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Was Gawain a Gamer?

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An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
English Honors-in-Discipline Program

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Introduction

The experience of playing a game can be summarized with three key elements. The first element is the actions performed by the player. The second element is the player's hope that precedes his actions, that is to say the player's belief that such actions are possible within the game world. The third and most interesting element is that which precedes the player's hope: the player's encounter with the superplayer. This encounter can come in either the metaphorical sense of the player's discovering what is possible as he plots his actions or in the literal sense of watching someone show that it is possible, but it must, by definition, be a memorable experience.

What makes *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*^a my favorite poem is how it captures the dynamics underlying gaming's endless loop and the importance of the superplayer in beginning that loop. Neither a man nor a machine, the superplayer exists at a level of mastery thought unattainable by the human hand, and he reaches it exuding the seductiveness that only the cloak of the flesh can bring. As Jean Baudrillard wrote, "everything started with seduction, not with desire" (*Fatal Strategies* 142). This is what Gawain sees in his initial encounter with the Green Knight. The concept of a superplayer, at its core, describes someone who infringes on a player's sense of reality within the game by hinting that it may actually be possible to do what the player saw as impossible. In doing so, the superplayer seduces the player into chasing after that forbidden realm of the impossible. When the Green Knight coolly grabbed his own severed head, he, just as any superplayer does, made the impossible possible, thereby inspiring Gawain to, just as any player does, embark on a quest to replicate that achievement of the impossible.

^a I have sourced my quotations from the 1967 printing edited by Norman Davis, et al, with translations from Marie Borroff's translation in the 2006 *Norton Anthology of English Literature*. For points where I felt Borroff's translation too broad, I have noted where I use my own literal translation, created using the dictionary provided in said 1967 edition.

In simplest terms, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem about a game and, thus, the troubles faced by Gawain should be looked at under that lens. I do not feel that one can adequately explore the poem's construction of gender relations or its portrayal of the Other while ignoring how these elements are used to by the poem to raise grander questions about what it means to be a gamer. In attempting such an analysis of the poem, I will be turning to the work of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Although his work was primarily concerned with the late 20th century and early 21st century Western world and is, thus, commonly associated with the postmodernist movement, the tools that he provides in describing the nature of reality and its relationship with gaming are universal. Indeed, despite the poem in question having been written in the Middle Ages, I would argue that the recent spread of videogame culture makes the poem's questions about gaming just as relevant to analysis under a postmodern perspective as a historical one.

Due to Baudrillard's idiosyncratic usage of certain terms within his philosophy, some explanation is required as it relates to the vocabulary I will be adopting from him. Though perhaps the best known aspect of his philosophy is his account of the death of the real and the birth of the hyperreal, it must be emphasized that Baudrillard saw the real as an illusion that "begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the very same time as it begins to exist" (*Disappeared* 11). His theory of reality is similar to that described in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," in that he argued the subject has no means of interacting with the world outside of how it represents itself to the subject's senses. Baudrillard's primary contribution to this theory is the observation, "There is not just the illusion of a real world, there is also that of a real subject of representation" (*Intelligence of Evil* 40). Baudrillard explains, "The very definition of the real is that of which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction. ... At the end of this process of reproducibility,

the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 73). When he speaks of the real as that which can be reproduced, Baudrillard is invoking the aforementioned Platonic ideal of a reality that, though inherently subjective, is at least created by the subject’s direct encounter with an object’s representation.

With hyperreality, this traditional relationship between the subject and the object is disrupted by virtue of the subject accepting properties as real when they have no relationship to an object’s representation. In simplest terms, hyperreality is a lie that is widely accepted as being true. Baudrillard’s most common example to illustrate hyperreality is the medium of television and how the news media often uses it to report stories that have no basis in traditional perceptions of reality, but which are accepted as real by a public that craves spectacle. Baudrillard went as far as claiming, “The masses are pure object,” in the sense that the proliferation of media culture had led to a world where many individuals no longer took the active role associated with the subject in creating their own reality, but instead had assumed the passivity associated with the object in accepting the hyperreality being pushed by media outlets (*Fatal Strategies* 123)

Baudrillard saw his vision of modernity as not only bringing about the end of the real, but also the end of history. He wrote, “the acceleration of modernity ... has propelled us to ‘escape velocity’, with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and history” (*Illusion of the End* 1). The basis for Baudrillard’s claim appears to be similar to Jean-François Lyotard’s arguments against describing the world with a grand narrative. Baudrillard described the world of the late-20th century as taking place “after the orgy,” meaning that people had liberated themselves from the stereotypical roles that could be described with a grand narrative

(*Transparency of Evil* 1). The “orgy,” in this case, is a symbol for the various human liberation movements of the mid-20th century, such as feminism and its attempts to subvert traditional gender conventions leading to a world where “we are all transsexuals symbolically”

(*Transparency of Evil* 23).

I feel that it is appropriate to use this methodology in analyzing the poem as the story deals heavily in both the superseding of the real by the hyperreal and the role of liberation in creating such a scenario. The poet begins by recounting the times of gritty territorial wars culminating in the ascension of Arthur, which could be seen as a point of “liberation” in itself with the poet’s emphasis on leisurely activities over war. Yet, Arthur’s court, with its continued reliance on old chivalric values, gives us more a look at a world in the midst of Baudrillard’s orgy rather than one that is past it. Meanwhile, the Green Knight symbolizes the post-orgy, existing outside the chivalric conventions through his repudiation of the rules Arthur tries to impose on him, yet also indulging in such an extreme rejection of chivalry’s ideal of manhood that the poet, at one point, appears unsure if he is an actual man. The confrontation with the Green Knight effectively begins the court’s own transition into the post-orgy with many of the key points in the adventure that follows being characterized by the collision between the old chivalric reality and the Green Knight’s new game reality. Must decapitation by the axe really kill a man, or is there some way of surviving it? Does the symbol of Solomon adorning Gawain’s shield refer to a virtuous hero or cautionary tale for descent into excess? Is the girdle a magic item or just an overhyped piece of cloth? By the end, the once-simple court has fully transitioned into a post-orgy hyperreality with its embracing of the girdle, a symbol of both Gawain’s transsexual liberation and the repudiation of chivalry by the game’s reality.

The Green Knight's game serves as the catalyst for all these changes. I see it as no coincidence that Baudrillard claimed, "The world is a game," and argued that gaming, in turn, indicated a "passion for rules" (*Baudrillard Live* 46, *Seduction* 131). In understanding the complex mechanisms behind how a "passion for rules" can bring about a utopia of liberation defined by hyperreality, I feel that it is appropriate to turn to the work of the philosopher of sport, Bernard Suits in defining a game. In his book *The Grasshopper* he provides his most often-quoted version of the definition in his concise claim, "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (Suits 55). In the same book, he offers an expanded version of the definition:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude] (54-55).

Perhaps the most complex, but important, part of Suits's definition is his concept of "constitutive rules." Although the Gawain critic Victor Yelverton Haines rejects Suits's definition on the basis that a game world can exist with "God-made laws," Suits anticipates and refutes such an argument later in *The Grasshopper* (Haines 223). Suits uses the example of mountain climbing, arguing that even in a world where an elevator cannot be used to get to the top, a mountain climber would still be adhering to the game's constitutive rules because they would reject such means if available. Thus, Suits's phrase, "less efficient means," does not literally mean that there must be more efficient means, but that the player partakes in the means allowed by the game purely for the sake of doing such and would reject more efficient means if they were available.

This is key to Suits's later argument that a "utopia" would effectively be a world where everyone plays games all day every day. To game is essentially to do what one desires purely because it satisfies that desire and without any grander utilitarian purposes for doing such. Thus, from the vision of a utopia as a world built on satisfying desires and which removes any barriers in doing such, no other conception of a utopia is possible.

The most obvious counterargument one could use against Suits's claim is that there are other activities that can be described as having no purpose beyond satisfying desires for their own sake. Suits himself does not address why a utopia would be defined by gaming instead of, for example, pornography or action movies. My argument would be that Suits's definition with its requirement of a prelusory goal presupposes some possibility of failure built into the game, whereas the closest thing in other forms of entertainment is to simply quit. This is a key distinction. Because one cannot fail at movies and similar pursuits, viewers are put in the position of passively carting to the finish line and, thus, cannot escape consummating Baudrillard's characterization of the masses as "objects." Because, as has been claimed, "there is nothing outside the text," art forms that are driven by passive interpretation can only exist as artifacts of the grander political system that spawned them. This is reversed in games. The possibility of failure allows for a system where not only can the gamer restore their role as the subject by crafting their own active experience, but it is a necessity if a gamer desires to continue playing. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, "That which is done out of love always takes place beyond good and evil" (103). This importance of active experience in gaming means that the political realm of textual interpretation that dominates other art forms is forced into a secondary role to the apolitical realm of passion.

This is what Baudrillard describes in the phrase, “passion for rules.” Although Bernard Suits was attempting to define the act of playing a game, it would not be a stretch to view his conception of constitutive rules as comprising the game itself. And if “The world is a game,” as Baudrillard claims it is, what can a reality be but a set of rules one accepts? Yet, whereas the writer can only describe a reality with an existence dependent on surrounding political systems (because, again, “there is nothing outside the text”), the gamer, in directly interacting with a set of rules, participates in a new reality independent of the outside world. In this sense, games are realer than the Platonic real because, instead of ending at the representations, games turn them into instruments that are used to gain a deeper interaction with the senses that make such representations possible. Thus, in its ideal form, gaming aims to realize the passions of the real in a form exaggerated beyond what the rules of the real allow. Gaming is, as Suits posits, the antithesis to labor in that it not only offers liberation, but it uses the opportunities offered by liberation to construct a new reality built around pleasure while minimizing any inconveniences. Herein lies the link between the realization of a democratic utopia, gaming, and rules. In a liberated world, immersion in gaming’s hyperreality is the likely result because it allows for the ultimate liberation from liberation.

Before I analyze the poem using this system, however, there is one more crucial addition to be made to Suits’s theory of gaming. Although he adequately covers both the requirements and purpose behind gaming, he is missing an additional factor that must be present to bridge the gap between theory and practice, allowing the player to extract pleasure from the game’s framework. That factor has commonly been argued as “immersion,” but to fully understand what immersion is, I feel it is appropriate to reconsider the full implications behind Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality. Hyperreality inherently draws into question the concept of not only an

objective reality, but also a single subjective reality. Rather, a world of hyperreality is one of an infinite number of equally valid realities competing to immerse the individual. With this, the distinction between fact and fiction collapses. A news story, an action movie, and even Baudrillard's own philosophy all coalesce into competing realities. In this light, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's suspension-of-disbelief must be viewed as a crucial element in not only art but also in any experience possible, because it describes the individual's unconscious (or, possibly, conscious) effort to filter out excess information that would interfere with emotional investment in a particular reality. I will refer to this phenomenon of successful suspension-of-disbelief that makes possible the passions of gaming as "immersion."

For the reasons that I have given, to engage with the constitutive rules of a game is not merely to engage in a leisurely activity but to engage with a construction of a new reality. As I have explained, the possibility of failure is an important part of that reality, but it should not be taken as my claiming that winning does not matter. Rather, winning and losing are both equally important because the existence of one presupposes of the other and the passions derived from either one are dependent on its complex interactions with the other. For either winning and losing in a game to be possible however, the rules of the game must be accepted by the player, that is to say one must first be playing the game. Behind even the passions of winning and losing, in every player there lies a deeper reason for playing in the immersion that ultimately makes the aforementioned passions possible.^b Thus, the term "role-playing game" becomes a useless term, insofar as that the goal of every game is to enjoy the passions of playing a role made possible by the rules. Giving immersion a central role in gaming also puts the act of gaming in more of a

^b It should not be taken from this, however, that "I play for fun" is anything more than an absurd excuse for defeat given that a game, per Suits, requires a prelusory goal. Striving for that goal within the game's reality (playing to win) cannot be indicative of anything but a high level of immersion and, thus, a high level of passion (fun).

sliding scale based on the gamer's engagement with the game world, rather than the absolute of either playing a game or not as Suits seems to suggest.

However, this emphasis on immersion also reveals my major point of divergence with Baudrillard's own views on gaming, specifically his seemingly interchangeable usage of the term with gambling. The videogame critic Alex Kierkegaard argues, "scoring in games creates a game OUTSIDE the game (the king-of-the-ladder game), while demoting the actual game to a mini-game" (Web). I don't agree with his application of his claim, in that the scoring driving the "king-of-ladder-game" mentioned exists exclusively as a summarization of actions within the actual game, but I do think the claim has merit when applied to playing for cash or other prizes with value created outside the game (gambling). Again, my view of gaming as a vehicle for immersion allows the activity to represent more of a sliding scale than an absolute, but gambling's emphasis on prizes for their value outside of the game undeniably places it on the lower end of the scale. The reason the act of playing for something greater than the game itself (which I will hereafter refer to as gambling, though gambling can admittedly be a very immersive game if played as an end in itself) is opposed to gaming can be seen in two ways. Most clearly, if something is viewed as being greater than the game, the immersion is irreparably damaged because the game merely becomes a currency within some greater world rather than a world in itself. Secondly, and less obviously, gambling gives the game a definite endpoint. This is a less than preferable attribute of a game because, if we view gaming as aiming to create a reality more immersive and, thus, more passionate than that of the outside, it follows that it should continue to immerse the player as long as the player's body can allow.

The ultimate game would be one that can be replayed indefinitely. Gawain's apparent rejection of the elaborate pentagram to accept the simpler circular shape of the girdle serves as

the perfect symbol for his wholehearted acceptance of the simple pleasures comprising the passions of gaming's loop over the elaborate rituals of the chivalric hegemony. On one side, there is masochism, comprising the traditionally "negative" emotions of defeat such as anger and frustration, and on the other side is sadism, comprising the traditionally "positive" emotions of victory such as dominance and accomplishment. Seeking only extreme passion, a great player lives as the embodiment of Nietzsche's concept of amor fati. That is to say he understands that neither state is inherently better and enjoys them both in themselves, though the illusion that one might be better serves as a motivation for the player's actions. The resulting drive towards victory and the many inevitable defeats that it brings merely serve as vital illusions to make possible the true ecstasy of reversal of the two extremes. As Baudrillard writes, "The supreme orgasm is metamorphosis" (*Fatal Strategies* 160).

This leads us back to the superplayer as the mediator of these experiences within the game. The superplayer cannot be fully mystical because he exists as a part of the same system as the player, thereby allowing the player a special intimacy with him. Yet, his seductiveness lies in that he cannot be fully human either. Rather, he remains true to much of Baudrillard's description of the Other in *The Transparency of Evil*, existing purely as a created mental image of the player, rather than a state that any individual can attain on their own. Because the superplayer exists as the player's own personal creation, he, like the Other, is not someone whom the player wants to know through a direct meeting, but someone whom the player wants to follow and, in doing such, bask in the distance separating them. The key point of difference is that the superplayer, unlike the Other, does not seduce the player through the hint of any underlying secret but by baring all of its secrets. The superplayer provides the player with pornography of the game, exposing itself to conceal the game's loop through the tantalizing hint

of a new frontier. Thus, through baring its own secrets, the superplayer seduces the player by creating a new secret within the player himself, known as “hope.” The superplayer is what allows me to repeat myself forever, but, even more important than that, the false promise of unattained heights that he represents is what causes the loop to begin.

Part I

The year’s end is a fitting beginning for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. There is a sense that we are near the end. We are near the end of the orgy, the end of the real, and the end of chivalry. But, it would be too hasty to conclude that we are at the end of any of these things. As we see in the poet’s recounting of the universal history tradition, Arthur does not represent a hard break from but instead a firm part of history: “Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges, / Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle (But of those that here built, of British kings, / King Arthur was counted most courteous of all)” (25-26). Of course, this implication of Arthur as representing an apex also implies a downward slope afterwards.

What was it that made Arthur stand out to such a point that those who came afterwards could not follow? We soon get an answer with the poet’s description of his court. With the poet’s emphasis on leisure, there is a sense of the beginnings at least a partial liberation from the “werre and wrake and wonder (war and wrack and wonder)” that defined Britain’s past (16). Yet, the poet never states outright that war truly is over, and with the poet’s emphasis on both a young Arthur’s highly ritualized dinner and the allusion to the intricate hierarchal structure governing the knights there is a definite implication that the historical tradition of chivalry remains strong. Thus, the depiction of Arthur’s court early in the poem can be described as situating it in an odd place where, though the circumstances that gave rise to the historical traditions have waned, the actual work of adhering to them remained.

The arrival of the Green Knight gives a look into the future, in that he represents the confrontation of a court still in the thick of the orgy of liberation with a resident of the post-orgy. Whereas the chivalry seen in Arthur's court can be seen as pushing an ideal of masculinity neutered by tradition into rigid formality, the Green Knight displays an exaggerated masculinity free of constraints. Before the Green Knight even begins belittling the manhood of Arthur's knights, the poet's detailed description of his exquisite physical features positions him as existing on a plane of fearsome manliness exaggerated far above that of anyone in the court. Somewhat paradoxically, his lack of constraints allows him to so deeply embody manliness that the poet expresses doubt regarding whether he even is a real man, writing, "Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were, / Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene" ("Half a giant on earth I hold him to be, / But believe him no less than the largest of men") (140).

It must be stressed that what spurs on the court's stunned awe is not a view of the Green Knight as a superplayer of masculinity but as representing the masculinity of an extreme Other. The secret that the Green Knight uses to seduce the court does not lie in the beholder's uncertainty in the possibility of replicating that which is on display (as is the case with superplayer), but in the inimitable air of mystery characteristic of Baudrillard's Other. In simpler terms, what captivates the court is not the Green Knight's skill within the rules of his game but in his utter disregard for their rules. He showcases the unusual but not the impossible.

The Green Knight's role as a man who refuses to go along with the court's customs forms the core of his observation that "þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hyȝe," ("the praise of you, prince is puffed up so high") (258). When he goes on to balk, "Here is no mon me to mach, for myȝtez so wayke," ("Here is no man to match me, for might so weak") we must remember that his claim cannot be taken literally because comparing high scores in two different games is, by nature, an

absurd proposition (282). Rather, what he is pointing out is that the game that they are playing in the subdued masculinity, which Arthur's court has maxed out, is by nature inferior to the limitless excess underlying the form that the Green Knight embraces.

More than that, however, the Green Knight's challenge of the beheading game symbolizes his challenging the court to take a step back from their work and enjoy the exaggerated passions brought about by embracing a luscious attitude. The threat of decapitation is merely a constitutive rule to allow for the prelusory goal of basking in a sense of masculinity. It would be utterly backwards to characterize the game as a byproduct of reckless manliness because the game is what creates the concept of manliness. Far from suicidal, the Green Knight's game is, in a way, life giving in how he challenges the court to reject homogenization and carve out their own role.

If the Green Knight embodies a game that ignores chivalric conventions, Arthur serves as the embodiment of said chivalric conventions. Arthur's response to the Green Knight's challenge illustrates such a deep complacency in chivalry's hegemony that the thought of embracing some other set of rules appears impossible to him. This is clear in that rather than embracing the Green Knight's otherness by acknowledging the chivalric customs that he is transgressing, Arthur aggressively aims to supplant the Green Knight within chivalry's homogenization by extending such a kind offer to join the combat rituals even after the Green Knight makes it clear that his game exists separately from such things. Understanding this, the Green Knight continued proclaiming his challenge until it would go against Arthur's chivalric values for him to not accept it. Arthur accepts the challenge not because he has been seduced by the Green Knight's manliness, but out of a desire to uphold chivalry's manliness in the face of the Green Knight's attempts to infringe upon it. Gawain asks to step in, Arthur indicates his refusal of the Green

Knight's seduction by stepping aside and, he believes, allowing Gawain to do what Arthur was planning on doing. Overall, Arthur's decision to step aside represents both inadequate immersion within the game and complacent comfort with subdued chivalry.

Though not completely immersed, Gawain's response indicates a far greater acceptance of the Green Knight's game. His attitude shows some similarities with Arthur in his attempt to fit the game into chivalric combat by calling it a "melly" ("melee"), but his overall acceptance speech suggests a far greater level of immersion (342). Instead of only going along with the game, as Arthur does, because of how the Green Knight's insults are seen as infringing on his maxed-out chivalric manliness, Gawain embraces the Green Knight's portrayal of manliness as a massive mountain to be climbed by portraying himself as unaccomplished. Further, whereas Arthur reflects his desire to rid the court of the Other by telling Gawain, "redeȝ hym ryȝt" ("rule it aright"), Gawain anticipates his future exploration of the game world by asking the Green Knight where the Green Chapel will be (373).

Most important is the fact that Gawain went through with performing the decapitation. The Green Knight's survival of the decapitation is the quintessential act of a superplayer, running far deeper than merely presenting an alternative to the rules of gambling but making even those within chivalry question what was possible within their reality. Whereas Arthur was able to reconcile the Green Knight's prior discourse on manliness within his chivalry, the act of surviving a decapitation that utterly demolished the conception of what it was possible for a man to do within chivalric reality. Arthur is, thus, given two choices. He could either allow himself to be swept by the superplayer into the Green Knight's game, or he could consciously deny the events as he had seen them transpire and instead create a narrative that could be fit within chivalric reality. Evidently, Arthur chooses the latter. In this denial, however, Arthur

inadvertently plays into Green Knight's plan as he lies and, thus, consciously defies chivalric morality. More than merely being a lie to cope with how his reality has been transgressed, it is a lie that ignores morality for the sake of creating a passionate spectacle, thereby continuing the court's journey through the orgy and its liberation from the real. Thus, as the actions of a citizen from a vanishing world, the quest Gawain will go on to the Green Chapel to continue the game with the Green Knight may best be described as an early attempt to find the answer to the Baudrillard's old question, "What are you doing after the orgy?" (*America* 30)

Part II

The poet's stating in the initial stanza that "Ʒe forme to Ʒe fynishment foldez ful seldom" ("First things and final conform but seldom") is a fitting beginning to Part II (499). This section of the story illustrates the odd position the court found itself in, in the wake of the encounter with the Green Knight, where although it is clear they are still holding onto chivalric elements, there is also a sense of inevitability as elements of the Green Knight's game creep in. Our first look at this comes in the section where the poet describes Arthur holding a party that has the court mourning Gawain's departure. There are multiple ways this can be interpreted. The most obvious would be simply that the court has rationalized the events of the previous part by choosing to believe that the Green Knight was not a mortal man and, thus, so sure that Gawain is going to die at the Green Chapel that they are mourning in advance. However, it would be more interesting to imagine the events of the first part in some way chipping away at their immersion in chivalric reality, and their mourning of Gawain not being rooted so much in his coming death but in his coming disappearance. That is to say, Gawain's departure is, in its own way, symbolic of both his coming decapitation and his rejection, on some level, of chivalric reality. After all, Arthur demonstrated at the end of the part one the possibility of crafting a lie to ignore the Green

Knight's challenge, but Gawain chooses to ignore this way out. Gawain attributes the reason for his decision destiny, or in other words the constitutive rules of the game, stating, "What may mon do bot fonde" ("True men can but try"), suggesting an eagerness to immerse himself within these rules (565).

Still, the influence of chivalric reality on Gawain remains clear. Firstly, his attribution of his actions to God during the same part mentioned above hints at how I have characterized chivalry as gambling, insofar as it placing something above the passions of the game. This is more apparent in the outfitting scene when, though the poet seems to create a similar dynamic with the Green Knight's description with the same excessive emphasis on elaborate details, it is an excess built on a traditional view of an ideal knight rather than the unrestrained unconventionality of the Green Knight. Nowhere is his adherence to chivalric tradition more clear than in his adopting the shield, an item described by the poet as being important more for its sign value within chivalry's systems out than for any actual use value in defending Gawain during the beheading game that he is embarking toward. Giving the pentangle on the front of the shield the unique name of the "endeles knot" ("endless knot,") the poet ascribes an elaborate symbolic system to each point of the pentangle comprising of the "fyue wyttez" ("five senses"), "fyue fyngres" ("five fingers"), "fyue woundez" ("five wounds") of Christ, "fyue joyez" ("five joys"), and the five virtues of "fraunchyse" ("boundless beneficence"), "fela3schyp" ("brotherly love"), "clannes" ("pure mind"), "cortaysye" ("manners"), and "pit " ("compassion") (630, 640, 641, 642, 646, 652, 653, 654). The detailed description of the symbols on the shield add to the sense of blind adherence to tradition as the pentangle, with the elaborate symbolic system being associated with Solomon while a painting of the Virgin Mary on the other side of the shield is treated as both an extension of the pentangle's five joys and a source of strength in battle. The

poet is somewhat counterintuitive in using Solomon and Mary in these ways, but considering these within their more common biblical connotations further adds to the sense that they exist as symbols opposed to gaming. Whereas Mary's status as the eternal virgin places her on a conservative level against gaming's pursuit of excess, Solomon's love for material excess places him against gaming's emphasis on emotional excess.

As Gawain sets off the poet proclaims, "Sir Gauan, on Godez halue, þa3 hym no gomen þo3t," ("Sir Gawain, on God's side, though him no game thought")^c clearly indicating both the continued influence of these religious symbols on Gawain's thought and his gambling approach to the Green Knight's game (692). Continuing this, the poet states in no uncertain terms Gawain's devotion to Mary during his search for the Green Chapel, writing, "To Mary made his mone / Pat ho hym red to ryde ("He prays with all his might / That Mary may be his guide") (737-738). Ironically, it is during a trancelike state of prayer that Gawain stumbles upon a grand castle, the events within which will see him abandon his faith as he is currently practicing it.

Once Gawain reaches the castle, the poet's description creates a contrast with Arthur's court, which is only accentuated by his prior detailing of Gawain's trip into the primitive wilderness. Similar to his portrayal of the Green Knight as more manly than chivalry's manliness, with his description of the castle's majesty the poet portrays it as a place that thrives off excess to such a point that it has surpassed the extravagance of Arthur's court into the territory of more extravagant than chivalry's extravagance. Whereas the Green Knight entered the court as a citizen of the post-orgy journeying backwards into the orgy, Gawain now finds himself a citizen of the orgy surrounded by a post-orgy world.

At the end of his first night in the castle, Gawain sets up an exchange game with the castle's lord, Bertilak, which will see the two spend the next three nights giving each other

whatever valuables they receive during the day. There is a similar scenario underlying his accepting the exchange game with Bertilak as there was his accepting the beheading game with the Green Knight, in that both cases involve Gawain finding himself seduced by the excess of the post-orgy. What Gawain is ignorant of in both cases is that it is doomed to be a one-way exchange. Just as the genie cannot be put back in the bottle, a world already past the orgy will inevitably liberate any item from before the orgy, whereas we have already seen Arthur's failure in attempting the reverse. It is the exchange of real items that entices Gawain the gambler, but little does he foresee how the use value of these items will become irrelevant as they soon are sucked into the realm of the game's hyperreality. In this way, the exchange game will forge a gambler of Arthur's court into a gamer with a level of immersion on par with that of his mentor, the Green Knight. With a kiss, the two seal the deal. For Gawain, the true game begins here.

Part III

Although it not revealed at this point that Bertilak is the Green Knight, the subsequent juxtaposition builds on the parallel that has been built between Gawain's gambling psychology and the Green Knight's gaming psychology. Baudrillard's description of the telecomputer man applies here: "The operator is working with virtuality: only apparently is the aim to obtain information or to communicate; the real purpose is to explore all the possibilities of a program, rather as a gambler seeks to exhaust the permutations in a game of chance" (*Transparency of Evil* 62). Bertilak cannot be said to have been merely hunting for food, nor can Gawain be said to have been merely flirting with Lady Bertilak by virtue of the fact that the poet places these activities within the exchange game. The poet's juxtaposition of Bertilak's hunting scenes with Gawain's bedroom scenes creates the contrast of Bertilak fully embracing immersion in his game world of hunting, while Gawain's attempt to run from the Green Knight's game by desperately

^c My translation

clinging to chivalry's reality only seems to speed up chivalry's destruction. The key difference in how their situations develop is intrinsically tied to their treatment of immersion, which is in itself tied to their different approaches as either a gamer or a gambler. Bertilak's hunting scenes give the most complete example in the poem of the gamer's mindset, showing him going to great lengths to bask in the passions of gaming's loop purely for its own sake. Meanwhile, Gawain's gambling reactions to the game presented to him by Lady Bertilak allow her to lead him towards the path of gaming.

The poet's description of Bertilak's first hunt appears to start in a relatively standard fashion. That is to say, the poet's majestic description of the hunt's pomp and circumstance serves to heavily reinforce the standard symbolism behind hunting in men relishing their sadistic dominance over nature. This much is clear in the vivid descriptions of "Hunrez wyth hyze horne" ("Hunters with shrill horns") freely massacring "Der ... doted for drede" ("Deer ... dazed with dread") (1165, 1151). With the subsequent deer butchering scene, however, the hunt goes beyond merely showing dominance and crosses over into the familiar post-orgy territory of excess, in this case portraying the butchering as allowing for dominance beyond what the conventional images of hunting can allow. Although one could argue that hunting naturally entailed cutting up the animal victims so that they could be eaten, the poet's detailed description within an otherwise mostly fast-paced narrative suggests a reveling in the spectacle of dissection in a similar fashion to what we have seen in Arthur's knights reveling in the spectacle of the Green Knight's appearance. But, games are about activity rather than passivity. The cool butchering of the deer does not serve as a moment of discovery of a new frontier as was seen in the initial encounter with the Green Knight, but the creation of a new frontier. By turning the deer from a simple organism to a complex machine, Bertilak can now conquer the deer to an

even greater extent by dominating its entire inner workings in addition to its outer mechanisms. Through the ideology of science, he has found a way to add material to the hyperreality of the game world itself while playing through it. Thus, he both reaches a new level of sadism and adds a new level of depth to his game. A high score always has room for improvement.

In contrast to Bertilak's reveling in power, the scenes of Gawain with Lady Bertilak juxtaposed with the hunting scenes portray Gawain surrendering his power to the intricate codes of courtly love. Yet, this is not so much indicative of Gawain's immersion in the passions of masochism so much as it is simply a byproduct of his gambler's approach. That is to say, because he appears to be treating the Green Knight's game as an endeavor for greater religious and chivalric causes, he does not suspend disbelief enough to fully immerse himself into the Green Knight's game as if it were a separate reality. The result of this is that instead of treating his dialogue with Lady Bertilak as if he wanted to revel in the Green Knight's unrestricted conception of manliness, he falls back on the restricted chivalric ideal by practicing courtly love. The result is that, though Gawain's adherence to courtly love brings a great deal of restrictions upon himself, Lady Bertilak's post-orgy background places her as being liberated beyond predetermined gender roles. In order to fool Gawain into thinking that she is operating under the same set of courtly love rules that he is, however, she pretends to participate in these gender roles while giving herself just enough leeway to take advantage of Gawain. This is what allows her to kiss Gawain without giving away her true motives.

The subversion of gender roles does not occur during Gawain's dialogue with Lady Bertilak but in what follows it. That is to say, Lady Bertilak utilizes Gawain's retreat into chivalry by forcing him to make the jump into post-orgy world of transsexuality when he returns the bargain to Bertilak. The key nuance is that within the exchange game, what Gawain returns

to Bertilak is not merely a kiss but a sexually charged kiss. Not only is it a sexually charged kiss, however, it is one from a woman, and since he's agreed to exchange with Bertilak the exact things he gets during the day, that entails that he gives Bertilak the kiss while assuming the role of a woman. Thus, Gawain is symbolically forced into transsexuality through how the game forces him to subvert the heteronormativity of chivalry. By kissing Bertilak as part of their game, he is liberating himself from chivalry's reality and joining the post-orgy world.

Whereas the deer-butchering scene showed readers an exploration of sadism, the following day's boar hunt gives us a look at its evolution into masochism. It begins right where the butchering left off, in that the role of creation is further displayed with the introduction of the boar. The poet builds a sense of suddenness and urgency into the hunt by, in the same stanza where he says, "Vche burne to his bedde busked bylyue" ("Each to his own bed hastening away"), stating only a few lines later that "Pe douthe dressed to þe wod, er any day sprenged" ("By the dim light of dawn they were deep in the woods") (1411, 1415). One is tantalized with the mystery of exactly what it is that has caused this shift in tone compared to the deer hunt until it is finally revealed as a boar that "Long sythen fro þe sounder þat sizied for olde, / For he watz breme, bor alper-grattest" ("That had ranged long unrivaled, a renegade old, / For of tough-browed boars he was biggest far") (1440-1441). All of these small, seemingly irrelevant details, ultimately coalesce into the constitutive rules of the hunting game Bertilak is immersing himself in. Yet, instead of being rules passively accepted, we can plainly see from the text that these symbolize a new product created by a Bertilak who desires to exhaust possibility in the same way that he did in butchering the deer. Even as the boar wreaks havoc on Bertilak's men, Bertilak's role as the sole creator of the situation undeniably puts him in an infinitely greater position of power. Although the boar is built up as a threat, it must be said that Bertilak has no

concern for the boar killing his men. Indeed, because the ecstasy of victory would be diminished if the threat of defeat was unconvincing, it could even be that Bertilak wants to sacrifice his men to the boar. Thus, a symbiotic relationship between the two exists in that boar's power is directly proportionate to that which Bertilak gives it in allowing it to kill his men, but Bertilak's own power within his hunting game is also proportionate to the power of the object he stands in opposition to. Herein lies Bertilak's genius as he expertly purveys this escalating exchange of power into an escalating exchange of pain in order to create the most immersive (what is more immersive than pain?) game possible. The immersed ecstasy exuding from every facet of Bertilak's hunt allows us to see the role of masochism in creating the ultimate game.

Gawain has not yet entered this advanced stage of gaming, though his exchange with Lady Bertilak during this hunt does give hints that he is inching towards it. The conversation follows the same pattern as their prior one as the Lady firmly situates herself as the object of desire and tries to get Gawain to act on his desire, including mentioning a rape fantasy at one point: “ʒe ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkþe, ʒif yow lykez” (“You are strong enough to constrain with strength, if you choose”) (1496). However, noticeably absent from Gawain's dialogue are the allusions to Mary that he had made a habit of turning to throughout the poem, including in yesterday's conversation. Instead of praising Mary, he praises Lady Bertilak and affirms himself as her servant several times, thereby hinting at the worship of her that will soon become pivotal in the story. At one point after stating himself “seruaunt to yourseluen,” (“Your servant”) he quickly adds “so saue me Dryʒtyn” (“so save me our lord”) as if aware of the religious interpretations of what he is saying (1548). All of this is in response to how she builds her dialogue around questioning Gawain's identity, setting the tone by saying, “Sir, ʒif ʒe be Wawen” (“Sir, if you be Gawain”) (1481). In Gawain's response we see

Baudrillard's aforementioned claim that "The supreme orgasm is metamorphosis." Having felt, even if only briefly, the ecstasy of subverting the heteronormativity of chivalric reality through his transsexual metamorphosis the night previous with Bertilak, Gawain has taken to worshipping Lady Bertilak in the same way that one worships God out of a desire to become a god. Thus, with Lady Bertilak's pleas for the lusty Gawain of courtly love fame being greeted with a silent refutation, one could call this the point where Gawain begins his transition from a surrendering of himself to chivalric gambling to lusory attitude. Herein lies the greater of the two meanings behind a returning Bertilak's remark that "þis gomen is your awen" ("this game becomes yours") (1635). The torch is being passed.

Revisited once more, the hunt on the third day picks up where the previous day left off. Whereas the previous day had a sense of finality as the meticulous adherence to masochism was carefully used to culminate in the ecstatic metamorphosis to sadistic victory over the boar, the fox hunt's prolongation of sadism reminds us of the eternal recurrence within gaming. The question underlying the scene is, "why such an unsatisfying target as a fox?" and the answer is that Bertilak, like any great gamer, knows that he doesn't want to end his game on a satisfying note. Contentment is opposed of immersion because, to maintain the motivation necessary for gaming's loop to continue, the player must be hungry for new achievements. Just as Baudrillard states, "discourse is proffered only in the hope of being denied and exorcised," Bertilak's dissatisfaction in hunting the fox exists to continue the cycle by fostering a demand for satisfaction (*Fatal Strategies* 140). And Bertilak succeeds, finding himself back to where he started in the deer hunt as simultaneously a divine Other to the hunted animals and a hungry player on his team. As he returns to the castle, Bertilak's disgust with his performance ("þis foule

fox felle—þe fende haf þe godez!” (“this foul fox pelt, the fiend take the goods!”)) again elucidates the golden rule of the lusory attitude: A high score can always be improved (1944).

It is during this time, as Bertilak illustrates gaming’s loop, that Gawain definitively distances himself from Mary’s seduction. Gawain all but states this directly when, in response to Lady Bertilak’s enquiry of his already being in “folden fayth” (“plighted faith”) to a woman, Gawain states, ““In fayth I welde ri3t non” (“In faith I possess claim no one”) (1783, 1790)^d. And why would he? The very concept of the virgin, with its connotations of never changing, quite clearly stands in opposition to the sophisticated tastes of a Gawain who has evolved into the realm of the post-orgy. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that Gawain lost his own virginity at the liberating moment of the transsexual first kiss with Bertilak two days prior.

With this in mind, the significance of Gawain’s accepting the girdle reveals itself. Clearly, Mary’s conservatism has died, but Gawain’s shunning of exchanging the materiality of his expensive glove and the Lady’s expensive ring indicates that Solomon’s materialism has died as well. By accepting the girdle, he is using the remains of both of them to craft a new symbol of the post-orgy. In a way, the girdle has always been his property moreso than Lady Bertilak’s in that it has been he, and not her, whose undying devotion to gambling has led him down the path of virginity that the girdle historically represents. Thus, I feel that if there is one spot where a convincing case could be that gender roles have been switched, it would be here. Instead of the traditional image of the lusty knight seducing the maiden, here it is Gawain who has been built up as the innocent virgin through his identifying himself with Mary and attempting to ward off the seduction attempts of the dominant female. The key to the exchange with Bertilak is that he does not take the girdle from her but has it given to him, as if force him to confront the virginity he has already lost through his liberation. The great irony underlying this is that because it is his

cross-over into the post-orgy that has made him lose his virginity (as in, he has been sexually liberated and, thus, the related discourse no longer has significant meaning) the girdle, by the time he is confronted with it, has already disappeared and been replaced with a power-up in the Green Knight's game. Thus, Gawain has not betrayed his host (Gawain's submersion within the post-orgy was, after all, part of the exchange game), but he has betrayed Mary by dissimulating the concept of her virginity. By fully immersing himself in the game's hyperreality over chivalry's hegemony, Gawain has liberated himself from war, sexuality, and Christianity. In other words, God is dead to Gawain in a Nietzschean sense.

This leads to Gawain's confession, perhaps the most mysterious scene in the poem. The paradox of the scene is that if he is confessing because he believes is going to die the next day, it becomes moot given that he plans to lie to the host later in the night and wear the girdle the next day as a magic symbol. Meanwhile, if he truly believes that the girdle will protect him and he is confessing for his magic use, it would make more sense to wait until after the challenge because, again, the sins that he is planning to commit immediately afterwards render the confession pointless. A surface reading of the text is little help in solving this paradox, only giving a tantalizingly vague mention of Gawain's having "schewed his mysdedez" ("showed his misdeeds") (1880). What misdeeds? Taking this in the poem's grander context, this vague tone is all that is needed to grasp the meaning behind Gawain's confession. Gawain is confessing not because he believes that he is going to die but to convince himself that he will die. As a gamer, the meaning of the words exchanged during the confession do not matter so much as the rituals surrounding it, or, in other words, the constitutive rules that they contribute to the game's immersion. Through his confession, Gawain has absorbed his old orgy of religion into the post-orgy hyperreality that he has created with the girdle at its center. With God dead, Gawain's piety

^d My translation

no longer functions as an artifact of the grand narrative to be gambled but simply a hyperreal tool to add to the immersion.

As odd as it may seem for Gawain to deem it necessary use his confession to add to his belief of his impending disappearance, Carolyn Dinshaw offers an explanation: “Anyone might worry, you might say; yet we have seen one man—granted, a green man—live through the chopping, making as if he didn't really need his head for it to do its work” (216). Gawain’s confession works quite well in helping him forget this, for it is the resulting passion that leads Gawain to cheat in his exchange game with Bertilak by keeping the girdle. As Bernard Suits notes, cheating is caused by “an excess of zeal in seeking to achieve the prelusory goal” (59). By cheating in his exchange game with Bertilak, and by extension, his exchange game with the Green Knight, Gawain both affirms the possibility of his death and creates the illusory possibility for him to lose the game by being caught in his cheating. Gawain has become a masochist.

Part IV

Highlighting Gawain’s evolution, Part IV’s beginning depiction of Gawain’s preparing to head off from the castle provides us with a call back to his departing Arthur’s court in Part II’s beginning. Immediately, the structural similarities become apparent with the poet opening both cases by describing the slow, inevitable progression of the weather’s cycle to mirror the slow, inevitable progression of Gawain’s cyclical exchange with the Green Knight. Gawain is no longer a gambler testing the waters of going against the chivalric hegemony, however. He is now an impassioned gamer so engrossed with his masochism that “*Paȝ he lowkez his liddez, ful lyttel he slepes*” (“Though he lifts not his eyelids, little he sleeps”) (2007).

There is a similar parallel with Part II in the account of Gawain’s dressing himself. With both scenes, the poet begins by emphasizing the glamor of Gawain’s garb before he gets to one

last important item that reflects Gawain's personality. Whereas in Part II, the poet described Gawain proudly displaying a shield that encompassed Gawain's choice of chivalric religion over gaming, with Mary and Solomon both dead, that is absent, only being mentioned later in the context of Gawain being handed it only to casually sling it over his shoulder. In place of the shield, the poet leaves us no doubt that it is the girdle he is turning to for protection in its place, writing, "wered not þis ilk wyȝe for wele þis gordel, . . . Bot for to sauē himself" ("wore not for its wealth that wondrous girdle . . . But to keep himself safe") (2037, 2040). Yet, more than only being a parallel to Part II, it also hearkens back to Part I's description of the Green Knight, which the scene in Part II was based on. By donning the green girdle, Gawain, in a literal sense, has become a green knight, too. Further, Gawain's wearing the girdle consummates what had been foreseen in the gender-exchanging kisses of Part III. Because he is turning to Lady Bertilak for protection instead of God, it could be said that he is turning to Lady Bertilak as God. Thus, by extension, he is choosing the uncertain masochism of the Green Knight's game over the complacent comfort of Jehovah's promise of immortality. And, by embracing that uncertainty, he has chosen the hope of higher highs over the prison of maxed out manliness. In short, Gawain has chosen gaming over gambling.

Another parallel with Part II occurs when Gawain's guide, after leading him near the Green Chapel, begs him to turn back from his confrontation with the Green Knight. Although Gawain's rejection of the offer does not differ from the similar scene with Arthur's court in Part II, the reason behind his choice does. Whereas when Gawain was discouraged from going in Part II, Gawain, as the poet implied, went on his quest regardless for God's sake instead of the game, such a thing is impossible now that Gawain has killed God via the girdle. Instead, this time Gawain rejects his guide's offer purely out of the lusory attitude that his journey has fostered in

him. By asking Gawain to quit by invoking a figure symbolizing the pre-orgy (“Mary!”) to a man who is already after the orgy, the guide gives Gawain one last look back at the ghost of the chivalric hegemony before his confrontation with the superplayer that has caused its destruction (2140). Even with the guide’s exaggerated description of the Green Knight as “þe worst vpon erþe,” (“the veriest on earth”), Gawain does not stop playing because the threat of death (the threat of losing, to be more precise) is an intrinsic part of the game’s appeal (2098). In this lies Gawain’s real test. True victory inside the game’s world is impossible, but Gawain has scored a metaphorical victory by daring to play. Thus, no matter what happens at the Green Chapel, Gawain enters as a winner.

The poet’s description of the Green Chapel is symbolic on several levels. Firstly, there are the aforementioned connotations of the lusory attitude superseding the chivalric hegemony in Gawain choosing to visit it instead of turning back. Secondly, there is the timing of Gawain’s visit. In Part II, we saw Gawain turn to Mary as he began his adventure and finding himself unable to find anyone who knew where the Green Chapel was, although the Green Knight claimed that everyone knew where it was. Only now that he has accepted the girdle in Mary’s place has he been able to find the Chapel, and he specifically did so by defying a man who screamed Mary’s name. Although he still has the shield in the physical sense, he has lost it in a metaphysical sense through having distanced himself from the religious symbols that defined it. The underlying irony of a chapel with no apparent purpose other than to stand testament to the death of God makes one wonder if he actually needed the guide or if his finding the Green Chapel was dependent on his rejecting the shield. After all the vague allusions to destiny and the crumbling of chivalric conventions, only now that he is at a chapel that mirrors his disappearing religion can Gawain at last perfect the game’s delicate balance of masochism and sadism: “My

lif þaʒ I forgoo, / Drede dotz me no lote” (“Forfeit my life may be / But noise I do not dread”) (2210-2211). This is immersion. By becoming a dissenter, Gawain can now game with a dissenter.

The ecstasy of Gawain’s immersion is the focus of the game that follows. Whereas the last time he had made his appearance in Part I, the focus was on the Green Knight’s sadism, this time, the poet focuses on Gawain’s masochism. Just as we saw in the boar hunt, Gawain’s dialogue as he anticipates the Green Knight’s strike paints a portrait of a man who has accepted pain not merely as a way of balancing dominance but as something worthy of being sought in itself. Gawain once more affirms to himself, “Bot þaʒ my hede falle on þe stonez, / I con not hit restore,” (“But if my head falls to the floor / There is no mending me”) yet he still cannot resist the seduction of gaming’s eternal masochism as he looks into his constructed abyss and cries, “þresch on, þou þro mon” (“thrash away, tyrant”) (2282-2283, 2300). From this perspective, the trembling that occurs prior must not be seen as the defeat that the Green Knight’s boasting that a surface reading might lead one to conclude but, rather, simply another point of immersion within the game that the two are playing.

Whereas in Part III their interactions were defined by an arms race that saw Gawain’s gambling crumble as Bertilak’s game world expanded, in Part IV they meet again as two gamers in equal competition with one another. Their style of competition is not the primitive form seen in gambling with them both vying for a single exhaustible object, but the more advanced form seen in gaming, in which the two play off of each other to mutually advance their roles within the game. Both heroes of the post-orgy, the two have no concern for the Platonic real, caring only about building the greatest experience machine possible. The Green Knight proclaims, “Þou art not Gawayn, ... Wherefore þe better burne me burde be,” (“You are not Gawain ... Wherefore

the better man I, by all odds”) but, as the man who led Gawain to the post-orgy through the joys of transsexuality, he knows better than anyone the nonexistence of the Gawain he refers to (2270, 2278). And, as the master of the girdle, Gawain can be seen as likewise doubting the true possibility of the potential killer he imagines the Green Knight to be. Thus, we see Gawain, the masochist, bask in the ecstasy of pain as he enlarges his carefully crafted image the Green Knight, whilst the Green Knight, the sadist, basks in the ecstasy of dominance as he enlarges his carefully crafted image of Gawain. Here, in the masochist/sadist dichotomy created at this point, we see the heart of competition within the advanced gameworld. Who is a superplayer? The Green Knight refers to himself as “þe better burne” (“the better man”) and all becomes clear.

But, no matter the heights of immersion reached, every game must have a point where the run effectively ends and the player is forced back to the title screen. This is what occurs as the Green Knight finally pricks Gawain’s neck with his axe. Just as with any other game, we see that out of this essential reset point are born the vital illusions of victory and defeat. But of course, true victory and defeat are an impossibility. The player can only either continue if the immersion remains too strong to stop or quit if the immersion is lacking. Gawain’s choice is immediately made clear as the poet describes the heretofore unrealized levels of passion experienced by Gawain following the Green Knight’s strike: “he neuer in þis worlde wyȝe half so blyþe” (“he never in this world man half so blithe”) (2321)^e. And Bertilak, as Gawain’s mentor, fully understands how to keep the flame of immersion alive as he kills off the mystery of the situation and, thus kills off the Green Knight. Through constructing the disappearance of the Green Knight, Bertilak delivers to Gawain the greatest defeat possible, that is to say, a defeat that he will never be able to avenge. This enables Gawain to continue his competition with the now-dead Green Knight through creating a new catastrophe to experience, enhancing his shame and

exhausting possibility by declaring the girdle a “syngne of my surfet” (“sign of my transgression”) (2433)^f. He is very much, as Baudrillard described it, “no longer waiting for the stars or the heavens, but for the subterranean gods who threaten us with a collapse into emptiness” (*Fatal Strategies* 40). Gawain’s intensifying of his crushing defeat serves to drive his immersion, allows him to continue playing, and brings him as close as possible to victory by keeping its illusory possibility alive.

Bertilak keeps playing, too. His killing off the Green Knight begins another transformation, solidified by attributing his claiming the old lady at his castle is Morgan le Fay and “Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle” (“She guided me in this guise to your glorious hall”) (2456). Although the quote has commonly been speculated as indicating Morgan as having masterminded the rest of the plot, Bertilak does not actually say that, and his emphasis on scaring Guinevere as motivating Morgan’s involvement could be taken as suggesting that her interest ended with the court’s reaction to the Green Knight’s beheading. Indeed, taking into account the respect that Bertilak shows Gawain during the scene, stating “I halde þe polysed of þat plyȝt, and pured as clene” (“I hold you polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright”), it may be that, far from having set out to expose Gawain as a fool, Bertilak reciprocated Gawain’s view of the Green Knight as superplayer by holding Gawain in similar esteem and, thus, was as immersed into the game as Gawain.

Still, it is certainly a mysterious thing for Bertilak to tell Gawain of Morgan at this stage, both for the lack of prior hints and for the fact that the claim comes after he had just finished revealing that he had been lying to Gawain about being the Green Knight and manipulating Lady Bertilak. Ultimately, however, it doesn’t matter whether or not the old lady really is a magician.

^e My translation

^f My translation

Bertilak's purpose in telling Gawain of Morgan was not to assure him of an unexpected truth, but to plant in his head that a wild claim just might be true. As Gawain appears to realize when he decides to reject Bertilak's offer of returning to the castle, it may be better this way, so that an air of mystery forever remains. After the girdle failed to work as advertised for Gawain, Bertilak's attribution to "Morgne þe goddess" ("Morgan the Goddess") assures him the problem wasn't that he had turned his back on Mary, but that he was barking up the wrong tree in turning towards Lady Bertilak (2452). Paralleling his initial challenge in Part I that "My manliness is better than your manliness," here he is telling Gawain, "My God is better than your God." Thus, a new challenge is issued. Just as with their exchange game in Part II, they seal the deal with a kiss and, with that, they set off once more in seek of possibilities to exhaust within their game worlds.

Just as the Green Knight was the superplayer who seduced Gawain into gaming, so too does Gawain become the superplayer who seduces the rest of Arthur's court into gaming. And he does it by wearing a girdle drenched in green, the color of gaming. Thus, one last exchange has retroactively taken place with Bertilak. They have exchanged identities. Just as it was Gawain whose stroke to the Green Knight's neck in Part I allowed him to become a superplayer, Gawain has been paid back by being allowed to keep the girdle and assume a similar role. And because everyone wants to be a superplayer, everyone begins wearing the girdle both literally and figuratively. The Green Knight's promise of passing on the axe (or torch) to his opponent in the beheading game has taken place symbolically. Yet, despite becoming a superplayer to the rest of the court, Gawain remains an addict to dissatisfaction, a high potency precursor to the high score drug known as hope.

The poem ends with the poet returning to the reference to the universal history tradition, but the meaning has changed. Whereas before it served to frame the poem within chivalry's

hegemony, with that having been destroyed by gaming's passion for rules, it now serves to approximate gaming's endless loop through the medium of poetry. As the poet states, "Mony aunterez here-biforne / Haf fallen suche er þis" ("Many such, ere we were born, / Have befallen here, ere this") (2527-2528). In contrast to gambling's goal of attainment, the now-dominant gaming sets a goal of chasing. Through this, Gawain and, by extension, the court has found the solution to the question posed earlier: "what are you doing after the orgy?" Locked in a high score quest doomed to ecstatic frustration, the gamer knows that the only answer is to attempt a bigger orgy. Of course, such an endeavor is doomed to failure, but to game is to learn how to fail.

Conclusion

Perhaps the reason Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has such an enduring appeal is that the Gawain poet has crafted a poem where the reader's journey mirrors that of the hero. Whereas Gawain unexpectedly finds himself forced away from his chivalric hegemony and in a post-orgy world where the grand narrative has given way to infinite strands of constantly changing hyperreality, the reader is lulled by the poem's beginning into believing it to be a simple continuation of a chivalric grand narrative, only to find a poem where traditional meanings of signs are subverted and where the constantly changing nature of the signs leads to a disorienting hyperreality. That experience of wading through the poem's complexities is similar to the problem summarized by Jean Baudrillard's famous claim, "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 79). Counterintuitive as it may seem, an excess of information is ultimately corrosive to meaning because it inevitably leads to skepticism, which is diametrically opposed to the suspension-of-disbelief necessary for meaning to be accepted. This is the riddle being posed in the question,

“what are you doing after the orgy?” In a world where all the rules have been removed, how can reality exist?

The solution, as described by Bernard Suits, coined by Baudrillard, and illustrated by the Gawain poet, is to embrace a passion for rules. There can be nothing more real than a game because the act of playing a game essentially describes the attempt to immerse oneself in a reality as much as possible. This is the beauty of Gawain’s fate. Although Lady Bertilak may not have been telling the truth about the green girdle, it allows Gawain and the rest of Arthur’s court, to enter world that’s beyond truth. Instead of the purpose being to satisfy some external object (gambling), the game exists to communicate with a higher order of reality in the senses that create truth. At the eternally recurring point of the game’s loop, the gamer’s leap of faith occurs not into an extension of any outside reality, but an attempt at an entirely new reality built purely of passion and fueled by the superplayer’s seduction.

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