SPIELRAUM: GAMES, ART AND CYBERSPACE

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ABSTRACT: Are videogames art? This essay considers in what ways videogames may be considered artistic and some challenges the form brings to contemporary aesthetics.

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LEVEL 1: INTERACTION AND DISTRACTION

In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Walter Benjamin discusses the effects of reproductive techniques such as photography and film on the concept and practice of art. The early points made by the essay have become an oft-told story: as images become more readily available and simpler to produce, the very sense of authenticity and uniqueness that surrounds the work of art – the aura – becomes less pronounced. Benjamin locates progressive potential in this key facet of modernity, suggesting that through photography, many people could gain access to images of objects (and especially objects of art) that had once been exclusive symbols of status in the hands of a ruling elite. Thus the cult value of works of art is, in modernity, gradually replaced by exhibition value. Photography and film extend the limits of the exhibition by both opening new opportunities for the masses to experience it and dissembling the auratic quality of uniqueness.

The history of art over the last century seems to vindicate Benjamin’s intuition that art would have to reckon with mass reproduction at the very core of its being. The great example is Duchamp, who was aware of what Thierry de Duve has called the ‘internalisation of the mass-produced’ in art that nevertheless maintained a rhetorical discourse of originality and uniqueness. Duchamp knew that mass-produced tubes of paint were vital in allowing the impressionists to leave their studios in order to paint directly from life and landscape. “Let’s say you use a tube of paint; you didn’t make it. You bought it and used it as a readymade.” [4] His famous exhibition of a urinal calls into question the very idea of the artwork as the unique product of genius.

While this dialectic between singular artwork and mass reproduced image that Benjamin sets up is of great importance, it is not the only gesture made by his essay. Perhaps less often discussed is an idea raised near the close of the work concerning the mode in which art is received. Benjamin suggests that whereas previously art was given the most profound *attention*, in the age of mechanical reproduction, the artwork is increasingly apprehended in a mode of *distraction*.

What exactly does Benjamin mean by this concept of distraction? Again, the paradigm shift is illustrated through the artistic image in a state of mass reproduction – that is, where the exhibition value is maximized in time and space. Consequently, Benjamin argues that “The greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation.” The nature of this change is

> Clearly… the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator… Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regards to buildings. Architecture has always represented the work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. [2]

Less relevant for understanding this point, Benjamin suggests, is the attitude of a tourist before some great monument – this is a clear case of concentration. Rather, consider the way in which an architectural work of art is appropriated (or perhaps, navigated) by the mass of people that move through it, that absorb in a tactile sense what they only notice incidentally. Thus another opposition is set up in dialogue with that previously established between the cult and the exhibition: concentration or optical reception against distraction or tactile appropriation.

> Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather, by touch and by sight…On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. [2]

This idea of tactile appropriation may seem strange when applied to art forms other than architecture – after all, it seems that we receive films and photographs as well as many traditional works in an optical mode. But this notion of distracted appropriation, of habituation, also works on a mass level in terms of the habits it generates in large groups. William Bogard, writing on ‘Distraction and Digital Culture’, has provided a well-founded theoretical bridge between Benjamin’s insights and the contemporary situation. Bogard suggests that it is possible to see modern forms of media as virtual architectures, or “The adjustment of conditions of perception and the formation of habits.” New media and art forms do not simply present novel experiences to a passive audience, they actively condition the audience into the terms of their reception in much the same way that a strange building becomes familiar over time. According to Bogard,

> In an important sense, tactile appropriation is not just another mode of reception on par with visual or optical appropriation. Rather, Benjamin argues, it constitutes the conditions of possibility for the latter, in the sense that habitualised behaviors which develop around the use of dwelling spaces, as routinised practices, *organize perception*. Architectural arrangements, in the social as much as the physical sense, determine what can and cannot be seen. [3]

These formulations throw an interesting light on the history of art over the past century. Duchamp's signing of a urinal can be thought of as an attempt to exhibit exhibition value itself – and hence also its limits. In short, Duchamp was exhibiting what was considered unworthy of being exhibited, what was unworthy of inhabiting the space of the exhibition. Combining this unlikely readymade object whose ilk populate the restrooms of the free world with the vaunted artistic signature, Duchamp effectively orphaned the work of art, ruptured the exclusivity of the gallery, hurled it into the world. With the rise of installation art such as the recent piece by Moriko Mori in Melbourne's own Federation Square, art works can constitute their own spaces distinct from the conventions of the gallery; by installing and intervening in new contexts, art can organize perception in ways distinct from both the cult and the exhibition.

Benjamin suggests that exhibition value is for moderns 'the artistic function', which may later be recognized as incidental just as the cult value or aura of an artifact is elided by display in a gallery or museum. In effect, his considerations allow that art is not now what it has always been and need not be so forever. "Earlier much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art. The primary question- whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art- was not raised." [2] Following the work of artists such as Duchamp, Lichtenstein, Warhol and Levine and especially with regards to the contemporary form of the video installation, exhibition value itself is less and less the determining characteristic of a work of art. While recognizing that it is absurd to declare art completely free of the exhibitive institutions of the modern art world (especially in a financial sense) any more than it is completely free of aura, is it possible to formulate through the ideas of distraction and habituation a third value that rises to prominence in contemporary artworks, a space which they can be said to inhabit?

Bogard suggests that technologies such as cinema inaugurate "a new mode of perception and, one would have to say, a new set of habits. Henceforth, everything is subjected to the test. Testing ie. measuring, dividing out, selecting, ranking, sorting – becomes the order of the day, and this is manifest in a specific way of manipulating the image, of producing it in each and all of its multiple perspectives, the better to capture its object definitively." This seems to be a clear expression of exhibition value: after all, in order to exhibit something it is necessary to separate it from its world and bring it into the context of the exhibit, the better to isolate it 'definitively'. But what Duchamp brought sharply into focus was that carrying an object to this point of definition through testing does not leave the subject unchanged – in Benjamin's terms, the object organizes perception, whether this be the subject's judgment of art as opposed to non-art, or the innumerable little eccentricities with which inhabit a familiar building.

This idea of testing is simulation, a complex interplay where the subject attempts to mark off and define the object with signs, but where the object in turn subtly affects the subject through habituation and distraction. This reciprocal action – a form of testing where both subject and object are exhibited in their own way - may be called interaction. It is possible to paraphrase Benjamin and say that, technically speaking, objects of art have always been interactive, but in the age of simulation and digital reproduction, this represents something new.

LEVEL 2: READYMADE WORLDS

I have decided to use the term 'interactive' despite Espen Aarseth's critique [1] because, as he argues, it is a word that is very general in meaning. Aarseth's more rigorous term, ergodic, is suited to the cybertexts he studies, but not all art (or even contemporary art) performs the functions Aarseth assigns to the ergodic text. Thus 'interactive' is efficient as a description of the tendency in contemporary art to be aware of the ways in which it tests the audience, or subjects them to new perceptual regimes. The term conveys well the sense of reciprocal action between subject and object I am attempting to describe.

Academics have recently begun to devote much-needed attention to a cultural form in which the processes of testing, habituation, distraction and simulation are central. Video and computer games provide readymade worlds, strange spaces into which thousands of people launch themselves every day. Is it possible to say that players inhabit the game-space? Do videogames 'inaugurate new modes of perception' in a manner comparable to that of film or photography? And can they thus be said to instantiate a new form of art?

James Newman's article, "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame", performs a kind of thought experiment, taking a traditional notion of narrative art – the character – and examining how the concept changes when situated in the videogame. This operation is worth taking into consideration here, as an example of a traditional artistic category and how it is inflected in a videogame context. Newman suggests that the relationship between character and player is not one of representation, but one of action.

Newman's pugnacious article asks a simple question: how ergodic are videogames? Many games make significant use of representation, with recognisable characters and cutscenes where the player is in fact a spectator without any control over the course of the game. This does not mean that videogames can be considered narratives, however. While games make use of increasingly sophisticated methods of representation, and actively adapt representative techniques and codes from other media (including methods of characterisation), this propensity should not blind critics to the nature of player engagement in the game world.

> The player utilises and embodies the character in the gameworld. While it may retain significance on the box, in adverts, even in cut scenes and introductions within the game, during On-Line engagement, the appearance of the player's character is of little or no consequence. By this, I mean to suggest that the level of engagement, immersion or presence experienced by the player – the degree to which the player considers themselves to "be" the character – is not contingent upon representation. On-Line, "character" is conceived as capacity – as a set of characteristics. [6]

According to Newman, what is important about a character for the player of a videogame is the set of capabilities that character represents, rather than personality or appearance which may be more meaningful in traditional or conventional forms. Thus while initially the player will be attracted to the most visually or narratively appealing character (the importance of this is obvious as it affects which game they are playing in the first place), once they begin to learn the specificities of a game, their preference may change. As they grow accustomed to the objects within the space and the ratios between those objects, players become habituated; they more comfortably *inhabit* the game. Characters in this space lose a degree of their 'character' as it is traditionally or conventionally conceived in favour of what Newman calls a vehicular relationship with the player, but retain recognizable visual or acoustic features that act as signifiers for that character's particular abilities. "The game needs me… We can see that as characters move between mediums they both gain and lose traits as the particular form demands."

Thus the situation of characters within videogames shows an example of distraction, the test-space and its tactile appropriation through habituation. Initially, the player encounters the characters or objects in an optical, contemplative sense. An unfamiliar videogame is prone to prompt such thoughts: "Can I jump this chasm? Am I strong enough to overcome that enemy?" A player at this stage will likely look for representational cues to choose a course of action. As the player becomes habituated and learns the specificities of the game-space, their reactions become more 'unnatural'- they no longer judge a chasm's length by their own real-world experience, but by the distance they know their character can leap safely. As the player tests the game-space, threats once formidable become incidental, handled automatically. Of course, in most videogames, the space is designed to test the player back. Perhaps the 'tetraminoes' fall faster onto the screen, or the enemies require more shots to defeat. At length, though, the player tends to see through the representations to the actual ratios of the simulation itself- even if the visual information is erroneous, a canny gamer can correct for the fault by force of habit.

As Bogard, a fine guide amidst all this distraction, writes, "It is no problem to see the force of distraction at work in the connection of any kid's fingers to the buttons of his or her videogame controller. Can we imagine a time when our brains are wired directly to those buttons, when the brain itself is a distraction-machine that can call up its own diversions at the merest thought? When we no longer appropriate the scene tactilely but through our nervous system?" It is certainly possible to *imagine* the innervation of the nervous system directly to distraction, but for my purpose here it overshoots the mark. This then is where - in this eleventh-hour inflection of the apparatus - videogames gain their own particular felicity. The videogame's distraction is still channeled through the 'fingers to the buttons'. This is the *particular* pleasure of the form thrown into relief: the testing and *tactile* appropriation of a range of virtual spaces *through* the specific apparatus of the videogame.

LEVEL 3: HARDSCAPE/IMAGESCAPE

Videogames, then, are not reducible to narratives or to games as there is a specific kind of fun to be had in *not* being completely immersed in a game or in a story, in controlling *through* an apparatus a body with a set of simulated characteristics and occasionally not being in charge of what's going on. Ideals of procedural narrative or pure ergodicity are certainly interesting design goals, but they are less useful for examining the videogame form as it exists now, with all its practical 'flaws' (that in fact may be pleasures). This is why, according to Bogard, Deleuze and Guattari insist that:

> … any system of signs must be explored not only in terms of its meaning, but in its 'asemiotic' or arepresentational component as well, ie as a regime of desire and affect, an organisation of force relations, rather than as a linguistic or 'mental' structure… [3]

Newman seems to agree. Extending his consideration of the idea of character in videogame spaces, Newman draws from an analysis of 'god games' such as Civilization (MicroProse, 1991) and SimCity (Maxis Software, 1992) by Ted Friedman which suggests a spatialised relationship between the player and the entire game world rather than discrete representative parts. While this is an understandable approach to games in which the player directly controls the functioning of entire civilizations or municipalities, Newman suggests that it has broader resonances across the various videogame genres:

> Player accounts are structured around action, around environment, around activity. In this way, any model of connection based around identification with a single entity in the gameworld is perhaps oversimplified… Clearly, this demands a totally new framework within which to understand the relationship between player and gameworld. Even the notion of On-Line character as an identifiable and singular entity embodied by the player may be an oversimplification indicative of an implicit reliance on existent models of audience… this linkage is best considered as an experiential whole that synthesises, action, location, scenario, and not merely as a bond between subject and object within a world… On-Line, the player is both the goal and the act of attaining it. [6]

While this seems a pure case of habituation and distraction, it must be recalled that videogames often demand concentration from players. Threats must be ascertained and dealt with in a systematic manner, and new challenges are presented which test the player in new ways. A good example of this is the ubiquitous gamer term ‘boss fight’, where often at the end of a level or stage, a powerful and unique enemy waits to test the player’s abilities. Players must be simultaneously habituated enough to their character’s abilities to act swiftly and surely, while concentrating to discern the strategy required to beat the boss. Often, representational clues are important in these situations and the usual rules to which the player has become habituated are broken... in a way, it may be said that the game-space is suffused and overwhelmed by character. Thus conceiving of games as ‘virtual architectures’ or ‘regimes of desire and affect’ requires a consideration of the constant and complex interplays between distraction and concentration.

This game-space is certainly not one of total immersion, but one where part of the pleasure is interaction through an apparatus, of habituation to its law. As Peter Lunenfeld writes in his book on contemporary art, even ‘Virtual Reality’ has pulled back from imagining a technique so effective that it renders redundant the need to consider its material conditions: “… the ‘goggles and gloves’ systems- those ubiquitous signifiers of VR… that combine head-mounted displays and prosthetic input devices- lost ground in both the laboratory and the marketplace to hardscape/imagescape hybrids.” [5] Thus the technological movement dedicated to the elision of the experience of apparatus has admitted that ideas of invisible technique are premature. For the videogame, a far less ontologically ambitious form, a consideration of the specific material pleasures involved seems vital. Lunenfeld warns (and there is no doubt the dialectical materialist in Walter Benjamin would approve), that it is necessary for critics to beware ‘dialectical immaterialism’: “A vapour theory of ruminations unsupported by material underpinnings.”

Lunenfeld’s concept of hardscape (the architecture) and imagescape (what is projected onto the architecture), although coined to describe installation art, seems to me useful for understanding the complexities of virtual being of the sort experienced in playing a videogame. From certain perspectives, the two ‘scapes are distinct entities (such as in a conventional gallery), while from others they combine into a whole (although not necessarily an unproblematic whole, as in Shirin Neshat’s *Rapture* where multiple images are projected at once). In videogames we may conceive the tactile aspects of habituation as hardscape, whereas the imagescape would be apprehended optically – although even this breakdown is oversimplifying a complex play of flows and blocks. The architectural conception also emphasises the materiality of the videogame experience, the pleasure of being subjected to a new perceptual regime, of indulging habits that are wonderfully useless in any other context. A strange kind of Dasein indeed, this unrepentant banality.

It must be admitted that because videogames are often tied to specific hardware infrastructures and spaces while art thrives on intervening in and subverting the spatial arrangements that ‘organise perception’ (by veiling hardscapes with imagescapes, for example), it seems premature to call videogames art. However, as Benjamin notes, “Many art forms have developed and perished. Tragedy begins with the Greeks, is extinguished with them, and after centuries its 'rules' only are revived. The epic poem, which had its origin in the youth of nations, expires in Europe at the end of the Renaissance. Panel painting is a creation of the Middle Ages, and nothing guarantees its uninterrupted existence.” Similarly, there is no guarantee of the uninterrupted existence of the videogame as we know it today, but if it is true that interactivity is challenging the dominance of exhibition value, future art historians will no doubt be grateful for critically engaged videogames study conducted today.

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