





# The System of Everything

BY STEPHAN SCHWINGELER

In the beginning I was an elephant. My first play-through of David O'Reilly's computer game "Everything" started inside the skin of a trunked animal. Shortly after that I slipped into the body of a beetle, I transformed into a grain of pollen and back again. I guided tufts of grass and turned into a palm tree, an island, but also a billiard table, a guitar, the sun and the galaxy in which I was everything simultaneously, embodying all the things it contained. One aspect of O'Reilly's "Everything" is its playing with this constant change of perspective, observing things and the world with the eyes of other things. Another is that the game plays with changes of scale, so that the previously embodied object becomes the measure of the next. It is a voyage from small to large, from micro- to macrocosm and back again, just like in the famous experimental film "Powers of 10" (1977) by Charles and Ray Eames. The essential difference to the film is clearly that "Everything" is a digital game, an interactive work through which no one passage is the same as another and which is received individually depending on which path the player chooses through "Everything"'s universe. This path does not lead in linear fashion from A to B but is more comparable to a net, a root complex, a rhizome. The player moves through this system of objects and rules and navigates the system herself by influencing the system.

## GAMES AS A SYSTEM

Games are regulated systems. In the cases of computer games these systems are programmed as software. In the case of "Everything" there is not only a regulated system on the level of a game and an algorithm, it also depicts a system: "Everything" is the representation of a fantastic, fictional ecosystem in which entirely in keeping with Alan Watts' philosophy everything is at home in everything and everything has an influence on everything. The small finds its equivalent in the large and the large rediscovers itself in the small, where one is inconceivable and cannot even exist without the other. In digital gaming "Everything" has found its perfect medium. The German word "Spiel" means at least two different things that would be denoted in English by the words game and play. Game is mostly used to refer to one specific instance of gaming while play describes gaming as an activity in general. The game will follow specific rules, whereas play is a free activity. According to Roger Caillois these poles of gaming are also termed ludus and paidia. The digital game "Everything" forms a system and that structure is governed by an algorithm. However, within the boundaries of that system the players are able to move freely. Paidia, playing freely within the representations of objects and surroundings, meandering between micro- and macrocosms, flitting from one avatar to the next, lies at the centre of the world that is put forward in "Everything" and created by it. The playful action focussed on in the version of this world that David O'Reilly has created for the new deployment of "The New Infinity" is dance. Dance is paidia par excellence, and dance's raison d'être is (playful) movement through space.

## AMBIENCE ACT: THE GAME THAT PLAYS ITSELF

Interestingly "Everything" is also a game that can exist without players. The computer game has one mode in which it begins to play itself – without the input of any external manifestation of the user. In this case "Everything" begins a life of its own as an algorithmic, simulated ecosystem in which the player becomes an observer as in the reception of the living art works of the artist Pierre

Huyghe. What happens in the event of this self-playing game in terms of media theory is a so-called ambience act. This is the continued diegetic existence of a game world without any input or influence from the player. So, for example, in many games, changes in the time of day will be programmed and NPCs (non-player characters) will continue to pursue their programmed activities etc. Ambience acts maintain the diegesis, i.e. the fictional universe, the game world and in doing this they are mechanized diegetic actions without any action made by the players. In a figurative sense during an ambience act the player is in pause mode. However, the device continues working in a suspended state of the constant process of calculation.

## COUNTERGAMING

From around 1995 artists started to use the medium of computer games as material and/or seize upon the cultural influences derived from game and adapt these using other media. Since then a rich body of artistic work has been created under the label Game Art. The artists' initial approach to the material at that time was characterized by a certain attitude of opposition towards computer games: these first uses of the new material of computer games often consist of a dissection of the software and its structures through media analysis. Artists such as JODI or Cory Arcangel have designed countermodels to the established forms of commercial games, with the aim of raising awareness of their media contingency. For example JODI produced an almost entirely white game ("Untitled Game: Arena", 1998 – 2001) and Arcangel modified a Super Mario game so that all that could be seen was the light blue background with white clouds ("Super Mario Clouds", 2009). Both examples are paradoxical artefacts, unplayable games. They make use of strategies of alienation – entirely in the Brechtian sense. Alexander R. Galloway has grouped these strategies together under the term countergaming. He emphasises the following strategies: drawing attention to their mechanical nature, formal and aesthetic experiments, the manufacture of incoherences, limitations on interactivity and radical actions or ones that do not comply with the game. Regarding the last point of radical action, Galloway notes in 2006 that this form is rarely found in art with computer games. He observes that artistic modifications of computer games in particular can be characterized as progressive on a visual level but as reactionary on the level of narrative, as the artists turn paradoxically against the game and therefore do not develop it further. Only when artists develop genuine alternatives to the narratives in computer games – says Galloway – will the countergaming project have been fulfilled and one will be able to speak of a true avantgarde. Galloway names one route the computer game avantgarde might be able to take towards radical action as the programmed creation of "pure joy" in completing the game. By concentrating on joy, gaming actions can be established that Galloway had previously called for under the term radical action. This is precisely what David O'Reilly achieves. He does not turn against games, but operates within the system to develop new alternative forms of play in a positive sense. By contrast to the aggressive, destructive impulse of deconstruction, O'Reilly builds something: he creates an independent universe, an independent system – a world of its own – with its own rules. As a result O'Reilly can be regarded as the representative of a new game avantgarde that is an ally of the medium and no longer grates against its structures but actively creates new ones.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Schwingeler (born 1979 in Dortmund) is a German art historian and media scholar specializing in the fields of image science, media art and computer games. He was former curator at the ZKM and currently Professor of Game Design at the Media Academy - Stuttgart University of Applied Sciences.

Schwingeler is internationally one of the pioneers of Game Studies, computer games explored as a relevant genre in the canon of the visual arts. Schwingeler was the first art historian in Germany with a PhD in computer games.