GAMEPLAY PHENOMENOLOGIES: HERMENEUTICS AND THE EXPLORATION OF PLAYER EXPERIENCES

SARAH CHRISTINA GANZON

Abstract

This paper considers the work of Barthes and Gadamer in the analysis of player practices. Much of the study of player agency has been relegated to the subcategory of player studies, with very little conversation between this area of study and the areas of rhetoric and philosophy. Moreover, apart from Bogost's *Procedural Rhetoric*, the various ways that games can function rhetorically is still under-theorized within game studies. This work attempts to create a dialogue between player studies and hermeneutic philosophy, focusing on how games can engage players hermeneutically and provide spaces to generate various narratives. Taking a cue from Barthes, I consider how games can function as writerly texts, generating emotion through ambience. Using Gadamer's work, I illustrate how games create experiences, and how some players utilize hermeneutics in the ways by which they critically engage with the virtual worlds they occupy. Games can create aesthetic experiences, and players can be transformed in the act of play.

In his book *Extra Lives*, journalist and fiction writer Tom Bissell (2011) describes his experiences of playing the videogame *Mass Effect*:

> A late *Mass Effect* mission involves an assault on an enemy stronghold. […] I was confronted with the loss of another squad member. This time there was no way out: Two of my teammates were trapped, and only one could be saved. I had

> been relying on the firepower and battle prowess of one of the trapped teammates throughout the game, and the other was someone who had taken up with me two of three points of a growingly isosceles love triangle. Complicating matters was the fact that the battle-hardened teammate had recently done something unforgivable and I wanted the romantic relationship with the other trapped character to be consummated. Thus the game took my own self-interest and effectively vivisected it. When decision time came, I literally put down my controller and stared at my television screen. (125-126)

Emotional decisions, such as these, tend to underlie several narrative choices in a number of video game series, particularly roleplaying games. They often become forefront in videogame marketing, such as those often used by creators of the *Mass Effect* series. While player engagement with narratives may vary, a number of digital games can indeed have this particular effect on a number of players: they have the ability to let players imagine worlds where they could create characters that could make key decisions that would shape the worlds in question.

In his book *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost (2007) discusses procedural rhetoric, describing it as "the art of using procedures persuasively." While it clearly explains how rules and codes embedded in the games operate to move players to certain decisions, it does not account for the more complex ways that players engage with the gameworlds or the wider discourses surrounding games that they participate in.[1] Although there have been a number of studies that broadly examine games as texts,[2] the discussion of player experiences in these texts tend to be relegated to the subcategory of player studies, with very little dialogue between

1 See also Miguel Sicart's (2011) "Against Procedurality," which is his critique of this more formalist approach to games and rhetoric.

2 These discussions are mostly drawn out in the ludology-narratology debate. See Espen Aarseth's (2004) "Genre Trouble," Janey Murray (1997) "Hamlet on the Holodeck," Pearce's (2005) "Theory Wars" and Thomas Apperley's (2010) "Genre and Game Studies." I will not discuss it here as this tends to be a conversation that has been exhausted. Moreover, Vossen's (2018) analysis of this debate in her dissertation also points to how this debate indicates forms of gatekeeping within the field of game studies. One text that can prove very useful though is Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) "Game Analysis" as they provide a methodological toolkit for to accommodate textual analysis in games.

theories around rhetoric and studies that highlight player agency. In this paper, I consider how a number of game titles function as writerly texts that create emotional experiences through ambience. Using Gadamer's ideas about hermeneutic phenomenology, I will look at how games create experiences, and how some players utilize hermeneutics in the ways by which they critically engage with the virtual worlds they occupy. By consolidating a number of ideas around rhetoric alongside a number of parallel studies in game studies, I aim to create a dialogue on how player experiences can be theorized. Single player games allow players to have unique experiences, and players can be transformed in the act of play.

Gameworlds as Ambient Writerly Texts

Roland Barthes (1990) defines writerly texts as texts that blur the boundaries between reader and writer, allowing readers to take a more active role in defining meaning in the text (4). These texts create bliss:

> Text of bliss, the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (Barthes 1975, 14)

Pleasure and bliss, for Barthes, are not merely psychological, but social as it can confirm identity, and the various positions that readers can take regarding the reading of the text. Pleasure can be used to interpellate readers, while bliss has the potential to go against hegemonic positions.

Games can qualify as texts of bliss. Michael Nitsche (2008) suggests that "narrative [in games] is best understood as a form of comprehension that can be triggered and affected by the game world" (42). He considers plot as players' interpretations of the game's fictional world, and argues that the act of engaging in game spaces enhances various cognitive processes, leading to the creation of individual plots (51). Of course, this is none more

apparent than in the practice of creating walkthroughs,[3] which Consalvo (2006) uses to point out the contextual and intertextual nature of video game play (331). The practice of modding[4] also renders that desire to make gameworlds malleable apparent. In the case of modding, Postigo (2007) indicates that modders see their work as art practices; the practice of creating mods allows players to "identify" with games, enabling them to enjoy these games more, given their personal investment in them since modding allows them to make these games "their own" (309). For example, some mods in *Dragon Age* can make some characters, who are only available as love interests for player characters of specific genders, romance-able for any gender.[5] In some cases, mods are also made to rail against some games' fictional narratives, such as one mod created for *Skyrim*, which changes dragons in the game into pro wrestler Randy Savage[6] as a way of demystifying fantasy elements in the game.

However, it is too simplistic to argue that meaning-making in games is only dependent on players. Marie Laure-Ryan (2006) points out that games often require a convergence in the creation of meaning: developers are involved in the top-down planning of the game's structure, while players are involved in the bottom-up process of interactivity (99). A number of developers create narratives and gameworlds around a number of player types.[7] These constructs of players are particularly important in the making of players as

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3 Walkthroughs are guides, produced either by game publishers or players themselves, to help other players progress through games. In a lot of walkthroughs created by players, whether in earlier text forms or video walkthroughs on *YouTube*, they also retell players' subjective experiences of games. See Consalvo's (2003) "Zelda 64 and Video Game Fans."

4 Modding is the practice of altering a game's program code to create new items, new places and characters, tweak plots, etc. Modding has been immensely popular in the fan communities of *Skyrim*, *Minecraft* and *Dragon Age* to name a few. See Postigo's (2007) work on this, as well as Olli Sotamaa's (2010) "When the Game is Not Enough" and Tanja Sihvonen's (2011) *Players Unleashed*.

5 See Robert Yang's (2010) piece on one particular mod on *Dragon Age: Origins* and how this particular mod has allowed him to reflect on hegemonic relationships in the game.

6 See Mat Paget's (2016) piece on this and his interview of this mod's creator in "The Life and Times of Skyrim's Best Dragon: Macho Man Randy Savage."

7 See David Gaider's (2009) blog post "How Do I Become a Writer For Video Games? p2" on the *BioWare* blog. In this essay, he instructs writers to consider the different types of "player voices" or the various types of players: the player who's trying to do the right thing, the player who wants to be a bastard, "the player who is the suspicious and reluctant hero, etc."

subjects because they structure the positions and the readings that players can take. Salem and Zimmerman indicate how gameplay is inherently metacognitive, as it requires players to understand and acknowledge game terms, rules, and mechanics (499). As a number of scholars have pointed out,[8] this structuring occurs spatially through game systems and interfaces.

Certainly, another important factor in defining roleplaying experiences in games are its gameworlds that provide spaces for the construction of meaning. Kristine Jorgensen (2014) defines gameworlds as interfaces that structure interaction by acting as bridges between players and the game's system (57). I argue that it is gameworlds that create ambience that help orient players to the world. In *Ambient Rhetoric*, Thomas Rickert (2013) borrows a number of concepts from Heidegger as he illustrates how places attune individuals, allowing them to understand their being-in-the-world. He deconstructs the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy by using Heidegger's ideas, particularly on individuals' connection with things. Dwelling, he points out, is an attunement that generates knowledge in one's relationship with the environment (27), and it is in dwelling that rhetorical production is situated (34). Indeed, this notion of dwelling is useful especially when applied to gameworlds.

Gameworlds, in particular, not only construct the environment that players occupy, but they also reflect how players, through their characters, live in them. One of the best examples of environmental storytelling[9] is the gothic-horror action game *Bloodborne*. In *Bloodborne*, players are thrust in the city of Yharnam, with very little narrative context. They awaken in a strange clinic where supposedly any sickness can be cured by blood ministration. They are given the simple instruction to "Seek paleblood to transcend the hunt." While that may not be a lot to go on, it nonetheless

8 See Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) and Ian Bogost's (2007) *Persuasive Games*. While both authors are notable for coining different concepts concerning games, they both point out individually how rules shape games as a medium (as Aarseth argues in *Cybertext*), and rules that shape the medium's rhetoric (as Bogost argues in *Persuasive Games*).

9 For more on environmental storytelling as a game design concept, see Henry Jenkins's (2010) "Game Design as Narrative Architecture."

prompts players to kill beasts. Upon exploring Yharnam, players discover that the city's streets are overrun by strange monsters and an organization of hunters intent on killing them before sunrise. Because gameplay is notably difficult, it forces players to stay longer in certain spaces and notice subtle details such as those found in the monsters that one fights in specific areas, item descriptions, and the color of the moon, which changes to red the more one progresses through the game. As players slowly unlock various areas in the game, they can find multiple sides of the games lore—one where dreams function as alternate realities, and where tentacle monsters rule the cosmos. Noticeably, the difficulty in combat decreases as one advances through the game, which is highly dependent on how much "insight" players gather by either defeating bosses or picking up items called "madman's knowledge," and how much the player's "Beasthood" status gauge fills up—the more insight players have, the less of players acquire beasthood. These decisions—whether players decide to acquire more knowledge or beasthood—carry over to the game's multiple endings. Depending on their choices, players can find their player character waking from a dream bound to a physical body, guarding the space of dreams in order to aid other hunters, or ultimately transforming into what appears to be an infant Great One or tentacle monster. In a lot of ways, *Bloodborne's* narrative, told through its interface and environment, reproduces the experience of Lovecraftian horror. Interfaces and environments such as these are constructed to tell the player how much s/he has progressed in the game, and in many ways, they also shape the various experiences player have with such games.

Projected Identity and Gameplay Hermeneutics

John Dewey notes how art creates experiences. Richard Shusterman (1992) provides a most interesting summary of Dewey's concept of "an experience":

> […] what constitutes the core of Dewey's aesthetic experience is another common sense of "experience"—that which refers to a memorable and ultimately satisfying episode of living, one that stands out from the humdrum flow of life as 'an experience' by its 'internal integration and fulfillment' reached

> through a developing organization of meanings and energies which affords 'a satisfying emotional quality' of some sort. Distinctively aesthetic experience, for Dewey, is simply when the satisfying factors and qualities of 'an experience are lifted high above the threshold of perception' and appreciated 'for their own sake.' (27)

Narrative-heavy game genres, such as adventure games or roleplaying games, utilize the emotional investment that players have on their characters. Bleed is one phenomenon that some scholars have noted in roleplaying games[10]. A term coined by the Nordic Larp community, bleed is "experienced by a player when her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa" (Jeepform). While the concept of bleed still needs to be theorized more thoroughly, it does point to an identity that is in-between the player's real world identity and the player character. In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee (2003) describes the identity that is formed in-between as the "projected identity". He argues that the formation of the projected identity makes it difficult to determine where both the real and projected identities begin and end. Gee argues that without this projection, the player will not experience meaning in the game (99-102).

Gee's projected identity draws a number of similarities from Kenneth Burke's (1969) identification. Burke characterizes identification as an essential component of communication, especially as the need to identify arises out of division (22). Seen in the context of his idea of language as symbolic action, identification positions individuals as actors who utilize symbols "to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (41). Burke and Gee indicate the necessity of intermediaries for understanding. In digital roleplaying games, gameworlds and projected identities perform this function of mediation. Players navigate through these intermediaries through play, which can be described as hermeneutic. Gadamer (1996) describes hermeneutics as

10 See Sarah Lynne Bowman's (2010) *The Functions of Role-Playing Games* and Annika Waern's DiGRA paper "'I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist!!': Bleed in the context of a Computer Game"

> a theoretical attitude toward the practice of interpretation, the interpretation of texts, but also in relation to experiences interpreted in them and in our communicatively unfolded orientations in the world. (112)

Hermeneutics require a mode of questioning that calls for a dialogue with prejudice and tradition in order to acquire a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer 1975, 273). Because the Enlightenment focuses on logos as the primary means of truth, he criticizes it for its "prejudice against prejudice itself" (1975, 239-40). Gadamer contends that traditions are essential in constructing self-understanding and identity.

For Gadamer, play is hermeneutic because it involves a mediated understanding, and a willingness to lose one's self to the game in the act of representation in order to find one's self. "All play," Gadamer reasons, "is a being played" (1975, 95). Monica Vilhauer (2010), in her interpretation of Gadamer's notion of play, argues:

> play's global relevance in Gadamer's hermeneutics and show that "play" elucidates the very process of understanding in general—that understanding which stretches through all our hermeneutic experience, including our encounters with art, with text, with tradition in all its forms, with other in dialogue, and which even constitutes (as Heidegger taught) our very mode of bring-in-the-world. The concept of play inevitably depicts the structure of our fundamental relationship to the world in a way so different from the Cartesian one that has dominated philosophical thinking that with "play" Gadamer manages to call into question all the familiar concepts of subject, object, knowledge, and truth that have been handed down to us by the early modern era.

In this way, play extends Gadamer's critique of the Enlightenment's focus on reason, and its distancing of the subject from the object. Vilhauer particularly draws attention to the dialogic nature of play.

Essential to the formation of this way of understanding are players who engage in the mimetic "to-and-fro motion of play" (Gadamer 1975, 94). By choosing to play the game, players, Gadamer

emphasizes, choose to submit themselves to the rules of the game in order to take part and enact in something larger than himself. In this way, the player becomes an active agent in performing the rules and is involved in an act of representation. Gadamer (1975) points out a paradox in this idea of representation:

> The self-representation of the game involves the player's achieving, as it were, his own representation by playing, i.e. representing something. Only because play is always representation is human play able to find the task of the game in representation itself. (97)

It is in this way that play is transformative: it is only by becoming something other than himself/herself can the player only be himself/herself. Adrienne Shaw (2012), in her study of how players identify with video game characters, notes that based on her interviews, players do not readily identify with game characters because they have similar racial or gender identifiers (56). Instead, players identify with characters based on a number of things such as similar life experiences, choices, etc. In this way, Shaw points out the complexity of how individuals identify with characters and uses this to argue for more diverse characters because players can identify with characters different from themselves (212-215).[11]

The dialogic nature of play becomes even more apparent when players consider the moral decisions given to them. Analyzing discussions among players of the *Mass Effect* series, one could see how players do reflect on moral decisions. In the controversial ending of *Mass Effect 3*, players are given four choices to resolve the conflict between synthetics and organics. The first option allows the player character to give his/her consciousness to the Reapers but s/he will die in the process to become something similar to a god in the universe. The second option, dubbed by a number of fans as the "space magic" ending, allows the player character to genetically manipulate all synthetics and organics in order to make

11 Much of Shaw's work delve into the dynamics of identification in games, and a lot of her other work also point to how gamer identities are performative. See also "Do You Identify as a Gamer?" A lot of this form of analysis also signal towards the ideological function of games, particularly on gender. For those interested in this, see also Shira Chess' (2017) *Ready Player Two*.

them all part synthetic and organic. In the third option, the player character destroys the Reapers but also destroys all synthetic life in the process, including one's allies. The fourth option, which is available via downloadable content, allows the player to refuse all the choices thereby dooming all life in the galaxy. These choices were heavily discussed in (or through) a number of forums, even outside the fan protests.[12] A forum poster at the official *BioWare* forums writes:

> I choose Destroy. Every single time I play. I'll always destroy the Reapers. It's been my goal from the first game. Annihilate the Reapers for good. I understand those that choose Control. Or Refuse. I get that. But... Synthesis? I don't even understand how anyone can choose to change the galaxies DNA to one single green matter thingy. Destroy because it's the original worthy goal. And I have the balls to take that responsibility on my shoulders. Destroying the Geth and Edi was not an easy decision. My Shepard(s) all hate that part of it. But she [*sic*] made the right decision. (MassaFX 2014)

Another writes: "I did have my near pure renegade Shepard pick Control. Now that was a scary ending. I commanded an army that none shall dare oppose" (ShotgunJulia 2014). Even more interesting are those who refuse to choose any of the given endings, often attesting that their player character would never make any of those choices. The fan reactions point to the fact that the choices are often personal, and they always evoke their vision of Shepard, the player character in often in relation to the game's morality. In many ways, these reflections are dialogic in the way that they all incorporate the player's knowledge of the world and his/her biases and connection to the player character.

12 When the ending was released, a large number of vocal fans created campaigns for *BioWare* to change the ending. This was partially successful, as *BioWare* gave in, releasing downloadable content months later—explaining the endings, and adding the fourth ending option. While some still find the endings problematic, this appeased a number of the protesters.

Further, Gadamer specifies that the dialogic process of play extend to the spectator:

> When a play activity becomes a play in the theatre a total switch takes place. It puts the spectator in the place of the player. He—and not the player—is the person for and in whom the play takes place […] The spectator has only methodological precedence. In that the play is presented for him, it becomes apparent that it bears within itself a meaning that must be understood that can therefore be detached from the behavior of the player (99).

In this particular model, the spectator is required to actively participate in interpreting the performance, and, like the player, to be transformed by it. Gadamer shows us that understanding itself is dynamic and social because meaning can only be worked in relation to others. In relation to games, many scholars have pointed out how meaning-making in games cannot be taken outside of their various social contexts.[13]

This social aspect of play that Gadamer illustrates can be seen in the phenomenon of Let's Plays and video game streaming in *Twitch*. In TL Taylor's (2015) study on e-sports and live streaming, *Raising the Stakes*, she points to how professional players and live streamers create different constructions of gamer identities for their audiences, and how their audiences become absorbed in these performances, thus creating an entire culture around the spectatorship of games.[14] Similarly, studies on Let's Players describe a practice where players record themselves playing a game to an audience, thus creating narratives centered around players rather than the games they play (Nguyen 2016; Kerttula 2016). However, these narratives surrounding these player identities can also generate sexist, homophobic and racist discourses prevalent in many game communities, especially as these players respond to and situate themselves in relation to these communities (Nguyen

13 See Consalvo's (2007) *Cheating* and "Zelda 64 and Video Game Fans," Newman's "Videogames" and Apperley's "Gaming Rhythms" to name a few.

14 See also Mark Johnson and Jamie Woodcock's (2017) study on Twitch streamers, Nicholas Taylor's (2016) ethnographic work on e-sports players, and Benjamin Burroughs and Paul Rama's (2015) description of practices on Twitch.

2016). In these ways, Let's Plays and streaming draw attention to the performative aspect of games[15] and become a productive area of studies to explore, especially in looking at the ways various players can create narratives alongside and against each other.

Conclusion

Digital games will always offer unique experiences for those who play it. They show how ambient texts generate affect in the way that they encourage play, and how players are not merely passive consumers but active agents defined by the gameworlds and the communities that they play in. As game studies continue to examine the complex nature of play, it is important to consider the theoretical underpinnings of the ways players talk about their game experiences and the ways they understand gameworlds and generate narratives of their own. While players can never become authors in the sense that they will never be able to legally own the rights to the games that they play, the narratives they make through gameworlds and their characters will always be theirs.

15 See also Thomas Hale's (2013) dissertation on this subject.

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