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Playing Buffy: Remediation, Occulted Meta-game-physics and the Dynamics of Agency in the Videogame Version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

"There's nothing like a spot of demon slaughter to make a girl's night."

[1] Alongside other high profile fictional fantasy figures, such as James Bond, Harry Potter and Frodo Baggins, Buffy Summers has entered the virtual arena of the videogame. Key to the attractions of many film and television tie-in videogames is that they extend a pre-existing fictional world into a 3D interactive environment, which can be explored by controlling a predefined character that links the player to that world. The active navigation of an interactive environment, achieved by pressing keypad combinations appropriately in response to events that occur in the game-world, is combined with the game-challenge of developing the skills needed to live up to the heroic status of the avatar. In the case of the Buffy game, the challenge for the player is to hone their virtually mediated combat and movement skills so that threats can be defeated in an accomplished "slayer" fashion. The player is therefore directly implicated in ensuring that the Buffy avatar acts in accordance with character and that, through the defeat of enemies and the overcoming of obstacles, the game-story is uncovered. While the Buffy game uses many characteristics found in the television show, the particular attributes of videogame form bring additional dimensions and significant differences to the established Buffy-verse.

[2] With developments in videogaming technologies most PC and console based

games allow players to travel in real time through a given game world. Videogames are constructed to motivate the player to respond physically and actively to a game's environment and the events that occur there. The types of actions that a player can perform in a game are structured by a game's design and programming infrastructure. This includes the look, sounds and spatial organization of a game world as well as the physical rules that dictate how objects operate and what a player can do within that world. Videogames are designed to engage the player in periods of intensive activity, marking a crucial distinction to the way that other screen-based media such as cinema and television are engaged with. As Espen Aarseth argues, games are "ergodic" because "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997:1). While we are *spectators* of the television show, we are *players* of the game; a difference that has an important effect on the way that a text is experienced and negotiated. In analyzing how the Buffy game generates patterns of emotional and physical engagement, I identify the ways in which themes, particularly that of exercising agency, and textual strategies present in the television series, translate or are remediated into the media-specific attributes of videogame format.

The game-world of Buffy the Vampire Slayer

[3] There are currently two videogame versions of the show on the market, one for the Nintendo's GameBoy Color released in 2000, and a more recent offering for Microsoft's X-Box, developed by The Collective for EA games and Fox, released in 2002. The X-Box version was originally slated for the PlayStation, but was abandoned in favor of the more sophisticated X-Box platform. Building the game on the new platform enabled sharper and more nuanced graphics, subtler character movements, such as facial expressions, as well as extending the scope for event-related dialogue, dynamic lighting, and game event related sound effects and music. These attributes are expressly deployed to minimize some of the media-specific distinctions between the game and its televisual counterpart. The use of voice talent provided by many of the show's actors provides an important touchstone with the show. As does the participation of two writers that have authored well-received franchised Buffy novellas (Christopher Golden and Tom Sniegoski) to construct the storyline and write dialogue, thereby ensuring that the game carries the type of language and storyline that characterizes the show. Another element that reinforces the connection between the game to the show is the use of "motion-captured" movements from two of the stunt people used on season three of the television show. Each of these factors deepen the game's relative realism and authenticity, and help blur the differences between the live-action format of the TV show and the digital mediation of the game. In lessening the gap between the two the game guards itself against failing to live up to expectations set by the show. The game version of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1999), for example, presented blocky unrealistic representations of the show's characters that failed to capture the appeal and defining characteristics of its televisual referent. The success of the Buffy game's "remediation" of the television show relies on it being both true to the spirit of the show and exploiting the interactive game media to extend players' engagement with the predefined Buffy universe. Remediation is a term coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to characterize the reuse of one medium within another, which they claim is a "defining characteristic of new media" (2000: 45). Importantly for this paper, they claim that this process may "refashion the older medium . . . while still marking the presence of the older media" (46) or try "to absorb the older medium entirely" (47). In the case of the Buffy game the presence of aspects of the TV show interacts and exchanges with the newer elements of interactive game media.

[4] Third person action adventure formats are more commonly used than the first person mode in film/TV tie-in games as they enable the franchised character to be seen (*Xena* and *Harry Potter* games are other examples). Locations, music, characters, and themes present in the TV show connect the game to the Buffyverse, but it is the fact that we, as players, can *do* things within that space that creates the game's media specific and marketable "value-added." You can of course play the game without having watched the show, but knowledge of the show provides greater meaning and gives context to the actions performed in the gameworld. The Buffy game exploits and rewards such knowledge by actively inviting player's to read the game events against those that have taken place in the show. Such intertextual maneuvers aid a player's immersion in the game world and enable the Buffy ur-text to transcend its various media contexts and formations.

[5] One of the distinctive features of the game is that it combines two established and popular game genres. This creates greater diversity in the types of challenges offered as well as linking the game to the multi-generic nature of the show. Action-adventure style puzzle solving and exploring, similar to the *Tomb Raider* series (1996-present), are mixed with the "beat-em-up" format, similar in kind to that of the *Tekken* series (1996-present). Action-adventure games involve exploring spaces, gathering various objects and avoiding or defeating potential threats. The format is strongly dependent on the way that 3D videogame technology allows the player to roam around in the game world. Within this format the game-story is uncovered through the player's actions: finding an object may facilitate access to another space in the game or trigger a cut scene. In the "beat-em-up" game genre a player controls an onscreen character who is in combat with either another player's character or one controlled by the game engine itself. Games within the beat-em-up genre are composed of a number of skirmishes that usually take place in a fairly limited arena and use motion captured movements of martial arts specialists mapped onto the game's characters. Players must produce combinations (combos) of movements, controlled by pushing button sequences, to defeat enemies. Within the Buffy game, all enemies are controlled by the game engine rather than in the two-player mode available in most other beat-em-ups. Unlike most beat-em-ups the Buffy game has a complex storyline that is in many ways reflective of the narrative formations used in the show (although the way that the storyline is accessed and its temporal delivery are dissimilar). Players are also engaged in a wider diversity of activities than in most standard beat-em-ups and the combination of genres help to broaden the target market for the game. Within the game action-adventure style exploring dovetails with combat sequences, calling on a number of different skills and creating a rich and varied game experience, that reflects, in some respects, the rhythm and generic mix of the show.

[6] Like the generic hybridity that characterizes the show, the game too draws on a number of game types and genres to create a sense of textual richness and mythic resonance. The third person format follows that used by the *Tomb Raider* series, and many of the moves virtual Buffy performs are similar to Lara's: including the jumping elements and the "shimmy" to propel herself along ledges. Lara and Buffy are mostly seen in rear view mode, and both move and respond to controls beautifully, providing a key gameplay pleasure. Game Buffy is, however, far more human than "femme-bot" Lara (Carr, 2002: 178) . Unlike cold, silent and doggedly metronomic Lara, who defeats her enemies from a distance with her iconic guns, Buffy's weapons are far more domestic (brooms shovels etc), her movements are more flexible and diverse, and she is very vocal during fights (this is also the case in the show with Buffy's bot-doppelganger who is combat evolved *and* emotionally quirky). In most cases it's hands on punches and kicks that allow her to get close up

and personal with the enemy (the subtextual sexual dimension of this is noted reflexively by Spike at one stage in the game). In making the fighting more "hands-on," accompanied by smart retorts and Buffy's characteristic soprano grunt, and less reliant on specialist equipment, a crucial sense of immediacy and presence is heightened, which operates in some way to mask out the markers of remediation. There are other notable references to other games: in particular *Resident Evil* (1996-present) and *Blood Omen 2* (2002): a third person action adventure vampire game, where you play a vampire who stays healthy by drinking the blood of hapless mortals (similar to how game Buffy stays healthy). The topsy-turvy "dreamer" world, encountered in the game's last level, is stylistically close to the alternative realities that appear in both *American McGee's Alice* (2000) and *Clive Barker's Undying* (2001). Throughout the game, as with the show, witty one-liners are constantly present. These are frequently referential and make a strong connection between gameplay and our knowledge of the show and its family tree. Far from seeing these intertextual references as simply derivative, such borrowings lend textual richness. They draw on a player's cultural capital and supply a crucial connection between the show and the game. A further effect of the plethora of inter and intratextual referents is to minimize the markers of remediation, helping to make the Buffyverse seem more than simply the sum of its media-specific articulations.

Navigating Remediation

[7] The game uses spaces, places and characters from the show and offers a virtual experience of life in Sunnydale, although no live action footage appears. All cut scenes are generated digitally by the game engine, so that there is little difference in terms of quality between interactive and non-interactive sequences (something that has been the case in other games and which can inadvertently disrupt the sense of a seamless game world). While the game's cut scenes use all the features of editing and omniscient camera we would expect from the television show, during the game's interactive sections what we see on screen is welded to the position of the Buffy avatar, whom we play. The anchored third person mode enables *Tomb Raider* like moves to be made (particularly the jumping feature that provides the central challenge in some of the levels where knowing the avatar's exact spatial position is key to making a successfully timed and co-ordinated jump). The anchored third person view means you can see Buffy during all interactive sequences. During gameplay the "camera" (not a physical lens-based artifact but an effect of the game engine and its coding) keeps Buffy more or less in the center of the screen. The anchored third person point of view constitutes a key enunciative and narrational difference to that of the show, entailing an important distinction between the way the two media handle the orientation of space and time. This has an impact on the way that tension and suspense is constructed. Third person anchoring means that no parallel activities can be shown that are not within the frame of Buffy's view. It is because of this that cut scenes are regularly punctuated throughout the game, proving important in forwarding the game's storyline (based on the return of The Master) and in some cases they are used to solve or set up narrative enigmas. They also provide a rounding effect by introducing another point of view or act as a kind of cross-cut by showing an event occurring simultaneously but in another space, thereby aiding the development of both dramatic tension and story.

[8] The anchored third person characteristic, as an effect of the game's remediation of the show, has an impact on the role played by the scooby gang. In general they are peripheral to the fight action, which has become increasingly less the case in the show. At the end of each level Buffy visits the library and the gang gives her various gifts and information. Interaction with the gang therefore represents a reward for

the effort of getting through a level. The gang is rarely directly involved in solving puzzles or in the beat-em-up style fights with various demons and vamps, yet they do perform collective spells to help augment Buffy's powers (cued from the end of season four ["Primeval" 4.21] in which the gang performs a spell to increase Buffy's slayer power). The game therefore draws more on the action-adventure aspect of the show than the more 'soap' style interactions (although these are alluded to). This distinction is related specifically to the videogame context, which, particularly with action-adventure games, operates on a challenge basis. Current videogames, with their emphasis on doing rather than talking, lend themselves to the action format rather than personal interaction (although some online RPG games do allow players to converse with each other). What we are seeing here is to some extent related to the limitations of current gaming technologies and the fact that games have settled into a fairly small number of generic patternings. For some potential players the generic alignment with fight-based action adventure, designed as it conventionally is to attract a male rather than female audience, may prove a step too far from the innovative generic hybridity of the show that expressly sets out to overturn the gendering of genre. This is particularly apparent when measured against the show's increasing focus on the interpersonal sphere rather than fight action. Acting perhaps as form of compensation for the partial exclusion of the interpersonal dimension of the show there are, however, other forms of emotional engagement solicited by the media specific form and organization of the game that are not available so directly in the show.

Temporal Rhythms

[9] Each episode of the show is designed around a 45-minute time slot, appropriate to television scheduling. While the player has more control over when the game is played than when a televised episode is shown, the 22 week season is comparable to the time it takes to complete the game (so far I have been playing the Buffy game on and off for 3 months). Levels give the game an episode-like format, again working to link the game to the format of the show. The time spent on any level depends on a player's gaming skills, but most take at least a couple of sittings to get through when played in "normal" mode. This rhythm represents a clear formal departure from that used in the show, however. In the game the narrative unfolds commensurate to progress made in the game, as such narrative is actively striven for rather than being simply present, as it is in the show. The experience of gameplay and the speed that narrative is uncovered therefore depends on a player's mode of "interaction." The greater your fighting skills the more fluid and less repetitious the game experience will be.

The game levels are also organized around a number of points where the game is saved – approximately 4-6 in each level (less towards the end of the game). If you "die" in the game you will be "resurrected" at the last save point. Because saving the game can't be done at will (as with some games), it can take a long and frustrating time to reach a new save point. This means that each level is often replayed many times, and repetition is largely alien to the show's form. There is a one significant exception: "Life Serial" [6.5] has a game-like repetitious form. The game form reference is to some extent supported because the cycle of repetitions undergone by Buffy is the result of a spell cast by game-playing "nerds." But this is not a simple to one-to-one correspondence as the episode also references the film *Groundhog Day* [1993] and echoes the repeating format that has also been occasionally used in other fantasy/SF TV shows, in which genre alignment allows the rules of linear time to be played with.

[10] The inevitability of repetition during gameplay means that some strategies used to solicit tension and suspense are rather different to those used in the show. The game uses many horror film conventions to create suspense, however – such as sound effects to create atmosphere and indicate threat, yet repetition in itself carries its own often quite unbearable emotional tension and suspense. Will I get through the onslaught this time? Will I manage to perform that particular move, will I manage to avoid this or that obstacle. As a level is played over and over you can come to know the terrain, and the threats that lurk there, very well. You pace out the virtual space with no ellipses or elimination of "dead" time. The adrenaline and frustration produced by trying to get it right and the intimate knowledge of the space promotes rather different types of emotions and physical responses than those solicited by the show. When stuck in a chain of repetitions, you are in some sense "punished" by that stuckness with all its mythic and therapeutic resonances, rather like the paralysis Buffy suffers in the penultimate episode of season five ("The Weight of the World" 5.21). Importantly, for the game, the next installment of the story is withheld – no story before bedtime. Yet stuckness and repetition are very powerful things, soliciting a gamut of emotional responses that are produced by the occulted orchestrations of the game's design.

The "moral occult," manicheanism and regimes of control

[11] Within a game context it's important to note that you can only play as Buffy. Role-Playing Games, such as *Neverwinter Nights* (2002), by contrast, offer the scope to build your own avatar character (with multiple choices that include the look of the character, ethical alignment, "race" etc). The Collective – the game's developers - chose action adventure over RPG form. As the game's VP of Production has said it "suited the material and there is a larger and more general market for action adventure style games" (Douglas Hare, 2002). Importantly, as we can only play Buffy we are therefore on the side of "good." The game is set up so that we defeat vamp canon fodder and fight key enemy characters, such as Spike (who can't be killed because he's still a "live" character in the show) and the Master, newly resurrected in spirit form, all in the name of protecting the innocent and keeping the forces of evil at bay. Unlike most First Person Shooters and Role Playing Games, the Buffy game is organized in a substantially linear way. While the player must explore the game environment to pick up clues and artifacts, there's often little time to just poke about in virtual Sunnydale, something that as a Buffy fan initially attracted me to the game. With the use of locked doors and mystical barriers to channel the path taken through the game, your gaming destiny, is quite profoundly predetermined by the game's infrastructure. This is something I want now to explore in greater depth.

[12] In alignment with the moral premise that underlies most other horror-based videogames such as the *Resident Evil* cycle (1997 - present) or *Clive Barker's Undying* (2001), the game Buffy has to restore balance to a world corrupted by evil forces that threaten love, human values and the unfolding of the storyline. The aim of the game is to defeat the manifestation of such forces to restore order and to reveal the game narrative. The game itself is structured and programmed to aid in the attainment of these aims (although you may have to work at it). The game deploys a surface story line and concomitant aesthetic strategies that reference the good-versus-evil format of many horror films; however, this dualism is more deeply embedded in the infrastructure that shapes the dynamic nature of the game's interactivity. This infrastructure operates as kind of "moral occult" (Krzywinska, 2002a). The occulted level of programming, and its inherent ordering, simulates a fixed metaphysical and manichean virtual duality in which events are designated as positive/good or negative/evil. Players can interact with aspects of the surface

dimension and the space of the game, but cannot interfere with its determining manichean infrastructure. Because you play Buffy, you are fixed into being an avatar of good. As a predetermined transcendent, metaphysical and extrinsic force, the game's moral occult is at work in the way it channels the player through its predesignated challenges. The game world is entirely geared around the restriction or promotion of a player's agency. These include physical barriers, life giving power-ups and handy weapons. Similarly the act of killing vamps and demons restores Buffy's life and power (enabling the player to progress through a level). The governing moral occult is also evident in other types of help offered to the player, such as Giles' combat lessons, clues as to where to go or what to do next, and in the series of rewards given for overcoming obstacles. Buffy herself is also programmed to help the player. Throughout the game the presence of a higher power – mirroring the role of "The Powers That Be" (a guise enacted by The Collective) - is always in evidence. Programming based pre-determination, which lies outside the player's sphere of agency, is therefore linked to the metaphysical dimension in which manicheanism operates in the show. In using a common transcendent and apparently extrinsic moral system to marry together disparate forms, the media specific differences become absorbed within the overarching mythical and moral fabric of the buffyverse. This is an effect of remediation but operates as if it were an effect of the Buffyverse's manichean metaphysics.

Fig 2 In Control – for the moment

[13] The shared mythology does not mean however that all markers of formal difference are totally erased. The interactive form of the game affords players an immediate and tactile experience of a dynamic between states of *being in control* and *out of control*. This is, of course, a key theme of the show, with its focus on the experience of growing up, which involves the characters in a process of learning what they can and can't control (Willow's use of magic is a good example). The game, by virtue of its interactive form, offers players an active and immediate, hands on / hands off experience of agency and determination. The operation of the game's programmed infrastructure invokes an experience of being subject to a pre-determined, extrinsic, and thereby, Othered force (in the full Lacanian sense), provided by the tacit alliance between The Powers That Be and the game designers. This works in productive tension with the

promise of player autonomy offered by the game's interactive dimension. It also reflects Buffy's own ambivalent and tense relationship with the authors (The Powers That Be) of her Slayer destiny, an aspect that derives from the world of Greek myth where heroes often struggle against the fates and the meddlings of gods.

[14] While the game possesses a deeply manichean structure, there are some incursions to the clear binary division between good and evil at work, which, to some extent, draws on a player's experience real-life moral ambiguities. One such incursion is related to the way the game organizes power ups: Buffy's life force is sustained mainly by her kills. Seen within the context of the show, this aspect of the game's design ties into an ongoing enigma around what Buffy is, something that is raised for the player as much as for Buffy herself. As yet the question whether Buffy is more demon than human is unresolved by the show. Her ambivalent relationship with her supernatural status seems to drive her attraction to Angel and Spike (vampires struggling with morality and redemption in different ways). That she is sustained by violent action in the game has an effect on her firm location as an avatar of "good": the more she kills – which she does with pleasure, expressed in her response "I feel like a new slayer" when an enemy's power passes to her – the stronger and more powerful she becomes. While this is broadly conceptualized morally as the fight for right and good it is nonetheless the case that the both avatar and player benefit from violence; the player is fully implicated in the ambiguously joyful practice of slaying. As Buffy often says during a bout of successful slaying "There's nothing like a spot of demon slaughter to make a girl's night."

Restriction-Autonomy

[15] Tension and suspense in the show is often intrinsically dependent on the fact that the viewer cannot intervene in the trajectory of events. We might watch and empathize as Dawn tries to resurrect her dead mother but we cannot help or hinder her. This aspect underlies many of the show's tensions, surprises and thrills. The pleasures entailed in this process are founded on an awareness of the inevitability of the events that will unfold without our intervention. Character's actions ultimately remain isolated from the sphere of the viewer, regardless of the extent to which he or she might "identify" or empathize with them. In this sense, I endorse Steve Shaviro's argument that horror suspense trades on an economy of delicious passivity, visceral affect and expectation. But the game offers more than this. A dynamic is set up between the experience of actively, sadistically, staking the vamps in the name of good (aided by sound effects and "real" physical action that make such dispatches feel "good" and satisfying), and a sense of being acted on by the game's infrastructure. This is channeled precisely by the pre-defined contours of the game's structure (with all its metaphysical resonances). The juxtaposition of the two enhances relatively the experience of both states. This is something not available in such a direct and "hands on" way in televisual or cinematic texts, even if the show itself has a thematic investment in such dynamics.

[16] The metaphysical implications arise in a special relation to the technological context of the game. Potentially, interactivity presents a problem to horror genre suspense, which often relies on managing what the viewer sees and when he or she sees it. As Steven Poole states: "for a game to surprise and move the player with its story line, it must necessarily still keep certain plot developments out of the player's control" (121). Full interactivity would negate the authorial shaping of interaction and, with it, the possibility for a directed storyline, which is crucial to the development of the horror experience in film or TV. It is for this reason that the

game mixes interactivity with predetermined boundaries and intrusive interventions that channel the player's engagement. The pleasure-suspense dynamics of the game is very much dependent on this combination. The game allows the player to act on events, but only in a manner determined by the game's internal structure. The game creates scenarios in which the pleasures and frustrations of being acted upon can be experienced: the dialectical on/off dynamics of interactivity create and heighten this. As such it seems mistaken to call games "promethean" as Poole does: there is no real transgression of higher powers; players remain, by and large, dependent on the tips and functionality bestowed on them. Like the show-Buffy, who can never escape her Slayer destiny, during gameplay a player is dutifully, sublimely, in the service of The Powers That Be. The pay-off is, precisely, the experiential gain of suspense and dramatic tension. Yet this is always balanced against the sphere of interaction that promises self-directed agency (with the crunch caveat that it is cast within certain parameters). The game therefore augments what is already present thematically in the show (as noted by various Buffy academics such as Rhonda Wilcox and Roz Kaveney).

[17] The experience of a restrictive inability to act on situations resonates with Buffy's struggle with her destiny and other comparable themes and tropes. Zombification, various types of possession and bodily invasion are typical horror genre scenarios used in the show that represent a loss of autonomy and self-determination (for example Oz's monthly werewolf transformation and Willow's uncontrollable addiction to magic in season six). The thematic interest in restriction reflects reception dynamics, the viewer - like the often beset characters on screen—is also helpless, unable to alter the trajectory of on-screen action. As such the show is less able than the game to provide a formal structure that creates a concrete and immediate experience of restriction and autonomy. While we manically button mash to prevent the vampires from leeching out Buffy's life, once it happens you can do nothing but watch her groan and die ...and it was your actions (or fumbled inactions) that caused her to die, doomed by the game's Powers That Be to return to the last save point.

[18] The interactive dimension of the game enables a *more* acute experience of losing autonomous control than that achieved by the show. This is achieved partly because, at times, the player does have a sense of active self-determination (which can only be represented in the shows). When autonomy is lost the sense of pre-determination is enhanced by virtue of the relative difference: something experienced very concretely by the player. As I have shown, game events and the path taken through the game are often imposed on the player, a stratagem that allows access to pleasures closer to those conventionally used by the show (and which derive from both emotion-inducing modes of melodrama and horror). While interactivity promises control and autonomous action it does not mean therefore that the player occupies an unassailable position of mastery (reflecting Buffy's ambivalent experience of mastery). It is sharply apparent that the game's virtual world, like that of the show, is a closed system: the authored aspect of narration governs the fabric of the game, channeling the way we negotiate and experience it. The metaphysical framework operates as a bridge between the game and the show. As Andrew Darley notes, and I build on this to underpin my argument about the game's inherent moral occult, there are points in most video games at which their pre-programmed nature means that the "element of control and choice...is revealed as illusory" (157). I do not see this as a "formulaic" game flaw, as he does. Instead this works in close unity with the guiding restriction / autonomy thematic present in the show. The game and show are working with similar thematic logics, which to some extent diminishes the particularities of the two media forms, but the game raises the stakes by implicating

the player directly in a rhythmic cycle of predetermination and autonomy.

[19] The pleasure of horror, in a general sense, is that it seduces through the arousal of anxiety, yet this is often combined with the containment of that anxiety provided by a pre-determined "good will prevail" narrative form. In the game this safety-net is provided by the forces of "good," with which the player is aligned, that ensure that evil can, potentially, be defeated. At times play is experienced as fluid, smooth and continuous (the occulted metaphysical force is literally with you), your movements flow and you stake the vamp with ease: you ARE Buffy at these times. This is "good" interaction, a player's movements perfectly co-ordinate with the demands of the game. At other times frustration and stasis prevail, yet the player nonetheless knows that a way out is always provided – even if it means doggedly repeating the level. When things go badly the experience of playing the Buffy game is often rather like the nightmare scenario of moving yet not moving, swimming, as it were, against the inexorable metaphysical current. And when you perform badly the distinction between superhero Buffy and you as player becomes acutely apparent. However, the frustration (and concomitant anxiety) accrued in not overcoming an obstacle is a positive factor since it motivates the player to improve their skills and work harder to gain the sense of relief that follows from mastering a taxing sequence. Yet, the game is designed to help the player to acquire skills in a progressive way so that the Buffy myth can be lived up to, and the subject/object disjunction minimized.

[20] There are times when the game Buffy does things independently form the player, most of these are in non-interactive cut scenes, but occasionally during game-play Buffy will look in a certain direction to warn the player of an impending problems. Such independently avatar-motivated action solicits, for me at least, something of a small identity crisis because it reminds me of the distinction between her as "other" and myself as player (something I am apt to forget in the thick of successful play, which is more "immersive" precisely because of sustained and progressive play). These exceptional incidents do serve to uncover one the game's guiding logics, however. As with the process of remediation, the game's underlying trajectory is towards unification rather than differentiation at a number of levels. When play is going badly, the player is thrown off this path and, unless the game is abandoned, is motivated to work harder to return to that predestined path (wherein the markers of remediation are diminished). This meta-logic guides the rhythm of game-play: a player oscillates between movement and stasis, achievement and non-achievement, self-determination and pre-determination. Thematically this dovetails with the experiences of key characters in the show, each of whom has struggled with various blocks on desire and achievement (which of course drives both the show's and the game's dramatic structure and tension).

[21] The magics of technological remediation at work in the fabric of the game operate to crystallize the Buffyverse as a meta-textual phenomenon. The show and the game both draw on the curious pleasures and dangers of the ambiguous and fragile status of identity, whether it is personal, generic, or in terms of form and narrative. However, there are some notable differences that are in some ways masked through the process of remediating the Buffyverse into the videogame arena. While the interpersonal is diminished in terms of Buffy's relationship with the scooby gang, other, perhaps compensatory, interpersonal relations are foregrounded between the player and the Buffy character, and the player and the authored gameworld. Yet while various ambiguities of emotion and category might be experienced, and some moral ambiguities are present, ultimately the game consolidates fixed notions of good and evil as discrete transcendent categories. This

provides a moral safety valve that provides narrative structure as well as sanctioning stake-em-up mayhem. The backdrop of the supernatural, with its dream dimensions that warp reality and which, in the closing levels of the game, split the slayer into dark and light versions, touch base with very conventional moral binaries. And as such the game sidelines some of the more subtle incursions to the coding of good and evil present in the show: Rhonda J Wilcox (2002), for example, has argued that light, traditionally used to signify good (particularly in vampire-texts), represents pain for Buffy after her resurrection in season five.

[22] Other ambiguities appear to be present in the game, however, particularly in relation to the player's interaction with the way the game constructs its version of the virtual Buffyverse and how death operates there. In the show, death is treated in different ways, vampires are the living dead but can be killed, Buffy has twice been resurrected by her friends, yet some deaths are very final. In the game, the player and the Buffy avatar dies, yet do not die, which is certainly ambiguous, but while this might look to be a different logic of death than the show, this too operates within the terms of a manichean structure. Like Christ the Buffy avatar never dies in a decisive sense, because she is in the service of good (she is, as the game states, "resurrected," with the easy push of button rather than through Willow's dark magics). Most enemies stay dead when properly killed (unless they have something of the human about them, Spike, Dru, and Angel – The Master is an exception). This difference in death-types links to the way the game and the show express a transcendent moral order at both surface and deep levels. Such a dynamic allows death to be pleasurable because the real finality of death is disavowed (something markedly overturned in the show with the definitive deaths of key characters Joyce and Tara), plus it also defends against the lack of an immanent and incontrovertible moral order. Within the gamespace, you have killed and yet not killed, been killed and not, the order of which is managed and conceptualized by the virtual and occulted mechanics of the game, and this connects to some extent with the game-style resurrections of Buffy in the show.

Nerds, Gaming, and the Rhetorics of "Mastery"

[23] While the Buffyverse has to some extent transcended its various media articulations, it is the case that the game is a remediation of the show, rather than vice-versa. The show remains the prime authoritative source material of the Buffyverse. However gaming in general, in both its social and formal aspects, can be identified as one of the show's important referents. Many Buffy fans are likely to be gamers or have played games more "casually" and the show often exploits the types of cultural experiences that its audience are likely to have encountered. I have already mentioned the resurrection of the Slayer and the form of "Life Serial" as examples of tacit references to game form, I might also include, as a Quake player, Buffy's use of the Quake-style Rocket Launcher to kill the Judge in "Becoming II" (2.22) [fig 3]. The introduction of the "nerds" saw a bolder step in this direction. The first time Buffy does direct battle with them collectively – they are invisible - is in a games arcade ("Gone" 6.11). In "Flooded" (6.4) the nerds have a game playing in looped mode on their newly acquired widescreen TV (it looks as if it may be *Max Payne* [2001]). Gaming is also referenced in "Never Leave Me" (7.9) where Willow uses Dungeons and Dragons style jargon, commonly used in multiplayer RPG online games, to facilitate an effective communication with Andrew. These examples indicate the way that the nerds more generally frame their bid for world domination and battle with Buffy in terms of both gaming and the type of camp villainy often present in popular culture.

Fig 3 Buffy does *Quake*

[24] The three nerds seem to represent different degrees of "geek-dom." Of each Jonathan has the clearest notion of the difference between "play" and reality, but is seduced by the power of magic to compensate for ineffectuality, signified in part through his short stature. Andrew is in many ways Warren's catspaw, a result of nascent homosexuality that finds expression through role-play style engagement with his friends. Unlike Warren, Andrew is opposed to killing people, but is roped in through his need to be part of the gang. Warren, however, exhibits the strongest pathological amorality guided by a thirst of power. Jonathan and Andrew's shock at learning that Warren murdered his ex-friend indicates a key difference between them. Warren is most closely identified with evil, he's lost a sense of a division between fantasy and reality and his level of "play" is deeply pathological. A graphic indication of this can be seen in the way he slides from the use of the fantasy-coded magic to the use of a real gun (an artifact never previously seen on the show) to shoot Buffy in "Grave" (6.21). A clear reference to the game-to-gun debate, exemplified by certain press reactions to the Columbine massacre for example, that looms over the episode. As is typical of the show's complex and relativist take on *personal* morality (which contrasts with the presence of a transcendent manichean order) there is no simple equation between virtual gaming and real murder. Tellingly, only Warren is intent on murder, as an overblown form of compensation for the humiliations visited on him by Buffy, rather than playful antagonism. The three nerds each turn to a potent mix of gaming, magic and technological wizardry to compensate for their social impotency. By virtue of her supernaturally charged powers Buffy stands as an emblem of what they do not have, and further presents a challenge to Jonathan and Warren's media-derived idealized notions of masculine identity. As a result they attempt to become her nemesis, in the mode of Bond or Batman style villains. Partly due to this rhetoric of camp villainy, their attempts at mastery are generally a source of comedy and even, at times, pathos. Nonetheless their quest for control is part of a more generalized theme

around the limits of autonomy and has strong ties with the way in which the game version of the show orchestrates interactivity. In some sense I often feel rather like one of the nerds when playing the game, in my attempts to control Buffy and master her movements through the remote device of the game handset. Perhaps this is why the nerds are absent from the game: if they were present then such negative geeky connections would be too uncomfortably overt for both players and game designers.

Game Over

[25] The interactive form of the Buffy game creates a complex interaction between bounded choice and predetermination that resonates with the way in which individuals, including the main Buffy characters, interact with the order of things. This occurs in the "safe" context of modally marked fantasy and its concomitant moral occult. The metaphysicalized determinism of the game accrues for the player a direct and heightened experience of being acted upon. As such the game is carefully designed and authored to exploit the frustrations and pleasures around living up to the Buffy myth as well as lending the act of playing the game greater meaning and resonance.

[26] Players are offered the challenge to defeat the technologically-based big bad (aided by the game's occulted infrastructure); if achieved a pleasurable sense of mastery may be accrued that reinforces the illusion of personal autonomy. Yet this can only be achieved by following the set pathway and fulfilling the quests designated by the game (the game's linear nature gives little scope for so-called emergent gameplay that would transgress the intentions of the game designers). The contract drawn up between hands-on interaction of playing Buffy and hands-off pre-determinism inherent within the game's infrastructure, operates, therefore, with the emotional economics of being acted upon, as much as with the drive to act, colonize, and take charge of the Slayer and her power. The dialectical switching between the two intensifies the experience of both restriction and autonomy, a strategy that neatly dovetails with and augments one of the show's primary themes. The remediation of Buffy into game form adds a media-specific interactive dimension, but the game's inherent moral occult operates to meld the world created by the game into the broader meta-textual Buffverse, which, despite being a hi-tech media phenomenon, has many of the transcendent attributes of the creation myth.

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