

PASSION PLAY? VIDEOGAMES AND CRITIQUE...

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Introduction: Immersivity, Interactivity and Play

As is common in much of the new videogame theory, the boundary distinction between videogames and cinema is central to our argument. We join those who insist that film studies and related methods of analysing old media can't capture what is essential about videogames. We suggest that in some ways, however, the oppositions often drawn between film and videogame are questionable.

The terms of these oppositions often hinge upon a distinction between immersivity and interactivity:

- 1 Cinema is typically held to be about *non-interactive immersion*
- 2 Videogames are held to be about *interactive immersion*

There have been many attempts to provide a theoretical tool-kit for coming to terms with the so-called new-media. We are here ignoring those media forms which are put to work in augmenting traditional linear forms. These new media technologies do not concern us so much as certain interactive (or non-linear) media such as video games, the internet and so-called interactive narratives. Our paper will concentrate on video games as a paradigmatic case. We will take a **programmatic** route as not only will we analyse the ontology of these game-spaces but will also recommend a practico-political pathway for their creation (suggesting some key resources towards this). We will set videogame ontology in opposition to the linear ontology of the cinematic whilst also pointing to the new relations with players that game spaces open up.

We grant that semiology, for example, has clear applications in analysing game settings, character semes, etc., but we believe that this and other methods appropriated for the analysis of cinematic texts potentially occlude much of the specificity of videogames. Yes, there are cultural issues (gender, east-west, generational, etc.) at stake, just as there are within more traditional 'linear' texts but these leave-out certain new operations characterizing games (and interactive texts more generally). Videogames configure the relation of user to text differently than linear media. Two important changes take place with the move from linear to non-linear media. Non-linear media do not provide a hard-wired time-space, as cinema does. Paradigmatic choices are made within ongoingly constituted syntagmatic spaces. This is an aesthetic of the unfinished. Following on from this the audience or 'player' takes up a radically different relationship with the text. Issues of identification are problematised. Identification becomes active and traceable in its enactment.

Some so-called 'new media analysis' also falls wide of the mark in constructing an opposition between new and old media. Often new media are seen as more cybernetic, that the 'user' becomes at one with the space; that man and machine become unified. We feel that this is back to front. We believe that it is the cinematic space that is cybernetic. The game-space actually operates at more of a radical 'Brechtian' distance. Cinema is the cybernetic mechanism par excellence.

I. Videogame Ontology

As stated in the introduction we contend that there is a boundary separation between what tools are needed to study film and what is needed to study gaming-texts. Those who apply linear-theory concentrate on those areas of these texts which share a great deal with the linear texts. Thus as there are characters in film so are there characters in games. Here then for instance the semiotics of character can be usefully analysed and the concomitant cultural and socio-political positions that they embody also (as has been ably demonstrated by....). Some have pointed out that the perspectival form of the central character driving forward the plot towards conclusion are more powerfully deployed (read submissive player) within a gaming space (taking the classic hollywood film to its immersive conclusion). Such conceptualisations of game-texts point out the ultra-decreased-lack of availability for critical distance that the gaming space allows, suturing more powerfully the user-spectator to apparatus (Drowning any critical abilities). Thus, for example, Jay Bolter argues that videogames remediate cinema. They borrow or refashion the formal characteristics of cinema and, along with this, the cultural work of the cinematic apparatus – i.e. ideological subject positioning. 'They perform much the same cultural work', he insists, 'promoting even further the sense of identification of the action hero', and providing an even more effective means of 'co-opting the user into the ideology represented by the film and the game'. On this view, videogames, with their powerful combination of immersivity and interactivity, *extend* the power of cinema to bring the user ideologically 'on board': 'Interaction may simply intensify the identification'. Videogames remediate the cinematic gaze, particularly, it is argued, in the deployment of first person point of view. Thus Mulvey's famous points about the surrogate nature of the cinematic central character to the cinematically positioned spectator are painted here, in the game space, on a much grander scale. By giving power and potency to the gamer in the form of gaming controls, by immersing the very real sensory-motor movements of the player 'into' the game-space the player becomes a first-person subject of the space. This potent power paradoxically robs the player of conscious awareness or critical distance. They are fashioning their own text as they render themselves powerless

In opposition to Bolter's views, we believe the game has a 'radical' and qualitative difference to cinema. If film theory (in the form say of Laura Mulvey or Jean

Baudry) is correct regarding the power of the cinematic apparatus then we see too many differences between cinema and games for Bolter's thesis to hold. Cinema, according to Mulvey and Baudry, is built on a certain absenting of real control from the hands of the spectator. Baudry points out that the raked seating, the darkened theatre, the physical incapacity, the preferred absence of third-party chatter are necessary pre-requisites for taking pleasure in the text, ie. for cinematic primary and secondary identification. Mulvey points out that the darkened theatre and window-shaped screen provide a voyeuristic safety where a screen surrogate takes on our dreamed-of vicarious duties. Thus paradoxically it is argued that voyeuristic distance and physical incapacity are foundational for cinematic pleasure per se. Her material policy is to destroy this institution. She joins with MacCabe in proffering an oppositional framework where the 'naturalising', seemingly transparent, perspectivizing operations of the apparatus would be drawn attention to, and foregrounded. We believe that game-spaces make the politico-textual programs of Mulvey, MacCabe and principally Brecht much more rather than much less possible. Indeed it is our thesis here that the medium is inherently and immediately Brechtian rather than uber-cinematic.

In the game-space different routes or forks are taken. What the cinematic space hides and makes ready-to-hand the gaming space makes apparent and present-at-hand. Here Heidegger's opposition is put to work to show the differing relationships we have to the objects we encounter. An opposition is built between the game-space and the cinema-space that we believe is reversed or topsy-turvy. Heidegger pointed out how Cartesian philosophy was wrong about how we usually encounter the world. Far from living in a subject-object jail where we live at a distance from the world we encounter it mostly as ready-to-hand. He points out how transparently we encounter many things (in hammering we think about lunch and not hammering, in driving we talk to our passenger and not driving). So is the way with cinema. In cinema we experience the cinema-world as ready-to-hand. All of the codes and the very real perspectival work that has gone into making the film (the paradigmatic choices, the craft-work, etc.) are hidden-from-view. All to sell the singular narrative trajectory. Brecht and then Screen theory's project is to expose the technique, to wake-the-viewer-to-the-tools, as it were: to show that the intentionality of the text is not the intentionality of the viewing subject. Things can happen otherwise. Conversely, then, Heidegger's notion of the present-at-hand fits games very well. When something goes wrong with the 'ready-to-hand' it becomes 'present-at-hand'. We again become thinking subjects. When hammering we hit our thumb, we stop thinking about lunch and get back (theoretically) to our hammering, when something unexpected happens on the road (when something interferes with the transparent system) we become conscious 'philosophically' of the road. Thus we believe that what Brecht wants for theatre, and Godard wants for film, is always already imminent in games. Plainly in games the subject is (the) part of the decision-making process. Where previously options and oppositions were hidden from view (and Godard showed them by laying bare) in games they are the very stuff of their space. By taking up the controls (not being seated constrained within a darkened space) far from

losing ourselves to the text we awaken to the possibilities. We are acutely aware that by following one path at a fork, that we are not following another. By choosing one character we have not chosen another. Thus rather than stumbling in on a filmic space where we find ourselves to be an advertising executive who is mistaken for a spy, to fight-to-the-death on Mount Rushmore before vanquishing the enemy and getting the girl, in the game-space the choices and trajectory are far from uniform, the choice far from hidden.

To refer back to our earlier diagram, the player of the game is in possession of paradigmatic options; the material signifiers. To choose one character, object or objective is to dismiss another character, object or objective. To choose one is to be aware that there could be others, that things could have been otherwise. Cinematic texts famously repress these oppositions within a fixed perspectival oneness. Here then we are saying that far from games being conceptually built upon a lack of critical distance, they are in fact composed of critical distance. It is not games that are 'in here' and cinema that is 'out there', but the reverse. Within a cinematically 'cybernetic' apparatus we have the paradox of voyeuristic engagement where fantasy reigns, but within a game-space we have the easier possibility of critical distance, a Brechtian Learning Play.

II. Learning Play

The first part of this paper suggests that embodied involvement/feedback loop at a motor-sensory level tends to occlude the ways in which the ontology of videogames is one in which spatial, temporal and emotional immersion is disrupted. In fact, where the meta-narrational cinematic text is about the immediacy of the ready-to-hand, demanding distantiated, disembodied reception, the videogame text-simulation is, precisely because of the embodied, undistantiated character of videogame play, interruptive of the kind of identificatory processes and visual pleasure learned from long exposure to the cinematic apparatus. It is about the present-at-hand and availability for negotiation. We propose in the spirit of experiment that Brechtian aesthetics, which have foundered in their cinematic adventure, may find refreshed and higher potential in the videogame.

The present part of this paper shows how this might be touched off by suggesting points of anchorage – some Brecht-inspired, some not. First of all, there are precedents for 'resistant' forms of videogaming that we should note. To begin with, there are a number of ways in which existing videogames have been subverted by artists, hackers and developers. So-called 'de-gaming' games are explicitly designed to suspend immersion and foster an inquiring attitude into design strategy. Along these lines, some games have been deliberately designed to be 'dead', unwinnable and, in various ways, terminally frustrating affairs. These are often conceived as works of art with wider cultural relevance. Another

approach is to derail a game from within for purposes of protest. The *Velvet-Strike* website provides a collection of installable spray paints to make anti-war graffiti in the virtual environment of the immensely popular online shooter terrorism game, *Counter-Strike*.

Aside from these fairly ephemeral irritants, a further approach testifies to the very beginnings of an independent scene in videogame culture in which some developers are attempting to subvert the commercial and capitalist, pro-imperialist agendas of the industry by designing immersive games which compel identification with counterhegemonic or conflicted roles. Take C-Level's game, *Waco Resurrection*, in which one plays as David Koresh: 'In 2003, the spirit of Koresh has become a paradoxical embodiment of the current political landscape – he is both the besieged religious other and the logical extension of the neo-conservative millennial vision. Waco is a primal scene of American fear: the apocalyptic visionary...confronts the heathen "other" – in Waco Resurrection, the roles are anything but fixed'.

Note also that some game engines are deliberately offered or designed to be hacked. Game editors are frequently made available. In the US, Garage Games licenses its Torque engine to other independent developers for a nominal fee (\$100). The 'hactivist' and open source ethos appears to be burgeoning in videogame culture. This is promising but we don't wish to give the impression that these interventions are remedying some 'missing' dimension of videogames. Rather, interactivity is key to the very ontology of the medium and has been occluded. Here are three suggestions as to how this ontology might be exploited:

- 1) Note a recent article by Stewart Woods ('Loading the Dice' – Games Studies website) which asks us to 'consider a videogame whose principle design consideration is to elicit critical understandings of our society and the roles of individuals within it. Consider a videogame that manipulates and deceives players in order to achieve those understandings. In short, consider a computer game that just isn't fair'. Woods thinks that analogue social-system simulation games, used in the quest for more effective business management and other quarters since the 50s, offer some vital lessons. Such games are intended to inculcate in their players a holistic understanding of the workings of a dynamic system through their own subjective experience of that system. They are designed to create conflict, to enable players to work through issues such as abuse of power and conflict through cultural difference. Unlike many videogames, the player is unable to read off a role from an onscreen avatar. Here, the player herself is interacting with the other participants, with all her attitudes and ideas initially intact. She is frequently compelled to devise her own goals for the game in discussion/ argument with others. In addition, these simulations often feature deliberately unbalanced gameworlds. Players begin with different information and expectations about the game. They may find themselves unfairly disadvantaged by certain systemic influences. The game

rules may sometimes, under certain circumstances, be altered during play, illustrating the 'impermanent nature of hegemonic power'.

Of course, existing online shooter games such as Quake already involve interaction with other players and this easily creates conflictual situations (Tony's comment: playing Quake online compelled a reflexive awareness of comportment – not simply engaging with a text but having to monitor one's own social behaviour. You team up with members and talk to one another – sometimes literally with new voice technology. Tony stayed too long looking through another player's visor – acting voyeuristically in a cinematic mode whilst hoping to learn the ropes – and was told to pull his weight and get fragging).

2) Gonzalo Frasca's work ('Videogames of the Oppressed') on the possibility of videogames as a form of serious creative expression is inspired by Augusto Boal's 'forum theatre', in turn inspired by Brecht's 'learning plays' (*Lehrstücke*). The single most potent criticism of the Brechtian aesthetic of alienation after Brecht (ie. Its cinematic appropriations) is its negation of pleasure. In Stam's words, 'the pleasure in the toy is transmuted into the pleasure of breaking the toy, a pleasure, ultimately, no less infantile. Why should the spectator or the theorist give up pleasure, rather than look for a *new kind* of pleasure?' Whilst this might with some justification apply to Brecht's epic theatre, his so-called 'minor pedagogy' (Brecht himself indicated that this was a compromise form, setting up the familiar structure of relations between author, stage and audience only to introduce elements of a negative critical practice), his relatively neglected earlier learning plays (the 'major pedagogy') are a different matter. There is little trace of a so-called Brechtian 'Puritanism' in the learning play's emphatic interrogation of attitudes through the governing principle of interactivity. The learning play is an exemplary source for the videogame of the future.

Brechtian aesthetics are famously anti-immersive. Brecht sought to engender a dramatic situation analyzable by its audience as a problem, exposing the circumstances in which the problem emerged. How did we end up this way and how could it have been otherwise? What attitude/action would be required to derail this fate? The objective, of course, was that the audience would take this approach and solution out into the world.

In the epic theatre, actors step out of character and take up attitudes towards their roles. In effect, they stand at a remove from the play to comment on its unfolding to the spectator. Here, the spectator is still rooted to the spot, but, in the learning plays, performed in schools, factories, for workers' clubs and choirs, the spectator was able to respond to the formalized, yet unfinalized, structure of the play. Brecht handed out questionnaires to the audience and rewrote the play on the basis of their responses. This is Brecht's democratic and processual 'theatre of the future', genuinely opening up situations for negotiation and contestation. In one example, *The Yes-Sayer*, in which a child is compelled by the customs of the collective to sacrifice his life, schoolchildren objected and

demanded that the child refuse the collective. Brecht rewrote the play as *The No-Sayer*, and both plays were then performed together. In this learning play, the rules governing the behaviour of characters in this dynamic social-system simulation were in principle alterable. This clearly foreshadows the kind of game editing which is possible in principle and increasingly a reality in videogame culture.

Boal extended Brecht's idea to permit the spectator herself to step on to the stage to intervene in the unfolding oppressive situation, playing the role of the protagonist and testing her ideas in order to try and influence the simulation. Boal's Forum Theatre operated with no agenda other than the opening up of discussion of different points of view with the intention of bringing about change and an antidote to oppression. The spectator is permitted to challenge the rules governing the simulation and to suggest revised models.

Frasca adapts the Forum Theatre into an idea for a modified videogame, *The Sims of the Oppressed*. He imagines an online version of *The Sims* that would provide an editor or similar design tool allowing players to modify the code governing character behaviours. Thus, one could introduce problematic characters – the alcoholic mother – into a family and see what happened and how the other members of the family reacted. The character could be posted on a Character Exchange and other players wishing to experiment could suggest changes and post their own. A dialogue could spring up with many modified versions and extensions of characters afflicted by a range of social problems.

3) Finally, Janet Murray has described what she calls the 'violence-hub' structure of interactive narrative. In this structure, the hub is the site of a traumatic incident from which, *Rashomon*-like, issue a number of different interconnected interpretations/ points of view, explorable by players. This structure offers no single coherent solution OR refusal of any solution. Rather, there's a structure of repeated returns to the trauma. In Lacanian terms, these are attempts to cope, encircling a Real which ultimately eludes any finalizable symbolization.

Slavoj Zizek proposes that this permutational operation potentially opens up a way to recognize the matrix of fantasy and to engender a transformative encounter with the Real that fantasy occludes. Lacanian psychoanalysis is, roughly speaking, anti-narrativist in that telling stories, reconfiguring experience adds another layer of fantasy rather than brings the fundamental fantasy to the surface. That is, narrative all too readily occludes the deadlock, the structural blockade which is the human condition, our inability to 'have it all', to have access to full enjoyment. Narrative is psychoanalytically associated with Oedipal regulation and the binding-up and sublimation of desire. It typically perpetuates the circling around of desire without leading to recognition of the absent centre.

Zizek cites examples of experimental cinematic narrative striving towards such recognition, notably David Lynch's *Lost Highway*. This film, which shocks

audiences with a disruptive leap from one narrative and one central protagonist to another narrative and protagonist, is gesturing, Zizek argues, towards possibilities that will only really be fulfillable with new media. It testifies, he says, to the fact that a 'a new "life experience" is in the air, a perception of life that explodes the form of the linear centred narrative and renders life as a multiform flow'. Cinema is pushed to the limit trying to articulate this new experience. Cinema is John the Baptist to the videogame's Jesus. The multiform flow's true objective correlative, we suggest, is the refunctioned videogame. From its vantage point we may be able to more fully comprehend the experience which cinema can only eccentrically hint at. Zizek says as much, proposing an "educational" use of participatory cyberspace role-playing games in which, by way of repeatedly enacting different versions/outcomes of the same basic predicament, one can become aware of the ideological presuppositions and surmises that unknowingly guide our daily behaviour'. The perception underpinning these filmic developments, ie. that reality is haunted by other possible outcomes will be better realized and explored in non-linear media than cinematic narrative.

I'd like to close by programmatically drawing out some aspects of these approaches:

The game does not offer stifling identificatory motivations. The game's pleasure/unpleasure depends not upon identificatory processes but upon an oscillation between play and reflexive grasp of the consequences of play, between praxis and knowledge. Not simply breaking the toy, but coming up with ways of reconfiguring the toy.

Multiplicity of viewpoint is important. A structure of repetition from different viewpoints is possible. The game might depend upon interaction not only with the game system but also with other players (suggests online multiplayer setting?).

The game places players on an unequal footing at its start point. Whether players can first grasp and then see further than this inequity and overcome the conflict it provokes is key.

The game presents a problem of which players must build a holistic understanding. 'Winning' the game, if it means anything here, means achieving a position of critical engagement with the system.

Game rules are, to some extent, alterable by participants.

Conclusion

On the surface, there seems to be much to commend a pessimistic outlook on videogames. The industry is irredeemably hit-driven, 'all centre and no margins' (Zimmerman). Videogames appear to reconcile immersivity and interactivity in a way which is profoundly inimical to self-reflexive manifestations. That there are very few signs of any counterhegemonic manifestations seems to testify to the blinding, knee-jerk ideological power of this combination. However, we have questioned these assumptions and set out possible lines of enquiry for future videogame design.