A Digital Fragment

The artistic videogame *Thralled* has been publicly anticipated at least since 2013, when it was profiled in Evan Narcisse’s article on the website Kotaku with the title, “I Need This Haunting Game about a Runaway Slave to Get Finished.” Created by students at the University of Southern California Games Innovation Lab, *Thralled* seems to be in a direct lineage of serious games like *Papers, Please, Darfur is Dying*, and particularly *Hush*, which is about a Rwandan mother who must quiet her child to avoid detection by soldiers. Those interested in the game can access the mission statement and trailer on the game’s website, Thralled.org, and limited play-throughs and student demonstrations are available on YouTube, but downloadable playable content is not available anywhere to date. Rather than being a detriment, the game’s unfinishedness and limited accessibility seem to work in tandem with its theme of rebellion. The unreleased fragment *Thralled* acts as a non-game, somewhat like Brenda Romero’s material game about the slave trade, *The New World.*

Romero’s *The New World* is not a purchasable commodity but rather an installation exhibit in which the “player” must load wooden pegs representing people onto a slave ship. Romero’s game about the Holocaust, *Train*, operates in a similar way. The player only discovers later in the game that the trains are bound for concentration camps, perhaps encouraging a feeling of complicity. As non-games, Romero’s works call into question expectations about player agency and games’ ability to foster empathy for the historical people represented by the wooden pegs. Expectations of ludic form and empathy are likewise raised by *Thralled*, and just as Romero’s “games” cannot be purchased, this game about a runaway slave remains an incomplete and largely inaccessible digital fragment.

The developers were kind enough to send me a playable version of the first chapter as a demo, and it is my experience with this version that I’ll present here. *Thralled* is a side-scrolling puzzle game in which the player pilots the small figure of Isaura across the landscape. On a black screen, the opening frames inform the player of the historical context of the game:

*Between 1500 and 1888, an estimated 12 million African men, women, and children were forcibly taken from their homes and sold as slaves in the Americas… The majority of these Africans were taken to the Portuguese colony of Brazil and forced to work on its sugar-cane plantations… Among them was Isaura.*

As the title cards share this information, the player hears the sound of a dense rain falling. When the last words dissolve, the sound of a baby crying—a sound which the player of this game must grow accustomed to—is introduced as the image of Isaura holding her child at the foot of a giant mangrove tree fades in. Supertitles situate the action: “Pernambuco, Brazil, 1700s.” The rain falls on Isaura and her baby until the player begins the action by shushing the child, a gesture that will become a frequent and urgent one. No instruction is given to the player, and I’ve found in the various classes in which I’ve demoed this game that students often begin with a feeling of what Gilleade and Dix call in-game frustration “when an objective is
not given.” It's only once they’ve figured out through trial and error that pushing the space bar will effect Isaura’s soothing of the babe that the gameplay properly starts, at which point the perspective zooms out and the haunting humming of the game’s soundtrack begins. At this point, the player has control of Isaura and must move her from the left to the right of the screen, helping her to cross the terrain, remove obstacles, and use objects along the way to make her path easier in this two-dimensional platformer game. She can backtrack only a certain distance; a waterfall appears to the left of the screen that marks the point of no return.

Let me begin by saying, candidly, that unlike other side-scrolling puzzle games I’ve played, there is absolutely nothing even remotely enjoyable about Thralled. In fact, the persistent crying of the infant makes this chapter an anxiety-filled agony. In particularly tense moments, other equally piercing sounds intrude into the aural space, including a frequent metallic screech something like the braying of a donkey and eerie music that elicited gooseflesh the first dozen times I played the level. (Members of my household begged me to mute the game, but I felt that was cheating.) The most intense moments come when Isaura arrives at locations that she cannot traverse while holding the baby, such as a high rockface that needs to be scaled. She must then find a designated safe-zone (a bower) in which to lay the baby down while she accomplishes a task that allows them to cross, like performing a complicated set of maneuvers to use an overturned wagon as a step ladder. The entire time that the baby is not in Isaura’s arms, he wails discomfortingly for his mother. And as if this wasn’t stressful enough, there’s also the apparition to worry about.

Called the “Reflection” by the developers in a demo of an early version of the game, this figure is a pale, somewhat transparent woman who looks something like Isaura’s white double. The two women are of the same relative size, but the Reflection is ashen,

her dress is more detailed, and she wears no headscarf, whereas Isaura’s dress evokes the traditional Bahian costume worn by slave women in the north of Brazil, with a belling skirt and headwrap. Ghostly, or witch-like, the specter pursues Isaura as she crosses the jungle. If the wailing child is left too long in the bower, the apparition reaches him, and her touch causes the game to end. As she draws closer to the baby, sounds warn that time is running out, which only heightens the player’s stress. The ghost’s approach is signaled by a clanking mechanical sound possibly meant to evoke the grinding of the wheels in the sugarcane mill. The apparition may represent the white colonizers who separated Isaura and her child, or she may recall the ancestral spirits from the world of the dead. In fact, this conflation reminds us that some Africans sold to European slavers confused the white slavers for ghosts because entities from the hereafter were thought to be pale. If the Reflection touches the baby, the entire level must be replayed from the start. If the player finishes the task at hand and reaches the baby before the white woman, the player still has to successfully quiet his cries or else the Reflection can claim him, a fact that makes comforting the baby quickly a crucial skill. Therefore, the game consists of often having to replay the level and repeat the same gestures—for my part, in a frenzied manner, my nerves frayed by the sounds of the baby’s cries and the tense auditory signals of the Reflection’s approach, which add to the dread of what will happen if this isn’t done fast enough. For one, it means suffering through this same routine once more.

By the admission of the creators in their game demo presentation, this insistence on repetition emphasizes the labor of the

5. That the reflection is specifically meant to represent “a dead version of the main character” is stated in Carmichael, “Empathy Game.”

enslaved. But the repetition resonates with the theme of slavery regarding more than just the labors that Isaura performs. Repeating this level several times, the player becomes somewhat inured to the horrors that accompany the specter’s approach in the first several play-throughs. The gameplay remains stressful and the game remains appropriately un-fun, but the player can eventually become habituated to the ghost’s clattering, stalking approach. This aspect of the game emphasizes, like Katherine McKittrick’s attention to the famous photograph of the slave Gordon’s scarred back, most commonly called Scourged Back, that “if we are not very careful, the image becomes so ordinary that the pleasures of looking, again and again, incite a second order of violence.” That is, if we become inoculated against the horrors of the imagery through repetition, we repeat the initial violence of the slaveholder’s lack of empathy. Repetition also works, of course, to represent the theme of trauma, and descriptions of later levels of the game in the developers’ mission statements call into question whether Isaura is meant to be in the New World or in Africa in this first level.

Is this level a subjective depiction of Isaura’s initial capture and separation from her child, or is she, as the title card suggests, in Brazil, fleeing her enslavement? What are we to make of the nkisi, carved wooden Kongolese fetishes that would surely be more commonly found in Africa, that punctuate the landscape she traverses, hanging from trees as if they were lynched bodies? At one point, Isaura encounters a sculpture of a mother and child posed like a


8. On the labor of serious games, see again Matthew Kelly, “Game of Politics,” particularly for his discussion of “work-as-play”: “the ‘work’ of playing a game is the intellectual investment of continual self-reflection and self-modification of one’s actions or thoughts within a virtual space” (469).

Madonna, which she would be likely to encounter in Portuguese Brazil, but its translation into the form of a carved wooden nkisi may be another indication of the game’s subjective viewpoint. Is this a Catholic icon that she translates into the form of a recognizable African fetish? Of course, this first level is not the game, which makes it difficult to analyze as a stand-alone artifact, for it raises many more questions than it answers.

No matter how successfully Isaura manages to outrun the Reflection—accomplishing her tasks in a timely manner, retrieving her child from the safe-zones, and managing to soothe him and stop his heart-wrenching cries before the ghostly woman closes the distance to the infant—at the end of the first chapter Isaura emerges from an underground cavern to face her with nowhere left to run. The Reflection approaches Isaura and lays hands on the child. The capture of the mother and child is followed by a dissolve to an image of Isaura drowning beneath the water, with her child floating away from her, perhaps a metaphoric representation of her crossing the ocean to her enslavement. After this, the game title appears. This has been, it seems, a kind of preamble, suggesting that Isaura was separated from her infant even before the crossing. The representation of her escape from a plantation in Brazil may therefore be overlaid with traumatic flashbacks that signify her separation from her baby and her homeland. Perhaps, in short, she only imagines that she is carrying her child. The developer’s description states:

*Thralled* is an interactive experience that portrays the surreal journey of Isaura, a runaway slave separated from her newborn and tormented by memories of a painful past. Set in 18th-century Brazil, *Thralled* follows Isaura as she traverses a nightmarish representation of the New World, reliving a distorted reminiscence of life in captivity and the events that led to the taking away of her baby boy.10

Despite the third person perspective of this platformer, the opening level of the game is clearly marked as a subjective rendering

of Isaura’s trauma. It would seem that the player witnesses how Isaura bears with the trauma of being separated from her child and her homeland.

Regardless of whether the completed game would ultimately contradict this interpretation, the fact that the white figure cannot be eluded at the chapter’s end adds much to the feeling of disempowerment that this tense, exhausting demo creates in its form as much as in its content. This first chapter, an incomplete fragment of an unreleased game, is decidedly unwinnable.

In February of 2017, I was invited to give a presentation on this and other videogames about slavery at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and the developers of *Thralled* were kind enough to allow me to demo the game throughout the day at the EMPAC Center. I was fascinated by the response the game garnered. More than one game developer told me *Thralled* was “unsuccessful” because it blocked the player’s absorption in the narrative. Perhaps because of its difficulty and, especially, its aural unpleasantness, it lacked what Bolter and Grusin call “immediacy,” which “dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented: sitting in the race car or standing on a mountaintop.”

Yet, for me, this is precisely what makes this text *successful* as a game about a rebel slave. Videogames depicting slave resistance offer a potentially problematic act of occupation of the historically subjugated person when the player is invited to play as the enslaved. Commoditizing the rebel slave as a playable protagonist risks “eating the [historical] Other,” to invoke bell hooks’s description of cultural appropriation. When these games interrupt their own “immediacy” in the sense used by Bolter and Grusin, that is, when they *defy* their invisibility as a medium and instead insist upon their presence, they work against their own problematic consumption,

reminding players of the separation between themselves and the historical subject position they would play at being. This defiance challenges how we think of empathy as fostered by interactivity.

Katherine Isbister writes that games “play a powerful role in creating empathy and other strong, positive emotional experiences.” While I don’t disagree, I think inquiry into serious games (particularly those that represent real, lived, or living subjects) should also consider how gestures of empathy have often come with an eclipse of the Other. In short, the trick is how to have empathy for others without replacing a concern for them with a concern for the self. One such way, I would suggest, is by engineering moments of non-immediacy that act as aporias, deflecting the player’s complete absorption into the character’s life as a reminder, in essence, that while it is only a game for the player, it was a reality for someone else.

As I said at the beginning of this section, there is evidence that the completed version of Thrall was highly anticipated in the press, with articles in 2013 and 2014 from Verge, Killscreen, and many others mentioning the title. As recently as 2015, it was included on a Motherboard’s list of best forthcoming games, but

12. Isbister, How Games Move Us, xvii.
14. Andrew Webster, “Can an iPad Game Teach You about Slavery?” Verge, September 13, 2013, and Jess Joho, “How the Upcoming Thrall Could Help Us Better Understand the Atrocity of Slavery,” Killscreen, March 21, 2014. The game was also profiled on Huffington Post, Venture Beat, Gaming Bolt, Grabit Magazine, and J Station X. See the “media” tab on Thrall.org for a sampling of articles mentioning or profiling the game.
that was five years ago now, and I fear that since the official website still lists its release date as “to be announced,” that this game may never come be released. Nonetheless, for our purposes here, Thralled’s existence as a fragment, an unfinished game, is apt. With a single completed level that forecloses victory for the player, the game seems to be among those that withhold the satisfaction of play from the wider gamership. However, the game’s fragmentary state and inaccessibility, existing as this demo does as a preamble without a narrative, deprive the would-be player not only of a satisfying ending but also of even the proper game itself. The fact that Thralled exists mainly in press clippings and gaming lore brackets this history as not only unwinnable but even unplayable for the majority.

15. Zack Kotzer, “Motherboard’s 15 Games to Look Forward to in 2015,” Vice, January 2, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/jp5aq4/games-to-look-forward-to-since-the-last-guardian-is-never-coming-out. See also Colin Campbell, “Ouya Slavery Game Thralled Now Coming to Multiple Platforms,” Polygon, April 24, 2015, which stated that the game was slated for release on PC, Mac, Linux, and Ouya, a failed console that was discontinued in the summer of 2015. The game’s official website still cites “exact date to be announced.” Some articles mentioned iPad and iPhone versions that were planned at some point.