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(The Work of) Play in the Age of Electronic Reproduction

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(THE WORK OF) PLAY IN THE AGE OF ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION

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Abstract

Electronic technologies have allowed for the mass (re)production of new media artifacts on a previously unachievable scale. While media across the board have been effected by the scope of such technology, videogames specifically provide an interesting and generative point of contact in the digital world. Videogames bridge gaps between the academic, political, and popular often unintentionally and unconsciously in ways that other new media artifacts and technologies cannot. But, while this is so, there seems to be a gap in discourse that brings together virtual and embodied experiences in order to create a more cohesive and holistic understanding of the role that videogames, play, and aesthetic experience have in an increasingly technologically mediated world. This project aims to build a foundation upon which to critically approach videogames, and new media more generally, through an understanding of the relationship between avant-garde aesthetics, electronic technologies, and massively reproducible play environments.

INTRODUCTION

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin outlines the history and consequences of mechanically reproduced art. Benjamin was ultimately responding to a new era of art, of politics, and of interaction. At the time, the media of photography and cinema showcased the ways in which art became mechanically reproduced, and also introduced new opportunities where technology not only mediated but became part of aesthetic experience. Now, electronic media face the same issues and opportunities with reproducibility and engagement, but with an added virtual dimension that was not previously experienced. This virtual dimension is one that is trapped behind a screen – mediated through hardware that has been replicated on such a scale as to be seen as not only normal, but necessary. Cell phones, computers, videogame consoles, and similar such media act as

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the portals into the virtual spaces through which digital interaction and participation occur. These spaces offer immersion into digital worlds that are structurally the same for everyone but attempt to provide new and unique experiences for individual users/visitors/players.

More specifically, videogames are a space of particular interest, as they are a medium that most explicitly attempts to immerse players in a world of individualized experience. For the purposes of this project, videogames will be defined as those games that can be played on a dedicated home console, such as those created by Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo. Despite this narrow view, these consoles and the games they mediate are ones that are a result of an expansive and complex lineage. One particular place that contemporary videogames have a strong historical connection to is that of the early cinema experiences created by avant-garde artists. By tracking this portion of videogame lineage, the medium of videogames can be posited as the electronic age's continuation of the legacy of the technologies outlined by Benjamin's "Work of Art." Because videogames are both similar to and inherently different from these predecessors, a new critical framework must be built to understand the impacts of the form on society and culture.

Ultimately, the medium operates on a series of levels, each providing certain contexts for understanding and interaction. Ian Bogost, in *How to do Things with Videogames*, states that

> We can think of a medium's explored uses as a spectrum, a possibility space that extends from purely artistic uses at one end (the decisive moment photograph) to purely instrumental uses at the other (the hardware store snapshot). In a given medium, many of these uses are known and well explored, while others are new and emerging. One way to grasp a medium's cultural influence is to examine how much of that field of uses has been explored. This approach represents a shift in how we encounter media artifacts as creators, users and critics. (3)

This approach to a medium such as videogames not only sheds light on a current state of affairs, but also brings to the fore gaps in discourse that have not yet been explored. While videogames have been looked at both as art and as an instrumental entertainment object, there is not often a critique that considers the medium as one that is simultaneously aesthetic, material, and virtual. This project ultimately aims to bring a more holistic consideration to videogames that opens the medium up to social and political realms, whether or not such a wider take was intended by the game developers. Developer's intention or purpose for a videogame or platform do not dictate how games are played or how hardware is (mis)used, placing the emphasis on player

experience and interpretation – and how those experiences and interpretations might themselves influence future development.

In order to do this, videogames must be considered as artifacts that operate in two spaces: the gamespace and the playspace. The gamespace, in this case, will be defined as everything contained within the screen. That is to say, the gamespace is what exists in a purely virtual sense. On the other hand, the playspace is the area that includes the physical space required to play a videogame – this includes the hardware the game exists on and is mediated by, the physical body of the player, and the room within which the player interacts with the hardware. This distinction between the two spaces allows the act of gaming to be situated in a wider context, while also emphasizing the necessity of embodied aesthetic experience. But, this is not to say that this is the only way to distinguish between the "real" and the virtual. As it stands, this serves as an oversimplification of an incredibly complex ecosystem – one in which videogames and their platforms are the product, but are by no means the only aspect that can shift and change the entire environment. Graeme Kirkpatrick, in *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*, states that "only by examining what games feel like to players can we really comprehend the video game. It involves making the claim that video games are aesthetic objects before they are anything else" (2). Considering videogames in a context outside

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of their virtual worlds allows the aesthetics of the medium to become pronounced in ways that are often forgotten.

This project aims to evaluate the medium of videogames in a way that takes into serious consideration embodied aesthetic experience. By comparing and contrasting the virtual aspects of gameplay to the physical infrastructure of the playspace as defined by the design and use of console controllers, an argument can be made that the primary experience of play is not only mediated by such hardware, but is also created, controlled, and politicized by it. The console controller is the site where player experience is defined, mediated, and articulated, but is also the site that is meant to be made invisible in favor of virtual immersion. Additionally, the physical design of the controller allows a distinct distance between the virtual world and embodied action. Rather than make scenes like that of battle and terror more familiar, players' physical experiences become abstracted into part of a novel plaything. Videogames provide scenes of battle where wars can be won by the slightest movement of the hand. While it is arguable whether this is or is not a negative aspect of gaming, this project instead aims to focus on how the embodied, aesthetic, and ultimately avant-garde experience and interaction with videogames might better inform and shape future critical discourse, creation, and engagement.

This thesis begins with discussions on the context of the avant-garde, play, and games in order to situate videogames within the historical and cultural

context of the avant-garde aesthetic. Each preliminary section builds upon the one before it to clarify and specify the relationship between avant-garde aesthetics and playing games. Once the foundation is laid, the discussion moves on to three levels in which games can be considered: narratively, graphically, and materially. Narrative is explored through the lens of both *Dr. Langesekov, the Tiger, and the Terribly Cursed Emerald: A Whirlwind Heist* and *DayZ*/open world games more generally. Additionally, the wider narrative of "playing a game" is considered to better understand the role of this level. Level 2 discusses the graphic level of videogames by discussing the visual experience of *Ori and the Blind Forest* and the way an immersive virtual world is built. Finally, Level 3 looks at the materiality of videogames as well as the embodied experience that often gets overlooked in critical gaming discourse by specifically analyzing the place of the controller and using *Resident Evil 4* for the Wii as a case study. Taken together, these levels resituate embodied experience as a primary consideration in videogames' infrastructure of play.

AVANT-GARDE

Within the context of this project, the avant-garde aesthetic specifically refers to the use of media to displace viewers or players from an otherwise familiar experience. This displacement allows viewers to become more aware not only of the current state of a medium, but also highlights what an artist, or

developer, might be doing that is innovative or convention-breaking. This displacement also has the flexibility to be political or apolitical, comfortable or uncomfortable. Even beyond the intention of the creator, the audience also has the ability to interpret a work as having aspects of the avant-garde aesthetics, allowing works to be perceived as avant-garde even if they were never intentionally constructed as such. Whether intended or unintended, the avant-garde aesthetic plays with convention and expectation, and this can be done or understood in any number or ways. The avant-garde aesthetic takes accepted norms and conventions and subverts, highlights, breaks, escapes, and/or challenges them.

Video games have an artistic lineage that can be traced back to the cinema, and more specifically (and productively), avant-garde cinema and the aesthetic experiences it fostered. The avant-garde aesthetic provides a setting that is rich in interaction between participants, between works, and between participants and work. Additionally, avant-garde artists have used games as a medium in their work for a long time. As John Sharp notes in *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, "there is a rich, if under-considered, history of games and/as art in the twentieth century—the surrealist's use of games like Exquisite Corpse, Duchamp's obsession with chess, and Fluxus event scores and boxes, to name a few" (3). To situate videogames within an avant-garde lineage is to follow a history of using games in and as art that

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predates any conception of electronic media, artistic or otherwise. But, with the rise of electronic media, the art world would become "intrigued by a potential alliance between art and technology that would be capable of changing the terrain of aesthetics by interrogating new modes of perception and production" (Patterson 48). The relationship between technology and artistic practice would take on many forms and pursue many different ends, and one of the most notable would be the relationship between the work and its visible mediating hardware.

Jennifer Wild, in *The Parisian Avant-Garde in the Age of Cinema, 1900-1923*, states that "the early cinema not only shaped the culture and experience of urban modernity, but also played a significant role in the development of modern and avant-garde art" (1). The art created within the period Wild covers provides a significant starting point for the aesthetic trajectory that will eventually include videogames. The exhibition of early cinema provided a space for new avant-garde experiences. Wild claims that the "cinema of attractions" that this new method of artistic exhibition created, "casts its spectators as embodied agents who self-consciously witness an equally self-conscious or exhibitionist technological display" (18). Rather than merely provide a more typical cinema experience where the act of spectating is automatic and unimportant, avant-garde cinema made spectatorship a visible act by bringing attention to it. Viewers would become almost hyperaware of

their role, unable to escape their embodied reality in favor of the temporary cinematic world.

In order to foster such avant-garde spaces of spectatorship, the cinematic exhibition provided an explicitly technologically mediated experience. Wild specifically highlights the transparent screen, in which a transparent rather than opaque screen is projected *through* rather than projected *on*. In these cases, the audience could not avoid acknowledging their role in the cinematic aesthetic environment, as they viewed the projector while the projector viewed them. This method of projection becomes important because it foregrounded the technological aspects of the viewing experience. Rather than sitting in a dark room captivated by the content of a film, the translucent screen allowed the audience to be arranged differently by placing the screen in the middle of the room rather than on the wall. Additionally, the screen was literally highlighted as the film lit up the room, being caught by the screen but also allowed to be projected beyond it and onto the audience on the other side. By intentionally placing the technology in the middle of the viewing experience, early cinema exhibitions created a sense of what Wild terms "cinematic horizontality."

Wild defines cinematic horizontality as "an inherent principle of the cinema of attractions that unseated the primacy of vision and nature for the reflexive epistemological registers of technology and culture" (25). Rather than focus on

the act of viewing the work, the focus instead was shifted to the technology that makes viewing possible and mediates the activity. Such a shift in focus sets up later technologies, and viewers, to act in a similar fashion and open up spaces of horizontality much like those created by early cinematic exhibitions. Further, this allows the technology to create and shape knowledge both about art and aesthetics as well as humanity and the human experience. Technology and culture can come together within such spaces of horizontality and work "against the spectatorial detachment of classically organized representational experience" (26). Rather than mere spectators, audiences are thrust into the role of participator in order to fully engage with the avant-garde nature of such displays. An avant-garde aesthetic requires viewers to participate in the exhibition experience as well as interact and engage with the work, rather than merely viewing an object from a place of detachment — such as one might view a painting or sculpture. While a painting or sculpture can draw in a viewer, they never literally include a viewer within the dimensions of a work – a viewer will never come between the paint and the canvas. Such avant-garde cinema, on the other hand, allows the audience to be projected onto within the exhibition space, themselves becoming impromptu screens while still allowing other viewers to participate in an equally fulfilling viewing experience.

Early cinema and cinematic horizontality worked to alter the aesthetic experience from one of detachment and intellectualization to one of

participation and accessibility. This will become important for future technologically mediated aesthetic experiences, as invention continued to bridge the gap between technologies and humanity. Of the physicality of cinema, Wild states that "while cinematic horizontality redrew the spectator-spectacle relation in symbolic terms, transparent projection also literally revised this relation by placing the screen between the projector and at least one half of the audience" (33). Not only was aesthetic experience changed conceptually by early cinema, it was also physically altered by the use of projection and exhibition technologies. The transparent screen, much like the contemporary digital screen, stood between the viewer and the viewed. The cinema divided space between the projector and the viewer, physically altering the way the audience could engage with works and mediated the aesthetic experience. Additionally, these cinematic exhibitions were often displayed in public spaces, and "in these everyday spaces, the spatiotemporal compendium of moving images could be discovered in step with the daily environment where crowds also smoked, dined, drank, and discussed current events" (24). Avant-garde cinematic works were taken out of specifically designated viewing or exhibition spaces in a move against traditional aesthetic standards. Instead, they were placed in everyday situations where viewers could engage with the work on a more popular and accessible level. In this way, the viewers naturally interacted with the work, but the work could also engage with its surroundings in a way

that art objects were previously unable to do.

Beyond the foregrounding of the cultural and technological, early cinema also acted as a political agent in its horizontality. Wild states that "the horizontal has a vastly plural function as a form of resistance against institutional aesthetics associated with state legitimation, and authoritarian forms such as academic perspectivalism and architecture" (21). Cinema places itself in a position for vertical analysis and access. But, through the use of technologies in everyday environments, it achieved horizontality and resisted the exclusivity of art within academics and spaces of power. By placing the exhibit space within everyday lived environments, early avant-garde cinema exhibitors allowed the aesthetic to be accessed and experienced by everyone — even those who may or may not have had the proper literacies to interpret 'correctly' these experiences. Through this, such avant-garde displays provided a new space for aesthetic experience and lived experience to interact and form new knowledge that stemmed from interacting with the medium, both conceptually and physically.

The early avant-garde cinema clearly worked in more ways than one as a precursor to video games. Conceptually, avant-garde cinematic exhibition brought the exhibition space into the everyday and the lived, allowing aesthetic experience to be had outside of traditionally designated art spaces. By opening up aesthetic experience in such a way, this allowed other mediums such as

videogames to also potentially provide similar non-traditional, avant-garde, highly accessible experiences. Aesthetic objects could thus be severed from institutional guidelines and expectations, giving increasing the potential for objects that might not have normally been aesthetic considered in terms of their physical experiences. Beyond this, early cinema also provided a technological precursor to video games. Even more than being a visual medium, cinema — and, in particular, the transparent screen — provided a similar site of access to content as video games. The projector and the transparent screen could be seen as ancestors to the computer/console and the digital screen, in the ways they both display and mediate aesthetic experiences with the content they provide. Where the transparent screen enhanced content while allowing it to pass through, the digital screen provides access to virtual worlds while simultaneously illuminating a physical playspace. Additionally, both highlight the nature and necessity of the technology as well as the technology's place in the culture that uses and consumes such media and aesthetic objects. Where the avant-garde relocated the screen in viewing spaces in order to expose both technology and the spectator, the avant-garde in videogames foregrounds and problematizes conventional schemes in both the physical and virtual aspects of gameplay.

Videogames naturally act as a new medium through which to explore and delve deeper into the avant-garde aesthetic experience. No longer are

audiences confined to be mere observers of a work. Now, videogames allow viewers to become players, as well as interact with and move about the worlds the medium renders. Ian Bogost, in *How to Do Things With Videogames*, acknowledges the importance of medium-specific sites of exploration. He states that "we ought to explore the relationships between the general properties of a medium and the particular situations in which it is used" (5). The avant-garde "disrupted traditional notions of art's role and…context became the predominant factor" (10). By providing a new field in which to inspire and create avant-garde experiences, videogames also allowed the context of such aesthetic experiences to take the fore rather than be forgotten or dropped from discourse altogether. By understanding what the medium can do in a variety of contexts, videogames thus have the ability to instigate social, cultural, economic, and political change outside of their gamespaces and playspaces.

In *Avant-Garde Videogames: Playing With Technoculture*, Brian Schrank states that "For videogames, the avant-garde is the force that opens up the experience of playing a game or expands the ways in which games shape culture" (3). The avant-garde in videogames disrupts standard conventions of gameplay in order to further advance agendas dependent on context, and by doing so, disrupts an individual's understanding, conception, and visualization of the world in some way that goes beyond the act of playing a game. Through the avant-garde, the act of gaming becomes a physically

manifested site of aesthetically politicized engagement, whether it is consciously done or not as players may not always have the knowledge or awareness of what specific avant-garde actions they are completing or participating in. John Hosper differentiates between works that are situated in a wider sociocultural context and those that are not. As quoted in John Sharp's *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art*, Hosper states that "Thin aesthetics are those that focus solely on the formal values of a work, while thick aesthetics are those that take into account the work's place in more complex cultural contexts" (77). In order for videogames to have any capability to do work in the real world, they must cultivate thick aesthetics on multiple levels.

Schrank goes on to specifically state that avant-garde games differ from mainstream games

> because they show how the medium can manifest a greater diversity of gameplay and be creatively engaged in more kinds of ways by more kinds of people. They redefine the medium, breaking apart and expanding how we make, think, and play with games. The avant-garde democratizes games, and makes the medium more plastic and liquid. (3)

The videogame, in certain parts of the world, is a fairly accessible medium (to a certain extent), allowing different styles of play to cater to different demographics, all utilizing the same general conception of gameplay. But, it is

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necessary to acknowledge that videogames are not a medium that are available in all parts of the world, and where they are available, are an expensive medium to have and continue playing. Avant-garde video games go beyond genre conventions and societal expectations to push the medium toward greater understanding not only of how to play, but how games and the way they are played influence/shape/define the world outside of the gamespace/playspace.

One way that the avant-garde aesthetic achieves this status within videogames is that it seeks to deeply understand the present in order to inspire critical thought and practice as both the field and audience move forward. To do this, the avant-garde aesthetic denies expectations of what is to come and instead breaks convention to move the medium forward in innovative ways. To this end, Schrank presents a series of categories to classify avant-garde games based on their means and ends. Two categories in particular, the formal and political avant-garde, provide productive spaces to critically approach a wide array of avant-garde videogames. Schrank states that "the formal avant-garde is realized in individual experience, letting art advance itself without regard for social concerns; the political avant-garde is realized in collective experience, politicizing art of using art to change society" (14). While Schrank poses these two as separate, videogames have the ability to allow both categories to function and or be interpreted as such simultaneously.

Schrank states that "we can evaluate the avant-garde according to how it opens up the experience of games (formal art) or the experience of being in the world (political art)" (21). While these two sectors can be evaluated and explored separately, as Schrank provides, I believe that the most productive and effective avant-garde games use both the formal and the political simultaneously. Videogames have the ability to shape, define, and challenge the act of playing the game while simultaneously shaping, defining, and challenging the player's own ontology, both within the gamespace, within the playspace, and within the wider physical world. The medium is so adept at accomplishing this not specifically through targeted and intentional avant-garde design and practice, but largely because of the layered aesthetic experience that videogames must inherently provide. Videogames contain sites of potential avant-garde aesthetic experience within visual, aural, conceptual, and physical levels—and the experience written into each of these levels can work either separately or together; they can be (intentionally or unintentionally) complementary or contentious.

Ultimately, the political avant-garde radicalizes the way art is made and the ways games are played and viewed "in order to open up as well as transform culture," while the formal avant-garde acts to reconceptualize and resituate the power of games outside of gamespaces and playspaces (Schrank 55). While not all games are intended as, or might be considered, art (avant-

garde or otherwise), all games do share a necessary aesthetic element that players engage with to play. In *The Aesthetic of Play*, Brian Upton states that "the goal of an aesthetic experience isn't for the audience to converge as quickly as possible on an intended meaning. The goal of an aesthetic experience is to make the process of convergence toward meaning interesting in and of itself" (211). Rather than prescribe meaning to an experience, avant-garde video games allow the experience to shape and define meaning from player to player, playthrough to playthrough.

PLAY

In order to engage with a videogame, individuals are self-evidently required to play. It is an inherent aspect to the medium, and one that is essential to understanding the potentials and boundaries of aesthetic experience. It is such a natural step in the process that users are called "players," a completed experience is called a "playthrough," and the physical spaces in which videogames are encountered are often described as "playspaces." Play is so essential to videogames, but it is not a natural touchpoint when attempting to critically engage with the medium. Often, it is taken for granted that players *must* play. But, the act of play provides a rich lens through which to view and engage with the medium on a theoretical as well as practical level. In *Aethetic Theory and the Video Game*, Graeme Kirkpatrick states that "play is perhaps

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inherently related to ontology, to human attempts to understand the fundamental character of being" (24). Play occurs throughout life, and in each stage of life play means different things and serves different purposes. It is an activity that is experiential, no matter what phase of life it occurs during. For a child, play may be primarily developmental, while for an adult, play might primarily be used to pass time and/or entertain. But, in both instances, to some extent, play becomes a way that an individual occupies and exists within the world – it is an ontological activity in the sense that it is a way a person can experience and explore their existence in the world, whether that be physical, virtual, or both. Play is where videogames and physical reality come together both naturally and necessarily.

Even beyond the realm of games, playspaces have also historically been places where technological, political, and socio cultural innovation occurs. Steven Johnson extensively explores the historical importance of play in his book *Wonderland: How Play Made the Modern World*. He states that "When human beings create and share experiences designed to delight or amaze, they often end up transforming society in more dramatic ways than people focused on more utilitarian concerns" (12). To Johnson, the results of play have been far more extensive than history has recognized, or even considered as a major factor in events. The role of play, as framed by Johnson, is a powerful one, but is concerned not with end results, but with the process of engaging

with wonder. In regards to videogames, the innovation often comes not because the endgame is satisfying, fulfilling, or valuable, but because the process of engaging with the medium, either as a developer/designer or player, provides access to a worthwhile play experience.

Of play, Kirkpatrick states that "If it is not meaningful in itself, play is the activity that makes meaning possible by spinning forms out of the darkness" (24). Play itself functions on various levels, and can either provide meaning in the physical act of playing, or can provide a frame upon or through which meaning is constructed. Either way, "all that play requires is the construction of a system of rules and the freedom to move within them" (Upton 15). One of the many ways variance might occur could be when a player either finds meaning in the actions necessary to play and/or complete a game (such as the person to person interaction encouraged and often required in a game in *WiiU Sports*), or meaning is constructed through the formal familiarity in movement or action required to make sense of a potentially nonsensical gamespace (such as the nonnarrative gameplay experienced in games such as *Journey*).

Drawing upon Johan Huizinga's definition of play, Upton states that "play is a process, not a thing. It is a series of moves, either mental or physical, carried out by the player. These moves are free in the sense that the player has control over what he will do next, but this freedom is bound by a set of constraints" (15). Upton's definition builds upon Kirkpatrick's understanding,

delving further into the actual, practical aspects of play. While, as Kirkpatrick states, play is necessary to understanding humanity's ontological positioning in the world, in the sense that it is an experience where an individual explores their existence – whether by discovering and perusing what they perceive to be valuable, or interacting with other individuals in person or online. Upton points to the fact that play is not a completely free practice. The constraints within a playspace cannot be ignored, but must also be recognized as situational—wholly dependent on context, much like the avant-garde. Constraints are not only medium, game, or rule specific, but also player specific. Even if an action is available in the medium, a player may not be able to complete the action for various reasons. Thus, not only is play constrained, but control is as well. It is for these reasons that the avant-garde becomes so effective in "laying bare" these constraints by bringing attention to what can be, cannot be, and has/has not been done.

Schrank states that "mainstream games strengthen the prevailing paradigm of flow, while avant-garde games weaken it, opening play to alternative paradigms" (7). The avant-garde disrupts play in such a way as to allow for conceptualizations of new possibilities. This is important to not only open the door to innovation, but to also allow play to react/respond to paradigm shifts that occur outside of the playspace, as "culture increasingly mobilizes its values through entertainment and technology instead of through the church,

museum, or academy" (Schrank 18). Forms of entertainment increasingly provide the cultural and political touchpoints in contemporary society that used to be held exclusively by less democratic institutions. Not only can avant-garde playspaces usher in new/alternative paradigms of play, but they also open spaces for new cultural paradigms, as well.

Avant-garde videogames seek to go outside of their designated gamespaces, and even beyond that outside of their designated playspaces. Specifically, "the common thread among the political avant-garde is the manner in which they earnestly play with our shared, mediated, public reality by blending art and politics. They take the position that neither play nor art are ever truly safe" (Schrank 63). If, truly, "the purpose of play is to reshape reality," then the methods through which play brings the unreal/imagined and the real together must result in shifts in the essential nature not only of playspaces, but also of the world they are situated in (Schrank 64). Johnson shares this view of play, stating that "in many ways, the story of play is the story of the emergence of a truly cosmopolitan worldview, a world bound together by the shared experiences" of interactive playful activity (12). Play, even if most often done in a solitary physical space, still connects elements of cultures and societies together in ways that cause an individual experience to feel shared and embedded within a wider cultural understanding/experience of the world. No artifact, whether it be a story, an image, a game, or some combination thereof,

exists in a vacuum. All works are connected, in some way, to a wider world where other humans exist and experience culture.

The political avant-garde takes the stance that "all media are political, especially when they are framed as entertainment" (Schrank 122). This sentiment hearkens back to Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of popular culture in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where popular artifacts allude back to those in power. But, while Horkheimer and Adorno view the culture industry in largely negative terms, those artifacts that have seemingly lost their political power by becoming situated in the popular sphere might not have actually undergone such a transformation. Instead, I would argue that often videogames (sometimes subversively) become more politically powerful as their status in popular culture rises. The political avant-garde has the ability to "transform shock and terror into materials with which the masses play," and this is a convention very commonly seen in the production of videogames (Schrank 118). The culture industry as it is realized today sees the small-scale avant-garde pieces of Adorno and Benjamin's time writ large through the (mass) production, reproduction, and engagement of and with videogames.

The inherently political nature of media such as videogames becomes important when exploring play because it is an explicit aspect that points to the ways play can be both complicit and radical in cultural contexts. Schrank defines radical play as a force that "destabilizes the entrenched patterns with

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which culture engages and plays with technology, allowing ulterior patterns to emerge and unrepresented subjects to become visible" (65). The political nature of videogames allows for yet another opportunity for paradigm shifts to be conceptualized and occur, but in this case specifically situated in the sphere of politics rather than (or in addition to) play. The possibility of radical play shows that media situated in and contextualized by popular culture still have the political ability to foster wider systemic change beyond both the gamespace and playspace.

Ultimately, "there is more to playing than just play. Play is a particular process, a particular way of thinking and doing within the context a particular structure of constraints. It is an end unto itself, but it is also a means towards other ends" (Upton 108). The act of play goes beyond itself and permeates into the embodied experience of acting out play, while also moving beyond the playspace to both influence and respond/react to its cultural context. Upton states that "we play the way we play because play is a by-product of how our minds exist within the world" (126). This sentiment mirrors that of Kirkpatrick, in that play becomes an act/engagement in which players explore human nature. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, play naturally opens up a dialogue with ontological questioning, and this is no different in the case of videogames. Play allows players to not only understand themselves, but to also come to know and understand the nature of a shared existence. It leads to the

understanding that "The pursuit of pleasure turns out to be one of the very first experiences to stitch together a global fabric of shared culture" (Johnson 13).

Johnson states that "because play is often about breaking rules and experimenting with new conventions, it turns out to be the seedbed for many innovations that ultimately develop into much sturdier and more significant forms" (15). Avant-garde play in the realm of videogames results in potentially "sturdier" forms of play for those who wish to not only engage, but to make change within the world of videogames as well as potentially in the wider world. In *Wonderland*, Johnson explores the narratives of individuals and groups who pursued innovation in realms of play and achieved serious cultural, social, economic, and political change as a(n often unintended) result. Those who engaged in culturally significant play were those who ultimately were not taken seriously as agents of change (Johnson 32). The conceptualization of play, whether in videogames or otherwise, should be recontextualized in a wider world in order to truly understand its potential. Play is a reproducible act that can result in non-reproducible experiences, and while the rule-basesd systems that govern play often attempt to dictate who can and cannot participate, it ultimately depends not on the system but on those who choose to engage – whether they are the game's (or history's) intended actors or not.

GAME

Where there is play, there is more often than not a game that guides the activity with some set of rules or constraints. Whether it be on a playground or through a console, games primarily act as entertainment objects with which to play. But, while players might weigh games based on their entertainment value, videogames as a specific medium exist in a space of convergence where entertainment, innovation, capitalism, aesthetics, and engagement all contribute to the end product. Johnson states that "Because delightful things are valuable, they often attract commercial speculation, which funds and cultivates new technologies or markets or geographic exploration" (21). Videogames are no exception to this, as they are most often conceived of in their commercial capacities, and these commercial capacities are where the most visible level of innovation takes place. But, one thing that is often most constant within the innovation of videogames, is that they are all playable *games*. Schrank quotes Jesper Juul's definition of a game as being "a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable" (qtd. Schrank 8). Juul accounts for the fact that some games do not meet all of these requirements, but he does not classify them as true games. Though Juul has a fairly strict

sense of what is and is not a game, his basic definition provides a useful baseline upon which a critical discourse can be built.

Good gameplay "requires that we have enough choice that we are challenged, but not so much that we are overwhelmed" (Upton 52). The rules and constraints within a game should promote and cultivate a relatively enjoyable play experience, based on the general nature and intent of the game. Typically, games utilize rule sets and software/hardware constraints to point the player toward some goal, namely to "win" or successfully finish the game. But, "it is entirely possible to construct a successful play space without asking the player to work toward any specific victory condition" (Upton 11). Such games might fall outside of Juul's more strict understanding of game, but still, in popular consideration, act as a game nonetheless. Because of this, what is considered a game in the videogame world might not actually categorically qualify as such in other realms. This conception of games allows the medium of the videogame to encompass a wider variety of play experiences.

While these rules and constraints are used to facilitate gameplay, Juul also states that an attachment to player-influenced outcome should be an essential aspect to games. In order accomplish this, games need to have some distinction between the results of chosen actions and decisions as the game progresses. Upton states that "in order to create a feeling of play in a goal-oriented space, it is essential that we be presented with the opportunity to

choose poorly. The possibility of failure is central to our experience of play"

(69). If players are presented with the possibility to "fail" in some capacity, there

is a greater chance that they might become more invested in the process of

play. Whether it be the threat of permanent death or the possibility of a "bad"

ending based on player choices throughout the game, some kind of opportunity

to fail encourages a greater sense of attachment to "correctly" navigating the

gamespace.

Beyond the investment that can be cultivated within the gamespace,

there is also the possibility for games to increase emotional investment outside

of the individual experience of play. Upton states that an experience with a

game can be successful/enjoyable "not only because the play space was

interesting to navigate on an abstract level, but also because the act of playing

provided a common meeting ground for human interaction" (109). Videogames,

though they might be played alone, are incredibly social spaces. Whether it be

through online play or through interaction after the fact where the game is

discussed, videogames provide both context and fodder for social interaction.

In this case, a videogame might cultivate attachment not necessarily through

its in-game infrastructure, but through the "real-world" communities that they

can foster. While it might not be what Juul had in mind when defining games

with this ability or playstyle, this potential provides an example in the ways

videogames can, and do, reach beyond their designated game- and playspaces to impact the world on a tangible level.

Sharp touches on this idea by exploring three "core affordances" that games might have: "the conceptual, the formal, and experiential." Sharp states that "the basic idea of affordances can be extended to include subtle but important expectations a community brings to the evaluation of what one can and cannot do with a cultural form, and what they should or should not expect from the experiences that the form's artifacts provide" (5). Affordances in this sense are multilayered and influence/shape game construction and play in different ways. Considering avant-garde games, affordances allow a standard of gameplay across the board of what a player may or may not expect when entering into a gamespace, but also provides a standard for developers to understand what may or may not be possible when constructing a game. In both cases, those expectations are on either a conceptual, formal, or experiential level.

Schrank states that "the avant-garde challenges popular culture to dive more deeply into gamespace than most care to go" (69). Because the avant-garde seeks to actively subvert, challenge, or break convention, games that foster an avant-garde experience push both developers and players to go beyond contemporary expectations and experiences within games. Developers can take the avant-garde aesthetic and intentionally approach and infuse their

work with it. On the other hand, players can come to understand and be aware of the avant-garde aesthetic in order to interpret works more critically – using the avant-garde as an interpretive framework, whether or not they are aware of individual developers' specific intentions or purpose. Schrank goes on to state that "collectively, the avant-garde liquefies games. It breaks apart and diversifies what games are as well as can do" (168). While Juul has come up with a widely used definition of what a game is, the nature and understanding of videogames as a medium, as well as the prevalence of avant-garde elements in videogames, allow these games to move beyond a static and rigid definition to become more than mere entertainment and reach beyond a solitary understanding of playspaces.

LEVEL 1: NARRATIVE

A very common, a quite logical, way to approach a game is through the narrative it provides. While there are conversations about narratology vs. ludology in the academic world, those are not often what inspire casual conversation between gamers. In reality, it is easy to critique a work's narrative, whether it be a book, movie, or videogame. Narrative provides an easily accessible access point to many games for anyone on any level. At the narrative level, the game is not merely something that can be interacted with, it is something that contains some sort of *purpose* – and it expresses this

purpose in the form of story. Because of this, each element of the story, both interactive and not, give off the appearance of being a conscious addition to the construction of the narrative. The gamespace has been deliberately constructed to allow a story to unfold in a certain way, and in doing so the story governs and shapes the majority of the aesthetic experience. To this end, Upton states that "In general, when we read a text that we know has been deliberately created to structure an aesthetic experience, we assume that each beat is consequential—that it exists within the narrative for a reason" (243). Beyond video games, the experience with any text or artifact is often (historically/traditionally) defined by the narrative structure.

Dr Langsikov, the Tiger, and the Terribly Cursed Emerald provides an example of such a narratively structured game. The player is thrust into a waiting room, where they first encounter the narrator as a distant voice discontentedly complaining -- shouting about the logistical inconveniences of the game the player initially expected to be playing. But, instead of a videogame where the story revolves around a robbery (the specifics of the expected narrative of this particular example can never be known because any story the title eludes to never actually occurs), the player is instead forced to work through a behind-the-scenes space as they press buttons, pull levers, and read strike notes in order to make the *actual* heist game work for another (actually nonexistent) player – all while being guided by a disembodied narrator who acts

as gracious and apologetic host while simultaneously filling the role of demanding upper management. The game ultimately acts as a meta-narrative, as the player does not actually play "the game" that is indicated in the name, but rather "puts on" the game as another player plays through – similarly, the player's own fate as the "actual" game is entered is determined by another "player" who also arrived too early. This game cuts out the expected gameplay in order to construct a narrative that comments on the nature of events that might occur within a story, without the actual narrative arcs that might explain those events – the player is displaced from the narrative while still expected to unwittingly function within it.

The attachment of experience to narrative in order to reveal meaning is deep-rooted. But, recent history has changed the nature, and even the necessity, of this relationship. There was an "epistemic shift in modern art" where "art did not need to persuade people or tell stories, whether these stories were biblical, beautiful, political, critical, or otherwise" (Schrank 30). The shift that occurred in art was one that also occurred in other cultural forms where stories could manifest. As a result, these cultural artifacts could inspire experiences that went beyond the normative understanding of meaning-making where events logically followed one another in a narrative arc that concluded with some sort of resolution. The avant-garde movement in cinema was ultimately a product of this, allowing experiences to be shaped outside of any

logical narrative or previously established notions of what it meant to watch, observe, and engage with a medium.

The avant-garde "deviates from established formulas and cues by definition, requiring additional effort and work to play" (Schrank 38). In the case of videogames, rules and formulas are bent, broken, or cast aside in favor of more captivating forms of play. Rather than present a standard heist game, as is expected from the game description, *Dr. Langsekov* presents players with a "behind-the-scenes" view of a game that could never possibly exist. Players know that such manipulation in a virtual gamespace is impossible, but we are forced to adhere to such a narrative as it is the only option we are given. We might try to escape, or change course, but the ever-present, unseen, and apparently omniscient narrator will not allow such disobedience – and the player at this point is left to forget that they have entered into a pre-programed, scripted, and unchangeable gamespace.

While *Dr. Langsekov* provides a hyper-structured gamespace in terms of narrative, there are also those games that exist which are marketed as completely devoid of narrative. One such game is *Day-Z* (originally a mod of Bohemia Interactive's Arma II), where the only objective is to survive. Otherwise, as per the game's trailer (Figure 2), "this is your story…unscripted" (*DayZ)*. Players must navigate through Chernarus, described as a "230 sq. km chunk of post-soviet state, featuring deep forests, cities, villages, abandoned

military bases, and more…" Rather than play through any type of narrative, *DayZ*, and games like it, allow players to roam around the world and encounter whatever might be out there. Such open world games are dependent on two common mechanics, though, and those are combat and looting. *DayZ* specifically added an interesting mechanic in its focus on survival. Schrank notes that "in most games, you die to live. You die (or lose), but quickly reappear, ready to die again if necessary. Death is a speed bump on the road to more living" (152). But, *DayZ* operates on a model where death is permanent (permadeath), and players lose all equipment gained before their death. There is no option to return to a save point or easily salvage lost equipment. This ultimately changes the tone of the game and gives the player something to live (or die) for. But, despite *DayZ*'s attempt at an escape or disruption of the norm through these mechanics, codified conventions of play are still a necessary aspect of gameplay. It is also worth noting that despite the game's attempt to break out of the preverbal box, it has yet to escape the early access alpha stage of development after four years—and has ultimately become the bane of many open-world gamers' existence as a result of significant mismanagement and ultimate abandonment by the original developer. *DayZ* as a game is difficult to play, as it does not often function on a consistently playable level. But, because of its functional difficulties, it can be interpreted and viewed using an avant-garde aesthetic – the game's less developed aspects frustrate the play

experience and forces players to acknowledge the technology that the game was constructed on.

Ultimately, such non-narrative games depend on the narrative of "playing the game" that is required to understand and navigate the both the gamespace and the playspace. Because open world games do not have narrative convention to guide players through the gamespace, there must be another set of conventions that function in that role. As mentioned above, the mechanics of combat and looting are what allow *DayZ* players to "move forward" in the game, despite the fact that there is no real indication or reward of progression other than the passing of time and the satisfaction of having lived another day (and thus been able to keep all of the materials that might have been found/stolen in that time). While in-game narrative provides a touchpoint for meaning within (and potentially without) the game, the narrative of what it means to "play the game" becomes the most essential narrative that all players must participate in.

Upton states that "during an encounter with an aesthetic work [such as a videogame], we are invited to make sense of what we are seeing or hearing by forming interpretive constraints that both account for what we have already encountered and make predictions about what we will encounter in the future" (179). Audiences are naturally inclined to make attempts at interpreting meaning, and narrative is one of the easiest ways to do so. But, while this

provides a guide to interpret and predict the nature and meaning of surroundings within the gamespace, it does not always necessarily translate out into the playspace, or the wider world. Because of this, it is also constructive to understand the narrative that players (often subconsciously) enter into the moment they decide to play a videogame. Ian Bogost states that "familiarity is thus the primary property of the game" and that "habituation builds on prior convention" (127). It is through familiarity that people understand, enter, and contribute to the narrative of gameplay.

A non-narrative game like *DayZ* works largely because the extra-narrative conventions provide a familiar style of play that provides players with very little to adjust to. While there is no guiding narrative to move players along a certain trajectory, there is still the progression of gameplay that causes players to value in-game survival and property. Despite the fact that open world games do not necessarily fulfill every defining category of a "game" that Juul outlines, it does often still contain one very important aspect: the emotive experience of fulfilling the goal set before the player. In the case of *DayZ,* it is being one of the millions of players who is still surviving ("*DayZ").* Much like early cinema's avant-garde displays, *DayZ* relies on the spectacle of survival – not just of oneself but of others as well. Possibly without intention, as it is totally unclear whether or not this was ever the intention of any of the developers, the game becomes an avant-garde work in its self-conscious awareness of its own

juxtaposition of a non-narrative space with a highly traditional style of gameplay.

Open world games and games with strict narrative structures both share a common thread in their gameplay: that they rely heavily on convention. While games with such a strict narrative as *Dr. Langesekov* could potentially escape many, if not most, familiar gameplay conventions, they often do not. The added instruction that would be necessary to show a player how to play the game on a basic level would add onto the already rigid narrative structure, and could create an unappealing environment where gamplay is overburdened by both the storyline tutorials on how to progress. On the other hand, games such as *DayZ* necessarily must rely on convention in order to construct both a playable and satisfying gamespace because otherwise they would not make sense as games. Either way, both ends of the spectrum are still limited in the sense that narrative construction and consideration often do not extend beyond the screen and into the physical playspace where the player's body and the hardware they interact with is part of the experience. While narrative provides an accessible way to make sense and value a game, it still is not sufficient in any attempt to truly and critically understand the medium of videogames.

LEVEL 2: VIRTUAL VISUALS

Narrative may provide an accessible way to make sense of a videogame, but often the very first aspect of a game noticed within the gamespace is its graphics. The visual world constructed within the game can take on one of many styles which are often dependent on the genre of game and style of gameplay as well as hardware and software constraints. Beyond the narrative, these graphic considerations are often what is analyzed by players and critics alike. Kirkpatrick states that "Video games are often thought of as visual media and it is not uncommon to find theorists and game reviewers alike discussing game graphics and the spectacular visual effects we sometimes find in games as if these were their defining aesthetic properties" (13). A videogame's visual quality in the virtual world can be as redeeming/defining/engaging as its ability to be played (for example: consider a game where the gameplay was mediocre but the visual world was so stunning/interesting that the game became worth continuing).

Bogost states that "videogames tend to offer continuous rather than discontinuous space that must be traversed deliberately and actively" (48). While this is often the case for a vast majority of games, it is even more so for those that follow the style of established games such as *Castlevania* and *Super Metroid*. These games are ones that involve fairly standard game mechanics, but their most notable characteristic is a very complicated and interconnected

map that must be traversed a number of times to complete the game and access collectables/power-ups/etc. The map is revealed slowly over time, but players must keep in mind where they are and what that area contains in order to recall if they must return—either to gain additional experience, unlock a new ability, or access a location that was previously inaccessible. One such metroidvania-style game is *Ori and the Blind Forest* by Moon Studios. What makes *Ori* of particular note, is that it is, quite intentionally, a very visually driven gamespace. The game is notable for its many awards for both graphics and audio environment, and its focus on visual world-building is clear from the moment the game begins. The player is invited into a world that has lost its light, and has become desolate and unwelcoming. Players navigate through the world as Ori, a small spirit creature who is tasked with bringing light and balance back to the world.

The visual aspect of *Ori* often outshines the narrative element of the game. The first scenes in the game outline the beginning of story only through visual cues. Beyond this, the game provides written narrative cues throughout a series of cutscenes, but these are minimal and do not actually provide much in terms of understanding the world. Additionally, the gameplay mechanics stay fairly static throughout the game, and only change in terms of increased ability rather than new or different inputs. Where the most direction is given is through the use of graphics and the graphical interface. Visually, *Ori* is stunning to look

at, but the graphics also work to guide the player throughout the game and provide access to meaning that goes beyond what can merely be seen.

The player is immersed in a world where what is seen is what's important (a major, if not the only, aspect of the narrative is that Ori is the last light left that can banish the darkness from the land). Even beyond the gamespace, the visual aspects of *Ori* are a sticking point for the game, and can be considered one of its most notable features. Kirkpatrick states that "the concepts of play and form take us beyond a superficial characterization of visual pleasure towards an appreciation of the whole experience of gameplay in terms of how it feels to players" (13). While the graphics allow for both guidance and pleasure, the importance in considering the in-game graphics is the contribution they make to the overall experience. Videogame graphics cannot be taken alone, and, like narrative, they are not the sole contributor to any experience a player might have.

Ori utilizes the *videoness* of videogames in a way that forces players to pay attention to as many visual cues and details as possible, emphasizing the reason why videogames even carry the term "video". In this way, the game follows in the tradition of avant-garde cinema in that "the avant-garde is able to see unique artistic potential in the *video* of videogames" (Schrank 10). The hand-painted backgrounds of the game give the visuals a unique depth for the game style. It is obvious that in such a game, the graphical characteristics are

the main point of concern not just for the developers, but also for players. *Ori* explicitly infuses a careful consideration of visual aesthetics into its gameplay. But, while this is a point to keep in mind, "aesthetic concerns cannot be bracketed off as incidental to gameplay but must be understood as central to an organizing of the whole activity" (Kirkpatrick 13). No aspect of gameplay can be considered in isolation from the others, despite videogame criticism's tendency to view graphics and gameplay as two separate and only vaguely connected pieces of the experience.

The graphics of a game build the world the player inhabits. Without this visual aspect, a videogame becomes a lesser experience. But, no matter how well rendered or realistic a virtual world might be, "the player still does not *feel* the texture of the road or the brush of the grasses during play, but only the cold plastic of the controller" (Bogost 79). The reality is that the world visually experienced within a videogame is one that is mediated and physically felt only through the peripheral materials that allow the game to be played. Developers "render the visual and aural aspects of these worlds in startling vividness and at great expense. But those worlds remain imprisoned behind the glass of our televisions and our monitors" (Bogost 82). Players are eternally separated from the gamespace by a screen, and even with the advances in virtual reality players are still bound by their physical spaces – such as the room in which the game is played. In order to be able to access the true value and limitations of

videogames, players, critics, and developers must all move beyond the gamespace and consider the playspace as an embodied reality necessary, and primary to, gameplay.

LEVEL 3: HARDWARE

The narrative and visual levels of gameplay provide the most visibly noticeable spaces for creativity and innovation when it comes to videogames. While technology has advanced over time, much of the innovation in hardware is left invisible because of the nature of electronic technologies. Zabet Patterson, in *Peripheral Vision: Bell Labs, the S-C 4020, and the Origins of Computer Art* states that

> with the advent of the electronic circuit, technology is no longer shaped
>
> by push and lever, gear and wheel. Instead, it begins to be comprised
>
> of machines whose functioning is no longer, strictly speaking, visible, at
>
> least in the ways in which the technology of the machine era had been
>
> visible. (60)

Electronic media has allowed the workings of the machine to be almost entirely disassociated from the work they do, and this has, as a result, caused the playspace and the gamespace of videogames to be disconnected in an essential way. While a controller can be used to move a character on screen, the connection between the movement of a player's hand and their virtual

status in-game do not generally seem to be treated with the same consideration. While players and users of new media cannot physically see the relationship between certain hardware and its work, electronic media does open up spaces that cultivate play in new ways – especially in the case of console videogames.

Videogames are "a major site on which culture naturalizes the ways in which we think and play with technology" (Schrank 4). Not only have games taken traditional narratives and allowed readers to interact with them on a new level through innovations in digital visualization virtuality, they have also built new playspaces in homes that redefine human-machine, human-human, and machine-machine interaction in everyday life. Interaction of this nature is most visible within the gamespaces of videogames, where players manipulate characters/avatars to progress, but it is also very present in the way gaming hardware is designed, displayed, and used. Games become "physically embodied in matter" (Johnson 210), but with the proliferation of virtual gamespaces these physical embodiments are often left by the wayside, made invisible, or even forgotten, in favor of a more simulated and reproducible approach to experience.

Ian Bogost states that "even though image and sound make up much of their raw output, touch is an undeniable factor of gameplay" (80). Videogames draw in and retain players through creating worlds and cultivating communities

that engage the imagination and challenge expectations. But, this is largely done completely virtually, without much regard to the controller or platform the games are mediated through and the playspaces they exist in—at least in terms of those who play, rather than those who develop. But, this priority of virtual content over hardware design has contributed to a cycle in which consumers are satisfied with normalized hardware systems that do not often see any significant alterations from the corporations who create them. Because of this, Nintendo's Wii/WiiU/Switch platforms have provided the only truly unique physical experience in mainstream playspaces. Nintendo has managed to consistently provide new and innovative ways to approach the console controller, and those controllers have had lasting impacts on the way playspaces are both created and considered. Specifically, their use of motion controls with the wiimote and nunchuck in both the Wii and WiiU platforms open up playspaces in ways that more traditionally designed controllers do not and cannot.

Within the Nintendo ecosystem, the Wii remote, or Wiimote, and nunchuck controller combination can be considered peripheral hardware to the system's core setup of console access through the gamepad. Wii also provides a peripheral "pro-controller" that is very similar in design to Xbox/Xbox1/PlayStation4 controllers, but that of course is arguably the least innovative controller design of the Wii/WiiU lot. The gamepad provides a unique

construction of both the gamespace and playspace by allowing for either distancing of the gamespace or shortenting of the playspace. Because of the built-in screen, the gamepad provides an extension of the gamespace by providing a space away from the television for player inventory/maps/etc, and also has motion-control capabilities. Additionally, the gamepad also allows a player to play using the built-in screen alone, without the need for any other external screen, proving an almost mobile experience (a notion that has since been taken advantage of by the forthcoming Nintendo Switch).

While the gamepad provides an interesting variation of the standard controller set-up, it is arguably overshadowed by the new infrastructure of play that the Wiimote/nunchuck creates. Steven E. Jones and George K. Thiruvathukal discuss this aspect of the platform in *Codename Rvolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform*. The authors state that "to study the Wii as a platform requires us to pay attention to the links between system design, framing, and cultural response" (6). The Wii is a unique platform in the sense that its target demographic is far different from the typical console demographic. While Xbox and PlayStation consoles are targeted towards more "serious" gamers, the Wii has always been *casual*. With the Wii, Nintendo aimed to show that "the physical living room is the space where what's most important to games really happens (as opposed to the imaginary, virtual game space" (Jones and Thiruvathukal 8). But, while a majority of Wii titles are family friendly and

resituate the playspace as one of face-to-face interaction with friends/family, there are some titles that take advantage of this idea in a more unexpected way.

Resident Evil 4 (*RE4)* for the Wii is one game that is built upon typical game mechanics, but is able to utilize the unique hardware mechanics that the Wii/WiiU provides. The game begins with the playable character Leon on a mission to find the kidnapped president's daughter, following a lead that she may be held somewhere in rural Spain. In his search, Leon encounters villagers who seem to have been brainwashed, presumably by some kind of cult, and must navigate across the map in constant danger of being attacked. Equipped with a knife, and early on a gun, Leon (and the player) must kill or be killed – there is no other choice. The game itself is neither a graphic masterpiece, nor does it stray far from the expected conventions present throughout the *Resident Evil* videogame franchise, but its optimization specifically for the Wii is one not often seen in a cross-platform game of this caliber. The game takes advantage of the platform's motion controls by allowing the player to aim and shoot by pointing the wiimote at their desired target. The wiimote's physical design makes this set-up slightly more natural feeling: in order to shoot, players must hold down the trigger (B button) at the back of the wiimote in order to ready their gun, and then press "A" at the front of the controller to fire. While far from realistic, the motion controls force players to interact far more with the

gamespace in their physical playspace than the typical controller setup allows.

In this case, consideration of the peripheral hardware is central to not only understanding, but engaging with and succeeding in gameplay. Patterson states that "resituating 'peripherals' as central to histories and theories of computation would demand that we attend to the historical materiality of particular computational systems not as they were intended at the outset but as they were adjusted and modified in actual practice" (xvii). Niintendo's intention for the Wii and WiiU platforms was to always resituate the playspace as central to human interaction while gaming. But, while this might be the primary aspect in certain games (such as *Wii Sports*), the hardware does not serve the same function in other situations. As Patterson states, the modification of peripheral hardware to suit new needs and tasks is an essential access point to understanding the nature of everyday electronic devices and the worlds they mediate *and* create.

RE4 is a prime example in which the hardware works, maybe unintentionally, to bridge some of the gap between the embodied and the virtual to create a more cohesive approach to gameplay. While still divided by the screen and unable to physically feel any aspect of the gameworld, this style of gameplay (wiimote/nunchuck combination) simultaneously widens the playspace (by forcing the player to be a certain distance away from their screen in order for the sensor bar to more accurately track their controller/hand

movements) but also expands the perception of the gamespace as in-game actions become emphasized and exaggerated by the movement of the entire arm. In contrast to the slight movements of thumbs and fingers, this causes players to be increasingly aware of the positioning of their physical body, in addition to the in-game positioning of their avatar/playable character. In my own experience, I found that I cannot position myself the same way whilst playing *Ori* as I might be able to when playing *RE4*. With *Ori*, my only focus needs to be on how I might be holding the controller, and even that minor consideration is forgotten the longer the game is played. But, with *RE4*, I must constantly be aware of how I am sitting, and how that positioning might influence the way I am able to aim. I found out all too soon that an overly relaxed physical position on the couch will lead to an immense struggle when an overwhelming combat situation arises, causing me to lose the ability to aim properly and throwing the entire ecosystem of play off balance.

Bogost states that the Wii platform "affords far more slothful play than its traditional controller-bound competitors" (115). While this might be true for a majority of Wii/WiiU titles that appeal to the casual demographic the platform was built for, it is not a sentiment that holds true across the board. But, the issue with any counter points to this idea is that they are always the exception to the rule. While gameplay in *RE4* is engaging, sometime difficult, and most often exciting, it is only one of the very few games that have been optimized for

and takes advantage of the unique aspects of the platform for a more "serious" game. And, despite this fact, *RE4* for the Wii is not the version of the game that most are likely to pick up, or even consider. The Wii's initial marketing, as well as some of the hardware limitations, seem to have stifled widespread innovation or optimization for similar games – causing things to remain in the same cycle of innovative design, creation, and distribution.

Across the board, it seems that the pattern of innovation is often the same, including in the case of console construction: "early experiements, followed by explosive diversity, followed by radical consolidation" (Johnson 170). While motion controls have not taken hold in the transition from experiments/diversity to consolidation within the field, they have been part of the rise of sensor bars as part of the standard console periphery library (as seen in the Microsoft Kinect). But, the phenomenon of motion controls have largely been relegated to the world Nintendo and their casual (and often considered juvenile) consoles (the PlayStation3 Move's short-lived life indicates that motion controls are not necessarily for all audiences with all platforms, despite being supported by a more powerful console). Their specific approach to controllers *a la* the wiimote and nunchuck have not taken root in a more widespread sense that garners continued innovation. While it may be somewhat due to their functionality, there is also a sense that the Wii controller

designs have not gained popularity largely because of their refusal to fully conform to the invisible nature of such hardware.

The controller as an artifact cannot stand alone, and is inherently defined by the gamespaces it mediates. Even beyond this, in a conventional set-up, controllers are not meant to be visible in gameplay – save for the few instances of Quick Time Events that might often prompt players to think about what buttons need to be pressed or what other physical action needs to be taken on their part. Despite being one of the only access points into a game a player has (the other being the screen/visualization device), the controller, and the embodied experience it requires, is intended to be forgotten in favor of immersion into a virtual world. Despite the desire to make these hardware objects invisible, there does not seem to be any intention to make them more ergonomic or easily usable in these playsapces. While such virtual immersion is required for an enjoyable gaming experience, it cannot truly be achieved without serious consideration given to the place, perception, and engagement of the formal embodied experience.

Schrank states that "according to the avant-garde, an artistic medium has three formal dimensions: material supports, the social and cultural conventions at work, and the range of sensations and aesthetic experiences afforded" (27). I believe that it is no mistake that two of the three formal dimensions rely solely on physical factors – one being the materiality of a work,

the other being the embodied experience that is the result of the audience's interaction with the work. In the case of videogames, the material and the embodied experience are intimately connected by the controller. This device is not only a foundational material support for the medium of videogames (without some type of controller there can be no gameplay – no matter how well-developed the medium is, if a player cannot move around and interact with the world there is no functional difference between a videogame and a still image), but also allows the viewer to emerge as a player – one who interacts not only with the hardware and gamespace, but also becomes an influencer on the fate of the world through these interactions.

An example of such formalisms in action can be seen in *RE4*. In the very beginning of the game, the player encounters a dog trapped in a beartrap. The player has the ability to approach and free the dog from the trap. But, the player also has the ability to pass by the dog, and even shoot at it (but not kill it). This early situation, on the surface, allows players to become a bit more familiar with the controller and in-game mechanics. But, beyond this, it also sets up a baseline for interaction with the non-playable characters within the game. Most things that move within the game are made to be killed, but the dog provides a rare exception to this rule and also, coincidentally, is a case in which the player's choices define their experience later on. In this case, if the player chooses to not free, or to free and then shoot at the dog, it will not appear in

the initial "El Giante" boss fight to help. On the other hand, if the player frees the dog and just lets it go, the dog will appear and help fight/act as a distraction during the encounter (even if the help is largely marginal to actually completing the task). No matter what a player chooses to do, this early interaction ties together the formal material and aesthetic experiences to begin setting the tone for the game and the events to come.

These formal conventions allow considerations of videogames to resituate the primary focus out of the gamespace, and call for a wider consideration of critique that extends into the playspace. Kirkpatrick states that "closer attention to the formal properties of games…opens up the possibility of a formal aesthetic method of video game criticism that does not re-centre analysis on the meanings of play as projected by the game's ostensible narrative content" (49). Current discussion surrounding games is predominately driven by in-game narrative, visuals, and mechanics. But, when a game is difficult or unenjoyable to play, one might not readily think to call out the standard design of a controller as the issue. Instead, a game can be programmed or designed in a way that does not cohere well with the hardware – causing the controller to become so visible that it gets in the way of gameplay. While it is unrealistic to expect new controllers for every style of play, it does seem odd that, when it comes to hardware, both the industry and players have

become complacent with peripherals that would benefit from some level of improvement.

As Patterson says, "media forms and practices can directly shape the bodies that interact with them, changing both what is seen and how we are able to see" (77). While the issue of hardware design and implementation in the videogame industry is incredibly complex and multifaceted, it is difficult to deny the impact of the systems these consoles create in many people's day-to-day lives. Even on a basic level, new media produce hardware that interacts with bodies in new, and not always beneficial, ways. Injuries and physical issues attributed to long-term and/or intensive gaming is an issue that has become more prominent as people interact with electronic media more and more (see: "Gaming to death: What turns a hobby into a health hazard?" from CNN in 2015). From addiction, to muscle injury, to eyestrain, to therapy, both psychological and physical (Granic et al.; Lohse et. al.), videogames are influencing embodied reality just as much as they influence virtual reality/ies. Because of this, it is important that the embodied aspects of gameplay not be left out of or marginalized in any critical discourse or consideration, as this form of play effects embodiment on the most basic of levels. Whether intended or not, the hardware through which videogames are mediated inherently politicize gameplay by either allowing or shutting out certain types of play by certain types of bodies. While it can be argued that controllers are created for the

greatest variance in play for the largest population, it is still questionable how hardware designers account for so little variance in their audiences.

Ultimately, no matter how immersive a virtual environment might be, "all videogame experiences require physical action" (Bogost 110). At this point in time, there is no way to enter into a virtual world without needing to remain attached to the physical body. Despite dreams of the singularity, embodied experience is a primary factor in gameplay, and should be considered as such. Innovation is most visible on the narrative and graphic levels, but "the body of the spectator [or player] becomes a site where the computer code is activated" (Patterson 78). The body is key accessing and understanding the playspace, and I believe it is safe to assume that a more productive gaming experience stems from, in large part, from an enjoyable/satisfactory/comfortable/engaging embodied experience, depending on the needs, desires, or intention of the player.

While the Nintendo Wii/WiiU platforms provided innovation in regards to controller design, its largest contribution to the aesthetic experience of gaming is the use of motion controls in games that go beyond the intended family-friendly vision of the platform. Abstraction of physical acts through the use of the standard controller setup de-familiarizes and de-sensitizes players from the action, while controller schemes such as Wii/WiiU "make the familiar strange" by re-introducing non-abstracted movement controls that are not only more

natural feeling, but also work to bridge the gap between the gamespace and the playspace. This moves such play into the realm of the avant-garde, as it highlights the role of the physical technology while also opening up new spaces of engagement that might not have been accounted for in more traditional schemes. Considering the material infrastructures of embodied play practices will hopefully lead to a deeper understanding not only of gameplay, but also of the way play shapes the world. In considering embodied experience within the act of gameplay, avant-garde spaces are opened up to promote forward thinking in game development – both in the virtual and physical levels of engagement. With a more holistic view of the engagement a player has with the medium, developers might be encouraged to include a greater number of players in a greater number of playspaces.

Future Research

While I have provided a very brief, and largely summative, overview of this approach, I hope to continue this project in ways that might impact both the way videogames are considered within the academy, as well as how they are envisioned and designed within industry. Ideally, research conducted at such places as the National Museum of Play would further inform any continuation of this project and allow a more refined discourse to immerge. Additionally, I plan to move forward with the project by specifically surveying the current state

of cross-platform games with motion control capabilities, with the potential of comparing them to the growing area of virtual reality (VR) game development. This survey will provide a more extensive understanding of the level of development dedicated to more nontraditional gaming experiences, but will also delve further into the conundrum of the place of invisible hardware in the case of VR headsets and equipment.

Conclusion

This project ultimately attempts to critically bring together the physical and the virtual in a way that might one day fill in some of the gaps the currently exist in videogame discourse. But, beyond that, it also aims to situate videogames as an accessible medium that is, at its core, one that cultivates and inspires aesthetic experience that reaches far beyond the confines of the screen. Like avant-garde cinema, an emphasis and understanding of the technology behind the visual/virtual experience lends itself as another dimension in the overall experience that ultimately cannot, and should not, be ignored.

Avant-garde playspaces must, by necessity, be both coherent enough to be playable as well as engaging enough to be enjoyable. But, there is a fine line between avant-garde playspaces and avant-garde art – the ultimate question is whether or not mainstream games can create such playsapces in

ways that are practical, productive, and effective. I believe that the key to this is not necessarily in narrative disruption or graphical innovation, but in thoughtful and considerate contemplation of hardware and embodied experience. While the virtual and physical infrastructures of play (videogames and the hardware they are played on) are infinitely reproducible through mass production, the experiences they foster are unique not only between players, but through each playthrough as well. Works of play ultimately become most productive as spaces of engagement when their various levels are considered and weighed, especially those levels that are often forgotten, ignored, or made invisible. Once a more cohesive and holistic understanding of play can be constructed, a more thoughtful critical discourse can emerge that takes into account a wider range of play styles, playspaces, and embodied experiences.

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