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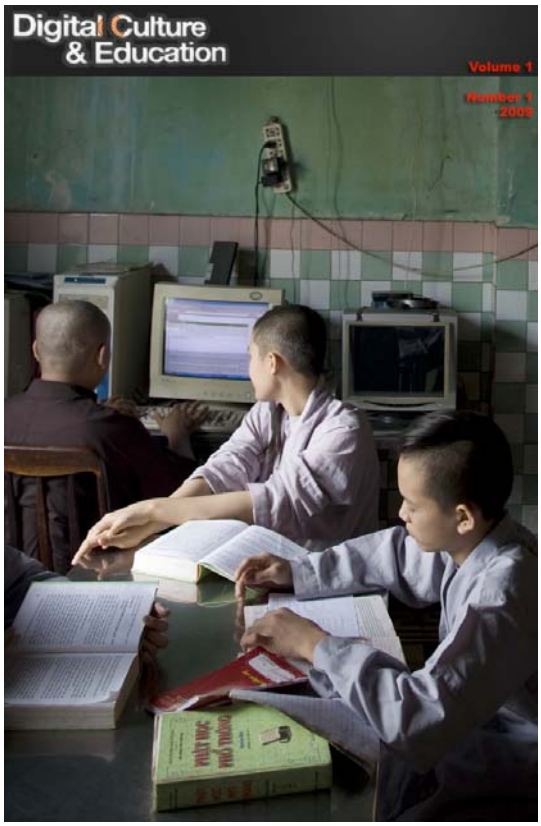

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Playing at bullying: The postmodern ethic of *Bully* (*Canis Canem Edit*)

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Abstract

This essay discusses Bully (Canis Canem Edit), considering the game's antecedents (narratives involving young people in school settings) and the features which set it apart from other teen texts. It discusses the controversy surrounding the game and comes to the conclusion that the principal reason for unease on the part of parents and educational authorities is that Bully's postmodernist ethic evades the binaries of liberal humanism and calls into question the foundations on which conventional ethical systems are based. The paper considers several episodes from the game to flesh out its arguments about how the game manifests features of postmodernist textuality in its propensity for simultaneously deploying and interrogating references to historical and contemporary cultural practices.

Keywords

Youth, video games, postmodernism, ethics, ideologies

Introduction

From the moment Jimmy Hopkins, the protagonist of *Bully* (*Canis Canem Edit*), is driven to the gates of Bullworth Academy by his mother and her fifth husband, he is marked as a bad boy. He has been expelled from seven schools, the last of which he burned down (or so the rumour goes); and he presents a truculent face to the world. Bullworth Academy is the last resort for parents eager to offload their unwanted young: its grim buildings are full of bickering students, noxious latrines, sadistic prefects, and a cafeteria catering to "the few and the brave" featuring dishes such as "Edna's famous bursting haggis" and "split liver pea stew surprise" (*Canis Canem Edit: A Guide,* 2006, back cover).

Bullworth's institutional ethos is outlined in the "Note from the Principal" included in the *Guide to Bullworth Academy* which comes with the game. Here Dr. Crabblesnitch acknowledges that: "we have our critics, those who say it is wrong to reward the strong and punish the weak and feeble." He maintains, however, that "Competition is good, it gives the youth of today what it needs: spirit and determination. Traditional schooling did not

leave me with any noticeable scars, apart from a few physical ones, and an inability to sleep without a light on." Crabblesnitch's undertaking to parents is: "We very much look forward to welcoming your child to our bosom. Boys or girls, we will make men of them all" (2006, p. 5). This broad parody of hegemonic masculinity and adult authoritarianism is symptomatic of the game's approach, which critiques institutional education through ironic, self-referential systems of representation and gameplay.

The textual genealogy of *Bully,* launched by Rockstar Vancouver in 2006, extends back to *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and nods toward *Catcher in the Rye*. It is, however, more closely related to the many parodic and semi-parodic treatments of school settings and narratives which proliferated from the beginning of the twentieth century, when school stories "started becoming more critical of school, more cynical, sardonic, subversive—also, in a sense, returning to the didactic as they criticized schooling" (Clark 1996: 229). Frank Richard's Billy Bunter, for instance, is cunning, obsessed with food, and averse to the very thought of physical exercise, constituting a carnivalesque alternative to the ideal of the athletic, clean-living boy hero common in nineteenth-century school stories. Similarly, the malevolent and violent schoolgirls of St Trinian's, developed by the British cartoonist Ronald Searle, afford a burlesque version of the high-minded protagonists of Enid Blyton's and Angela Brazil's school stories. Parodic versions of school stories were adapted for film and television from the 1950s series *Down with Skool!,* to teen films including *Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Election* and *The Breakfast Club*. These texts share a tendency to caricature teachers and school staff, and a propensity for casting students according to their group affiliations, as nerds, jocks, bloods, preps and so on. Their mildly anti-establishment narratives are concerned mainly with students' projects of evading authority and of enforcing subaltern economies of power and control. The 1985 game *Skool Daze,* produced for the ZX Spectrum in England and Commodore 64 in the United States, anticipates a number of the narrative and gameplay elements of *Bully,* including a storyline featuring a wayward schoolboy (Eric) who must steal his report card from the teachers' staffroom, evading obstructive fellow-students and hostile teachers.

The seminal boarding-school text is Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), which locates its schoolboy inhabitants in an educational establishment (Rugby) which professes to transform boys into men. Hughes's boys are English, and the social formations of Rugby mirror the class system of English society. *Bully,* on the other hand, is set in a

private school in the United States, its leafy and prosperous setting suggesting one of those preparatory schools in the northeast of the country (in states such as New England, Massachusetts or Connecticut) which gave the world the word 'preppy'. In *Tom Brown's Schooldays* Hughes celebrates the public school as the site where 'England' is formed and where boys are transformed into the imperial men who will become the soldiers and administrators of the British Empire. *Bully,* on the other hand, reflects the disillusionment and scepticism of late modernity, where individual subjects no longer derive their identify from institutions such as religion and public schools, and where the influence of feminism and civil rights movements has reshaped earlier hierarchies of value.

Despite the temporal and geographical distance between them, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and *Bully* depict a strikingly similar habitus and a common set of themes and tropes, demonstrating the longevity of school texts and the consistency of the genre (including the parodic forms of which *Bully* is an example). In both, school life is structured by a relatively unyielding schedule of classes, periods of recreation, and episodes of strenuous activity incorporating team sport (in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*) and fighting (in *Bully*). Indeed, team sport and fighting have a good deal in common, since both involve competition, the infliction of pain, and displays of physical strength. Regimes of control and surveillance are in evidence in both Rugby and Bullworth, where senior students wield power as proxies for teachers. In *Tom Brown's Schooldays,* such senior boys can be agents for good, protecting smaller boys from the bullies who prey upon them. In *Bully*, however, prefects are without exception violent and thuggish, speaking to contemporary unease about the effects of hegemonic masculinity on identity-formation.

Prominent among the themes addressed in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* are the boys' negotiations with the townspeople of the town of Rugby. The tradesmen, shop-owners and farmers who feature in the novel function as reminders of a classed and gendered world outside the masculinist, privileged domain of Rugby. Relations between the Rugby boys and the townspeople thus prefigure relations between the Rugby boys and their inferiors once, as adults, they are in positions of power and influence as lawyers, medical men and public servants. The town of Bullworth is more stratified than Rugby, with shops which serve the needs of the Bullworth students, an area (Old Bullworth Vale) inhabited by the richest of Bullworth citizens, an industrial zone ironically named Blue Skies, and a sleazy, downmarket area (New Coventry). As well as showing the demarcation between rich and poor citizens,

Bully points to the effects of social exclusion and discrimination in late modernism: the vagrants and shabby tenement buildings of New Coventry; the Happy Volts Asylum in the south of the Blue Skies area. In contrast to the depiction of happy Rugby villagers in *Tom Brown's Schooldays,* evincing an attitude of tolerance ("boys will be boys") toward the exploits of the Rugby students, the citizens of Bullworth display a variety of attitudes toward Bullworth Academy students, ranging from obsequiousness to hostility. Of course it is true to say that Hughes's England was riven with divisions between rich and poor; it is also the case that its portrayal of Englishness is based on the assumption that such divisions are right, proper and even divinely ordained. Such assumptions are absent from *Bully,* which conducts a critique of class and economic divisions as well as a commentary on the resentment and anger of those who find themselves at the bottom of the economic and social hierarchy.

Many of the tropes which feature in *Tom Brown's Schooldays* emerge in *Bully* in refracted and ironic forms. Thus, sport is treated as a metaphor for life in the world of Rugby: to play hard and demonstrate sportsmanship is to demonstrate one's fitness to become an active and useful member of society, preserving and protecting the prestige of the institution of Rugby. As I have said, fighting substitutes for sport in *Bully,* but Jimmy's encounters with the various Bullworth cliques do not point to a set of values beyond themselves; rather, they foreground the unreliability of group affiliations, since students are principally concerned for their own survival rather than looking to the good of the group. Other tropes which appear in both texts and which disclose marked shifts in ideological terms include the distinction between private and public; relationships between home and school; systems of authority and of resistance; relations between male and female characters; and depictions of homosociality.

On the face of it, *Bully* would seem to be relatively innocuous in comparison to many teen texts located in school settings. The PlayStation II version which I played involves no sexual behaviour beyond pashing (Jimmy can kiss girls and some boys); no-one dies; its language is relatively tame. When the game was launched, Jimmy's option of kissing boys was extensively discussed on online sites such as Joystiq and Gamespot, where the consensus opinion was that such gameplay elements were unexceptionable; relatively few expressions of disapproval appeared in these and similar sites, suggesting that players of *Bully* saw them either as an unremarkable or "normal" aspect of the school setting, or as a

strategy calculated to tease and provoke players. In the *Bully: Scholarship Edition* for Wii, players receive twenty points for the "Over the Rainbow" achievement of kissing twenty boys, while the "Casanova" achievement of kissing twenty-five girls attracts twenty points. This development extends the PS2 version and normalises same-sex attraction within the game.

There are other respects in which *Bully* is less obviously subversive than many films and television series located in school settings. Classroom scenes in school-based films are typically sites of anomie, boredom and even insurrection. In contrast, *Bully* players are obliged to attend classes which constitute puzzles or games inside the game, and when successful they acquire skills or items which later assist them in missions. Despite widespread moral panics about video game violence, *Bully* exercises tight controls over the kinds of violence permitted in the game, and the characters against whom violence is tolerated; for instance, Jimmy can fight bullies or trip up prefects, but he cannot behave violently toward girls or young characters or nerds without consequences such as detention. Why, then, has *Bully* aroused such fear and alarm: banned by Walmart in the United States and by Dixon Stores in the UK, excoriated by education systems, politicians and experts on bullying; the object of a court case brought by the rightwing warrior Jack Thompson, who in 2006 took *Bully* to court in an attempt to prevent its launch in the United States. Thompson lost the case and subsequently wrote an open letter to the judge in which he said: "You have consigned innumerable children to skull fractures, eye injuries from slingshots, and beatings with baseball bats" (http://au.gamespot.com/news/6159812.html). That is, Thompson reads the game as a mirror of the real: episodes when the protagonist Jimmy Hopkins uses a slingshot to annoy his opponents the preppies, or sets about them with a baseball bat, are interpreted as mimesis. Secondly, the young players envisaged by Thompson have no agency or capacity for reflection, but are doomed to repeat in the real world what they have experienced in the mirror world of the game.

While Thompson misses the point that *Bully* is more artful parody than mirror of "real life", he obscurely grasps the fact that video games are anchored in the real, in a way not true of experiences of reading fiction or viewing films. First, the game is accessed only through the embodied actions of the player who manipulates the controls which move Jimmy Hopkins around Bullworth Academy and the town of Bullworth. As Alexander

Galloway says, "The gamer is significantly more than a mere audience member, but significantly less than a diegetic character. It is the act of doing, of manipulating the controller, that imbricates the gamer with the game" (http://gamestudies.org/0401/galloway/). Secondly, video games do not exist as texts until they are played; and each player approaches the game differently, depending upon disposition, experience of gaming, and knowledge of the world and of texts. Thirdly, unlike books which can be picked off a shelf and sampled, video games require that equipment is set up; in the case of *Bully,* that PlayStation 2 is attached to a television set, the DVD activated, the sound at the right level. The business of setting up the game foregrounds its artificiality as a world apart, but it also navigates between the game and the real world in which it is played. Moreover, *Bully* is located within a vast system of paratexts including reviews, websites, cheat sites, walkthroughs and fansites, which exist because players enjoy exchanging views and information about games. As well as existing within a web of paratextual relations, playing is a social practice. *Bully* is a one-person game played on a console, and thus does not incorporate the online communication and shared enterprises common in Multiplayer Online Games. Nevertheless, the virtual and real-world communities which cluster around games constantly engage in discussions about strategies, experiences and opinions.

The most obvious explanation for the moral panic surrounding *Bully* is that video games, like older forms such as the novel, film and television, provide a ready explanation for antisocial and violent behaviour by the young. While Young Adult literature is commonly blamed for a variety of crimes (such as promoting sexual behaviour, obscene speech, self-harm or suicide), the book is not in itself regarded as an object of fear or alarm. The video game, however, does not possess the cultural capital of the book, which is associated in Western cultures with knowledge and with the promulgation of cultural values. The lack of any firsthand experience of games does not generally inhibit their critics; that they are video games is enough. The second factor is the fear and alarm evoked by the title *Bully* in the context of widespread cultural anxieties about bullying in schools and debates as to its causes and effects. When Rockstar retitled the game *Canis Canem Edit* (*Dog Eat Dog*), the original title continued to be invoked, together with the contention that the game teaches players to bully. The third factor, which I focus on in this paper, relates to a sense that video games have a problematic relationship with "real life"; that they blur boundaries

between game and reality, and that they blunt the capacity of young people to make moral decisions in real life.

Bully and the postmodern

These factors relate, broadly, to modes of representation in *Bully,* and to the ideological frameworks which inform the game. I would argue that *Bully* is in many respects a postmodern text, and that its ideologies are to be located in its propensity for interrogating received views and representations, rather than in any transparent or obvious system of values. In contrast to the humanist belief in a universal impulse to produce narratives which make sense of human experience, postmodern textuality is sceptical both of the existence of such a universal impulse, and of the capacity of narrative systems to unproblematically encode human experience. Rather, postmodernist texts draw upon the intertexts of history and of fiction to engage in parodic reinventions of the past and of textuality. Seen in this light, *Bully* can be read as a postmodern parody of school stories and of the assumptions and attitudes of contemporary society. To be sure, postmodernism is often associated with a lack of attention to politics and political questions; in *The Idea of Culture,* for instance, Terry Eagleton claims that "the postmodern cult of the socially constructed body … has been closely linked with the abandonment of the very idea of a politics of global resistance" (2000, p. 111). However, postmodernist parody is invested in the social and ideological systems to which it alludes, since it both depends upon and challenges these systems. Linda Hutcheon points out that "even the most self-conscious and parodic of contemporary works do not try to escape, but indeed foreground the historical, social, ideological texts in which they have existed and continue to exist" (1988), pp. 24-5). *Bully* foregrounds the conventions of school narratives and (more importantly) the assumptions and values which inform them, engaging players in the action of the game while simultaneously distancing them from its existents. This strategy positions players to critique the game as they play it, preventing any simple or straightforward experience of immersion in the game or identification with the figure of Jimmy.

In *Image, Music, Text* Roland Barthes says that "A text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a

tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1977: 146). When Barthes wrote this description of the postmodern text in the 1970s he privileged the medium of print ("a variety of writings"). Like many video games, *Bully* takes the postmodern further: it cannibalises and alludes to various texts and modes – print, film, TV, other games, refusing to adhere to the conventions of one or the other – and it evades attempts to systematise or master it. It is, quite simply, too clever for the likes of Jack Thompson.

Bully's hyperrealistic depiction of the Bullworth setting has a retro feel and look which makes it both like and unlike contemporary school settings. Like the genre of science fiction, which introduces into its narratives novel phenomena, or nova, which are nevertheless explicable in relation to empirical and rational principles, the world of *Bully* negotiates between realism and fantasy. For instance, when players have worked through the first "Chapter" of the game, they can (in the person of Jimmy) escape from the confines of Bullworth Academy to explore the town of Bullworth, where they can take on missions and get up to various kinds of mischief. One way of travelling to the town is by skateboard, another by bicycle, exhilarating journeys in which players can collide with cars or fall from the road without being hurt. There are also rules of a quasi-realistic kind: for example, classes start at 9 am and 1pm; and curfew is at 11 pm; if students are still up at 2 am they pass out and can be robbed of their valuables. As in science fiction, then, phenomena are internally consistent and interpretable; they are also novel enough to effect what Darko Suvin calls "cognitive estrangement" (Suvin, 1979, p. 4), a strategy which distances players from characters and events and alerts them to the constructedness of the game and its components.

Jimmy goes to art class

As Jimmy progresses around Bullworth Academy on his way to art class, he encounters students as well as teachers and prefects. Characters are identified by their clothing, appearance and demeanour as members of one or other of the Bullworth factions: nerds, jocks, preppies or greasers. Snatches of conversation and monologue drift around: for instance:

> "I knew there was something I'd forgotten to do."
> "I don't understand why the world can't live up to my standards."
> "Why don't I start a rumour that I'm a princess."
> "If I don't get that A, my mom will be so disappointed."
> "Why are boys so confusing?"

Despite the fact that these and hundreds of similar utterances are completely formulaic, repeated many times over the course of the game, they convey the illusion that Bullworth is populated by adolescents whose subjectivities evade the gameplay. Even when individual characters feature, such as the nerd Algernon, with his unfastened fly and weak bladder, the game contrives to suggest a history and psychology; yet these group and individual identities are entirely self-referential, elements in a system constituting its own simulated reality.

The art class is conducted by the glamorous Ms Philips, about whom the *Guide to Bullworth Academy* says:

> Ms Philips often goes above and beyond the call of duty, often sitting as a life model for her students. Since she arrived at Bullworth, Ms Philips has persuaded the academy to expand the arts curriculum to … include photography. Both subjects are now student favourites, due in small part to Ms Philips' uplifting endowment of the ability to inspire creative poise.

The reference to Ms Philips's "uplifting endowment" draws attention to the sniggering schoolboy humour which it evokes, at the same time that it mock the obviousness and crassness of this style of humour.

The painting class which Jimmy attends involves an intertextual link to the 1980 arcade game, Pac Man. Jimmy must paint squares without being "zapped" by various floating attackers; each square forms a part of the picture, the whole of which is eventually revealed as a study of Ms Philips reclining seductively (if fully clothed) on a couch. The game casts Ms Philips as a Mrs Robinson figure, the *femme fatale* of Bullworth. Later in the game, Jimmy gains the impression that she is sexually interested in him, but discovers that she has merely used him to pave the way for her liaison with the alcoholic English teacher, Mr Galloway. It is easy enough to identify the anti-feminist implications of the Ms in Ms

Philips' name (she is the only female character to be attributed this title) as well as the sleazy associations of the quotation attributed to her in the College Prospectus on the *Bully* website: "This is the year I'm going to find emotional fulfilment; I can *feel* it", a statement delivered with an emphasis which suggests an excess of emotionality. The photographs of Ms Philips and other faculty are juxtaposed against a description which reads as follows:

> At the front line of our battle against sloth and degeneration is one of the finest faculty bodies ever assembled. Professional and honest, passionate and dedicated, our accomplished staff is full of true role models that are perfect to teach your children the values of integrity, virtue and valor.
> (http://www.rockstargames.com/bully/prospectus/)

The "Faculty bodies" featured opposite this description are presented as a motley collection of dysfunctional characters, each attributed with a statement which raises questions about her/his fitness to act as a "true role model". The clichés of the Prospectus are thus exposed as so much window-dressing; at the same time, however, the phrase "Faculty bodies" refers in a particular way to the figure of Ms Phillips, whose corporeality is thus foregrounded.

Nevertheless, it is curiously difficult to engage in a critique of what seem like anti-feminist and anti-female representations and narratives in *Bully,* because if we situate them in relation to anti-feminist discourses in the "real" world, we are driven back onto the circularities of the game and its signifying systems. In its parody of the lustful 15-year-old panting after his art teacher, and of the over-sexed single woman, the game buys into sexual fantasies at the same time that it mocks them. If it evokes real-life instances of inappropriate sexual relationships between teachers and pupils, it is also "only a game" – a constructed and mediated hyperreal with its own logic. The language of the College Prospectus refers to and parodies countless School and College Prospectuses which extravagantly promote the virtues and abilities of teaching staff. Like other forms of parody it calls into question not merely the "truth" of such promotional material, but also the authority of language itself.

Vagina dentata and systems of class

The next stretch of play I intend to discuss is a challenge entitled "Weed Killer". Jimmy is summoned into the biology classroom, and in a cut scene Dr Slawter the biology teacher shows Jimmy his very large *crapula maxima fortissima* (Venus flytrap). The object of Dr Slawter's envy and resentment is the *crapula maxima fortissima* owned by the rich boy Derby Harrington, of Harrington Hall, where Bullworth's preppies are accommodated in a setting befitting offspring of the country's "financial elites" (*Guide,* p. 13). Dr Slawter's favourite saying is: "There are two sides to biology: life and death"; the mission he gives Jimmy relates to death. Their conversation is as follows:

> "Look at that plant, boy. Magnificent, isn't it? A *crapula maxima fortissima* – a rare and precious Venus flytrap! Unfortunately, there is a boy at this school, Derby Harrington, who was given such a plant by his father. His father is NOT a nice man. Derby is NOT a nice boy. They keep that plant to belittle my collection. There are two sides to biology, boy. Life...and death. Do I make myself clear?"
>
> "Very clear sir. You want me to kill Derby Harrington. Yeah, I'll get right on that."
>
> "Not the boy, boy! The plant, boy! Kill the plant!"
>
> "Oh...right."

Jimmy's misapprehension about his target alludes both to his characterisation as an action man incapable of subtlety, and also, reflexively, to the fact that this is *not* a game about killing, unlike (say) Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto*. The game's playful use of Latin in *"crapula maxima fortissima*" (the botanical name for this plant is *Dionaea muscipula*), suggests the vagaries of schoolboy Latin and its potential for puns and wordplay. In visual terms Dr Slawter's Venus flytrap is an impressive spectacle, with large, fleshy leaves and threatening spike-like protuberances. Dr Slawter looks upward toward his plant, which seems to loom over him. Indeed the *crapula maxima fortissima* resembles the *vagina dentata*, the "female monster, or monstrous-feminine" (Creed, 1993, p. 1) who haunts national mythologies and horror films, and in this respect *Bully*'s linguistic and visual representations of the Venus flytrap allude to the overheated imaginations of adolescent boys and their fear of the

feminine. The figure of Ms Philips constitutes another manifestation of the Venus flytrap, and an episode involving the schoolgirl Eunice also draws upon this imagery.

Jimmy's excursion to Harrington Hall requires that he take on the clothes and appearance of a preppy: having selected an aquaberry sweater and cargo pants ("aquaberry" being a combination of Aquascutum and Burberry), he visits the barber in the town of Bullworth, selecting from haircuts including "Good boy", "Heart-throb", "Neat" and 'shaggy". He selects a "heart-throb" cut and is rewarded when his appearance is praised by one of the preppies he meets on the street: "Your hair looks great". Jimmy has attended all his English classes and as a consequence has amassed an enhanced supply of conversational gambits which he can use instead of fighting. When he reaches Harrington Hall and encounters the macho preppy Bif Taylor, then, he engages in pleasantries with him instead of a fist-fight; this saves time and enables Jimmy to search for the *crapula maxima fortissima*. Once he has killed the plant, Jimmy returns to the biology classroom to report to Dr Slawter, who gives him $15 as a reward. He can use this money for a variety of purposes, such as buying flowers for girls so that they will kiss him.

The "Weed Killer" episode is infused with parodic references to real-world features of contemporary consumer societies. The aquaberry label, for instance, reeks of privilege, and when Jimmy wears his aquaberry sweater and sports his heart-throb haircut he is mis-recognised as one of theirs by the snobbish preppies. The setting of Harrington Hall, too, is replete with the signifiers of new wealth claiming cultural capital in the form of baronial halls, corridors lined with portraits, vast fireplaces. The "Weed Killer" mission has a loose narrative (for instance, we are offered no insight into Dr Slawter's antagonism toward Derby Harrington); but the pleasure of the game lies in action and in the player's virtual experience of spatiality. When Jimmy enters Harrington Hall his masquerade enables him to enter a world marked by class and wealth, a space normally inaccessible to him. Players have no choice but to invest in Jimmy's success in order to progress through the game, and the action of the "Weed Killer" itself proposes a preference for Jimmy (bluff, physical, ordinary) over the preppies and their self-important posturing. Without necessarily recognising this at a conscious level, then, players are positioned to collaborate in what Hutcheon describes as "parodic intertextuality" (188, p. 135). In *Bully* this takes the form of signifiers of a pseudo-British, upper-class aesthetic (portraits, timber-lined halls, stuffed animal heads) coupled with references to British public schools and their traditions. By

aligning players with Jimmy, the game challenges class divides, exposing the privileges accruing from money and social standing.

Eunice, "that weird chick"

Like many video games, *Bully* organises its gameplay around short episodes where a character seeks to achieve a specified goal. In Chapter One, "This is Your School", Jimmy's mission is to find a student, Eunice, whose box of chocolates has been stolen by another student, Constantinos, and to return the chocolates to her. He must find the girls' bathroom, where Eunice is weeping over her loss, accept the quest from her, retrieve the chocolates from Constantinos, and restore them to Eunice. Jimmy can choose between hitting Constantinos and snatching the chocolates, or paying him for them. He returns to the girls' bathroom, where he restores the chocolates to Eunice. A scene ensues during which Eunice kisses Jimmy. The moment of the kiss comprises what Galloway refers to as a "machine act" (2006:19-25), in which the game, as it were, takes over from the player by imposing a sequence of actions over which the player has no control. Such "machine acts" are rare in *Bully,* in which players generally choose among various options for action.

As a player I bring to the game a consciousness of issues relating to the body: ideals of thinness for females, muscularity for males, strategies of objectification, and so on. While moving around Bullworth, I was conscious of how depictions of bodies and clothing defined the various groups: the muscular jocks, the uncool, bespectacled nerds, the polished, well-dressed preppies. The depiction of Eunice, "that weird chick" (in the words of Gary, the psychopathic loner who guides Jimmy around Bullworth in Chapter One), is a troubling one: she is overweight, unhappy; and she clearly has a crush on Jimmy. There is a touch of pathos, too, in the depiction of the stolen chocolate box, which is heart-shaped, hinting at a desire for romance. On one hand, the game seems to be playing into gendered stereotypes; at the same time, playing subjects are positioned ambiguously in regard to Jimmy, whose bad reputation is signalled through the snippets of conversation we hear as students pass him in the corridor: "I hear that new boy's killed six people"; 'so you're a tough guy then". It is significant that players have no agency in this moment: Eunice kisses Jimmy enthusiastically while he shrinks from contact with her and says "Sheesh!"

The game offers no straightforward ethical orientation to the kiss. While Jimmy retrieves Eunice's chocolates, his motives are scarcely altruistic; and his response to the kiss is disdainful. We have scant access to his inner life, apart from cut scenes in which he engages in dialogue. He is thus a figure onto whom the player can project motivation and purpose, and in this respect he is all surface, a postmodern identity without depth. This does not mean that the world of *Bully* is without ethics, but rather that like postmodern texts more generally it is, in Linda Hutcheon's words, "a curious mixture of the complicitous and the critical" (1988:201): players are complicit with Jimmy's treatment of Eunice but they are nevertheless invited to critique the very representation in which they are, as Galloway says, imbricated. Ambivalence and ambiguity are thus built into *Bully*'s gameplay and representational modes.

What, then, does *Bully* teach Jimmy (and the player) through the moment of the kiss? I would argue that in a game which so self-consciously plays with representations and represented practices of hegemonic masculinity, this moment of gameplay confronts playing subjects by its refusal to allow them an object; that is, intentionality. The kiss places Eunice momentarily in the position of the player as she acts upon Jimmy. But of course Eunice is the wrong kind of girl for this role; and so the moment of the kiss comprises a parody of female sexuality and of the fear of the feminine that lurks beneath displays of hypermasculinity, thus affording another example of *vagina dentata*. Another way of reading this moment is to see Jimmy's uncomfortable reaction to Eunice's kiss as playing out a larger discomfort in its reminder of the world outside the game and of other "weird chicks" who might similarly be teased or bullied. Here as elsewhere *Bully* confronts, provokes and troubles; it provides no answers, but sets up questions through its representational modes and its gameplay. In this way it is a postmodern text for young players, requiring them to engage not merely with the actions whereby Jimmy moves through the game, but with the complex issues these actions evoke.

Nowhere in the "Eunice" episode is there the slightest hint that the authorities of Bullworth Academy might take an interest in the welfare of a girl student who has been subjected to bullying behaviour. On the other hand, it is clear that Dr Crabblesnitch and his staff are highly adept at various forms of manipulation and control. The charges made against *Bully* – that it normalises bullying and conducts a tutorial in how to be a bully – are at odds with how the game positions its players. The pace of the game, and the multiplicity

of missions and tasks on offer, mean that episodes involving fighting are relatively unattractive. The charms of the town of Bullworth and the possibilities of adventures and excitement in its streets and various establishments beckon; in comparison, yet another fight with the preppies affords a less challenging alternative. Moreover, the game precludes bullying by penalising Jimmy if he hits a smaller or weaker student; and rewards behaviours (such as the Eunice episode) where he defends students who are bullied. Rather than a primer for bullies, *Bully* functions as an argument against bullying.

The virtual world of the game and its play of hyperreality does not preclude agency. The agency of players resides in a series of negotiations between game design, player, and the possibilities of the game itself, which in a complex system like *Bully* always exceed its design. Perhaps (although this is almost certainly to attribute deeper knowledge of the game than its critics possess) what so shocks (some) adults about *Bully* is not that it teaches players to bully but that it depicts adults as manipulative and corrupt. Such representations are, however, also part of the game. The retro setting of *Bully,* itself a distancing strategy, evokes the "generation gap" of the 1950s; in particular, Holden Caulfield's disdain for adults as phonies. Here again we are driven back onto the self-referential logic of the game, which parodies both the adolescent angst of its caste of characters, and the fictionality of that angst. Jimmy is no Holden Caulfield, since he lacks the inner life which Salinger exposes through Holden's first-person narration. Whereas Holden dreams of being the "catcher in the rye" by saving the innocent children who play in the rye-field and who stray near a dangerous cliff, *Bully* contests the humanist notions which inform this conception of childhood innocence. The game does not promote any clear set of ethical and ideological principles; rather, it raises questions about symbolic systems and their operations in late capitalism.

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