

Notes from a Videogame Breakdown by Savitri Young

In a recent argument over whether films or videogames require a more active audience, I found myself arguing that the more active spectator would be the one watching a film. I do not contend that all film spectators are more active than game-players, but I do believe that film has more potential to give spectators more freedom than any game.

While the ability of the game-player to manipulate narrative gives the player an obvious role in the storytelling process, the active participation of the film viewer is equally (if not more) effective in terms of engaging with the text. I think both games and film have an ironic function, as games create the illusion of immediacy while films create the illusion of distance. The crux of my argument lies in the three main differences I see between the two related mediums.

1. PLACE, NON-PLACE, OR JUST PLAIN OLD SPACE?

In his essay “Architecture and the Cinema” (*Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film*, Verso: New York, London, 2002.), Peter Wollen refers to the distinction among place, non-place, and space (quoting Marc Augè). Place must be relational or laid out symbolically historically rich with meaning, and have personal significance. Spatial relationships must be concerned with identity or with the indexical which harbors cultural and social meaning. If space does not function in this manner, it cannot be called a legitimate place but must instead be known as a non-place.

When we move through a place we always have an interactive relationship with it, as place evokes response. I am talking about physically walking through real places; however, both games and films invite players or spectators to maneuver through their respective spaces (although in different ways) which determines whether the caliber of space is significant or if it has a direct relationship to the strength of the response to that space. The more active the player or spectator, the more intense the space must be. Dave Hickey argues that Las Vegas and Santa Fe are “dialectical utopias” and writes that, “like all resort architecture, the built environment in both cities is essentially diversionary, although each environment aspires to its own form of disorientation. Simply put: to be in Santa Fe or Las Vegas is to feel lost. First, you are lost in time, lost from history.” ([From *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*](#).) Evoking a feeling of being lost, these cities are examples of non-places. Curiously, this is the feeling I get either when I play a videogame or when I watch someone else play. Games must ferociously re-make the world into an ugly, incomplete, and artificial wasteland. It is precisely because games do this so haphazardly that I cannot engage them. My definition of an active spectator (or player) is one who needs no incentive to engage a text and who is content with the ability to alternate between relinquishing their involuntary attention and is able to take control when something piques his curiosity. A medium for an active spectator should aspire to lead one into a situation whereby there is enough stimuli for this dialogue between involuntary and voluntary attention to cultivate. As far as I can tell films possess the

capacity to do this and games do not for the simple reason that games are worlds made entirely of non-places.

2. SPEED

In film, speed is dependent on “under-cranking, slow motion, pixilation, jump-cuts, rapid camera movement, rapid tempo of editing, rapid movement within the frame, rapid delivery of dialogue, rapid narrative development.” (*Paris Hollywood* p.269) While these effects exist in the game space, they are not used as a brief punctuation, instead they are omnipresent. When you play a game, what you are seeing is an abundance of ellipses, some so small they are jump cuts and others spanning minutes. Much of the action is missing. When a player dies, a series of jump-cuts re-animate it. Movement through space is always jumpy, giving the impression of a fast speed. Wollen explains that if the cinema has undergone a steady quickening of speed, calculable by diminishing shot lengths over a number of years, then it must be because the cinema audience has a high percentage of thrill-seekers, as “[a]ccelerated speeds enable us to enter exposed and unfamiliar situations, far removed from the zones of safety and normality...thrills are not directed against an outside object, but valued for the subjective experience they bring the thrill-seeker.” (*Paris Hollywood* p.265) Games have an advantage over films in terms of speed. Animation has the liberty to create its own experience of time and is therefore capable of accelerated speeds for extended durations (often hours) that would have to be compromised in a film. These high-speeds discourage active sensory-motor perception and encourage a more hypnotic engagement. I think the faster the speed of the text, the less time the spectator has to re-act to information that is passing by, and therefore there is less time for your voluntary attention to wonder. When your voluntary attention cannot wonder, the nature of your interaction with a text must be submissive.

An important question to ask is, can a game be self-reflexive and if so when does this happen? In terms of voluntary and involuntary attention, the self-reflexive seems to be when the text breaks its own trajectory as opposed to when the spectator initiates a break in his involuntary attention. When this happens in a film it should not be an accident; however, in a game it almost always is a mistake. In my opinion, the reflexive moments are when you become stuck in the game space because this reveals that the game is incomplete in some way. For example, when you are trapped or at a dead end the mistake is not wholly yours, but rather a glitch in the game that either forces the player to backtrack or quit. The real displeasure likely comes more from being forced to decelerate. In film, self-reflexivity is meant to appear as a mistake but what makes these moments so complex, is that they are forged mistakes or they give the illusion of a mistake. To my knowledge games cannot do this. Games and films seem to opposite when it comes to the effect the reflexive act has on the spectator.

3. SOCIAL OR ANTISOCIAL?

It is my opinion that games require a less active audience for social reasons. Animated environments displace the social for solitary entertainment. Games are primarily played at home which, by definition, is a legitimate place. To play a game, you

are physically in a place but mentally in a non-place. A movie theater is by definition a non-place. When you watch a film (projected) you are physically in a non-place but (depending on the film of course) you could be mentally in a real place. I need to throw in a disclaimer here, when I say film I don't mean all films, I am excluding animation films and films with fantastic settings because of the nature of those spaces. Seeking to be social in the privacy of your own home is a form of antisocial behavior. DVD and video watching are antisocial methods of seeing films. Even though sitting in a dark theater with a bunch of strangers might not sound like a social activity, I would argue that it is infinitely more social than staying home. First, you are forced to listen to or even sense the responses of other audience members. Second, you will be forced to have some relationship to other people since you must wait in line and choose a seat. Since its inception, cinema has been obsessed with social norms. Unlike the videogame, film attempts to recreate, analyze, critique, describe, and understand society. I do not mean to say that only very social people like films. If you have ever been to a LACMA screening you must have witnessed the elderly lady, who loves the third row as do I, flip out mid-film at the person sitting behind her that really isn't there. The social value I speak of in film has to do with nuance, tone, and the capacity of the cinema to communicate the minutia of our daily experience. To watch, re-watch, appreciate, know, and memorize these nuances is an expression of our obsession with the social; it also represents a very human desire to stop the passing of time. Videogames are the places where time can go berserk.

4. I DON'T WANT TO BE A NAZI

“Call of Duty” is a multiplayer Internet game set in WWII. The player can choose to be on either side of battles, which are modeled after real WWII battles. The game claims that the maps and skins (the appearance of the surfaces) are “accurate” depictions of time and space. I have a friend who is so into the game that he has his own server and his own “clan.” He once spent an entire day making an image of an authentic WWII Russian ushanka hat into a skin to wear in the game. This level of engagement with the text reflects the zealous behavior of many gamers who actively participate in the constructing the world of their favorites game.

An interesting feature of many games is the ability to record or save the game session so it can be re-watched. On one occasion, my friend decided that he wanted to make a “film” of himself playing the game. As the “cinematographer” and “editor” of his own “film” he ran into a huge narrative problem. While the game provides the option of joining any European WWII battle, in order to visit more than one country within a single game you must be a Nazi. Not only was it impossible for my friend to make the film he desired, but this lack of freedom within the game has serious moral and historical baggage. The game is the most rigorous only when the player is in fact a Nazi (not to mention that if the player and his clan are any good, it is likely that the Nazis will win). Of course the outrage of this dilemma is eased when we remember that the locations, the events, and the characters are all non-locations, non-events, and non-characters.

In his film *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (a film about how films depict the city of Los Angeles), Thom Andersen complains that Hollywood's most common portrayal of Los Angeles is "low-tourist" and cliché, lacking in temporal and geographic integrity. For Andersen, these representations give a false sense of a real place, ultimately cheapening what we know as valid places by turning them into non-places. On the other hand, "high-tourist" depictions manage to maintain the historical and geographic (relational) integrity of the city; the city (or any city for that matter) remains intact and recognizable. It may seem that "Call of Duty" is a high-tourist game since its designers put so much effort into making the maps, battle sites, and uniforms "authentic." However, "Call of Duty" simplifies the war and condenses it until all that is left are some names of cities, and some measly signifiers (jeeps, uniforms, weapons, and ushanka hats). If, as I would contend, "Call of Duty" is a low-tourist game, it is because its intentions are not to appreciate, remember, or work through any history at all but instead to speed through it polluting, distorting, and possibly even destroying its own subject.

5. GAME OVER OR THE END

As Marc Augè eloquently puts it, "our touristic fascination with non-places throws us back into solitude [and even] when traveling in groups, the relation we have with a place is never a social relation, but an individual and anonymous one." The source of this fascination with fantasy architecture is Globalism, which "seems to have moved us away from a time-based towards a space-based culture, in which we can be kept in constant touch with simultaneous events and sights from across the globe while our sense of history as a meaningful succession of events is correspondingly eroded. This cultural change seems also to involve a move away from a tactile to an optical apprehension of the world, to a fascination with seeing at a distance, with access to an elsewhere, rather than learning to inhabit a space, physically integrating oneself into it. This is a culture, which values mobility above memory, or spectacle above narrative, which sees architecture in terms of public façades and views rather than spaces to be used and given symbolic meaning." (*Paris Hollywood* p.213)

So what about the cannon? Does the study of videogames belong here in the university? If we are to have rigorous theoretical writing about games I think that it needs to come first from the discipline of architecture, since these are the experts on how space functions. Critical thinking about videogames via the study of technology, television, new media, or even film has a tendency to either be too optimistic (the player has a maximum of control) or too pessimistic (the control the player has is just an illusion). The initial intention behind this opinion piece was to figure out why most people who love watching films dislike playing videogames and why most people who love playing videogames don't care for many films. Perhaps the best author for this topic is someone (an architect) who enjoys doing both.

Savitri Young is a second-year MA student in the Critical Studies department.