Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2008

The performance of digital play

Westecott, Emma

FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Special Issue 02 | Summer 2008

Introduction

> '… videogames, whether console-based or online, embody the most expansive and successful display of involvement in theater-based concerns that the world has ever witnessed.' (Dixon 620)

Steve Dixon's introduction to the history, theory and practice of digital media in performance is perhaps the first core performance theory text to take videogames seriously. He argues that the visual nature of videogames together with their 'essentially plebian' content (Dixon 621) accounts for the slow interest in this form by the academy. This snobbery is mirrored in culture at large and whilst the games industry produce ever more beautiful experiences the perceived cultural value of games remains under question by the few who do not play them.

To date, games studies (the academic field that analyses videogames from a humanities perspective) has drawn from the fields of play theory, psychology, sociology, film studies, cyber culture, literary and media theory as well as visual anthropology to map its roots. This paper adds the field of performance theory to this family of disciplines in order to better understand the emergent and interdisciplinary field of games studies. These disciplines have hinted at the connection between the discourses surrounding play and aspects of performance and performativity. However, scholars have been less forthcoming in acknowledging the role of performance in play as a subject in its own right, worthy of study.

Current literature in game studies seems most preoccupied with establishing the discipline and marking the sand as to the starting point for the field, a position more fully explored in David Surman's (2007) extended review. Other areas start to map the unique

aspects of game form but little work, as yet, looks in-detail at the ways in which the player performs in the game context. One exception to this is the recent work of McGonigal (2006) who suggests a framework for types of game play performance that includes: talent-based (art), mastery (interaction), expressive (identity), spectacular (attention) and theatrical ("as if"). The context for this framework is the area of ubiquitous gaming whereas my work functions in the more traditional context of on-screen gaming. Part of the seduction of gaming lies in the knowledge that it is not 'real' without compromising the 'believed-in' nature of the play act, and in this way digital gaming departs from traditional notions of 'live' theatrical performance. Gaming is safe whilst live theatre is dangerous.

As a starting point to frame the phenomenology of digital play it is useful to look to core elements of a play experience. On the highest level these can be understood as the game object (which consists the game world and its rules), the player subject and the play act (the unifying action that creates a particular performance).

Parallels between fields

Increasing amounts of anthropological research is being undertaken to map the new cultures spawning at play. Other strands of analysis from literary theory look to better understand the game object. My work looks to build on the strong foundations of this nascent field to explore the event of the game experience through the lens of performance theory. Through this focus my research foregrounds the context of the played game; where player and game meet to generate the game experience. The act of play in this setting is co-creative.

There are parallels between the fields of game studies and performance studies, in that it is a new interdisciplinary field with wide cultural application for other disciplines. The

active involvement in the practice of performance is a key facet of both fields, and artistic practice (both in terms of design and play) is closely connected to theoretical understanding.

In their 1990 review, Bauman and Briggs describe how the approach of researchers has evolved in performance studies. Most important is the move from the study of a performance text through the analysis of textual context to a shift towards contextualization. They present an argument that context is created by active negotiation between participants. In future work I plan to explore how such a process-led approach might be applied to the field of game studies.

Over and above this, in his study of actions, Richard Schechner (2002: 1) has framed the field of performance studies in the following ways:

- Behaviour is the 'object of study' with a focus on what people do in the activity of doing it
- Artistic practice is part of the discipline
- Fieldwork as 'participant observation' adapted and put to new uses
- Is actively involved in social practice.

Digital game form, in which the practice is the play act, offers a generative environment within which to host this type of enquiry.

Characteristics of Digital Gameplay

So what is the potential for performance offered by modern digital games? What does

a critique of performance in contemporary digital games reveal about them?

Videogames are categorized by genre, with a particular genre based around a style of gameplay; each style tends to focus on certain aspects of performance[1]. Although a detailed analysis of genre is beyond the scope of this paper, certain genres of game offer a wider potential for performance than others, these include: action, adventure, fighting, role-playing and platform genres[2]. The playing of these games is a dynamic and visceral experience that is all about movement, immersion and flow. As an art form, games are visually led, in that sensorial immersion is typified by intense audio-visual stimulation expressed via a given game platform. Currently this contact is mostly mediated through a flat screen. The visual style of much digital game form is situated within a popular cultural heritage that includes comics, science fiction and fantasy genres. All game players 'perform' skilled actions in order to 'win' the game.

The contexts for digital play offer a wide scope for performance. Broadly speaking, this can be split into in-game performance, where a player expresses her virtuosity within a given game world, and out-of-game performance where the physical setting for play supports a multitude of performative acts. Recent innovations in game form blur these distinctions by incorporating reality into games (e.g. Augmented Reality Games (ARG's)) and by bringing games more into reality (e.g. Wii Sports).

In terms of intensity, our experience of game play ebbs and flows over time and any given performance is tied to a number of events that precede and succeed it. In his essay

[1] For example, fighting games offer a strong focus on spectacular performance.
[2] This paper intentionally omits the genre(s) of online multi-player gaming from its analysis; the performance dynamics introduced by multiple players is beyond the scope of

'What Are We Really Looking At?', Barry Atkins (2006) explores the future orientation of the game gaze, in the sense that video games are all about anticipation. As a time-based media, both as gaming moment and as cultural event, games progress along a timeline of anticipation for their players. The centrality of time is one feature that game play shares with traditional notions of performance.

Video games are also performative, in that much of our digital play experience is mediated by the presence of our in-game avatar, or player character (the player's representation in game), whom provides us with a framework for the play we express and allows us to play out various representations of self. The evolving relationship between the player and the player character in the context of their performance is a key area of interest. Bob Rehak's (2003) essay points to the importance of this relationship and provides a psychoanalytic framework as an entry point to the way games reflect players back at themselves.

In terms of film and television, albeit in different ways, identification can be seen as a core process in the telling of stories. However, game form does not singularly orient around a narrative frame but are also driven by the desire to play, and game identification is experienced through the active control of the player character. In the performance of digital play we are in control of where we go and how we progress and thereby drive our own experience.

The Pleasure of Play

As a purely voluntary activity (Huizinga, 1955) pleasure is a core criterion of most

---

this initial work.

play experiences and an important part of any study into the field. The desire to play is directly related to the pleasure gained from the experience.

As Victor Turner outlines in his essay 'Liminal to Liminoid' (37) '..since they [sports] are optional, they are part of an individual's freedom, of his growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence. Hence, they are imbued more thoroughly with pleasure…'

More recently there is increasing work that looks to expose the types of pleasure gained from the play act, an important work is the STeM project 'New Media: New Pleasures' that explores compound concepts of play, performance and flow and elementary concepts of control, immersion, intertextuality and narrative.

Within academic discourse on digital culture, one of the key areas of discussion is the tension between immersion and interactivity, and the question whether the self-reflexivity implicit in the interactive act removes the possibility for full immersion. In some ways this binarism fails to acknowledge the flux state experienced during a digital game experience where the player shifts social, emotional and cognitive states in a fluid performance as the game progresses. To conceive of gameplay as a performance act allows for a multitude of ways to engage with the play act and sidesteps this binarism. The experience of gameplay is a multidimensional phenomenon that is wholly dependent on the situated context of the player.

One of the most influential theories of fun in games studies is flow theory by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991); this theory offers a model to understand the balance of challenge and skill involved in attaining flow. Games offer an effective environment for flow in that they provide ever-increasing levels of challenge together with immediate feedback.

The Cybernetic Loop

The kinesthetic action that makes up a game play experience can be seen to consist of an ongoing dialogue between the player and the game system. This communication is non-verbal and consists of the player reading cues within the game world and responding with an appropriate course of action. The game system keeps track of player progress through the experience and adjusts the game context accordingly. As Richard Bauman and Charles L Briggs have identified 'Performance … provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes.' (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 60).

My position is that video games are a dramatic form, more akin to modern experimental forms of theatre that include the audience explicitly in the experience than to the more linear media forms of film and television. Examples can be seen in the way that much site-specific work involves the audience, similarly the act of video game play erodes the boundaries between spectator and participant.

As a dramatic experience game play operates in a cybernetic loop between the player and the rules. This performance can be seen as an improvisational act in which the player plays 'with' the game system to explore possibilities and constraints for progression. Unlike more 'live' drama, the experimental spaces offered by the digital allow us to push against the boundaries of possibility to see what will happen without worrying about consequence.

Multiple Models Of Mind

There is a historical requirement for performance to have an audience; my conceit departs from the notion that this is a separate individual or group by arguing that the player

acts as both performer and audience.

A key dynamic of this field in our post-modern climate is the active involvement of the player in the ongoing evolution of form; the player collides with the game system to create the media experience. This performance blurs the boundaries between producer and consumer in that the player simultaneously takes on both roles within the game. As a player I am both producing my experience in the ways in which I express my skill within a particular game play moment whilst simultaneously consuming the results of my actions.

The acronym VURP (Viewer, User, Reader, Player) collects together some of the roles assumed by the consumer of digitally mediated game form, with all the associated connotations for game activity and meaning-making. This term arose from a series of millennial lectures by Richard White that attempted to crystallise modern viewing practice. The largely anonymous engagement with gaming within the digital context supports playful experimentation with identity and role. In this way we win the opportunity to enact a multiplicity of selves, in effect creating a double embodiment, and by participating in a virtual act we become dramaturgically aware.

In terms of the relationship between player and player character, personal accounts of play have a tendency to confuse perspectives. Studies (Flanagan 2002) have revealed language that includes:

"I control her"

"She acts independently"

"We act together"

"I watch her"

"I am her"

The rapid interchange of terms in the recollection of a play act indicates a mutability of focus that reveals the experimentation of the player in her in-game behaviour.

Becoming a Player

How does one become a player? Why do we play? The most common answer is that games offer a safe challenge. Games provide a safe space within which to rehearse a response to challenge, according to Newman (2004) 'at least part of the pleasure of videogame play is derived from the refinement of performance through replay and practice'.

From the taking on of the game body through the controls of the game, the player performs a multitude of small acts to build up play patterns that create a 'gameplay gestalt' (Lindley 2003). The player's enactment of particular play patterns as ritualistic gestalts embellish the game experience and allow her to cognitively offload the functional requirements for progression in the game as her proficiency increases. The game offers the player the option to rehearse and refine her performance (through the save and reload of game mechanics).

The game body offers many guises; game actors (characters that are distinct from the player in the tradition of Lara Croft), avatars (shells of ourselves represented on screen, as seen with Second Life creations), or iconic characters (a gameplay mask that allows play, in games like Super Monkey Ball) (Tosca 2003).

Conclusion

Audience studies has long since shown that the active engagement of a viewer is vital for any creation of meaning to take place, the action of play extends this discourse by exposing the creative expectations of a player. In the act of becoming a player it is necessary to learn a pattern of behaviour in order to progress the game. This game play gestalt can be regarded as the building blocks for a performance on behalf of the player. All game players build a skilled performance of action in order to inhabit and eventually win the game. Within the context of the game, this act of performance is key to the creation of meaning for the player. The game play experience soon stops if the player is unable to acquire a level of proficiency sufficient to allow progression in the game.

But there is more to digital play than acquisition and expression of skill, the performance of identity keys into possibilities for mimetic play.

Digital games are democratising access to creativity, by supporting playful performance, games allow an attainment of skill that is more accessible than in other digital forms of expression i.e. photography, etc. This has the potential to create a space that prioritises a more playful approach to our engagement with techne.

Works cited

Atkins, B. "What Are We Really Looking at? The Future-Orientation of Video Game Play". Games and Culture 1 2 2006: 127-140.

Bauman, R. & Briggs, C. L. "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life". Annual Review of Anthropology 19 1990: 59-88.

Dixon, S. Digital Performance A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.

Flanagan, M. "Hyperbodies, Hyperknowledge: Women in Games, Women in Cyberpunk, and Strategies of Resistance", reload: rethinking women + cyberculture. Eds. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002. 425-454.

Huizinga, J. H. Homo Ludens: A Study of The Play Element in Culture, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.

Kerr, A., Brereton, P. and Flynn, R. "New Media: New Pleasures?", Accessed 6 September 2007. http://www.stem.dcu.ie/.

Lindley, C. "Game Taxonomies: A High Level Framework for Game Analysis and Design", Accessed 6 September 2007.

http://www.gamasutra.com/features/20031003/lindley_01.shtml.

McGonigal, J. "This Might Be a Game: Ubiquitous Play and Performance at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century". Accessed 6 September 2007. http://www.avantgame.com/dissertation.htm

Newman, J. Videogames, London: Routledge. 2004.

Rehak, B. "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar", The Video Game Theory Reader. Eds. M J P Wolf and B Perron, London: Routledge, 2003. 103–127.

Schechner, R. Performance Studies: An Introduction, New York: Routledge, 2002.

Surman, D. "British Game Studies? An Extended Review of Two New Publications", Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal. 2: 3 2007: 273-282.

Tosca, S. "The appeal of Cute Monkeys", Proceedings of Level Up. Digital Games Researchers Association Conference, Utrecht, the Netherlands, 2003.

Turner, V. From Ritual to Theatre The Human Seriousness of Play, New York: PAJ Publications, 1982.