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Watching the Game: Video Games as a Function of Performance and Spectatorship

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Abstract

This article deals with non-playing video game audience cultures and their relationships to the gaming experience. We begin by identifying some primary motivating factors behind game spectatorship, including video games' relationship to other media such as sport and film. The article then proceeds to discuss video games specifically as enacted narratives and their impact as potential audience-friendly media. We conclude by taking another look at the current industrial/theoretical perspective of the medium and assess the possible implications non-playing game audiences may have upon video games as a developing field.

Introduction

In the recent video game documentary *King of Kong* (2007), Walter Day, a gaming referee, reflects that he "wanted to be a hero" for playing video games: "I wanted the glory. I wanted the fame. I wanted the pretty girls to come up and say, 'Hi, I see that you're good at *Centipede*.'"[1] *Kong* producer Ed Cunningham, formerly a player for the NFL, knew from the outset that the film he and director Seth Gordon were making was not about the exoticism of gaming subculture, but rather the ways in which competitive video gaming parallels trends in larger society-- namely, spectator sport. "At the highest levels, we tend to be mesmerized by the skill of someone who can accomplish a physical feat much better than we can," observes Cunningham; "[but] we can only be truly interested in watching a sport if we know how hard what we're watching is to do."[2] He notes that because a greater percentage of the human population is familiar with soccer, baseball, and other

such games, these have thus far enjoyed more widespread acceptance than other competitive pursuits.

Of course, as another of *King of Kong*'s interviewees points out, "everybody games." A common baseline of experience is not limited to physical contact sports, as historic interest in chess competitions and the current growing market for televised card games illustrates. Fast on the heels of these niche spectator sports are video games, which, as a medium, often straddle the line between sport and other forms of entertainment, such as animation, musical performance, and narrative. While many video games can generate spectator interest for their purely ludic qualities -- from a head-to-head *Tetris* (arcade, 1985) match at the Omegathon to the world record endurance trials found at Funspot-- other titles draw upon elements of aesthetic and narrative to form a player-spectator relationship much more akin to a performer and an audience. These "passive" video game fans are something of an accidental byproduct of the gaming experience, unaccounted for in both the video game industry and (as of this writing) existing theoretical literature. Though effectively invisible, these non-playing audiences have not only developed their own interactions with the text which differ substantially from the perspective of the player, we may find they also significantly *inform* a player's experience.

We begin this article by looking at the psychology behind spectatorship and how it applies to video games as spectacle. Drawing upon these ideas, we will then narrow our focus to examine narrative-intensive games in particular, looking at the ways in which passive third parties engage the text in a transformative manner. Finally, we will conclude by addressing the phenomenon of non-playing game audiences in the context of our current theoretical and industrial mindset, in the hopes of yielding insight into how future discourse might incorporate these audiences.

The Game Spectator

Spectatorship, as a behavior, draws upon a variety of factors, having largely to do with the background and mindset of the individual, by himself and as part of a group. *Sports Fans* (2001) identifies the top five reasons for sports spectatorship as *entertainment value*, *stress relief*, *group affiliation*, *self-esteem benefits*, and *aesthetic*.[3] Entertainment value and stress relief both may be interpreted, in part, as the pleasure of seeing the "narrative" of a game carried out by its players: games -- be they sports, traditional games or video games-- offer a premise of conflict and one or more objectives for the participants to meet in order to overcome that conflict. A failure, for instance, of a sport spectator's chosen team to meet those objectives would diminish (but not necessarily extinguish) his impression of entertainment. Aesthetic in this sense refers to the appeal of "the artistic beauty and

grace of sports movements", which cause us to react in much the same way as when we admire a painting or listen to a piece of music.[4] This attention to bodily movement is significantly pronounced in sports such as figure skating, gymnastics and martial arts, where control exerted over one's body is a demonstration of overall skill; it is less evident but nevertheless present in games such as chess and *Tetris*, where mental acuity supplants physical finesse as a form of gracefulness. Because skillfulness as aesthetic so frequently motivates spectatorship, it comes to as little surprise that crowds of gamers cheer during a *Halo* (X-Box, 2001) deathmatch as when chess enthusiasts reenact a championship tie-breaker.

Modern video games, of course, are often as much pure spectacle as they are ludic. The side effect of this is that the meeting of objectives can be a pleasurable experience for onlookers for stylistic elements that operate in conjunction with, or even to the excess of player skillfulness. For example, *Dance Dance Revolution* (arcade, 1998), a dancing game popular in arcades worldwide, incites its players to perform specifically for a crowd: its cabinet design consists of the main console, large speakers, and a miniature dance floor arranged with buttons, which users must step on in time with commands on screen. The player is never isolated, sequestered away from the rest of his environment-- he is literally on stage for all to see. This audience-oriented design, coupled with attention-getting features like high volume and flashing light arrays, practically ensures outside spectators: many are themselves players of the game, but quite a few are simply entranced by the strange movements and the perfect rhythm engineered by the gameplay. The implication of this is that *Dance Dance Revolution* is able to entertain purely as spectacle, without necessarily having to involve an individual esoterically.

The Industrial Intentions of Story

The allure of spectatorship is easily observed in video games which emphasize skill, endurance, and often grace and beauty of performance. However, as stated before, while many, if not most contemporary titles can be appreciated partially or predominantly for their gameplay elements, they share with their more narrative-intensive brethren some command of story form, as a means to justify and propel the on-screen action. What emerges from these narrativist strategies is that many video games --some far more than others-- generate a narrative experience which a third party may evaluate under vastly different terms than might the player.

This third party is one which the game industry doesn't even appear to consider. Game writing texts, for example, generally speak of "the audience" as a metaphor for the player, even in situations where player agency is irrelevant, such as in the case of cinematics. Though conceptualized as a form of enticement, and reward

and, often, a mode of communication between game and player, cinematics, by their very definition, are nevertheless movie-like: they are played out by the system rather than performed by the gamer, thus the player and any given third party both experience them passively. The collection of cutscene "reels" on Youtube videos or collectors' DVDs which merely string these cinematics together is a testament to their innately filmic properties. Certainly, players can feel rewarded for unlocking a cinematic, but the observer is also rewarded for his patience. The audience --here, I mean audience in a non-playing sense-- is gratified the same way he is gratified watching a theatrical performance: through no effort of his own, he is reaping the benefits of an enacted narrative.

Putting the Family in Super Famicom

We have looked thus far largely at the interplay between a player and a presumably unaffiliated third party: a crowd watching a competition, for example, or an incidental passer-by in an arcade. However, intensive game performances, especially of narrative-heavy titles, do not tend to be carried out in public settings, but rather occur most frequently in domestic spaces. Game-oriented sibling and peer groups, therefore, have a much greater potential to develop a consistent performer-and-audience dynamic, one which lasts over time and can become quite involved. Often in families with two or more siblings, narrative-intensive video games such as Japanese role-playing games (JPRGs) can become an extension of other forms of non-competitive, messenger-recipient entertainment, such as reading to one another or putting on magic shows, where one child (often the oldest) is the performer and the rest merely observe. Likewise, in many families, video games occupy a space alongside or in preference to television and other pursuits as a favorite communal pastime, turning the game console into another component of Lynn Spigel's "family circle". Greg Roy, a father of five children, says that video games were a cost-efficient way to create a family experience: "When I was a kid, we went jeeping and camping all the time: that was our big thing. Well, I wasn't making quite the money my father did, so I sold off my Jeep and all my camping equipment and I bought an Intellivision. It was something we could all do together."[5]

Although the Roys consider themselves lovers of all games, Greg's son and four daughters are noted for being avid JPRG players-- and watchers. Jenny Roy, the third-oldest child in the family, admits that she has never completed *Final Fantasy VII* (Playstation, 1997), and yet knows its characters and storyline by heart, having watched her younger brother play it from start to finish. Of the games that she has played, narrative-intensive titles dominate the list: "I don't play fighting games or simple action games. Things like *Grand Theft Auto* don't do anything for me", she

explains; "If it doesn't have a plot, it's just boring to me. It's especially boring to watch". Even Timmy, who is more ludic than his sisters and often plays more action-oriented games, favors RPGs for their depth of storytelling: "Storylines in games can be some of the most rewarding in the world," he says enthusiastically; "They can be deep, they can be philosophical, they can play with a lot of different themes. Some of these games just blow your mind, and it only happens because you play them for so long." Jenny observes that while she and her sisters found little interest in watching Timmy slog through mythical dungeons and hack at palette-swapped monsters, they were virtually glued to the television set during a dialogue sequence or a cinematic, which occur quite frequently in JRPGs.

Another non-playing video game fan, Heather Pederson, has developed additional methods to enmesh herself in games in an unconventional way. Though she occasionally takes hold of the controller for herself, she usually does so with friends, to create a team dynamic: "One person plays, one person's consulting the strategy guide, one person's on look-out [for dangers in the game]. We might switch if someone gets tired or if someone else can [pass an obstacle] that the first player can't", she explains, adding that it is forbidden among her friends to advance the storyline when someone on the team isn't present.[6] In the absence of a support network, Heather often uses cheat codes or maxes out her characters' stats manually to play through the game with ease, and reads voraciously about the title in online resources. Like Jenny Roy, she considers herself a fan of many more games than she has played to completion. For Heather, the story is everything, while gameplay is merely an obstacle to be overcome-- and if it can be overcome by someone other than herself, all the better.

Passenger Mentality

Whether non-playing video game fans *should* be considered a legitimate part of the gaming community is a non-issue: the point is that they exist, and in numbers far greater than we might imagine. Though video games are habitually perceived in terms of the player's agency over the text, these passive audiences engage the text as they would a play or a film. However, this is not to say that audiences always confer absolute power to the player as the enacting agent.

First, there is any number of reasons why an individual would choose to be a passive rather than active participant. In cases where observation closely resembles sport spectatorship, the observer may defer to the player because of his skill. He may do this to study technique, to admire player performance, or because he wishes to better appreciate how the game behaves. Siblings and peer groups may orient themselves into player-audience dynamics for similar reasons, or because, owing

to a variety of factors, the audience may feel alienated from the playing experience. The observer might have a tough time with hand-eye coordination, making play difficult; others might feel intimidated by the player's situation, and even crack under the pressure if given control. Though it is a generalization, industrial and scholarly research also tends to indicate that females do not enjoy violence or tough situations as much as males do; conversely, females tend to appreciate narrative and character relationships far more than their male counterparts. Females, therefore, may be drawn to watching a game for these elements, which they can enjoy without feeling intimidated. Occasionally, the love they develop for these storylines can pressure them into taking up the controller when they might otherwise not: one girl I interviewed acknowledged that she first taught herself to play games because her older brother tired of being a storyteller.

A player can come to feel encumbered or emboldened by the presence of an audience. Many player-audience groups reflect on game experiences as being profoundly shaped by the communal experience: mothers I interviewed often hailed games as a bonding experience; peer and sibling groups recall the way they would shout out suggestions, laugh collectively at comedic moments, or talk back to the screen. Players that I spoke with --both male and female-- tended to evaluate story in games much higher if they were used to playing with an audience: boys like Timmy Roy, though generally having more of an interest in game combat than their sisters and female peers, were typically more likely to appreciate narrative and care about its matter of execution if others were experiencing it passively. In a sense, the game audience can respond to the enactor in real-time, making him more aware of narrative and potentially influencing his decisions and manner of play. Gamers who might skip through dialogue sequences if playing by themselves are often ordered to wait so that their audience can take it in; other players adopt a pedagogical approach and read the text aloud for the benefit of their younger siblings. Games which call upon the player to make moral decisions might have them decided (insisted upon) by the player's audience, either to the reinforcement of a collective ethical code or its subversion to see what kind of mess it will land a player in. And as I mentioned, in many groups, for the player to advance the story without his audience to witness it can be a grave sin.

Audiences legitimize story for story's sake and performance for performance's sake, something which many titles are hard-pressed to do if they are ostensibly only intended for the player. What meaning does *Guitar Hero* (Playstation2, 2005) have to a single listener? What point do *Metal Gear Solid 4*s (Playstation3, 2008) extensive nonplayable sequences have if there is no "pure audience" mentality? Perhaps video games are a lot like cars: the driver is empowered by being the decision-maker, but the passenger has the option to take in a view that the driver can't, to offer alternative solutions, and to give additional meaning to the experience.

Game audiences, therefore, are able to provide incentive, validation, and editorialization of the game experience.

Game as Film, Gamer as Filmmaker

Ludologists such as Espen Aarseth are critical of any perceived narrativist imposition in video games. Aarseth even goes so far as to say that games which proceed along a singular path are not games at all, but rather misrepresented narratives:

> In a game everything revolves around the player's ability to make choices. If the choices presented are so limited they clearly seem to lead the action in one unavoidable direction, they become quasi-choices, and the game becomes a quasi-game. [...] [The] story disguises itself as a game, using the game technology to tell itself.[7]

Aarseth's prescription for genuine (as opposed to "quasi") game titles most accurately suits competitive gaming, as it essentializes games down to their ergodic qualities in achieving empirically observable feats and solutions, such as gaining points, performing combos, and defeating enemies. Here, player agency is absolute. In these games, any perceivable narrative, as Ragnhild Tronstad predicts, becomes a product of retrospective assessment, something which is defined by the player and his audience to describe an incidental collision of events.[8]

However, though "quasi-games" may be less ludic, this does not mean they stop succeeding as entertainment products. Calling them video games may or may not be wholly appropriate, or rather, perhaps "video games" is too hasty a label to apply to a medium so varied as to include puzzles and digital chess to one extreme and visual romance novels on the other. Nevertheless, narrative-intensive games retain an interplay between ludic and conventional storytelling that recalls film and literature, therefore enticing both players and audiences that other game genres might not. One of the more memorable non-playing game fans I spoke with remarked that not only did watching her older sister play enhance her reading ability at an early age; it also informed her of novelistic structure and prepared her for complex narrative. The girl, now 17 and in her second year of college, credits games for giving her a passion for literature; her older sister whom she watched now aspires to be a movie director. For these player-audience dynamics, video games cease to be a matter of utmost autonomy within a fictional space and become instead a dialogue between enactor and audience, using game storytelling just as they would other forms of narrative to engage and communicate.

Conclusion

The current division amongst game theorists between narratology and ludology is fundamentally fictitious and, as Matthew Johnson notes, "has actually begun to stand in the way of valuable scholarship."[9] As stated previously, most video games combine ludic and narrative elements to achieve a particular effect, just as films are comprised of an interplay between imagery and story. The video game industry and its consumers are far too diverse to suggest that the same techniques --or ways of talking about them-- should be applied universally. We need a more holistic approach, and there are far worse places to start than to reconsider what the "game audience" consists of.

Video games, like their ludic antecedents, will likely continue to occupy a larger and larger role in our culture, including as a spectator pursuit. The niche that "electronic athletes" like Steve Wiebe currently occupy is poised to expand significantly, perhaps even into the mainstream, in the coming decades. But even as more people play video games, it is important to keep in mind that individuals play --or don't play-- for any number of reasons, and absolute player agency is not the only way to guarantee entertainment.

Unless we are prepared to say that narrative as a whole is set to vanish from our culture, we must acknowledge that audiences, and even many players, enjoy the perspective of the passenger: they want stories as well as freedom, and the opportunity to see artistry as well as make art. We must stop generalizing games as novelties of interactivity and appreciate them for their multifarious qualities by which they garner human engagement. By exploring video games as participatory *and* passive, where the player and game authors act in concordance rather than in opposition or submission to the other, we may uncover new possibilities for games as electronic art or even literature-- to be experienced communally rather than in isolation, as performance as well as play.

Notes

1. Gordon, Seth, director. <u>King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters</u>. 2007. DVD. Picture-house, 2008.

2. Cunningham, Ed. Personal interview. 16 April, 2008.

3. Wann, Daniel L. et al. <u>Sports Fans: The Psychology and Social Impact of Spectators</u>. New York: Routledge, 2001. 31.

4. Ibid. 34.

5. Roy, Greg and family. Personal interviews. 17 May, 2008.

6. Pederson, Heather. Email interview. 8 March, 2008.

7. Aarseth, Espen. "Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse". <u>Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling</u>. Marie-Laure Ryan, ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 366.

8. "Quests [...] are basically performative: they belong first and foremost to the order of the act. As soon as they are solved, though, they turn into constantives. The reason quests can easily be confused with 'stories' is that we are normally analyzing the quest in retrospective, after we've already solved it." Tronstad, Ragnhild. "Semiotic and Non-Semiotic MUD Performance". Quoted in "Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse", Espen Aarseth, 2004.

9. Johnson, Matthew S.S. "Combat to Conversation: Towards a Theoretical Foundation for the Study of Games". <u>dichtung-digital</u>, 37. 2007. <http://www.dichtung-digital.org/2007/johnson.htm>