

PROCEDURALISM AND THE AUTONOMY OF PLAY IN A SOCIETY OF CONTROL

Computer games are profoundly symptomatic of contemporary culture: of the intensification of certain forces and tendencies, of our use of and relationship to technology, and even to be “in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatics age” (Galloway, 2004, p.35). Yet whilst game scholarship has grown in an attempt to better understand them, there has been less sustained political critique on the cultural transformations that games have effected (with a view to how they may be different) than might have been expected. I submit that a pressing question to raise is this: what are the kinds of play or engagement that are encouraged by games and what kinds of subjectivities do they give rise to? This is borne out of serious concerns that games and gameplay are deeply commodified and that players can be moulded via linear, repetitive gameplay in a diffuse and molecular way through “ultrarapid forms of free-floating control” (Deleuze, 1995, p.178), into subjects suitable for a “society of control” (Deleuze, 1992). If “Empire” is a new planetary regime or system of power “with no outside” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p.xii), then playing computer games – products of commercialised mass entertainment – can be regarded as a deeper embroilment within spectacle, a “self-administered reality” (Retort, 2005, p.187) where subjects already immersed in a commodified and militarised regime are provided the means to animate, elaborate, refine, and extend their own commodification as “self-spectacularizing cocreators” (Wark, 2007, p.111).

Crucially, if we are still in the early stages of computer games, then this is exactly when “strategic interventions have the most opportunity to effect real change, before the powerful inertia of naturalization sets in” (Friedman, 2005, n.p.). But this project first requires more sophisticated critiques of existing games; as Flanagan (2009, p.6) puts it, “the goal in theorizing a critical game-design paradigm is as much about the creative person’s interest in critiquing the status quo as it is about using play for such a phase challenge”.

My background in philosophy and the history of art has prepared me to think about interpreting the meaning of interactive works or objects from a variety of theoretical perspectives, from the fields of aesthetics, literary theory, and sociology, amongst others. I have also taken courses concerning the instrumental and non-instrumental conceptions of our relationship to technology and its connectedness to aesthetics, as well as courses on the political radicalism (or lack thereof) of aspects of contemporary art and culture. My MA dissertation is especially pertinent to my current proposal, as it was a political critique of Bourriaud’s (2002) claims for the emancipatory power of participatory or relational art, which he claimed could foster kinds of interaction that stood outside of homogenised supplier-client relationships and everyday instrumentality. These arguments and counterarguments, together with the general idea that participation or interaction can be geared towards emancipatory ends, are highly relevant to the analysis of participatory media and computer games. Indeed, given computer games’ comparatively greater popularity and cultural impact to relational art, the concerns expressed over instrumentalisation and homogenisation have concomitantly higher stakes.

My research will be inter and multi-disciplinary, moving beyond the confines of game studies, which has tended to be weak at contextualising computer games within a broader and more systematic view of a cultural sensorium. It is my belief that only by taking a broader view can one hope to understand the transformations effected by games in relation to other mutations that are taking place, and whether these collectively point towards a shift towards a "society of control" (Deleuze, 1992), or indicate more complex tensions and forces.

Research Design and Methodology

As an heuristic guide, I first tentatively propose that games can be understood broadly in terms of i) their rules, or how things work within the game world, including the complexity of the system that it constitutes and the means by which gamic elements relate to other gamic elements; ii) their subject matter, setting and narrative, explicit or implicit, and how the player's character's role is incorporated within this; iii) the range of actions and processes available for the player to engage in, their nature and quality, including those that are both encouraged and discouraged by the game (or other players); iv) how players in fact navigate these choices and the meanings that they assign to their gameplay decisions. Although these divisions undoubtedly all overlap, I think iii) and iv) bear the most relevance to my research since they raise the questions of disciplinary power, the freedom of play, and gamer autonomy most clearly; iii) is best addressed by proceduralist close readings, and iv) via case studies.

With regard to iii), if computer games can be thought to function like a Panopticon by surveying the player's actions through input devices, and then constantly presenting this back to the player in the form of statistics and informatics, which both reminds players of the perpetual surveillance, and encourages them to monitor and correct their actions (Caldwell, 2004, p.48), then Foucault's concept of "discipline" is apt to consider the ways in which different games may encourage certain forms of play and discourage others. On this basis, RPGs that create a barrage of numbers to clutter the screen as feedback for damage dealt and received for evaluative purposes, evidently appear to control player action by goading them to attempt to maximise their character's 'DPS' through careful calculation and speculation – *World of Warcraft's* 'Theorycrafting' being a prime example. Further, various techniques are noteworthy for appearing to 'punish' players' 'failure', from restarting levels to losing points. Game tutorials can be argued to train players to adherence to particular ways of playing, and to serve the "triple function of showing whether the subject has reached the level required, of guaranteeing that each subject undergoes the same apprenticeship and of differentiating the abilities of each individual" (Foucault, 1977, p.158).

These critiques raise some of the following questions. Is it possible for a game with a quantifiable win state to not fall foul of at least some of the above? Do these concerns truly capture what is *sui generis* to games, or do they represent the attempt to eschew complexity by fitting everything onto the familiar procrustean bed of totalising oppression? And should it be assumed that there is a correlation between the mere motivation for gameplay and the desire to maximise one's score, to conformity to 'efficient' modes of play? Or, if one does indeed opt for an 'efficient' or 'conformist' mode of playing, is the experience of play reducible to the purely instrumental? Alternatively, is the fact that players often choose to explore a variety of personal goals within games dependent upon the social context (Juul, 2009) or elect for sub-optimal methods due to idiosyncratic reasons overemphasised? If the meaning of playing

(multiplayer) games resides primarily in the social mediations that go on between players, what conclusions can be drawn if those interactions can be neatly slotted into narrow (Turkle, 2011, p.221) or wide sets of categories (Wright, Boria, and Breidenbach, 2002)?

These questions shift the enquiry into iv), where case studies will be important in assisting the understanding of the various trajectories or approaches that can be taken by players, building upon existing work in this area (e.g. Taylor 2006, 2009). It is not my intention to conduct detailed ethnographic studies, but to ensure that the arguments for the complexity of play are examined in relation to concrete examples rather than assumed or ignored. Game writing is often orientated around the commentator's perspective alone, thereby naturalising a particular way of engaging with a game, whilst seemingly similar ways of playing to the observer may belie very different motivations, goals, and mindsets if play is recognised to be creative and expressive (Fink, 1988, p.104). My aim is to begin by focusing on several games that have been deemed to be paradigmatic and demonstrative of their genre, and which through various means appear to offer a panoply of different choices and play styles. This will serve the multiple purposes of giving an overview of the main genres, enabling the relevant application of the resultant conclusions (at least in part) to the genre as a whole, in addition to providing well-established existing templates for how gamers are expected to play. Further, the emphasis on games that privilege player choice set up limit test cases for the proceduralist framework and the allegations that many of the games analysed by proceduralists have "only a few "operations" available to players" (Sicart, 2011, p.15), i.e., that the framework is only equipped to deal with such games. Potential candidates for study include: *Skyrim*, *Civilization V*, *GTA IV*, *Minecraft*, and *Spore* amongst others. The choice of 'popular' games will promise rich resources in terms of the academic literature, game forum posts, footage of fan play throughs, blogs, potential interview candidates, and reviews, all of which will be aid in supplementing the proceduralist approach and in supporting or undermining the view that certain games represent the rationalisation of play.

The fact that game designers can only create the rules, and actual use or play as emergent gameplay is a second-order creation (Salen and Zimmerman 2004) does appear to indicate a certain amount of inalienable player autonomy, but perhaps only insofar as players' actions and desires are truly beyond prediction and estimation. The ability for players to create their own maps in some games, to intervene at the fundamental architectural level of the conditions of play, make for interesting cases to consider. If entry into the ludic state depends, almost by definition, upon the feeling of a sense of possibility, then can all viable possibilities be effectively anticipated yet without compromising the player's sense of autonomy and play? Alternatively, do genuinely emergent games with a high level of replayability simply herald longer durations of player commodification?

I propose to address these questions with a strong mindfulness that seemingly discerning consumption can be vulnerable to "containment" (Fiske, 1989) in a landscape where the flexibility and product customisability enjoyed by many corporations today enables people's tactical subversions (de Certeau, 1988) to be "turned into strategies now sold to them" (Manovich, 2008, p.38). On this point, many existing suggestions of "counterplay against Empire", such as those described by Dyer-Witford and de Peuter (2009, p.193) seem suspiciously overdetermined and predictable, consequently calling for re-evaluation. A fundamental dilemma here appears to be this: to ignore the politics of life at the "micro level", the connection between "interior, semiotic resistances and sociopolitical

ones, between meanings and behaviours...between evasive and offensive tactics”, (Fiske, 1989, p.9) would seem to preclude the possibility of a “molecular revolution” (Guattari, 1996, p.90) in principle altogether, but to overinflate it would amount to a misrepresentation of the extent of Empire and of its extensive commodification of experience.

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