

Making Science Fiction Personal – Videogames and Inter-Affective Storytelling

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Abstract

Videogames bring science fiction into the affective present. By and large, videogame texts are structured so that there is none of the mediation presented by the protagonists of books or films; instead, the relationships the player forms matter to them because they are personal. The agency provided to game players means that they have a direct relationship to the consequences of their actions, which give science fiction videogames impact at a personal level. In “System Shock 2,” the player is confronted with body-horror. Enemies yell for the player to hide or run away, even as those enemies cannot prevent their bodies from attacking, after being taken over by alien worms. “System Shock 2” then makes the body-horror personal by creating situations where the player questions her/his own humanity, due to cybernetic modification. The game asks the player, “What do you do? How does that feel?” The affective experience of videogame texts is distinct from that of other forms of media because the questions are directed to the players themselves, rather than to a character they identify with.

Since videogames are distinguished by the player’s experience of the text, tools from phenomenology can be applied to consider how the player forms affective relationships with fictional characters and science fiction concepts. Affect, the dynamic and transportable zone of potential emotions, functions through cathexis, whereby an individual becomes invested in something regardless of what that may be. The investment occurs within a contextual world-of-concern which envelops the player and grounds his/her investment in the experience of the game’s story.

The impact of having the player directly involved and affectively invested in the experience presents opportunities for inter-affective storytelling which would not be possible outside of an interactive context, since agency is a fundamental part of what makes the affective connection personal.

Key Words: Affect, immersion, responsibility

1. How Mediation Shapes Experience

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The texts which mediate the stories we engage with are not neutral to our experiences of them. The processes each medium requires of us in order to negotiate the texts help to shape the way we perceive the story. As an example, *House of Leaves*¹ is a novel which presents a sequence where there are a small handful of words to a page, and as events become more tense the number of words gets smaller and smaller: readers physically turn the pages faster and faster the fewer words there are to read, increasing the apparent pace of the story, and this is folded into their affective experience of the text.

When science fiction worlds come to video games, a similar concern with affective experience is relevant. Videogames bring science fiction into the affective present, for they offer players a direct feeling of responsibility for how the problems of alternative worlds are negotiated. The responsibility provided to the players of videogames is part of a distinctive affective experience which sets games apart from other methods of textual storytelling, and means that the person playing the game has a different experience of the text than someone watching a film or even *watching the game being played*.

Phenomenology provides a useful toolset for analysing *the experience* of engaging with a text, and thus the extent to which the textual structure modifies that experience. Videogames provide the person playing them with *agency*, which Janet Murray defines as "...the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices"². One of the consequences of player agency is the feeling of responsibility for the decisions the player has made, which makes the experience of games a *personal* one: when players of a game achieve something, *they* achieve it rather than reading or watching someone they are intended to sympathise with achieve it.

Videogames thus present a different way of engaging with the speculative questions and issues presented by science fiction texts, by making players personally responsible for the outcomes they choose; they are immersive in ways in which other media forms are not, which results in a different affective tenor for the experience.

2. Affect and Immersion

The difficulty in comparing different subjective 'experiences' lies in the extent to which experience is non-cognitive and happens, in some ways, where we are not watching. Or, to put it another way: to be self-consciously aware of what you are feeling as you are feeling it is to alter the experience, precisely because you are making a conscious effort to do so. *Affect* is the term used to distinguish the non-cognitive component of subjective experience from the *emotions*, which we are more cognitively aware of and

which thus present fewer obstacles to critical discussion: it is possible to specifically name an emotion and pin it down, whereas the affective tenor of an experience is by definition harder to label.³

Affect functions through an economy of *cathexis*, whereby an individual becomes *invested* in something, regardless of what that something may be. Affective investment occurs within a ‘Heideggerian world-of-concern,’ which Lars Nyre defines as a space shaped by human engagement, rather than an objective space.⁴ Nyre argues that an objective space is *everything present within an environment*, such as all of the furniture and fittings within a lecture theatre, whereas a world-of-concern is grounded in *contextual relevance*. In the context of a seminar, a world-of-concern would involve the speaker, the audience and the subject at hand while the majority of the room fittings would remain irrelevant or uninvolved.

In the context of a videogame, the player is *invested* in experiencing the game as a lived space with its own chain of sensible cause-and-effect relationships, and in engaging with the characters within the world-of-concern as legitimate entities in their own right. The importance of this investment is such that Laurie N. Taylor argues for two distinctive forms of *immersion* based on different subsets of player engagement. Diegetic immersion is where one can become “lost in a good book,” remaining “unaware of the creation and relation of the elements within the text”.⁵ In comparison, Taylor also offers *situated immersion*, which is where the player is *acting within* the digital environment. Situated immersion describes the successful world-of-concern established when engaging with videogame texts: the world-of-concern is contextual, and what is affectively relevant to the player’s experience (and thus what they are invested in) is acting *within* the diegetic space of the game world, rather than upon it. When *situated immersion* has been achieved, the person playing the game or exploring the digital environment is no longer policing the dividing line of the virtual, and is invested in being perceptually inside the diegesis of the game text.

3. Coherence and Responsibility

Stephen Poole uses the term *incoherence* to describe situations where an action undertaken within the diegetic space of the game environment does not have the consequences which would be expected if the same action were taken in the real world; such incoherence is an impediment to situated immersion.⁶ The action can be as simple as your movement knocking a piece of stone into a river; if the stone sinks with a splash, this is a consequence that fits the contextual world-of-concern as a zone of legitimate cause and effect. On the other hand, if the stone sits unmoving on the surface of the ‘water,’ this will emphasise the mediated nature of the world-of-concern and arguably damage the investment the player has in the notion that they are occupying a legitimate space.

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Situations *with* structural coherence introduce the feeling of *responsibility* into the experience, which itself reinforces situated immersion: the reason for this is that if you make a choice, then you are responsible for the consequences of that choice. When a decision has a sensible outcome, the player is aware that their *next* decision will have a legitimate consequence, and this awareness becomes enfolded into the experience of decision-making. This feedback loop reinforces the contextual world-of-concern, and constructs the diegetic environment of the game world as a lived space where there are consistent rules, producing a logic of cause-and-effect. Responsibility is affectively powerful because within the contextual world-of-concern, being and *feeling* responsible for other characters is a significant component of forming relationships with them that *matter* to you. Structural incoherence makes it less likely that the player will feel responsibility within the contextual world-of-concern, because the rules of cause and effect are shown to be inconsistent and determined by something outside the player's control.

*System Shock 2*⁷ presents a good example of what a significant impact responsibility (and a lack of incoherence) within a sci-fi world-of-concern can have for the player's experience of the text. *System Shock 2* is set within an experimental space ship which has been taken over by alien forces far from home. The game provides a detailed three-dimensional sound-scape for the diegetic environment, in which you can typically hear enemies before seeing them. The key to situated immersion lies in the fact that the reverse is also true, which provides concrete consequences to any actions the player takes in exploring the environment. The result of this sound-scape for the experience of the text is that every action is taken in the certain knowledge that *you are being hunted*. In turn, this knowledge leads to two generalised responses within the world-of-concern, each informing two different 'styles of play,' possessed of their own affective register. If the player runs through the diegetic environment with their guns blazing, the noise will attract enemies from across the level; the dread fuelled by this style of play arises from the uncertainty of whether the player will run out of ammunition before they run out of enemies, within a context of constant threat. The alternative is to use stealth, and thus minimise the amount of noise produced in exploring the diegetic environment within the world-of-concern; the tension in this approach is drawn from the ongoing attempts to avoid detection and slip past the opposition, and bursts of frenetic conflict when those attempts fail. Both approaches are entirely appropriate for the science fiction/horror genre of *System Shock 2*, but the experiences are affectively distinct.

4. The Experience of Affectively-Unmediated Science Fiction

Videogames present contextual worlds-of-concern which the player actively invests in, and the economies of cathexis and immersion at work mean that the person playing the game has a fundamentally different experience of the text than someone else who is watching the same game being played: someone who is an audience to game play has no agency, and no *responsibility* for how events unfold. There is less *affective mediation* inherent to the experience of videogame texts than would otherwise be provided by a protagonist within textual prose or filmic diegesis: feeling a *character* feeling is different than feeling yourself being. It is the player who responds affectively to the awareness of being hunted within the diegesis of *System Shock 2*, not the character he/she occupies, and not the protagonist of a novel or film whom the audience is expected to sympathise with.

*Mass Effect*⁸ is an example of a game which demonstrates how significant a difference in feeling can be. The game misses an opportunity to confront the player with a genuinely alien social context by associating the humanoid with the safe and familiar. Two alien races are relevant within the context of *Mass Effect*'s world-of-concern, in which humanity is a newcomer to a society of pre-established star-travelling species. Firstly, there are the Asari, a race of diplomats, socialites and concubines with a great deal of economic and social influence on the society of the game; they resemble blue humanoid women with tentacles for hair, and are capable of mating with any species. It is possible to have a romantic and sexual relationship with an Asari character as part of playing the game. Secondly, there are the Rachni, which are remorseless insect-like soldiers believed to be extinct, and which all of the other races of *Mass Effect*'s diegesis are terrified of. Imagine how different the experience would be if the lore behind the two races were kept the same, but the *visual design* were swapped: the Asari would be socialites and concubines who resemble giant insects, and the Rachni would be remorseless soldiers who look very similar to us. Doing so would confront the player with a contextual world-of-concern which would *feel* very different and raises the possibility players would have to ask themselves how they felt about a romantic and/or sexual relationship with a giant insect, as opposed to a blue woman. The game (not unreasonably perhaps) went with the more marketable, but decidedly less *alien* and discomfiting option. Even the minor difference of having the Asari designed as a race of blue *men* rather than women would have a detectable shift in the feel of the experience; presenting what we understand as potentially lesbian relationships within the world-of-concern was apparently a less threatening way of marking the Asari as different than potentially gay relationships would have been.

*Fallout 3*⁹ presents players with the moral responsibility of choosing between different levels of suffering. The series of games is set in a nuclear post-apocalypse setting where human society has largely been destroyed,

leaving a vast divide between the technologically advanced descendants of the inhabitants of gigantic vaults, and everyone who has been surviving outside. One particular moral responsibility which *Fallout 3* hands the player lies in valuing life: an expanding oasis has formed in the irradiated wastelands around an apparently immortal mutated man conjoined to a tree, who is suffering and wishes to die. The situation is complicated by the fact that players of earlier games in the *Fallout* series will have encountered the character, Harold, across more than a century of in-game history, and thus have invested in him as a legitimate entity within the contextual world-of-concern. Killing Harold would destroy the oasis which shelters other survivors, driving them out into the wilds; leaving the oasis intact requires sacrificing Harold to an eternity of misery. There is also the possibility of deliberately accelerating the growth of the tree he is conjoined to, which will spread the oasis but increase his pain. The game sets up a situation in which no matter what the player chooses, *suffering will result*, and they will be personally responsible. The question is, what do *you do*? Kill your friend, or doom a growing settlement? An interesting point is that there are players who are motivated to hunt down a fourth alternative, presenting an affective tone of *defiance* to their experience: none of the options are good enough, so they will find a better way.

A moral dilemma about the role and value of artificial life confronts the player in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*¹⁰, a game set many millennia before George Lucas' original series. A woman named Elise asks the player for aid in locating her missing droid, which she believes has been stolen, but the situation is not as simple as it seems. Elise's husband has died, leaving her grieving and unable to move on, to the point where she has transferred her feelings to an unhealthy attachment to the droid her husband had built to take care of the family. The droid has run away into the desert in an attempt to destroy itself, on the grounds that it had tried to reason with its mistress and failed, and that this was the best thing it could do to help her heal. The droid asks you to destroy it and to tell Elise that it is gone, so that she might eventually gain closure. Alternatively, you can order the droid back to the household, where Elise will continue to fall apart and be unable to move on. There is also a third option: You tell the droid that once you have destroyed it, you will lie to Elise, persuading her that the droid is out in the desert somewhere, and she should keep looking for it – condemning her to an unending misery, and taunting the droid with the fact it “wanted to die” before you finally murder it. What is interesting about this dilemma is the extent to which players who deliberately seek to create evil characters can remain *deeply uncomfortable* with this option, because of the responsibility they hold for spreading misery for its own sadistic sake.¹¹ The fact that you

can *feel* bad for being cruel *to a robot* underlines how affectively important having responsibility within an experience can be: games can present a very different feeling of relating to artificial life than what is presented by watching Data or Wall-E emote.

5. Conclusion

Videogames bring science fiction into the affective present. They are *personal* experiences because of the agency provided to the player, which means they *feel responsible* for the outcomes of the choices they make through the course of negotiating the text. This allows videogames to present players with dilemmas and issues within a science fiction context in a way which would not be possible in other media forms, because the outcome is *experienced as* immediate and hence *felt differently*. The lack of affective mediation allows videogames to present science fiction experiences in a distinctive and memorable fashion, because of the ways in which players engage with, and relate to, videogame texts.

Notes

- ¹ M. Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2000.
- ² J. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Cambridge Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1998, p. 126.
- ³ M. Kavka, *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 30-31.
- ⁴ L. Nyre, 'What Happens When I Turn On the TV Set?' in *The Media and Phenomenology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2007, p. 26, <http://www.wmin.ac.uk/mad/pdf/WPCC-VolFour-NoTwo-Lars_Nyre.pdf>
- ⁵ L. N. Taylor, *Videogames: Perspective, Point-of-View, and Immersion*, Gainesville, University of Florida, 2002, p. 12, <http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE1000166/taylor_l.pdf>.
- ⁶ S. Poole, *Trigger Happy: Videogames and the Entertainment Revolution*, New York, Arcade Publishing, 2000, p. 95.
- ⁷ K. Levine, *System Shock 2*, Looking Glass Studios, 1999.
- ⁸ C. Hudson, *Mass Effect*, BioWare, 2007.
- ⁹ E. Pagliarulo, *Fallout 3*, Bethesda Softworks, 2008.
- ¹⁰ D. Falkner, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, BioWare, 2003.
- ¹¹ J. Walker, "Bastard of the Old Republic," in *RockPaperShotgun.com*, 2009, <<http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2009/04/26/bastard-of-the-old-republic-part-three/>>

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