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Odyssey renewed: Towards a new aesthetics of video gaming

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Abstract
The first home video-gaming console, the Magnavox Odyssey, was released in 1972. Its limited graphical capacities led Magnavox to ship it with a number of plastic overlays for the user’s television that would admit a little variety into the then relatively crude gaming experience, limited to a built-in, Pong-like game. Computer and video games have come a long way since then, but it often seems as if critical approaches to gaming have continued shuffling through these plastic films, taking transformations of the screen, or on-screen events, for the whole of the gaming experience. It seems to me that reflection has been paralysed, becoming a discourse of regulation as it revolves around anxieties about gender, violence and narrative. I’d like to explore these anxieties as they’ve emerged in a few places, and then see if I can articulate the beginnings of an approach that might afford us a more complex, less pessimistic aesthetics of gaming.

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The first home video-gaming console, the Magnavox Odyssey, was released in 1972. Its limited graphical capacities led Magnavox to ship it with a number of plastic overlays for the user's television that would admit a little variety into the then relatively crude gaming experience, limited to a built-in, Pong-like game. Computer and video games have come a long way since then, but it often seems as if critical approaches to gaming have continued shuffling through these plastic films, taking transformations of the screen, or on-screen events, for the whole of the gaming experience. It seems to me that reflection has been paralysed, becoming a discourse of regulation as it revolves around anxieties about gender, violence and narrative. I'd like to explore these anxieties as they've emerged in a few places, and then see if I can articulate the beginnings of an approach that might afford us a more complex, less pessimistic aesthetics of gaming.

Anxieties around gender are partly premised upon an evident difference in the types, frequency and extent of gameplay on the part of boys and girls. Recent Australian research suggests that while 76% of boys use home computers for gameplay, the proportion of girls who do the same is around 60% (Cuppitt and Stockbridge 1996). In addition, similar Australian research suggests that while 98% of 12-17 year old boys play games regularly, only around 89% of girls do (Durkin and Aisbett 2000). There is evidence that girls and boys favour different gaming genres (Durkin and Aisbett 2000), and there is little doubt that the magazines and Websites that operate so integrally within gaming cultures tend to hail and attract a mostly male audience. Evidence of this kind of gender split can be seen across the extant research, and from it the argument is often made that this gender imbalance implies a lifelong advantage for boys proceeding from an early pleasurable familiarity with computers. In addressing this problem, rather than confronting questions of access, and parental or teacherly responsibilities to guarantee equity of access for boys and girls, or even looking at issues of gender representation, many critics have instead argued that most games are fundamentally unsuited to the way girls play.

In a recent anthology, From Barbie To Mortal Kombat (1998), essentialist discourses of gender are deployed in assembling a consensus around what is termed the 'girls games movement'. Time and again in most of the assembled articles and interviews, claims are made that girls' and boys' interests and styles of play are fundamentally different. While boys allegedly favour destructive play, with an emphasis on mastery, control and competition, girls -- it's constantly asserted -- require collaboration and co-operation, an emphasis on feelings and discussion, a less competitive framework for play, and, above all, narrative. Repeatedly in the anthology, its impugned that games now do not encompass the narrative complexity or richness that girls need, and that girls are alienated from the violent 'twitch and kill' dynamic that pervades gaming.

Apart from the thoroughgoing essentialism -- which is brilliantly interrogated by the game-grrlz featured at the end of the anthology -- what troubles me about much of the anthology and much contemporary critical work on games is the implied moral demand that young people's game-culture begin to measure up to another generation's notions of 'appropriate' cultural experiences. A persistent trope in critical work on games -- from Jenkins's piece in the anthology (Jenkins 1998) to works like Marsha Kinder's Playing with Power (1991) -- is the parent-critic watching their children playing video games and becoming perplexed and worried about what is going on. The panic around the lack of 'girls games' -- apart from affording a lucrative opportunity to produce and market worthy material to concerned parents -- serves to authorise the 'correction' of young people's culture. The move from a critique of gaming -- one which rarely engages sympathetically with its pleasures -- to an attempt to inject strong, adult-devised narrative content into games is a move from speaking about gamers ('over their heads') to speaking for gamers.

This speaking-for, this flutter of panic has, I think, more than a little to do with an anxiety around the dissipation of cultural power. Theorists of moral panic like John Springhall tell us that moral panics function as attempts to preserve the intergenerational status quo and the cultural-critical hierarchy of a particular period (Springhall 1998). Catharine Lumby argues that new media are like force-fields that reorganise social relations in their wake, and that the anxieties they can inspire can tell us a lot about who feels threatened by such re-organisations, and why (Lumby 1997). Gaming is disturbing in that
although it shares some features with other, more familiar visual media, it seems finally, stubbornly unassimilable to the modes of criticism that have developed in relation to those forms. Enrenched critical narratives of spectatorship, or the relationship between viewers, texts, meaning and the economies of cultural production don’t seem to find any useful or lasting purchase here. No-one would now argue that televisual or cinematic experiences are passive, but gaming’s requirement in principle for the player’s direct physical participation in the production of cultural experience means that the old separations underpinning mechanisms of identification or notions of consuming audiences seem irritatingly awkward. Faced with these and other difficulties, criticism has tended to become mesmerised with what is shared -- the screen -- and to be at once frustrated and provoked by the enormous differences still inscribed there. While the close scrutiny of gender representations in gaming has uncovered some serious problems, alongside the demand for narrative we can also see it as part of an older generation’s attempt to adapt familiar, free-floating critical modes and models to a group of media with which it has no apparent deep or pleasurable engagement. Faced with a radical analytical and critical failure, the lack of any pleasure to account for or recover, and the need to preserve a cultural and critical hierarchy premised upon the study of other media, it is perhaps inevitable that a desire to alter gaming -- to make it more familiar -- has arisen, and with it a critical discourse of regulation.

If we move beyond the screen, if we simply attend to what happens when we and others play games, we allow the possibility of a new aesthetics of gaming to emerge that moves beyond such desires for control. When we realise that what is almost never talked about in current critical work is the body of the player or the nature of machine-mediated play, a field begins to open that might allow us to talk about the uses and pleasures of gaming, and to see its various forms in a wider network of interactions.

Paradigm-cases for beginning the sorts of investigations I’m thinking of are those amazing arcade games, like Dance Dance Revolution, that enable and even require public performance and public display. Often positioned at the street entrances of arcades, these games usually attract passing crowds to stop and watch (male and female) players dancing in time with thumping tunes and on-screen instructions. Points are scored by closely matching foot placement with the directional arrows thrown up onto the small screen, but what really attracts the onlookers is the undeniable, individual -- and, strictly, unnecessary -- flair with which the dancers often execute their moves. What at the level of programming, and from an analysis of the screen alone, is the most rudimentary of narratives nevertheless mediates a thrilling and spectacular playful-performative display.

And this is where we begin to see that gaming pleasures do not, perhaps cannot, rely on finished or closed narratives. It seems to me that the undeniable popularity of gaming comes from the provision of endlessly recursive grammars and vocabularies for cyborg players to narrate performance, play and self. While many gaming genres and titles do include chunks of traditional narrative storytelling, it seems to me that these often simply embellish the distinctive pleasures of gaming, which require and enact the fundamental redistribution of authorial and narrative power. Gaming establishes a new relationship between perceptual fields and bodies -- a relationship fundamentally different from cinematic or televisual relationships. Associated with these pleasures and relationships is gaming’s demand for an ontology -- a series of ontologies -- that can conceive of the moment of play as simultaneously social, mechanical, neither, both. Code and performance, programming and improvised play, when seen together in this way, make the demand for narrative -- ultimately premised upon the separation of consumer and product, spectator and image -- empty of any force. This is to say that when we begin to see the moment of gameplay as a hybrid one -- one where human and machine, play and code, text and reading, producer and consumer cannot be meaningfully distinguished -- we can then begin to see that its unfixed, unstriated forms of play demand a hybrid aesthetics.

Such a hybrid aesthetics would move beyond the screen alone to consider gaming’s involvement in multiple networks, and thus come to a consideration of its pleasures and possibilities that avoided discourses of morality and control. What it would consider is not only the relationship between gaming and other forms of ‘visual culture’, but simultaneously its technological artefacts, its involvement with transnational industry, the physical dexterities and epistemologies it demands, the differing shapes of its collectives as it proliferates, its interactions with urban spaces, and its production of different kinds and mixtures of spectators, players, narratives and machines. This kind of Latourian anthropology, with its refusal to bracket gaming as another form of ‘soft’ culture, is a critical approach that will allow us some traction on gaming’s slippery surface, as it allows us to talk about its complexity all at once. If we begin to see games as ‘mediators -- that is, actors endowed with the ability to translate what they transport’, who in turn ‘associate, combine and redeploy countless actors’ (Latour 1993), if we look beyond the screen and instead, following Wittgenstein, look for the meaning of games in their everyday social use, we will have begun to look at games in a way that is more interested in what they do, than in what they allegedly do not do. Carrying out this kind of aesthetic project will require not only an attention to the involvement of players’ bodies in gaming, but to the patterns of games’ dissemination, and to what players themselves say about the games they play.
Such an approach need not, in opposing the pessimism that goes with screen-fetishism, veer toward the utopianism of so much cyber-rhetoric. If we take arguments like Latour’s seriously, we will say not that gaming represents a revolutionary moment, but that there has always been a deep involvement between humans and our technologies, such that machines and humans constitute collectives for social action. An aesthetics of gaming that takes cognisance of this will short-circuit conveniently polarised debates, and clear space for a more interesting consideration of the networks and uses of gaming. Perhaps those of us who have keenly felt the pleasures and possibilities of gaming can extend a conversation that is no longer sifting through the Odyssey’s yellowing transparencies.

References


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