Mechanics of Inspiration

A Recursive Play of Reflections in *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*

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INTO THE VORTEX

> "In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools, and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. […] What can look at itself is not one."
> (Derrida 1967: 36)

We are in a bronze age mountain wilderness and follow a bearlike barbarian deep into an ancient forest, where a slow-paced establishing shot starts to unveil a new and secret location. The camera is gently tilting down from the night sky, following a red light beam with no visible origin. Strobe lights are flashing. A heavy drumbeat, a hypnotic bassline and a wailing guitar evoke a dark and mesmerizing vibe, both menacing and seductive. Towering amplifiers manifest themselves in the fog and reveal that this is a diegetic sound: we have stumbled into a modern rock concert. This anachronistic encounter evokes *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1992) and lets us revisit Lynch's movie. The original scene is commonly referred to as the *Pink Room* and borrows its name from the corresponding song by Angelo Badalamenti. The game scene is a subtle but meticulous restaging of the *Pink Room*, including camera movement, light and music. The theme we now hear, not a cover version but a homage, is aptly called *An Ode to a Room*. The name of the game is *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*.

Jim Guthrie himself has climbed onto the stage to perform the song, and since the game is labeled like a type of musical recording (*EP* or *Extended Play*), we should probably not be surprised to meet the composer in the dark and orbital center. Yet, the *recursion* (Burns 2006) we are experiencing creates a trace of vertigo, and its infinite mirroring effect gives the *Extended Play* an additional meaning. Also on stage with a pixelated Guthrie are several NPCs from the game, including the narrator and some eerie skeleton warriors. They all have dropped out of their fictional roles like actors in a Brecht play in order to join the party. We might wonder if this dance of death indeed comes from an elaborate design decision or if we are witnessing the shameless reuse of game assets for cost-saving reasons. Nevertheless, the *Verfremdungseffekt* is taking its toll, disrupts the stage illusion, and messes up the game mechanics: The skeletons have abandoned their positions within the gameplay and no longer serve as enemies.

DIGITAL MANNERISM

Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP (2011, *SS&SEP*) prepared its audience early on for its presumptuous mysteriousness and primed future players for an idiosyncratic play with references. Instead of promoting the iPad game with a sober announcement trailer, we are "initiated" by an "audience calibration procedure" that promises a "psychosocial audiovisual experiment" for "touchtronic machinery" and culminates in a nebulous release date: "We will meet again at the appointed time when the day and the night are in balance." "Around the Vernal Equinox", when we get our hands on the indie game, we find ourselves in a meandering fantasy adventure that is simultaneously staged as an 8-bit game, a dream, a theater play (with opening and closing curtains), a counseling session, an analytical test and a double-sided vinyl record.

On the threshold of this *remediation* (Bolter 1999) gone wild sits a narrator, who also acts as a therapist, mythographer, mentor and gatekeeper. The so-called *Archetype* not only mocks Campbell's comparative mythology (Campbell 1949) and Jung's self-experiments with *active imagination* (Jung 2009) but repeatedly pulls us out of the game to dictate periods of rest between the sessions. The gameplay becomes further fragmented as the hypermediated adventure wants to tweet every bit of progression into the social ether, and the switch between game mechanics requires a recurrent rotation of the "machinery". Eventually, we have to wait for a specific moon phase in the real world before continuing our quest. Also responsible for the digression is a narrative device called the *Megatome*. The magical book we have stolen in the fantasy world reads people's

minds and writes them into the game log. As the *Megatome* also records the narrator's thoughts, it complements the confusion of *diegetic levels* (Genette 1980) and the disruption of different realities.

In *SS&SEP*, the medial borders are blurred and permeable. The adventure extends the scope of intertextuality, common to the genre (Giappone 2015), as an unbridled number of pop-cultural allusions stray into the mythopoetic landscapes. Our protagonist, the *Scythian*, is battling game references and fencing genre tropes while drawing her strength from cinematic quotations: "Long live the new flesh." (*Videodrome* 1983) The heroine wanders through poetic dreams and loses herself in soundscapes that pay homage to Philip Glass, John Carpenter and *Godspeed You! Black Emperor*, only to bump into wrestling legends and street art: "Last year before the yuletide Andre The Giant assembled a posse & we set out to re-assemble The Trigon Trifecta." (*SS&SEP*) The references come from various media and art forms, but because they span all aspects of the game, they tightly interweave into a captivating and compelling adventure. A tribute to *Zelda* (*The Legend of Zelda* 1986-2015) transforms into a rhythm game. An homage to Al Jaffee's *MAD* fold-ins, which were themselves an ironic reversal of the *Playboy* centerfolds, gives the player the ability to fold landscapes. Since the allusive play is not limited to the usual genre repertoire, it inspires innovative gameplay and contributes to a unique experience.

Figure 1: Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP 2011.

Source: screenshot (Faller)

A consistent visual style maintains the unearthly atmosphere. The pixel art of *SS&SEP* is a highly suggestive aesthetic choice. (Hood 2015) Like low poly art or the so-called silhouette style, it leaves room for imagination. But while a game like *Feist* (2015) uses silhouettes to give an organic feel and hide its digital nature ("It's easy to feel as though you're interacting with a live painting rather than a video game." [Tran 2015]), the pixel style of *SS&SEP* creates awareness of the medium by drawing attention to its digital quality. Of course, this apparent distinctness is pretended and deceptive – the iPad adventure is not an 8-bit game. The result is a kind of stylish artificiality. This artifice is reinforced by lush and static, tapestry-like compositions with illogical compressions of space, elongated character proportions and other elements commonly associated with mannerism. Although *SS&SEP* contributed to a resurgence of pixel art, the game still stands out today as a work of high consistency: The core characteristics of the visual style appear in every other aspect of the game. A scope for imagination, a tendency to deception and nostalgia, a high amount of self-referentiality and artificiality imbue the gameplay, the music, the narrative and the deliberately misspelled name: *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*.

DARK MASS

Pop cultural references can give us a sense of belonging, a comforting and soothing sentiment. They can assure us that we have the cultural literacy and proper knowledge of the canon and stand on common and solid ground. They also play an essential role in geek culture, where expertise acts as social currency (McCain 2015), and help cement a fanbase. When a mainstream entertainment industry is committed to the idea that everything needs to be explained and exploited, an abundance of redundant references and worn-out tropes become the cement that suffocates every last spark of inspiration. What we are facing, with a multitude of sequels, prequels, spinoffs, reboots and cinematic universes that aim for the broadest common ground, is "a parody of the world of the imagination" (Baudrillard 1989: 55).

Since *SS&SEP* claims to be an "experimental treatment for acute soul-sickness", it does not shy away from soothing moments. But the explicit hints that give us something to hold onto drift in a vast sea full of vague and oracular allusions. Apparently, references are made out of love (Deleuze 1977), not for clarity. They often *Link to the Past* (*The Legend of Zelda* 1991) and the forgotten: *SS&SEP*'s self-description echoes one of the earliest *Sword & Sorcery* tales. The cover art of *Conan*'s very first adventure (Howard 1932) promised the read-

er "a soul-searing story". It unmasks the 'soul-curing' game as a remedy against the effects of Howard's fiction. However, the inscription on *Conan*'s cover that exposes *Sworcery* as a kind of inverted *Sorcery* appears only in the original 1932 edition. The reference point is almost untraceable.

Eventually, the game mocks our interpretative efforts: "My logs have many secrets … secrets about sylvan sprites & impossible islands. Unfortunately, I don't speak log-language." (*SS&SEP*) Elsewhere we are warned against excessive interpretation: "In my experience there are times when owls are not what they seem & at other times they're just plain old owls." (*SS&SEP*) Then again, both the mockery and warning are themselves references (*Twin Peaks* 1990) and only draw us deeper into the allusive and self-conscious game. In the heart of its darkness lurks the antagonist, a deathless specter that we have awoken, only to be hunted by him. Its skull-shaped head is a genre trope, but why is the evil creature called the *Gogolithic Mass*? Scholars are in disagreement: "a reference to the Googol, no doubt, or perhaps to Google? The sum of all evil, perhaps an ironic commentary on Google's famous slogan?" (Games on a Train 2015) Likewise, it could be "a deliberate misspelling of the Glagolithic Mass" (No. 6 2016) or an allusion to Nikolai Gogol's Gothic fiction (Gogol 1835). Since the *Gogolithic Mass* allegedly descends from shapeshifters, it must condense all of these explanations and probably more. This "Mass" with its deadly, consuming gravity, awoken by the player and strikingly and self-referentially staged as a black hole, frayed and burned into the otherwise pixelated landscape, was not created by magic but by referential play.

INFINITY MIRROR

This explorative puzzle adventure reminds us to "observe, dream, believe, and reflect". The written words also appear in trailers, where they promise essential features. They refer to general gameplay (observe, reflect) and to specific mechanics like entering the dream state, where they function as subtle but essential clues: The word "believe" appears in the dream world when we reach the lakeshore, an apparent dead end – but we "believe" and walk across the water. The simple but elegant staging reflects a crucial aspect in general game design: creating acceptable level boundaries as part of a believable game world. *SS&SEP* reverses this idea and reminds us that a game is not reality. Instead, we have to believe in the game's dreamlike quality, where waterfalls can be strummed like harps. The word "reflect" surfaces on another shore, where the player character meets his mirror-image in the water. Highlighting a simple mir-

roring effect first appears as a mockery of typical game marketing and its obliga-
tory feature listing. The use of a literal reflection for an ironic reflection of game
traditions has a poetic quality. But as it later turns out, there are more layers: "re-
flect" was also an instruction to think, and a hint that we need the mirroring in
the water to solve several puzzles.

SS&SEP is a game of waters and a play of reflections, where references ap-
pear as distorted mirror images, and genre tropes are consequently inverted. *The
Trigon Trifecta* is literally an upside-down *Triforce* (*The Legend of Zelda* 1986-
2015). Instead of experiencing a worn-out power fantasy, we are on a "woeful
errand" (*SS&SEP*), and our female protagonist is not leveling up, she is weaken-
ing throughout the adventure. The gameplay even reflects its mirror mechanics.
It figuratively stages the reflection of ancestry and raw material when it brings
our heroine to face the *Grizzled Boor* in the dream state. The half bear, half bar-
barian-like creature, which emerges from the forest's depth to enjoy a free-
swinging display of its manhood, is both an embodiment and an archaic remnant
of the *Sword & Sorcery* genre. According to the *Archetype*, the barbarian-bear
helps "to self-identify". Not surprisingly, the name of our *Sword & Sworcery*
heroine is *Ursula*: little bear.

THE MAELSTROM

Players may wonder to what extent the myriads of references are intended or at
which point they "see what isn't even there" (*SS&SEP*). But ultimately, they are
caught in a meticulously crafted mirror maze where the referential play is end-
less and productive. The narrative mechanics continuously create new points of
reference because *SS&SEP* is both cryptic and self-referential. Eventually, the
game finds a name for this recursive process: "The song of sworcery can be un-
derstood as a psionics technique & it allows you to perceive a reality within the
one that you know." (*SS&SEP*) *The Song of Sworcery*'s imaginative potential
and capacity for inspiration manifest themselves in an infinite amount of fan art
and other projects which have followed the game's release. *SS&SEP* has con-
tributed to the revival of an artistic style and inspired countless other titles, in-
cluding such influential games as *Monument Valley* (2014) and *Hyper Light
Drifter* (2016).

During the adventure, the recursive play with references creates a sense of
wonder and a feeling of being lost. The gameplay made to lose yourself is em-
bodied by a player character that begins to dissolve like a Pynchonesque hero
(Pynchon 1973) and dissipates into the pixelated landscape. In the end, our hero-

ine will deteriorate in a mise en abyme called *The Whirling Infinite*. She will multiply and fade away, eventually die and disappear. But since *SS&SEP* is both a playful homage and a highly inspiring game in itself, it ends in a final act of recursion and a demonstration of respect. In a self-referential closing scene that both reveals and forecasts, the body of the *Scythian* is brought back by the river and recovered. Several characters of the game gather to honor the heroine, while her remains are burned to pixels.
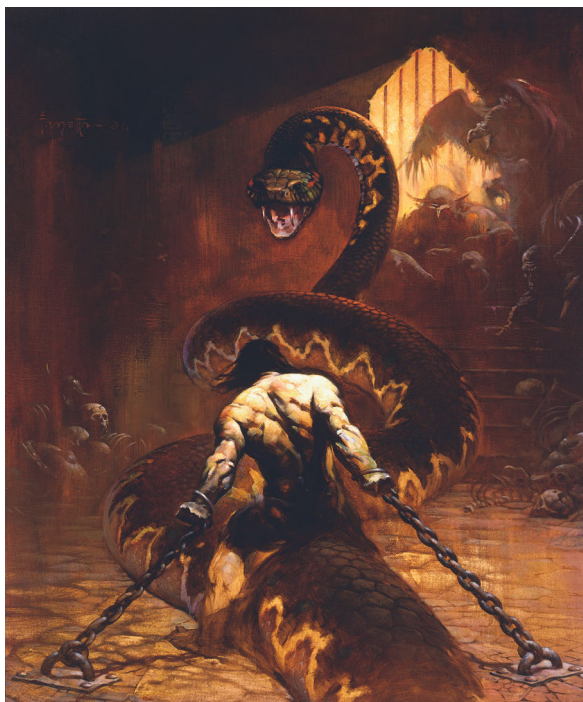
SWORD & SORCERY

> "Our creativity comes from without, not from within. We are not self-made. We are dependent on one another, and admitting this to ourselves isn't an embrace of mediocrity and derivativeness. It's a liberation from our misconceptions, and it's an incentive to not expect so much from ourselves and to simply begin." (*Everything is a Remix* 2012)

Robert E. Howard, who today ranks among the most influential authors of fantasy literature, was already a successful writer in his time in that he could make a stable living. But due to his tragic death at the age of 30, the writing autodidact would never see his work transcend the pulp magazines, which were both devoured and scorned for their lurid and sensational expositions and were printed in huge quantities on the cheapest possible paper. In 1936, when the young Texan shot himself in the head, he left the world more than four hundred stories, full of vigorous men, voluptuous women, vicious beasts and vile wizards. Among these were the adventures of *Conan* (Howard 1932) and a multitude of other scenarios with plenty of violent action. With the decline of the pulp magazines, Howard's work fell almost into oblivion (Dedopulos 2019), but eventually, it would come to define a new and vibrant fantasy sub-genre that would be formative for a wide range of popular media.

This process needed decades, the help of other artistic disciplines and other influential artists. In the early 60s, when *Sword and Sorcery* (*S&S*) was coined (Leiber 1961), emerging art legend Frank Frazetta began to illustrate the covers of Howard's republished adventures. Muscle-bound stallions, callipygian vixens, and, quite literally, big exotic cats, all of them scantily clad, but always maned, sometimes chained and often armored. Frazetta's melodramatic, action-packed

oil paintings redefined the genre's style without bastardizing Howard's original work. On the contrary, they introduced a counter-culture vibe with a dash of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll, which even amplified its effect. The reinvented imagery of *S&S* would inspire generations of painters, illustrators and designers, while Frazetta's depiction of the barbarian would never again be artistically challenged – probably to the chagrin of historians.

Figure 2: "Chained" by Frank Frazetta (cover art on Conan the Usurper by Robert E. Howard 1967).

Source: Robert E. Howard

TWO SNAKES FACING EACH OTHER, BUT THEY ARE ONE

In the early 80s, Howard's work was finally made flesh – on celluloid, on steroids and in plastic. *Conan the Barbarian* hit the big screen in 1982. Oliver Stone's screenplay had been written under the strong influence of cocaine and

depressants and turned out to be "a total drug fever dream" (Riordan 1994: 102). Director John Milius, a gun-loving, self-proclaimed zen-anarchist and Hollywood's man for the rough, apparently valued physicality more than drama school and cast in the leading roles a dancer, a surfer and Mr. Olympia. In the same year that Arnold Schwarzenegger's 'acting' career kicked off, and Frazetta's work was pinned up in the muscle factories, *S&S* was flooding into children's rooms: *Masters of the Universe* (1982), a new toy line launched by Mattel, drew heavily on "Frizetta" [sic] (Seely 2015: 12) and swept the full catalog of genre tropes into the homes of concerned parents – including oversized battle axes, armored bikinis, skull-headed archenemies, skull-faced fortresses, plenty of other skull-shaped items, giant skeletons, enormous snakes and a wild bunch of other monstrosities. As both *Conan* and *Masters* cruised extensively in the genre's primordial waters, they eventually clashed in a lawsuit.

Unlike *Masters*, which would become one of the best-selling product lines in the history of the toy industry, *Conan*, despite its undoubted influence, was a singular and only moderate financial success that was greeted by a storm of negative reviews and lamentations: "more Neanderthal than Nietzsche" (Von Gunden 2001: 15). The Austrian bodybuilder would be back (*Terminator* 1984), but future cinematic approaches to the genre were doomed to become box office flops. There are exceptions. *Mandy* (2019) is substantially (in its narrative core and its orgiastic and visceral imagery) *S&S*, but this highly successful indie film is set in the rural American present.

BARBARIANS AT THE GATE

In other domains, however, no such transformation or relocation of the genre is needed. Pen and paper role-playing games, arcade games, and, later, video games could adopt the pulp fantasy almost one-to-one. The fast-paced scenarios turned out to be a perfect playground and are generally better blueprints for gameplay than the epic, 'unhasty' tales by an English professor at Oxford. In contrast to the slowly evolving stories of the so-called *Epic Fantasy*, which have to conjure up nothing less than a world-threatening battle between good and evil to call the righteous but reluctant hero to a leisurely adventure, the stakes in *S&S* are actually high: because they are personal. The motivational design (often vengeance, mostly survival) is primal and effective. It allows a *show, don't tell* that plays into the hands of game masters and helps arcade games to hook their audience at first glance. The danger is confined to the heat of the moment (Philip 2002: 35) and asks for immediate, but constant action. This ongoing turmoil en-

sures pure gameplay. Its sequential structure (another pulp heritage) translates into sessions, levels, quests or any other form of breakdown crucial to the game design.

Then there is the perfect protagonist. "They are simpler. […] They are too stupid to do anything but cut, shoot, or slug themselves into the clear." (Haile: 1982 89) Howard wrote almost lovingly about his heroes. In the same way that the living dead, with their limited abilities and their determined, relentless, Yul Brynner-like behavior, are the ideal embodiment of hostile NPCs, the pulp barbarians from *S&S* are appropriate templates for many player characters. They embody the limitation of possible interactions which have to be accepted and substantiate the lack of knowledge players experience when confronted with a new game world. They represent the players' illiteracy regarding new rules and systems and even justify the inability to speak. (This last point, however, is not pulp heritage, but rather the leftover of a failed logotherapy in showbiz). More importantly, the *S&S* barbarians are morally unbound, socially unattached outsiders. As such, they offer a means of overcoming social restrictions (Crawford 1984) and allow for a freedom of action appropriate to the mechanics (Christen 2012). Not surprisingly, there is a bit of barbarian in many player characters. The tribute to Frazetta on the cover of *Doom* (1992) is apt, and *Dr. Bree*, the antagonist in *Half-Life 2* (2004), has some valid points when he identifies *Freeman* as "Anticitizen One" and accuses him of destructive behavior and throwing civilization into freefall. *Bree*'s problem is that he is in the wrong game genre. If *Half-Life 2* were a strategy game, his fascist and inhuman dreams of optimization would be in line with the goal. Whereas *Freeman*, who does not get the bigger picture, would be doomed to run with the barbarian tribes that usually spawn in random places as a constant annoyance.

S&S's stories of high adventure are set in perilous and dystopian worlds, where civilization is corrupted and in decline, and social structures are either destroyed or an expression of moral decay. The reason why we cannot find the lands of *Howard's Hyborian Age* on the *World Peace Index* is not so much because they do not exist, but because they are totally off the scale. In short: The worlds of pulp are fertile ground for action-packed gameplay. They let the constant spawning of enemies seem plausible and make the player's destructive raids legitimate.

THE WHIRLING INFINITE

Robert E. Howard had to accept countless failures before his first published success – a story about a Cro-Magnon man who had to fight a Neanderthal over a beautiful woman. (Dedopulos 2019) During those years, the autodidact studied the popular pulp stories meticulously, always searching for the perfect narrative formula. In a potentiation process that defied homeopathy laws, he mixed what he found (Martin 2020), until he got a final brew that was fresh, strong and addictive and could hook the readers in seconds. *SS&SEP* is an heir to the *Sword & Sorcery* genre – not because it indulges in the pulp potion, as plenty of other games did and still do, but because it understands the creative process: *copy, transform and combine* (*Everything is a Remix* 2012). *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* is a self-referential parable about the inspiration that reminds us that creativity is not a form of exploitation, nor is taxidermy a bedrock for the imagination. When we meet the bearlike ancestor in the ancient wilderness, the adventure gives us a choice: we can slay the primal beast or follow it deeper into the mythic woods – and dive into the vortex.

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