

The becoming-flower of video games: a Deleuzoguattarian analysis of Thatgamecompany's *Flower* (2009)

> **Corné du Plessis**

Centre for Philosophy in Africa, Nelson Mandela University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa

corne.duplessis@mandela.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Current prominent theoretical approaches within the field of video game studies tend to engage with video games in terms of narrative and gameplay because of the legacy of narratology and ludology. However, these approaches are potentially ill-equipped to adequately account for the specificity of certain video games that involve digital interactive experiences that are not primarily, or solely, focused on narrative or gameplay, but can rather be understood as video game multiplicities that consist of percepts and affects. A pertinent example of a game that functions as a video game multiplicity is Thatgamecompany's *Flower* (2009), which is analysed through a Deleuzoguattarian lens in order to highlight the unique aesthetic and play elements, or 'percepts' and 'affects', that enable the potentially transformative experiences offered by the game. Theorisation of these elements is arguably important because they entail a movement beyond the essence-based representational models of video games that are generally advanced through narratology and ludology, toward a model of multiplicity and becoming. In particular, the article explores how the percepts and affects of *Flower* can potentially open the player to a form of "transversal becoming" known as "becoming-imperceptible".

Keywords: Video games, becoming, Deleuze, Guattari, *Flower*, multiplicity, affect, percept.

Introduction

As noted by Dovey and Kennedy (2009:2), the video game industry ‘is the most established of all sectors of the emergent new media landscape’. Indeed, many individuals, especially members of the younger generation, spend more time playing video games than watching television or reading books (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:2). Therefore, in recent years, the video game medium and its relations to culture and society have become important topics of study in many disciplines, including visual culture studies. For the most part, narratology and ludology have served as important theoretical frameworks through which video games have been analysed in the majority of these disciplines. While narratology frames video games as interactive stories that represent our cultural and historical contexts, ludology focuses on gameplay in relation to rules as the essential characteristic of the medium.¹ In other words, video games are seen by narratology as digital representations of narratives, and by ludology as digital representations of rule-based play. It is worth noting that in recent years a more complex, hybrid approach that acknowledges both narrative and rule-based gameplay as essential elements has gained momentum in relation to the study of video games in visual culture studies. However, because these approaches are ultimately informed by a representational framework on the one hand (that video games are mere digital representations of the “real life” practices of storytelling and gameplay), and an essence-based framework on the other hand (that video games all share an essential characteristic – either narrative or rule-based play – that captures the medium’s specificity), they cannot adequately contend with games that fall outside of these traditional frameworks.

In the latter regard, numerous video game critics have argued that Thatgamecompany’s video games, including *Flow* (2006), *Flower* (2009), and *Journey* (2012), defy the medium’s general characteristics and tropes and should be understood as “digital interactive art”, rather than video games in the traditional sense.² One of the major factors behind the specificity of *Flower* is Thatgamecompany’s philosophy of video game design and development. As Kellee Santiago, co-founder of Thatgamecompany, explains in an interview with GamesIndustry.biz, the company was founded as a result of her and Jenova Chen’s mutual desire to design and develop creative and experimental video games that did not blindly follow industry tropes (Elliot 2010:[sp]). Thatgamecompany’s philosophy of video game design and development is rooted in experimentation with the aim of expanding the medium’s potential – especially the emotional spectrum of video games (Sheffield 2008:3). According to Santiago, Thatgamecompany’s design process always starts with an emotion or affect, followed by an attempt to ‘design a game around that emotion, as opposed to starting with

the mechanics, which is often how designers approach games' (Elliot 2010:[sp]). For example, in Chen and Santiago's first collaborative project, *Cloud* (2005), which they developed during their Master's studies, they started 'with the idea of trying to capture the feeling of what it was like to be a kid, staring at the clouds and daydreaming,' and then created an entire game around this affect (Herro 2010:[sp]).

Upon playing any of Thatgamecompany's video games, it is apparent that narrative assumes a minor role at most, and while gameplay is certainly an important component within the overall experience, it can by no means be isolated as the essential characteristic. Indeed, as stated by Chen and Santiago, Thatgamecompany's aim is to create video games that facilitate certain affects. It is for this reason that Deleuze and Guattari's conception of "percepts" and "affects" can prove useful in analysing video games such as *Flower*. That is, rather than reducing such video games to an essential aspect (such as narrative, gameplay, or even "interactive experience"), Deleuze and Guattari's concepts highlight their multiplicitous character, while nonetheless providing a useful conceptual framework through which to unpack and maximise the potential of their specific components. Ultimately, I argue that Thatgamecompany's novel design process moves beyond the traditional representational and essence-based design frameworks, thereby extending the limits of what video games can be and do. In particular, I argue that *Flower* can be understood as a video game multiplicity that consists of a variety of percepts and affects, which can, in turn, open the player to a particular type of "transversal becoming", namely, "becoming imperceptible". With this in mind, in the next section I discuss Deleuze and Guattari's conception of "multiplicities", "percepts", "affects" and "transversal becoming", which forms the theoretical basis for the analysis of Thatgamecompany's *Flower*.

Multiplicities, Percepts, Affects and Transversal Becomings

According to Deleuze (1994:182), a multiplicity 'must not designate a combination of the many and the one, but rather an organisation belonging to the many as such, which has no need whatsoever of unity in order to form a system'. As explained by Jonathan Roffe (2005:176), a multiplicity is therefore, 'in the most basic sense, a complex structure that does not reference a prior unity'. That is, a multiplicity is not a system or organism that can be defined by an essence, understood in this instance as a universal archetype, but a unique and complex structure, or assemblage,³ that consists of fragmented, yet communicating, parts. Roffe (2005:176) provides the following useful example to clarify this conception of multiplicities:

For example, a house is a patchwork of concrete structures and habits. Even though we can list these things, there is finally no way of determining what the essence of a particular house is, because we cannot point to anything outside of the house itself to explain or to sum it up – it is simply a patchwork.

In other words, when understanding a structure or object as a multiplicity, one does not reduce it to a simple essence, such as the essence of “house” being “a building for human habitation”. Instead, one understands the structure or object as a complex and open assemblage, in which all the different components (including objects and processes) contribute, to varying degrees, to the specificity and quality of the particular assemblage. By extension, if any of the components are removed or altered, the quality of the multiplicity alters in turn. Importantly, as Manuel DeLanda (2002:10) suggests, one of the key features of Deleuzian multiplicities is its emphasis on potential. By understanding an assemblage as a multiplicity the emphasis is not placed on neat and accurate definitions, but rather on the assemblage’s capacity to generate difference and becoming. This notion is linked to Deleuze’s preference for “becoming” over “being”, and his interest in the transformative power of thought and art. From a Deleuzian perspective, it is therefore crucial to interpret works of art, including video games, in terms of their potential to create transformations in people and life in general. I argue that the transformative potential of video games as multiplicities, including Thatgamecompany’s *Flower*, is situated within the medium’s capacity to create a variety of sensations, or “percepts” and “affects”. In order to understand the nature of these sensations, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s account of art and the creation of “percepts” and “affects” from their collaborative text, *What is Philosophy?*.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1994:164), the unique capacity of art is to preserve ‘a bloc of sensations, [or] a compound of percepts and affects’. In other words, any work of art consists of a variety of percepts and affects, understood in this instance as sensations, which were created by the artist with the material specific to a particular form of art. Importantly, different forms of art create different kinds of percepts and affects, depending on the material and methods that are available to the artist. To begin with, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1994:164), percepts are not perceptions and affects are not affections. As Claire Colebrook (2002:22-23) explains, affections ‘are what happens to us (disgust, or the recoil of the nostrils at the smell of cheese); perceptions are what we receive (odour, or the smell itself)’. In other words, perceptions and affections are always rooted in an experiencing subject. In contrast, percepts and affects are independent of a particular subject – they exist in the work of art itself (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:164). In this sense, the artist has freed the percepts and affects from the ordered world of everyday experience, and, through the material of the form

of art, has given them a life of their own: 'Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived' experience (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:164). For example, a painting of a "tortured flower"⁴ is not a mere representation of a flower that the artist perceived at some point in the past – although memory undoubtedly contributes to the painting of the flower (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:167). Rather, the artist has brought a variety of disparate components together – "flower", "torture", "line", "colour" and "style" – into a new, independent bloc of sensations.

The freeing of percepts and affects from everyday experience and opinion is significant for Deleuze and Guattari (1994:174), since in everyday life we act as if percepts and affects are simple, self-evident objects that we can identify and delimit: 'Opinion makes a direct link between affect and concept, between what we see and what we say, or between the sensible and intelligible' (Colebrook 2002:24). For instance, for practical purposes, at a day-to-day level there is the tendency to homogenise perceptions of the various shades of green into a single, identifiable category of "green". This homogenisation of "green" is also accompanied by a habitual response to the possible affections produced by the perception of "green", such as "I like green", "I don't like green", or "green relaxes me". This habitual or automatic response to percepts and affects diminishes the creative and transformative potential that is inherent to percepts and affects as intensive experiences. However, art disrupts this habitual order that is imposed on life, by disengaging 'the ordered flow of experience into its singularities', that is into percepts and affects (Colebrook 2002:24). In this way, percepts and affects in art are powers of becoming that can transform thought and life.

As mentioned before, the nature of the percepts and affects depends on the particular form of art. However, different kinds of percepts and affects nonetheless share common features. For Deleuze and Guattari (1994:169) percepts are receptions of sense data that are not located in the human subject (Colebrook 2002:126). Drawing on a remark by Paul Cézanne, they state that the 'percept is the landscape before man, in the absence of man' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:169). Thus, percepts are nonhuman perspectives of sense data, including the perspective, or imaging power of the camera, the landscape as paint, or even the landscape as music; such as Olivier Messiaen's "melodic landscapes" which Deleuze and Guattari (1994:169) often refer to. Therefore, the function of the percept is ultimately 'to render perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world, and that affect us, make us become' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:182). In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze (1973:42) argues that the world that a particular work of art reveals (referred to here as percept) is necessarily individual, and that it reminds us that there are multiple worlds, multiple perceptions, and not merely a single, universal world or perception. Therefore, by dislocating percepts from the human perspective, art reminds us that human perception is only one among a

potentially infinite number of perceptions. It reminds us that we contract specific percepts from a flow of pure differences. In other words, percepts can open us to entirely novel forms of perception, including non-human perceptions.

According to Brian Massumi (1987:xvi) an “affect” is ‘a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act ... (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include “mental” or ideal bodies)’. Therefore, affect refers to, not only a mere feeling, but virtual alterations in the body that either increases or decreases a body’s capacity to act. Deleuze and Guattari (1994:169) argue that affects are the “nonhuman becomings” in art, or zones of indetermination, of indiscernibility, where ‘things, beasts, and persons ... endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation’. In other words, as in the example of the “tortured flower”, an artist creates an affect by bringing together two or more disparate becomings. According to Deleuze (2007:177, 179), this process of bringing together disparate becomings is what he and Guattari refer to as ‘plateaus’ (establishing an intensive continuity between very different things). For example, in his book on Francis Bacon, Deleuze argues that in many of Bacon’s paintings, a zone of indiscernibility, or plateau, is produced between human and animal. This can be noted in the following extract, in which Deleuze (2004:21) discusses two of Bacon’s paintings, namely *Triptych, 1976* (1976) and *Two Studies of George Dyer with a Dog* (1968):

Sometimes the human head is replaced by an animal; but it is not the animal as a form, but rather the animal as a trait – for example, the quivering trait of a bird spiraling over the scrubbed area... Sometimes an animal, for example a real dog, is treated as the shadow of its master. The shadow escapes from the body like an animal we had been sheltering ... It is never a combination of forms, but rather the common fact: the common fact of man and animal.

These affects of becoming-animal in Bacon’s paintings enhance one of the primary motifs of his work – the suffering of flesh. Through these affects, Bacon dislocates suffering as the suffering of only human bodies and extends it to nonhuman bodies: human, animal, flesh and suffering enter into a zone of indiscernibility through colour and lines. Importantly, affects do not belong to the artist who created the work of art, neither do they belong to the perceiver who experiences the work of art, they exist in the work of art itself. However, the work of art can open the perceiver to these non-human becomings – that is, the affects can pass through the perceiver – which can potentially increase the perceiver’s capacity to act – that is, experiencing the affects of a work of art can generate creative transformations in the ways that we think and live. For Deleuze (2007:180), it is always a question of potential: ‘How can these

affects change me?’, ‘What new connections has it made available for me?’, and ‘How can I put them to use in my own creative endeavors in order to proliferate further becomings?’.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1994:176), art, as the language of sensations, ‘undoes the triple organisation of perceptions, affections, and opinions in order to substitute it with a monument composed of percepts, affects, and blocs of sensations’. Therefore, art as a power of becoming has the capacity to open us to difference, making our lives more intense in the process. Artists not only create blocs of percepts and affects, ‘they give them to us and make us become with them’ (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:175). In order to understand the manner in which a work of art can open us to different becomings, it is necessary to discuss the concept of “transversal becoming”.

In this article, I adapt Colebrook’s (2002:133) use of the concept of “transversal becoming”, in order to differentiate between human and non-human becomings. The term “transversal” is adapted from geometry and designates a line that passes through two other lines at two distinct points. A “transversal becoming” involves the establishment of an intensive continuity between a human individual and an entirely different becoming, such as works of art, concepts, other objects, experiences or events. In other words, while an affect in art is a non-human becoming that is created by an artist; for example, in *Moby Dick* (1851), Herman Melville creates a becoming-animal between the fictional character, Ahab, and a fictional whale – a transversal becoming is a process that occurs in relation to an actual human individual, and not within a work of art. However, it is important to note that a transversal becoming can occur between a human individual and a work of art. For example, the zone of indiscernibility that Bacon creates between human, animal, flesh and suffering, in his paintings can affect an individual and transform the way in which the individual views, and relates to, art and animals, among other things. Furthermore, a transversal becoming is always affective, and not mimetic. As Colebrook (2002:133) argues, becoming-animal ‘does not mean becoming like an animal, or being an animal and leaving the terrain of the human altogether. It is a becoming-animal and not a being-animal because it is hybrid’. Transversal becoming is marked by a desire ‘that is directed to a multiplicity of affects’ – the multiplicity of intensities and perceptions that constitute the other’s different mode of becoming (Colebrook 2002:134). In short, transversal becomings involve a desire for action and transformation, and not a desire for what the other symbolises or even what the other is.

The concept of transversal becoming is of particular importance in this article, as I argue that *Flower* can potentially open the player to “becoming-imperceptible”, a form of transversal becoming that is explored by Deleuze and Guattari in relation to art.

Specifically, through art we experience sensibility itself, or, in Deleuze's (1994:54) words, 'the being of the sensible', which is a "sensible" that is not 'contracted and organised according to the specific interests of the perceiver' (Colebrook 2002:127). As Deleuze and Guattari (1987:280) argue, by becoming-imperceptible 'one has made the world, everybody/everything, into a becoming, because one has made a necessarily communicating world, because one has suppressed in oneself everything that prevents us from slipping between things and growing in the midst of things'. In other words, one becomes a de-individualised part of the whole and is receptive to the transformative power of new connections and other becomings. In the next section, I analyse *Flower* as a multiplicity that consists of percepts and affects that can possibly open the player to becoming-imperceptible.

The "percepts" and "affects" of *Flower*

In *Flower*, the player experiences the "dreams" of six potted flowers that are positioned on a windowsill, overlooking an unidentifiable urban environment. Upon entering an individual flower's "dream", the flower is displayed in either a natural or urban environment, depending on the flower, and a single petal gently dislodges from the flower and drifts into the air. Although the player-controlled breeze can propel the petal in any direction, thereby enabling the exploration of the intricately designed digital environment, the perspective intuitively gravitates towards other flowers that dot the digital landscape. When the player's petal touches another flower, a number of gameplay and aesthetic signs are emitted. First, the flower, which is initially retracted, blossoms and the grass surrounding the flower becomes a vibrant green (or, at times, also a number of other colours depending on the particular flower's dream). Second, touching a flower also generates a musical chime that harmonises with the music of the video game. Third, the flower releases a single petal that joins the first petal in the breeze. As a result of these particular gameplay and aesthetic elements, the player can eventually accumulate a trail of dozens of multicoloured petals that swirl and dance in intricate patterns within the breeze. Finally, touching a flower can also initiate various in-game events that enable the player to progress. For instance, after touching a particular circle of flowers, the landscape shifts, opening new pathways through which the petals can be blown.

The first and second flowers' dreams occur in natural landscapes, with no trace of either human or animal life. Both are open grass fields, dotted with flowers and giant boulders that form complex patterns. The grass in both of the landscapes is initially dry and either light yellow or grey in colour. However, as the petal touches the flowers,

the grass surrounding the blossoming flowers become vibrant green in the first dream and a variety of vibrant colours in the second dream. In the first, yellow, flower's dream, the colours of the landscape are definitely brighter: a blue sky, lush yellow or green grass, and a wide variety of different coloured flowers that can be found across the landscape. While the second, the red flower's dream is less bright: the sky seems cloudy and the landscape is generally more grey in appearance. The first landscape is also flatter and more open than the rest, presumably in order to enable the player to learn the gameplay and the aesthetic signs that make the play possible within the video game, and to provide an open expanse for the player to experiment with the flight-based movement. In the third (pink) and fourth (blue) flowers' dreams the first human elements enter the landscape in the form of windmills, lamp poles and electricity pylons. Similar to the yellow flower, the pink flower's dream is initially extremely vibrant in terms of colour. However, after a few minutes the sun starts to set, and the landscape and all its colours transform into various shades of orange, pink, gold and grey. A unique element in the pink flower's dream is the emphasis that is placed on the role of the wind in relation to the landscape. The wind creates intricate patterns of cloud in the late afternoon sky, completely altering the colours and lighting of the landscape. On the other hand, the blue flower's dream is set at night, and involves touching the flowers that surround the lamp poles and electricity pylons, which leads to the formation of beautiful patterns of light in the grass. The fifth (purple) flower's dream is also set at night. However, the dream occurs during a thunderstorm, and the landscape is situated on the outskirts of an urban area. Unlike in the blue flower's dream, this landscape has no light sources, except for the occasional flash of lightning, and is filled with collapsed pylons and pipelines. The landscape is therefore different shades of grey and the only visible colours belong to the flowers and a few faint orange lights that remain flickering on the pylons. Finally, the sixth (lavender) flower's dream is set during the day again, and occurs within an urban area, which contains a variety of buildings (including massive skyscrapers), broken pylons, and flowers that grow in tiny urban gardens or more unkept areas such as sidewalks and parks. The buildings of the urban environment lack detail and colour, while the broken pylons function as obstacles that block the player's progression. However, after touching a number of flowers, the petals become imbued with a bright light, which enables the petals to dissolve the pylons, which, in turn, leads to grass and flowers appearing in the urban environment, as well as opening new areas for exploration. Further, when the petals touch a line of flowers that encircle a building, the building's colour changes into the colour of the respective flowers. In this way, the player can transform the urban setting into a colourful urban landscape full of life.

Upon initiating the video game, the player must become familiar with the gameplay of *Flower*. Unlike most video games, in which the player must learn a complex controller

configuration – that is, the function of each button and the optimal combinations in which to use them – *Flower* incorporates motion controls in order to be more accessible to a broader audience. The player can press and hold any single button on the controller to increase the speed of the breeze, while tilting the controller to change direction. The gameplay enables the player to move the breeze vertically and horizontally, thereby enabling the player to explore the digital landscapes from various perspectives. As soon as a player selects a flower on the windowsill, the dream is initiated and nothing interrupts the play experience. *Flower* contains very few prompts or instructions (when starting the game, the only instruction is “hold any button”), and has no menus or tutorial screens. The player must therefore learn the gameplay of *Flower*, including the gameplay rules and rules of skill, through intuitive experimentation. Further, the general pattern of movement within the video game is individually generated by each player, depending on the individual flight patterns in combination with the flowers that dot the landscape. Although the flowers are often arranged in lines, and even form shapes, particularly circles, the free movement of the video game enables the player to touch the flowers in any order. As a result, the pattern of play can never be rigidly predetermined and will be unique with each new playthrough. Once the player is familiar with the gameplay, including the aesthetic signs that are emitted when touching the flowers on the landscape, the player can potentially enter a state of “flow”,⁵ rendering the player more sensitive and receptive to the percepts and affects of *Flower*.

As mentioned in the introduction, Thatgamecompany design their video games around emotions, or, in Deleuzoguattarian terms, affects. According to Santiago, the affect around which *Flower* is designed and developed, is the sublime experience of being in a giant field of flowers (Cox 2012:[sp]). Chen has stated that *Flower* is not a video game that promotes renewable energy or any other environmental message (since he views himself as “too young” to produce a strong message regarding such complex ethical issues). More specifically, according to Chen, the idea is based on the feeling he had the first time he experienced an expansive grass field: ‘The sense of being engulfed by nature is something sublime that I can't capture with photos or videos. As a game designer, I wanted to try to capture that feeling with an interactive experience, and that is how I started the concept of *Flower*’ (in Reynolds 2009:[sp]). In other words, rather than designing the video game around gameplay or genre, as is the case with the majority of video games, Thatgamecompany starts the design process with a sensation, which forms the basis for the gameplay and the aesthetic design. As a result, every element in the video game, including the gameplay elements, the visual elements, and the audio elements are carefully designed to contribute to the sensation of being engulfed by nature. Although one can undoubtedly perform a reading of *Flower* from either a ludological perspective, by focusing on the flight-based exploration of gameplay, or a narratological perspective, by analysing the possible representational

meanings portrayed by the flowers, landscapes and specific colours, I argue that Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of 'percept' and 'affect' are more useful for understanding the specificity of the various aesthetic and gameplay elements that constitute this particular multiplicity.

As explained earlier, a 'percept is the landscape before man, in the absence of man' (Deleuze & Guattari 1994:169). In other words, percepts present us with sensible data or forms of perception that are liberated from everyday habitual perception. In *Flower*, the player is presented with a number of digital perceptions of grass fields and urban environments, depending on the specific flower's dream. In terms of the grass fields, the developers placed great care in creating each individual blade of grass. In fact, at any given moment up to 200 000 individual blades of grass are rendered on screen simultaneously, and each blade is receptive to the force of the breeze that the player controls, thus creating a sense of vitality and movement in the landscape (*Flower's* Grass [sa]:[sp]). In addition, the landscapes are also dotted with numerous flowers (all different shades of colour), and a variety of other carefully designed objects, including boulders, electricity pylons and, at times, urban buildings. Importantly, the complete absence of other living creatures, including human beings and animals, dislocates the landscape from everyday perception and creates a sense of isolation, thereby contributing to the sensation of being engulfed by nature. Unlike in many other video games in which the percepts, or digital environments, are reduced to the level of everyday perception and therefore approached in terms of utility – as a gameplay "level" that merely draws the boundaries for in-game movements and actions – in *Flower* the gameplay occurs through and in relation to the landscape, thereby always drawing the player's attention to the landscape as something sensible in itself, or, in Deleuzoguattarian terms, the player is confronted with 'the being of the sensible' (Deleuze 1994:54). In each flower's dream, different facets of the landscape are emphasised in order to draw the player's attention to the affective power of the percepts. The clearest example of this can be noted in both the pink and blue flower's dreams. These dreams explore the intensive power of colour by focusing on the ways in which natural lighting and artificial lighting transform the landscape and its objects at a visual level. In the pink flower's dream the sky changes from a bright blue expanse with intricate patterns of white clouds to a twilight sky consisting of a range of colours, including various shades of orange, pink, gold and grey. These changes in the natural lighting not only alter the colours of the landscape, for instance initially changing the vibrant chartreuse green of the grass to pine green and eventually to a shade of grey with only a trace of green, it also completely alters the atmosphere and therefore the overall play experience. On the other hand, the blue flower's dream is set during the evening, and artificial lighting is introduced through the use of lamp poles and electricity pylons. Initially the landscape is dark, and only the vague dark silhouettes of the

different elements in the environment can be discerned. However, the player can activate lamp poles by touching the series of flowers that encircle each individual lamp pole. In this way, colour is restored to the landscape, but not the colours that are produced by the natural lighting of the sun. Rather, the artificial lighting renders the colours of the landscape in darker tones, while simultaneously endowing these colours with a soft glow. Therefore, *Flower* consistently draws the player's attention to the affective power of the landscape, specifically in terms of colour, which is not presented in terms of everyday perception. As explained in the previous section, through everyday perception, which is rooted in the human subject, percepts, such as colours, are tamed and ordered, thereby stripping them of their affective potential (recall, for instance, the example of the everyday opinion that all instances of green are practically the same). However, *Flower* liberates colour from everyday perception and opinion by presenting it as an intensive force through which the landscape and, at a general level, the world becomes.

Further, the player-controlled "character", the breeze, is not an actual visual presence in the game world that draws the attention of the player away from the digital landscape. Indeed, Chen explained in an interview that Thatgamecompany experimented with a number of player-characters, including characters with a visible presence, but eventually settled for the invisible breeze, since 'you only see its impact on the environment, not its actual self' (Takahashi 2009:[sp]). Incorporating an invisible player-character is therefore another method of drawing the player's attention to the digital environment, rather than drawing the player's focus to other in-game elements, such as a clearly recognisable video game protagonist and non-playable characters. In short, one cannot play *Flower* without becoming aware of the landscape as "something to be sensed" or as an affective and transformative force.

In addition to its percepts, *Flower* also incorporates various powerful affects by bringing "gameplay", "flight", "flower", "light", "colour", and "landscape art" into different zones of indiscernibility. Importantly, although the affects are immanent to the video game assemblage, the majority of them have to be brought to the fore through the input of the player – that is, through gameplay. For instance, by mastering the gameplay the player creates a "becoming-breeze", which enables the player to transform the digital landscape in various ways by creating connections between different flowers, colours, objects, and even sounds. In particular, each of the dreams enables the player to experiment with different combinations of colour, lighting, objects and movement. In this sense, one can argue that by becoming-breeze the player becomes an artist that unlocks the potential for colour and movement that is immanent to the digital landscape of the multiplicity. A particularly clear example of becoming-breeze/artist can be noted during the red flower's dream. Near the end of the dream, the trail of petals can be

imbued with either a magenta, yellow or cyan light by touching one of the three stone formations that correspond to the particular colour. The trail of petals can then be used to light-up, or “paint”, the grass, altering its colour and imbuing the landscape with, what can be described as, patterns of organic light, thereby creating a plateau between “breeze”, “grass”, “flower”, “colour,” “sound” and “light”.

What is interesting about this particular affect in the red flower’s dream is that it creates a truly unique form of gameplay, which is a positive feat, since a number of video game scholars argue that, in recent years, gameplay design has become marked by “creative conservatism”. For instance, according to Mikolaj Dymek (2012:41), bolstered ‘by astonishing technological innovation, the [video game] industry produces an impressive number of titles with extremely sophisticated graphics and visuals, while paradoxically maintaining a low level of creative/artistic/gameplay development’. Indeed, when one considers the gameplay of many of today’s most popular “AAA” titles, it becomes apparent that it is merely a slightly improved or altered version of earlier gameplay innovations. For example, both the recent *Uncharted* series (2007-2017) and the new *Tomb Raider* series (2013-2018) implement third-person action-adventure gameplay that is extremely similar to each other, and that was arguably introduced in the mid 1990’s in the first *Tomb Raider* (1996). In contrast to the majority of “AAA” and “Indie” video games, *Flower* features truly unique gameplay. That is, rather than focusing on the violent negation and destruction of in-game characters and environments, *Flower*’s flight-based exploration gameplay consists in creating connections, or zones of indiscernibility, between disparate elements in order to create new becomings within the digital landscape. For example, in the lavender flower’s dream, by touching a line of flowers that encircle a building in the urban landscape, the building’s colour changes into the colour of the corresponding flowers. The initially drab buildings, which are grey, white or beige in colour, are thus transformed into a variety of vibrant colours. In this example, the player-artist initiates the becoming-flower and becoming-colour of architecture. In turn, the digital urban landscape is brought into a zone of indiscernibility with the natural landscape, rendering new possibilities, or becomings, for both landscapes and enhancing them in the process.

The music and sound design of *Flower*, which was composed by Vincent Diamante, can also be viewed as affects. The video game’s music consists of ‘selected layers of acoustic instrument samples that rise and fall depending on the actions of the player’ (Jeriasca 2009:[sp]). That is, “sound” and “movement” are brought into a zone of indiscernibility, thereby greatly contributing to the gameplay experience and atmosphere. For instance, when the player moves the breeze slowly, the music’s tempo is slower and less instruments are audible. On the other hand, when the breeze accelerates, the tempo and number of instruments increase, creating a constant and

affective feedback loop between movement and sound. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, when the trail of petals touches a flower a sound that harmonises with the music is emitted. According to Diamante, each flower has its own individual sound, which was created with a variety of instruments, including bass flutes and bassoons, and is based on the specific flower's colour (Jeriasca 2009:[sp]). In other words, the sounds that are emitted by the flowers can be understood as the “becoming-flower” and “becoming-colour” of sound, and are thus also affects.

Becoming-imperceptible in *Flower*

From a Deleuzoguattarian perspective, it is important to attempt to identify the types of transversal becomings that are potentially on offer through the percepts and affects of *Flower*. Since Thatgamecompany's aim in *Flower* is to create a sublime experience akin to being engulfed by the beauty and grandeur of a natural landscape, one of the possible forms of transversal becoming in *Flower* is “becoming-imperceptible”. By drawing from Colebrook (2002) and Hadot (1995), I argue that “becoming-imperceptible” involves a type of aesthetic perception that leads to us ‘no longer seeing ourselves as a point of view detached from life’ (Colebrook 2002:129), but as immanent to life: one form of perception among countless others.

To begin with, the first stage of becoming-imperceptible involves dislocating perception from its everyday roots and entering a state of “aesthetic perception”. According to Hadot (1995:254), “aesthetic perception” is a “detached” and “disinterested” mode of perception. Hadot (1995:256) argues that, unlike everyday perception through which things are perceived in terms of utility, aesthetic perception enables one to see the world qua world, or as a series of vital forces that overflow the limited experience of human beings in all respects. In other words, by engaging with the transformative percepts and affects of an artwork, one can enter a mode of aesthetic perception in which perception is dislodged from its everyday, utilitarian roots (Hadot 1995:256). This in turn leads to “spectator novus”, which is the experience of perceiving with “new” eyes, or experiencing percepts and affects as if one experiences them for the first time. Hadot (1995:257) explains that since we are generally not in the habit of seeing the world – as a result of habitual perception – we are usually not astonished by the powerful percepts and affects that constitute the world. However, through spectator novus the perceiver becomes “stupefied” by the complex and unmotivated surging forth of the world, and, as a result, can become more open to the differences that can make life more intense, including percepts and affects.

As can be noted in the specific examples discussed the previous section, the percepts and affects of *Flower* are designed to dislodge perception from its everyday roots. For instance, instead of presenting the in-game landscapes, including the natural and urban environments, in utilitarian terms as mere “levels” or “arenas” that draw boundaries for gameplay and narrative, the landscapes in *Flower* are presented as powerful percepts through which all gameplay unfolds. Specifically, the main objective in the multiplicity is to bring colour to the landscape by creating affects or, stating it differently, initiating a series of becomings between “breeze”, “flower”, “colour” and “environment/landscape”. Since *Flower* places the focus on the landscape and the various elements and forces that constitute it, the player’s perception is dislocated from its everyday roots, and is instead drawn towards the transformative and creative potential inherent to the various percepts and affects within the video game. In addition, since the gameplay in *Flower* involves the creation of various affects, including becoming-breeze, becoming-flower, becoming-colour, and ultimately becoming-artist, the player can arguably be opened to aesthetic perception, which can be understood as the detached perception of the artist, who sees the world qua world, and who actively desires to participate in the act of creation. This notion is corroborated by the majority of the video game critics who reviewed *Flower*. For example, Brad Nicholson (2009:[sp]), a reviewer for Destructoid, explains that *Flower* dislodged his perception from its everyday roots, and instead focused it on the creative endeavors inherent to the video game: ‘It took me away from my vexing week and plopped me into a world rife with color and sublime subtlety ... My fuming was replaced by a child-like sense of excitement and an intense desire to take part in the game’s unspoken narrative’. From another perspective, yet compatible with the notion of aesthetic perception, the review of *Flower* on Eurogamer.net describes the game as creating a ‘feeling, unusual for video games, that you are not just collecting stuff but also enhancing the environment rather than diminishing it’ (Harman 2014:[sp]).⁶

The second and final stage of becoming-imperceptible involves an awareness and contemplation of “perception” itself. That is, one no longer sees oneself ‘as a point of view detached from life’, but as immanent to life: one form of perception among countless others (Colebrook 2002:129). This realisation can render us more open to the intensive differences through which the actual world unfolds, and can enable us to imagine life, or becoming, from various inhuman perspectives. As Colebrook (2002:129) explains, becoming-imperceptible can lead to the creation of numerous “lines of flight”: ‘from life itself we imagine all the becomings of life, using the human power of imagination to overcome the human’. In other words, in the last stage, becoming-imperceptible can potentially extend beyond the experience of the art work, rendering us open to other perceptions and becomings in life in general. Stating it

differently, becoming-imperceptible is a form of transversal becoming that can render a person more open to transversal becomings in general. In other words, the shift in perception, which *Flower* initiates, can make the player aware of perception itself, which can in turn lead to the realisation that reality consists of a potentially infinite number of perceptions. The potential of this re-imagining of perception is also noted by a number of video game reviewers. For example, Isaac Yuen (2012:[sp]), a reviewer for Ekostories.com, explains that '*Flower* as an experience is conducive to the contemplation of perspectives beyond the player's own ... While the player is floating in the wind, they have the opportunity to unpack their minds and wander along new lines and trains of thought, all while being immersed in an appealing and relaxing audiovisual experience that depicts nature in its most idyllic forms'. Becoming-imperceptible, therefore, allows the player to not only enter a mode of aesthetic perception, but to also expand their thought by creatively imagining perceptions beyond their own, necessarily limited, human perception.

Conclusion

It is clear that *Flower* is not a typical video game that can adequately be analysed according to the parameters set by the theoretical approaches of narratology and ludology. Instead, since *Flower* is designed around the idea of creating an emotional experience, Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of "multiplicity", "percept" and "affect" are particularly useful for providing an account that captures the novelty and specificity of this video game. *Flower* can be understood as a multiplicity, which means that it is not reducible to an essence, such as "narrative" or "gameplay", and it is also not a mere representation, such as being a copy or simulation of an actual object or experience. Rather, as a multiplicity, *Flower* can be understood as a patchwork of "percepts" and "affects" that can potentially generate transversal becomings, or intensive transformations within the player.

Although *Flower* can arguably create various forms of transversal becoming, in this article I discussed "becoming-imperceptible", a form of becoming through which the player becomes more receptive to the various percepts and affects that constitute the experimental video game. Importantly, the percepts (the digital landscapes) and affects (becoming-breeze, becoming-flower, becoming-colour, etc.) of *Flower* are not rooted in everyday perception. Instead, they are transformative blocs of sensation that can generate affective alterations within the player. More specifically, they have the potential to liberate the player's perception from everyday perception, and enable the player to pursue a line of flight in the form of becoming-imperceptible. By becoming-imperceptible the player can enter a mode of aesthetic perception and can view the

percepts and affects of the video game multiplicity as something with intrinsic value (as transformative forces), and not as something that merely facilitates gameplay and other “more-important” events, including the narrative of a protagonist. Instead, *Flower* is designed in a manner that opens the possibility for the player to view the various percepts and affects with “new eyes”, thereby becoming astonished by their affective power. For example, viewing natural and urban landscapes as intense, multi-layered experiences; or viewing colours as forces through which the visual world becomes. Finally, as Colebrook (2002:129) points out, the becoming-imperceptible that a work of art, including a video game assemblage such as *Flower*, can generate in the player, can potentially extend beyond the particular assemblage, rendering the player open to other becomings in life in general. Ultimately, a Deleuzoguattarian approach to video games enables one to think about video games beyond traditional models, thereby extending the limits of what video games can be and how they can affect us.

Acknowledgements

This study is adapted from a thesis completed at the Nelson Mandela University, titled Video game as play assemblages: applying philosophical concepts from Deleuze and Guattari to create a novel approach to video games. I would like to acknowledge the financial support provided for this study by the Department of Research Capacity Development of the Nelson Mandela University and the National Research Foundation (NRF). Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to Nelson Mandela University or the NRF.

Notes

1. Since the narratology/ludology debate has been covered extensively by numerous video game scholars, and as a result of the limited scope of this article, it cannot be discussed in great detail here. In brief, proponents of narratology, such as Barry Atkins (2003) and Janet Murray (2004), argue that narrative is the essential characteristic of video games, while rules and gameplay are viewed as mere facilitators of narrative. On the other hand, ludologists, such as Jesper Juul (1998), Ernest Adams (1999), and Espen Aarseth (2001), hold that the essential characteristic of video games is “rule-based play” and they critique the narratological approach by stating that ‘the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game’ – a mere “theme” that has no profound impact on the gameplay (Aarseth 2004:48). In other words, just like the narratologists are not completely dismissive of gameplay, simulation and rule sets, the ludologists do not deny that narrative, as well as numerous other aesthetic qualities, can be (and often are) part of video games. However, as Aarseth (2004:47) notes, the ‘artistic elements are merely supports for ... the gameplay’ at best, or detractors from the gameplay at worst.
2. For instance, in the review of *Flower* that appeared in *The Daily Telegraph*, Tom Hoggins (2009) described the video game as a ‘wonderful work of art’, while *GameTrailers* (*Flower: Review 2009*) viewed it as

'less a game and more an experience. You don't necessarily "play" *Flower*; you interact with it'. In addition, *Flower* has also been acquired by the Smithsonian American Art Museum as part of the museum's permanent collection, further propagating the video game's status as "different" from more traditional video games.

3. In a *Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari employ the concept of "assemblage" to express the notion of multiplicity which Deleuze developed in his early work.
4. In the chapter dealing with percepts and affects in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari continuously refers to the example of "tortured flowers", which is possibly a reference to Vincent Van Gogh's *Two Cut Sunflowers* (1887).
5. In this instance, "flow" refers to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's conception of "flow", which he formulates in order to account for the "peak experiences" associated with various types of play activities. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2009:53), "flow" can be understood as a state of "optimal experience", in which there is a complete merger of action and awareness. In addition, the merger of action and awareness is accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness and a distorted sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi 2009:63, 66). Finally, the state of "flow" also makes the player/experiencer more sensitive to the signs of the activity, thereby opening the player/experiencer to the transformative affects that are potentially available within the activity.
6. Indeed, most of the reviews for *Flower* express the idea that the game draws one's attention to the vital and creative forces within nature (see for example Clements 2009, Hoggins 2009, and VanOrd 2013) and/or dislodges one's everyday, subjective perspective (see for example Nicholson 2009, Shoemaker 2009, and Yuen 2012).

REFERENCES

- Aarseth, E. 2001. Computer Game Studies, Year One, Game Studies. *The International Journal of Computer Game Research* (1)1. [O]. Available: <http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>. Accessed 28 June 2018.
- Adams, E. 1999. Three Problems for Interactive Storytellers. *Gamasutra*. [O]. Available: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/131821/the_designers_notebook_three_.php. Accessed 29 December 2018.
- Atkins, B. 2003. *More than a game: the computer game as fictional form*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Clements, R. 2009. Flower review. *IGN*. [O]. Available: <https://www.ign.com/articles/2009/02/09/flower-review>. Accessed 10 February 2019.
- Colebrook, C. 2002. *Gilles Deleuze: Routledge critical thinkers*. London: Routledge.
- Cox, K. 2012. From Flower to Journey and Beyond: A Talk with Kellee Santiago of Thatgamecompany. Kotaku. [O]. Available: <https://kotaku.com/5894990/from-flower-to-journey-and-beyond-a-talk-with-kellee-santiago-of-thatgamecompany>. Accessed 25 October 2018.

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. 2009. *Flow*. HarperCollins e-books.
- De Landa, M. 2002. *Intensive science and virtual philosophy*. London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. 1994. *Difference and repetition*. Translated by P Patton. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Deleuze, G. 2004 [1981]. *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*. London/New York: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G. 2007. *Two regimes of madness – texts and interviews 1975-1995*, edited by D Lapoujade, translated by A Hodges & M Taormina. London: The MIT Press.
- Deleuze, G & Guattari, F. 1987. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Translated by B Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G & Guattari, F. 1994. *What is philosophy?* Translated by H Tomlinson & G Burchill. London: Verso.
- Dovey, J & Kennedy, HW. 2009. *Game cultures – computer games as new media*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Dymek, M. 2012. Video Games: A Subcultural Industry, in *The video game industry: formation, present state, and future*, edited by P Zackariasson & T Wilson. London: Routledge: 34-56.
- Elliot, P. 2010. Thatgamecompany's Kellee Santiago. *Gameindustry.biz*. [O]. Available: <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/thatgamecompanys-kellee-santiago-interview>. Accessed 17 July 2018.
- Flow*. 2006. [Video Game]. Thatgamecompany. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Flower*. 2009. [Video Game]. Thatgamecompany. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Flower: Review. 2009. *GameTrailers*. [O]. Available: <https://n4g.com/news/285007/flower-review-gametrailers>. Accessed 20 April 2018.
- Flower's Grass. Sp. PS3's Flower's grass impossible on other systems. *Gamezine*. [O]. Available: <https://www.gamezine.co.uk/ps3-flowers-grass-impossible-systems/>. Accessed 10 February 2019.
- Herro, Alana. 2010. Fellows Friday with Kelly Santiago. TED Talks. [O]. Available: <http://blog.ted.com/fellows-friday-with-kellee-santiago/>. Accessed 17 April 2018.
- Hadot, P. 1995. *Philosophy as a way of life*. Translated by M Chase. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

- Harman, S. 2014. What to make of Flow and Flower on PS4?. *Eurogamer*. [O]. Available: <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2014-01-03-what-to-make-of-flow-and-flower-on-ps4>. Accessed 10 February 2019.
- Hoggins, T. 2009. Flower Power Will Give You Play Fever. *The Daily Telegraph*. [O]. Available: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/video-games/4611024/Flower-video-game-review.html>. Accessed 20 April 2018.
- Jeriaska. 2009. Sound Current: a beautiful flight – creating the music for flower. *Game-Set-Watch*. [O]. Available: http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2009/02/column_sound_current_audio_in_flow.php. Accessed 10 February 2019.
- Journey*. 2012. [Video Game]. Thatgamecompany. Sony Interactive Entertainment.
- Juul, J. 1998. A Clash Between Games and Narrative. [O]. Available: <http://www.jesperjuul.dk/text/DAC%20Paper%201998.html>. Accessed on 5 May 2018.
- Melville, H. 2013 [1851]. *Moby Dick*. London: Harper Press.
- Murray, J. 2004. From Game-Story to Cyberdrama, in *First person: new media as story, performance and game*, edited by N Wardrip-Fruin & P Harrigan. Cambridge & London: MIT Press:2-11.
- Nicholson, B. 2009. Destructoid review: Flower. *Destructoid*. [O]. Available: <https://www.destructoid.com/destructoid-review-flower-121625.phtml>. Accessed 10 February 2019.
- Reynolds, M. 2009. *Jenova Chen* (Flow, Flower). *Digital Spy*. [O]. Available: <http://www.digitalspy.com/gaming/interviews/a182429/jenova-chen-flow-flower/>. Accessed 20 May 2018.
- Sheffield, B. 2008. Finding a new way: Jenova Chen and Thatgamecompany. *Gamasutra*. [O]. Available: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/132049/finding_a_new_way_jenova_chen_and_.php?page=3. Accessed 17 April 2018.
- Shoemaker, B. 2009. Flower review. *Giant Bomb*. [O]. Available: <https://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/flower-review/1900-110/>. Accessed 10 February 2019.
- Takakashi, D. 2009. Game review: Flower for the PlayStation 3 breathes life into stale games. *Venturebeat*. [O]. Available: <https://venturebeat.com/2009/02/09/review-flower-for-the-playstation-3-breathes-live-into-stale-games/>. Accessed 10 February 2019.
- Tomb Raider*. 1996. [Video Game]. Core Design.

Tomb Raider. 2013-2018. [Video Game Series]. Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal. Square Enix Co Ltd.

Uncharted. 2007-2017. [Video Game Series]. Naughty Dog. Sony Interactive Entertainment.

VanOrd, K. 2013. *Colors of the wind*. Gamespot. [O]. Available: <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/flower-review/1900-6415537/>. Accessed 10 February 2019.

Yuen, I. 2012. Interactive storytelling: Thatgamecompany's Flower. *Ekostories*. [O]. Available: <https://ekostories.com/2012/03/30/flower-thatgamecompany-nature/> Accessed 10 February 2019.