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Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers: Seriality and Critical Game Practices

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Abstract

The title of this essay borrows from Raymond Queneau's iconic *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, a sonnet generator capable of producing 10^14 unique texts – a quantity that no one reader (or even a million readers) could parse in a lifetime. While *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* gestures towards the impossibility of ever accessing the totality of its many reading paths, computer games such as *Super Mario Bros.* limit the player to one isolated, incomplete perspective among an enormous (but finite) set of possible playthroughs. Despite this single-player experience, collective patterns of play emerge from the repetitive, procedural, and discrete elements – what Ian Bogost calls "unit operations" – that drive computational media. Following Mary Flanagan's approach to game criticism and Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of seriality framed in terms of contemporary theories of network culture, this essay examines two categories of "metagames" which "critically play" the serial logics intrinsic to computational media. Metagames are games about games and the examples in this essay are built inside, outside, or alongside *Super Mario Bros.*, inscribing twenty-five years of procedural play. From remakes of ROM hacks to speedruns of sequencers, this eclectic collection of player-created modifications documents an alternative history of computer games defined not by the production of software but by play. Whether reading Queneau's book or playing computer games, the constraints of the poem or program produce a range of repetitions. Rather than subjecting the player to the mechanisms of control as defined by the rules of the game, the techniques documented in this essay successfully metagame their own serial conditions to model the movements of a hundred thousand billion fingers.

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Seriality or serial collectivity is a term that feminist scholar Iris Marion Young used to describe a reconceptualization of the category of woman in her 1994 essay Gender as Seriality. Young borrows the concept of seriality from Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason, where he originally developed the idea to describe the relationship of individuals to social classes and the capitalist system of production and consumption. Understanding women as a series, rather than a group, entails the recognition While Hundred Thousand Billion Poems gestures towards the impossibility of ever accessing the totality of its many reading paths, computer games such as Super Mario Bros. limit the player to one isolated, incomplete perspective among an enormous (but finite) set of possible playthroughs. Despite this single-player experience, collective patterns of play emerge from the repetitive, procedural, and discrete elements – what Ian Bogost calls "unit operations" – that drive computational media. Following Mary Flanagan's approach to game criticism and Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of seriality framed in I have been greatly indebted to the critical difficulties suggested by the members of my Harvard classes. Also this work would never have been written without the constant encouragement and counsel which I owe to my wife. A. N. W. Harvard University January, 1929. CONTENTS. Editors' Preface v. Preface xi. Part I the speculative scheme.