. Fredric Jameson argues that the ethos of work, suffering and transformation
 31 that typified nineteenth century sensibilities has been replaced, in the post-
 32 modern imagination, by play, idleness and indifference. Terry Eagleton frames
 33 the difference between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics in a similar
 34 way: 'In the post-war years a different form of aestheticization was also to satu-
 35 rate the entire culture of late capital, with its fetishism of style and surface, its
 36 cult of hedonism and technique, its reifying of the signifier and displacement
 37 of discursive meaning with random intensities' (Eagleton 1990: 373).
- 38 4. My thanks to Teemu Hupli for pointing this out.
- 39 5. Although listing every 'failed' videogame would require more space than the
 40 present paper allows, it is worth mentioning a few recent releases that have
 41 been singled out as particularly bad. *I'm Not Alone* (Mamba Games, 2010) suf-
 42 fers from constant crashes, shoddy graphics, illogical game mechanics, slug-
 43 gish frame rate, poor hit detection, sloppy dialogue and long loading times.
 44 *Shadow Harvest: Phantom Ops* (Black Lion Studios, 2011) has also been slated
 45 for its murky graphics, shoddy controls, long loading times and frequent

- crashes. Boasting appalling graphics, incomprehensible gameplay mechanics, nearly non-existent functionality, and a tendency to crash repeatedly, *Big Rigs: Over the Road Racing* (Stellar Stone, 2003) has been described as 'an absolute failure in all departments' (Barratt 2009: np).
6. 'In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology and human goals' (Hayles, 1993: 3).

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