

Breaking Realities:

A Subjective Account of Gaming as a Catalyst for the Development of Consciousness

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## ABSTRACT

As a hardcore gamer turned consciousness explorer, I have had a unique opportunity to compare the states of consciousness produced by video game play with those brought on by traditional mystical practices. A few key experiences led me to recognize similar phenomena while entering and leaving virtual realities, as while crossing in and out of altered states brought on by meditation or psychedelics. These transition phenomena bookend a process of deconstructing one reality in order to fully engage with a new one. This “breaking of reality,” reveals that realness is not an intrinsic property of reality, but rather a construction of the mind. In this way, video game play has served me in developing the mental flexibility needed to productively explore higher states of consciousness. This chapter will examine the experiences that led to these insights, and consider the potential effects of gaming on my development of consciousness.

## INTRODUCTION

Video games have been a part of my life for as long as I can remember, and for a time, I really let myself go. During the first six months of my freshman year of college, I lost myself in the virtual, and my desire to remain there eclipsed much of my real life. It was a rough time for me, but the more I played, the more clearly I was able to perceive the effects gaming had on my heart and mind. My observations led to reflection, writing, and eventually a short film called *As Real as Your Life* [2005]. The general message of the film was simple: video games played a formative role in the development of my identity and worldview. Video games were my greatest source of emotional fulfillment and meaning. At the time, in 2006, people seemed genuinely shocked by the idea that video games were more than just entertainment, but by now this old news. In her recent book, *Reality is Broken*, pop game designer Jane McGonigal (2011) codifies this idea in a vision of the future where life is made more fulfilling by grafting game ingredients onto real life. This process of “gamification” has become the mantra of corporate marketers and peace-loving educators alike. Video game mechanics applied virtually or in real life, have proven to reliably produce mental engagement and emotional fulfillment.

*As Real as Your Life* also contains a far subtler, and potentially more powerful message. In the penultimate shot of the film I sit on a city bench looking dejected. A man costumed as Mario (of Nintendo fame) walks up, consoles me for a moment, and then offers me a hand. We walk together into the unknown. Fade to white. Over this sequence is the following voice over:

What I have only recently come to realize is that beyond the graphics, sound, game play and emotion it is the power to break down reality that is so fascinating and addictive to me. I know that I am losing my grip. Part of me is just waiting to let go.

My gaming had begun to subtly alter my sense of what was real, and in this I recognized a power that transcends mental and emotional engagement, a power to “break down reality.” In the five years since making the film, I’ve endeavored to better understand the specific ways in which video games break reality, and how this process relates to the development of consciousness. By playing video games with the express purpose of observing my inner experience I discovered similar phenomena while entering and leaving virtual realities, as while crossing in and out of altered states brought on by meditation or psychedelics. The characteristics of this meta-experience do not depend upon the content of the experience but rather the direction of the transition. In transitioning between states of consciousness, I have found that the constructed nature of reality is most clear. In this way, video games, like other altered states, have helped me to understand that the sensation of realness is not an intrinsic property of reality, but rather a quality that I project onto a given sensory experience. This chapter will examine the key experiences that helped me arrive at these insights.

Before moving on, let me offer some clarification. I’ll leave defining consciousness to someone with more degrees, but for the purposes of this chapter, I mean consciousness to be the ongoing process by which raw sensory input (or lack thereof) is transmuted into the subjective experience. With this working definition, shifts of consciousness are

simply variations in this continuous process. When a large enough shift occurs, the new pattern is experienced as a discreet state of consciousness. This chapter will focus on the transitions in and out of states of consciousness, including ones caused by video game play. I will compare states of consciousness in the language of scale, rather than height, which is traditional (e.g. higher state of consciousness, peak states). Describing changes in consciousness in terms of the expansion and contraction has always felt most natural to me.

Like my film, what follows is intended as a window into the subjective experience of an introspective gamer. I will begin with an account of my first, and most dramatic, trip into an altered state. The expansion, and subsequent contraction, of consciousness I observed was the first step towards recognizing the transitional phenomena of video game play.

#### INTO THE VOID

In a blaze of explosions, the wooden tower catches fire. The energy of the crowd surges, and when the tower finally collapses, the restless crowd erupts, rushing in towards the smoldering core. I hold my ground as bodies graze past me, like space dust sucked into a collapsing star. It is 2008, my first time at Burning Man<sup>1</sup>, and the manly dose of LSD I took is just kicking in (also a first for me). Reality as I knew it was like a ship, sailing on a sea of boundless awareness. The LSD was like a gathering storm, tossing reality wildly on ever growing waves of unfiltered awareness. Every sense felt harshly amplified. My

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<sup>1</sup> *Burning Man* is an annual gathering of some fifty thousand free spirits who elect to construct, and live in, an enormous desert tent city for a week of self-expression and “radical self-reliance.”

little ship began taking on water, and I knew I was going down. Time began looping, ever more rapidly. The loops grew so short and fast that eventually the past and future no longer existed. I plunged into the turbulent waters. Disoriented and overwhelmed, I clung desperately to the flotsam and jetsam of reality, but eventually the weight of the drug pulled me below the choppy surface. When I finally let go, I was engulfed in profound peace and wholeness unlike anything I could have imagined. My sense of self, even the memory of my ever having been a self, was gone. In the real world, I was slumped on the floor of a giant circus tent in the middle of the desert, but my subjective experience encompassed all of creation.

This was the broadest state of consciousness I had ever experienced, vast and timeless. Such “peak experiences” are a hallmark of most mystical and religious traditions, and their significance has also been expounded in a secular context by psychologists William James, Carl Jung, and later Abraham Maslow who coined the term and detailed the characteristics of such experiences. They are temporary expansions of consciousness usually triggered by intense meditation, feelings of love, exposure to overwhelming beauty, as well as certain psychoactive drugs. Getting there by chemical means can be a disorienting but worthwhile journey.

While my entry into this peak state had taken only a few hours, the return trip was far more gradual. This transition state following a peak experience is often called the “afterglow” in parlance of psychedelics. Over 72 hours my state of consciousness

gradually returned to a normal. This period came with its own distinct feel, and, to my surprise, familiarity.

#### DOWNSCALING: CONSCIOUSNESS CONTRACTS

My perceptions were clear, as though each flow of sensory input had been perfectly channeled. Tastes and colors felt so real that they took on a quality of artificiality. No matter where I went, or what I did there, there was an effortless sense of being in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. I felt perfectly synchronized within the flow of the world. Normally positive (a sweet new pair of shoes) and negative (a flat tire on a scorched parking lot roof) experiences were all equally engaging and satisfying. It was as though the present moment had become simpler, easier to understand, and hold completely in my mind. To my surprise, this flavor of consciousness was not altogether unfamiliar. It felt just like a video game, as though, somehow, I was both player and avatar in the game of my own life.

Obviously this association is a result of my long relationship with video games. It's possible that the feeling was simply a conditioned response to some game-like aspect of my experience. I had experienced game "flashbacks" before, moments when some real life event or environment triggered a sense of virtual déjà vu. Such an experience inspired much of my film. While enmeshed in a multi-day *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* [Rockstar 2002] marathon, I briefly stepped outside my apartment for food when a low flying helicopter was approaching. The sound triggered a panic reflex conditioned while playing the game. The sensation only lasted a second or two, but the adrenaline rush was

palpable. In another case, after a couple days of non-stop *Mirror's Edge* [EA], a game in which you deftly navigate city rooftops, I found myself visualizing ideal ascent routes on urban façades ripe for heroic scaling. These are examples of game transfer phenomenon, a well-documented effect where virtual conditioning is mapped onto real life situations. In both these cases, the stimulus triggering the flashback is obvious.

The game-like quality of my LSD afterglow was considerably different. The source of the familiarity was very diffuse. As far as I could tell, there was nothing external, symbolically or in the structure of my experience, which resembled game content or mechanics. Perhaps more significantly, my awareness was free of the mental features that gaming usually engenders. I had no conscious goals or sense of purpose. There were no challenges. I was not receiving feedback based on my performance. Equanimity was my dominant emotion. Nonetheless, I remember thinking, “this is the best game ever.” The feeling faded as my state of consciousness normalized.

To better understand this seemingly paradoxical set of phenomena, I began a practice of self-aware gaming; closely observing the subtle aspects of my experience. Before switching on my console, I allow my thoughts to settle and I cultivate an attitude of careful observation. Once I begin playing, if I notice that I have forgotten my intention, I simply reestablish the attitude of observation and continue. At first this practice was fruitless, and I would spend most of my time completely lost in the game rather than making observations. Thankfully, my meditation practice has helped improve my concentration and made me more sensitive to my inner experience.



In doing this practice I observed that a typical console gaming experience for me begins even before the game loads. As soon as I make the decision to play a video game, a mental shift begins. Whatever is on my mind, or tugging at my heart, begins to withdraw. My attention focuses on the relatively simple virtual world. Awareness of anything outside of the game becomes diffuse; nothing in the real world matters right then. There is a sense of observing a discrete reality, and this, in itself, is fulfilling. As my awareness scales to the scope of the virtual it becomes more difficult to perceive it as separate. Mental and emotional engagement takes over, and the feeling of downscaling is overshadowed by a one pointed focus with the virtual task at hand.

It did not take long to identify the pattern of phenomena I had first noticed during the afterglow of the LSD. I concluded that this set of phenomena arise in transitioning into a more contracted state of consciousness. I later nicknamed this experience *downscaling*. It is the temporary period where the new reality feels whole because it is perceived from a distance. Just as it is impossible to perceive the earth as a sphere from a close distance, as awareness approaches the scale of the new reality, the perception of downscaling the fades.

In this way, the differential in the scale of consciousness for a given transition determines the intensity of the phenomena. This would explain why downscaling following my peak experience at *Burning Man* lasted for so long. The peak was so far beyond anything I had experienced before, that it took a full three days for my consciousness to return to a scope

I could sustain. Video games are a reliable source of downscaling because virtual worlds are (at least for now) reductions of reality. I believe simpler video games cause a greater perception of downscaling because they demand such a relatively small scope of consciousness.

I first observed downscaling with the games I was already playing. These tended to be the latest action and adventure titles smattered with the occasional first person shooter and real time strategy game. The pattern is always the same, though the duration and intensity of downscaling varies depending on the game and my current state. I later experimented with the games I played as a child. Thankfully, I still have my Super Nintendo (circa 1992), and a shoebox full of games. When I play these relatively simple (though often very challenging) games, I can easily embrace the entire virtual world with my mind, and the sights and sounds of these games feel pregnant with realness despite their limited resolution. It has been with these older games that I have experienced the strongest feelings of downscaling.

In my practice of self-aware gaming I often noticed instances of downscaling followed directly by flow, a self-fulfilling mental state identified by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi [1990]. Characteristic of flow is a one-pointed focus and immersion in a task; which often is the outcome of good game design. Since flow is essentially a tight focusing of awareness, I would expect downscaling to occur when transitioning into such a state.

Video games have proven to be the most reliable way for me to experience downscaling. My guess is that this phenomenon has been part of my gaming experience for a long time but I had never taken notice of it until it showed up outside its usual context. Since beginning a regular meditation practice, I have experienced spontaneous presentations of this feeling in real life, usually following periods of meditating more than my usual 30 minutes a day. Again, the duration and intensity varies, but the phenomena are the same. I have also found that meditating before gaming will increase the presence of downscaling, possibly because it temporarily expands awareness, increasing the relative difference in scale between my state of consciousness and that demanded by the game.

#### UPSCALING: CONSCIOUSNESS EXPANDS

If the contraction of consciousness has the predictable phenomena I have labeled downscaling, then it follows that the complimentary process, call it *upscaling*, might also have some common features. I have only experienced a few dramatic expansions of consciousness like my experience with LSD. During the transitions into these states, the flood of unfamiliar sensory information is overwhelming. Until my consciousness adjusts to encompass the breadth of this new reality, nothing much makes sense. At the time, there are no words that capture the apparent profundity of what is happening.

I experienced this phenomenon recently in a shamanic ritual involving ingesting psilocybin -- a naturally occurring psychoactive substance found in a variety of mushrooms. As my field of awareness expanded, I struggled to put into words what I was experiencing. There was too much sensory information for my current process of

consciousness to efficiently translate into a comprehensible reality. As I moved completely into the expanded awareness, the desire to describe my situation subsided. I floated into formless realms of omniscience. I had the intention to record some of my experience for later reference, so during the ceremony I kept a notebook in front of me. The next day I found page after page where I had simply written “this,” and then circled the word over and over. Clearly, I had difficulty translating my subjective experience into the language of normal consciousness. Even now, though I can remember the ceremony vividly, it is impossible to comprehend the experience looking back on it through the pinhole of my normal awareness.

Obviously psychedelics affect the mind in dramatic ways. What phenomena are aspects of expanding consciousness, and which are unrelated is impossible to say. One could look at my inability to form coherent thoughts as a kind of collateral damage. However, I have experienced far less intense, but parallel phenomena in meditation. In these cases, my mind has been calm and lucid, but my ability to understand what I am experiencing is still compromised. I can think straight, but what I’m experiencing does not compute. Knowing that I have the ability to snap myself out of it makes any disorientation less uncomfortable. As a novice meditator, this is still relatively unknown territory for me. I am, however, an expert gamer. Could video games also reveal something about the transition phenomena of expanded consciousness? If consciousness contracts upon entering the reality of a video game, then it follows that consciousness would expand upon returning to normal reality; almost like a typical altered state experience, but in reverse.

Let's look closely at the phenomena of leaving a video game reality. In my experience, there is an adjustment period after gaming, a few minutes during which the full bandwidth of sensory experience can feel overwhelming. Physicality is uncoordinated and dream-like. However, this brief disorientation is a far from the ineffable quality of a rapid expansions of consciousness I have described. To more closely study this transition out of gaming, I conducted a simple self-experiment. I attempted to play *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* [Bethesda 2011], a recent open world solo role-playing game, continuously for 24 hours. I wanted to see what the effect of such an intense exposure would be, and how I would feel upon returning to reality. The experiment was also a thinly veiled excuse to play video games all day.

I set up a schedule with five to ten minute breaks for food, physical movement, or a short meditation every hour. I had logged hundreds of hours playing the preceding game in the series so I felt an intuitive familiarity with the virtual world. Even though *Skyrim* is a very large, photo realistic, and complex virtual world, the feeling of downscaling presented in the usual ways. The virtual world felt complete and self-contained. I was present and active within the world, but felt distanced enough to maintain a strong sense of equanimity. Even with hundreds of potential quests before more, everything already felt complete. These feelings of equanimity diminished as I drew further into the game. After four hours, when my timer signaled me to take a break, I was fully absorbed in the drama of the game, laden with quests, and rushing about the virtual world like fiend. My consciousness was aligned with the game. By hour 12, the idea of stopping to do pushups

or eat seemed impossible. After 17 hours I was overcome with fatigue and collapsed on the couch and fell instantly into a deep sleep.

It was afternoon when I awoke. The rest of my day had a dream-like quality to it. I was definitely disoriented; rooms of my own home were unfamiliar. Everything felt pregnant with mystery and awe. My senses were heightened, almost to the point of discomfort. I felt like I had just been born, confused and overwhelmed despite the utter familiarity of my surroundings and activity. While eating a plum, my mouth felt disjointed, as though I was learning to taste for the first time. I carefully made a fire and curled up nearby, letting my body absorb the invisible waves of heat. By bedtime I felt normal again, and in retrospect, the altered state I traversed seemed even more ineffable. Though not as dramatic as transitions of consciousness I have witnessed in meditation, or with psychedelics, the disorientation, sensory novelty, and indescribable quality of this experience parallel other instances of expanding consciousness.

To reduce consciousness to a single dimension of expansion and contraction is obviously a gross over-simplification. Shifts in consciousness are not one-dimensional, but in my experience my scope of awareness is the most tangible characteristic of any given state. The concepts of upscaling and downscaling grew out of the very personal experiences I have described, as well as my unique relationship with video games. That said, within the context of my own life, upscaling and downscaling appear to be predictable sets of phenomena produced by certain shifts of consciousness. What I find most fascinating is

that these phenomena are contingent, not upon the qualities of the starting or ending state, but upon the relation of those states.

Based on the experiences I have described, it is possible to contextualize the altered state produced by video game play into a broader continuum of consciousness. My observations of upscaling and downscaling imply that this state is more contracted than my normal state of consciousness. It is widely held that the development of consciousness (i.e. the ability to achieve and maintain states of greater awareness) is central to spiritual development. Are video games then, in some way, a lower, or less desirable state of consciousness to practice? In my own life, my relationship with video games has never felt like a hindrance to my development of consciousness. Just to the contrary, I feel my spiritual development rests on a foundation I built playing video games growing up. Perhaps there is value, not only in achieving and maintaining expansive state of consciousness, but in simply transitioning between different states.

#### THE ROLE OF GAME PLAY IN MY DEVELOPMENT OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Upscaling and downscaling are my own way of understanding perceived changes in consciousness. How deeply my relationship with video games has altered the way I process realities is impossible to say. Obviously, someone without a history of gaming would not recognize the phenomena I've termed downscaling to be game-like. The experiential metaphor of gaming would not even be in his vocabulary. Perhaps even my awareness of shifts in consciousness is a skill developed through playing video games.

My belief is that from an early age video games trained me to break realities. Each game was an invitation to practice deconstructing and rebuilding a new world within my mind. I have always been a dreamer, someone all too willing to suspend disbelief for the call of imaginative play; perhaps, this why I took to video games with such zeal. Some of my most vivid childhood memories are of gaming. These are not memories of playing games, but rather frozen moments from within the virtual worlds I explored as a child. By the time I made my film I understood that video games have the power to alter one's relationship with reality, to transform patterns of consciousness.

My former dependency on video games was born out of dissatisfaction with reality. My intuition was that what I accepted as real was in fact a mental construction, from which I could potentially break out. Video games allowed me to practice freeing my mind. I would not be surprised if gaming considerably honed my ability to move between different states of consciousness, and increased my awareness of the transitions between states. In my meditation practice, as well as my limited experience with psychedelics, my willingness to step outside of reality has facilitated powerful experiences and access to expansive states of consciousness.

In the three years since Burning Man, I've played fewer and fewer video games. Meditation has become my primary practice for breaking reality. In a very subtle way, my overall experience of reality has shifted towards feeling more a video game. The frequency of spontaneous moments of downscaling has increased, and overall I feel as though I am subtly downscaling more and more of the time. So while gaming is no longer



a big part of my life, the skills and perspective I developed through gaming continue to play a role in my development of consciousness.

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter explored a few of the key experiences that have most informed my understanding of the role of video games in my development of consciousness. Altered state experiences, brought on by psychedelics, and later meditation, revealed phenomena reminiscent of video game play. By observing my inner experience closely while gaming, I discovered the same feelings arose at the start of game play. I named this set of phenomena *downscaling* because it characterized transitions into a contracted state of consciousness. I later identified a complimentary set of phenomena, *upscaling*, which occurs when consciousness expands. In downscaling, the bandwidth of awareness is reduced, and consciousness gradually contracts to match. During this process, there is temporary surplus of consciousness. Reality feels small and whole, and with this come feelings of equanimity and integration. In upscaling, the opposite occurs. Increased awareness causes consciousness to expand, and the temporary consciousness deficit causes disorientation, confusion, and feelings of awe. Reality becomes ineffable because there is too much of it to process. The intensity of these phenomena depends only on the relative shift in consciousness involved.

Upscaling and downscaling occur with video game play as well as other altered states. This confirms that, for me, video game play produces a distinct altered state of consciousness. If this is the case, then, as a lifelong gamer, I have been exploring altered

states since childhood. I recognized years ago that video games offered me the power to “break down reality” -- an activity to which I was addicted for a short time. I suspect video games helped me develop an ability to move readily through different states of consciousness, and generally made me more sensitive to subtle fluctuations of my inner experience. I believe there is an inherent benefit in directly experiencing transitions of consciousness. Independent from the content (of video games or other altered states), simply recognizing reality as a construction of the mind can be a powerful tool for spiritual growth. I am thankful that I no longer depend on video games to engage in this process. Traditional spiritual practices have proven to be a more sustainable alternative for me. While I no longer play video games on a regular basis, my virtual past is still part of who I am. When I sit and meditate each day, I am reminded of the ways in which gaming has shaped my consciousness. Most days, I am sure it has been for the better.

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