

Super Mario Galaxy and the Videogame Aesthetic

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Abstract

The Nintendo Wii console has been successfully marketed to appeal to a broad demographic as a tool for social interaction, entertainment and play. Media reports on videogames have tended so far to focus on their supposed negative impacts. While in social and cultural studies such assumptions are normally avoided, there is a predominance of articles concentrating on the videogame as a form of interactive media through which people 'negotiate' identities and play out 'real-life' scenarios. Most current scholarship, therefore, examines not so much the videogame as the interactions that take place between the living beings using them. Against this tendency, this paper develops a set of concepts to define the videogame as a unique form of artistic expression. Adapting concepts from Gilles Deleuze's work on art and cinema, this paper provides a reading of Super Mario Galaxy on the Nintendo Wii console. In describing videogames as art of a kind, a position is taken on what makes a great videogame.

Introduction

Super Mario Galaxy (2007, Nintendo Wii) was developed by Nintendo's Tokyo EAD studio. Shigeru Miyamoto is the name more readily associated with the series and a highly influential figure in the videogame world. I refer to Miyamoto in this paper as an ideal-type videogame auteur. Super Mario Galaxy is an appropriate example for this exploration for several reasons. It is the most critically acclaimed game of the current generation of consoles, recently winning the 2009 BAFTA award (backdated to the end of 2007) for best videogame against competition from Grand Theft Auto 4 and Call of Duty 4 and the spiritual successor of Super Mario 64. Only the Legend of Zelda series compares to the Mario platform in terms of critical acclaim¹.

SMG is a beautiful looking game, a work of breathtaking imagination and executed to near perfection to enable the player to flow with its world. The orchestral soundtrack and dynamic electro renditions of tunes on previous Mario games add to the effect. While SM64 will always be the more significant game because it was the first to

break through the two-dimensional barrier, SMG is arguably the more rewarding game to play and includes enough innovation for it to stand alone as a unique work of *videogame* art of a kind. Yet it is an art that cannot be justified here according to narrative or representations. While a game review might touch upon the points made above, the singularity of the videogame aesthetic is left wanting. The challenge is to discern the universal to all videogames regardless of genre or technology: to discover in SMG the essence that could equally be found in a first-person shooter or role-playing game. Gilles Deleuze's work on art and cinema contain concepts that can usefully be reassigned to help in determining this videogame aesthetic.

In my analysis of SMG I propose four distinctive and also interrelated concepts appertaining to the videogame and hypothetically to all videogames. The four principal concepts are unpacked in sequence. First, I shall argue that in videogames there is an objective limit to subjective interpretation of the 'text'. If we 'misread' the videogame we lose: videogames virtualise the Oedipal complex, punishing us for our excessive desires. Second, that while the programme is sold complete the art of 'Miyamoto' is only fully realised when the player brings the game to life: the videogame involves the collaboration of two artists: designer-artist and player-artist. Third, Miyamoto 'paints' onto the videogame canvas non-representational patches of potentiality for sensation, what I call a ludo-diagram. Fourth, friction appears as an entity in itself in the videogame. Without the 'friction-image', the sensation and then the registration of the effect of the player's manipulations on the screen, there would be no possibility for mastery over the forces the player brings to life.

The Banal Reality of the Virtual

The categories, modes and functions of the videogame serve as a point of departure for discovering their essence. Terms such as technology, pleasure, immersion and interaction are often associated with the videogame. The most distinctive quality of a videogame, though, is the capacity it generates for (virtual) play.

Play according to Huzinga (1955) is a free activity, pre-subjective and non-commodified. It is an intrinsic part of our nature. But it is a problematic concept for describing our relationship to the videogame. It can trivialise the form without shedding much light on what is distinctive about it. For lack of adequate substitute the word play is used here but only in association with other words to signify the *application of force* constitutive of videogame 'play'.

Slavoj Žižek (1997) relates Lacan's ideas on a 'decentred' subjectivity to virtual reality. In the real world our behaviours can be ridiculed and punished. In the virtual space of the videogame a male can take on the identity of a woman without fear of social opprobrium or kill civilians without fear of imprisonment. In virtual space we are closer to our real selves because there is no superego authority to punish us, nobody to fear, nothing to feel guilty about. In the videogame there is an object of desire, the completion of a level, a high score, a new ability or in SMG the rescue of Princess Peach from Bowser. The banal reality of the virtual in videogames is that unlike other media, we cannot allow the fantasy to 'run riot'. In short, the 'rules of the game' prevent us from possessing or killing whomever we un/consciously please. The superego punishes us for our attempt to acquire the object of desire by constantly creating new obstacles to overcome. Fantasy is only ever partial. Take Call of Duty 4 as an example. I can imagine when playing that game that instead of shooting Arabs I am in fact shooting US and UK imperialist forces. But if I get carried away with my own fantasy I may start shooting the in-game symbolic referents of real world US and

UK soldiers and their vehicles of destruction. This is not permitted in Call of Duty 4. If I try to bomb a Chinook helicopter the game ends. It is the same outcome when I spray too much ‘friendly fire’ in the direction of my teammates. These objective conditions practically block the fantasy. Objectively one cannot kill anyone but a symbolic enemy. Oedipus enters the screen. When playing a videogame we have to interpret the world in the manner of the auteur’s choosing.

My first point, then, is that videogames in varied ways reproduce the Oedipal complex within the field of play. There is a struggle between the game-maker or superego (represented onscreen as Bowser in SMG) possessing the object of desire and the game-player who lacks the object of desire. It is a struggle that the game-player can never win.

Artist and Apprentice

SMG is an assemblage of multiple desires, the animator, the composer, the chief designer, the programmer and the game tester. Together these form a Body without Organs (BwO), intensities of desire, lines of flight, desiring production. The videogame is the actualisation of the multiple desires of the members of the production studio. Miyamoto, the game-maker or artist, captures and codifies the desiring production of the videogame team.

In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze (2008:33) describes the BwO as ‘flesh and nerve’:

The body is completely living, and yet nonorganic. Likewise sensation, when it acquires a body through the organism, takes on an excessive and spasmodic appearance, exceeding the bounds of organic activity. It is immediately conveyed in the flesh through the nervous wave or vital emotion.

In the paintings of Francis Bacon representations of people appear deformed. They appear to share human characteristics but in their deformations they reveal forces that are external to the form. These forces lie outside of representation. Bacon does not paint a figural representation of a human, rather an interminable presence, a *figure*:

The insistence of the smile beyond the face and beneath the face. The insistence of a scream that survives the mouth, the insistence of a body that survives the organism, the insistence of transitory organs that survive the qualified organs. And in this excessive presence, the identity of an already-there and an already-delayed. Everywhere there is a presence acting directly on the nervous system, which makes representation, whether in place or at a distance, impossible (Deleuze 2008: 36).

So what is Mario? Mario is a particular videogame avatar but also an ideal-type referent to the videogame avatar / objects and also the distorted body of the figure of Mario and its equivalents in its multiple forms when we play. Without the player's input Mario is entirely figurative, a crude stereotype. But he becomes a figure through the manipulations of the player. The player applies the force upon Mario when the avatar glides across different surfaces, hits objects, and leaps around planetoids. The player feels the different effects of gravity. Miyamoto creates Mario but he does not create the figure, the force is latent. The game designer creates potential. The game player engages in an endless process of creating the figure. In this respect, unlike forms of art that are completed prior to their reception, the work of the videogame artist not only *must* remain incomplete but is only being completed (fulfilled) in the hands of the player. Unlike interactive theatre, which one could claim does this too, the work arrives as a completed product but it is still incomplete in this crucial sense. There is only a figure in movement: the figure is constantly being re-created by the player's manipulations.

We can distinguish between the technical role of a game-maker and the art of Miyamoto. Every videogame is the product of a game-maker. But Miyamoto creates

the condition for the possibility of the figure in its many deformations. The videogame figure, whether Mario in motion SMG or the manipulations upon the falling blocks in Tetris or movement of the cross-hair that guides the exploding projectiles in Missile Command, allows the game-player to develop her own art. The art of the videogame lies in the manner of the collaboration between the two artists. If the videogame is too easy the art of the game-player is never properly tested. If the controller is poorly mapped to the game, the player-artist can rightly blame her tools for a poor rendering. If the platform that the avatar jumps on is not accurately represented on screen, the player-artist cannot with any precision perform her task.

Miyamoto is the play or ludo-creator to enable the game-player to embark on line of flights of mastery over the game. For the videogame to become art of a kind there has to be the capacity for lines of flight of mastery for the player. In SMG there are endless labyrinths of forking paths for the player to embark on. The relationship between ludo-creator and ludo-apprentice is always imbalanced but this will be forgotten when we lose ourselves in play. A good design permits this possibility for dematerialisation into the game's diegesis.

Ludo-Diagrammatic Sensation

Calleja (2007) maps 'the digital game experience' with reference to Fine's appropriation of Goffman's *Frame Analysis*. Included in the schema is narrative, affective, performative, shared, spatial and tactical involvement. Elements of these are found within SMG. The diagram of the videogame is a latent force brought to life by the ludo-apprentice. Deleuze (2008: 72) describes the diagram in the work of Bacon as 'chaos, a catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm'. On the painting, the 'diagram are the zones, line-strokes and colour patches' upon which recognisable

forms are created. Its function is to be 'suggestive', a possibility of fact (2008: 71). The diagram is like the rhizome, here the work of artistic preparation. Its order, such that it can be called that, is 'non-representative, nonillustrative, nonnarrative... asignifying traits' (Deleuze 2008: 70). The *ludo*-diagram is all of these things. The force that distorts the figure in the videogame is an invisible presence in the zones, line-strokes and patches: the possibility of the fact of sensation for the ludo-apprentice brought to life in the brush strokes of play. Because the figure of the videogame is distorted through the act of play, the force and the figure is non-representative, nonillustrative and nonnarrative.

Guattari (Trend 2001:43) describes the way a 'diagrammatic machine... develops in coordinates that are more numerous and more deterritorialised.' The 'subjectivity of the machine is set up in universes of virtuality that everywhere exceed its existential territoriality.' (Trend 2001: 45). Patches appear to the ludo-apprentice as patches of colour, switches that create momentum, vines that Mario can swing on. Only the potential for force is represented. The ludo-diagram hooks us in. It is the fix that will produce a bodily affect. It promises the feeling of giddiness when we first run around, upside down, a planetoid. Or it is the sense of vertigo when we walk along a precipice. It is the rush of excitement as we near the coveted power star. Wherever we go in SMG we feel the effect of the ludo-diagram. When the ludo-apprentice adds her brush strokes she feels the force of the ludo-diagram on Mario and ludo-diagrammatic sensation or *kickback* on herself. Sensation passes from one 'order' to another, one 'level' to another, one 'area' to another (Deleuze 2008: 26).

Miyamoto presents us with a ludo-diagram that is in constant flux but signposted nonetheless. We know which way gravity will flow because there are arrows on the wall pointing in that direction. We know that we are safe to run underneath a

planetoid when there is no ‘black hole’ under it to suck us into oblivion. These various signs, representations, are preludes to the friction-image of the videogame.

The Particle Effect and the Friction-image

Drawing his influence from Bergson, Deleuze in *Cinema 1* and *2* develops the idea of the movement-image and the time-image. On the movement-image, Deleuze (1997) explains how temporal pauses between one still image and another creates a sense of movement and a linear perception of time. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze (2005) fleshes out the time-image. This he says concerns the way cinema presents time in a pure state. The time-image is out of joint, non-sequential, scattered. A film can capture different moments in time by fragmenting narrative. Cinema foregrounds time and so reveals time as a fragmented object that exists independently of our ability to control it.

In the time-image of the videogame, the ludo-apprentice is the stationary observer of time: time itself is in movement. In *Viewtiful Joe* on the Nintendo Gamecube, time can be slowed down and reversed. In *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* on the N64, the follow up to *Ocarina of Time*, Link has to rescue Zelda before the moon collides with the land of Termina. But he has the power to return to the beginning of time, to start the day over again. All the objectives he completed during that day carry over into what is essentially the same day repeated. Link’s actions are subordinated to the time-image, time moves but Link remains in the same place.

In *SMG* we sense gravity in our manipulations and register its presence across the game world in order to enhance our skills. We have to think about the surface, the ice we can slide across, the slope we could tumble down and the water we can float in. When we play *SMG* for the first time we see friction in these objects, we have to think about it and how its intensities will affect our movements: we have to get used

to the sensation of running around different sized planetoids with their signature gravitational effects.

Friction is sensed through the movement the ludo-apprentice creates. The friction-image is generated by an interval of a kind between particle effects, the Mario before the jump (the arrangement of particles or pixels prior to the ludo-apprentice's actions) and the Mario after the jump (the arrangement of particles after the action). Within the interval there is the sensation of Mario the figure, a flash of representation as we travel the ludo-diagram. In movement the figure rapidly decomposes and recomposes in a series of iterations, flashes of representation and sensations upon the ludo-apprentice's body.

This also relates to the action-image of cinema (Deleuze 1997). Deleuze describes this as a sequence from recognition of a problem to overcome, the action to overcome it, and the outcome of the action. For example, in a standard Hollywood film, we see a ticking time bomb, the bomb has to be defused, the hero rushes to the scene but he is too late: the bomb explodes. In videogames the action-image is determined by the ludo-apprentice. In SMG there are multiple action-image stacked upon one another to be completed linearly or left hanging in mid-sequence to be completed later.

Mario is only alive through the skill of the ludo-apprentice in the manipulation of the brushes, the Wii-mote, the 'nunchuck' attachment, the 'dual shock' Playstation control or whatever other device is used for whatever videogame to control whatever avatar, represented onscreen or sensed through particle effects such as explosions in first-person games. A great game lets us forget the interface. In SMG, the controller (Wii-mote plus attached 'nun-chuck' control) is so finely mapped to the game world that the apprentice is soon able to apply her art with ease: the controller becomes an appendage. SMG enables multiple sensations of friction but these soon become

imperceptible as the ludo-apprentice melds with the game world. The world of SMG is impossible yet soon into our apprenticeship the world we encounter begins to feel natural, real even. If cinema is the reality of the virtual, the videogame is the reality of the impossible.

Conclusion: If Videogames are Art, not all Videogames are Videogames

The basic aesthetic of the videogame is essentially the same whether the opponents are online (eg. Left 4 Dead) or offline (eg. Wii Sports). The genres are different manifestations and intensities of the same thing. A strong narrative is essential to a videogame such as The Legend of Zelda but not essential to all videogames. All videogames require a ludo-diagram. But there is a qualitative difference between a pick up and play game such as Carnival: Fun Fair Games on the Wii console requiring few skills or honing of skill to play well, and something like Geometry Wars 2 on Xbox 360 Live that rewards mastery. If a game rewards random effort and execution, the ludo-apprentice is merely a game player, not an artist of the game but a docile machine: the videogame becomes, or so appears, socially retarding.

In terms of complexity, the ludo-diagram of the original Space Invaders is primitive compared to SMG. The distortions are limited by the singularity of the friction-image. But with a limited technology it was still possible to create a ludo-diagram that could seduce would-be artists into playing games such as Space Invaders, Donkey Kong and Defender. The friction-image revealed itself in the effect of the action upon the gameworld: the base in Space Invaders, the jumpman in Donkey Kong, the fighter craft in Defender. They all produced ludo-diagrammatic sensations on the body of the player. In these seminal videogames the ludo-diagram is perfectly attuned to the technology and controller.

Super Mario Galaxy is perfectly attuned to the Wii console. But the quality, complexity and multiple deformations of the ludo-diagram and its signature friction-images are the many rewards for mastery that help to explain why Super Mario Galaxy is a great videogame of our time.

Notes

1. See Edge Magazine's issue 200 'The 100 best games to play' list

References

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