

Spectators of videogames

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The complete title of this paper should be 'spectators of videogames or players of cinema'. Cinema today sometimes reflects a clear imitation of videogames aesthetics and videogames are reproducing many of the cinematic techniques that made films the connection between art and technology in the 20th century. The audiences/players have also affected the convergence of both mediums. If cinema provoked the evolution of videogames in a certain direction to meet the audience requirements in terms of image quality, narrative, camera perspective and character construction, then videogames are currently transforming the way in which some spectators watch films as untraditional camera angles and movements, colours, and film rhythms are demanded to produce a successful blockbuster film.¹

1. Watching videogames: how cinema influenced videogames

By the end of the 1980s, videogames started to compete with cinema and television, to provide an alternative source of diegetic worlds, worlds that are seen on screen, which are an artificial production of image and sound, but ones with which the player could interact. The influence of the old media has produced that today most of the 3D games, especially FPS videogames, used the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema (Wolf, 2002: 29-30). This is something that radically contrasts with the origin of videogames; games such as *Pac-Man* (1980), *Asteroids* (1979) or *Pong* (1972) did not imitate a lens generated camera but tried to simply be efficient and practical in showing the content of the game. Indeed, today, in FPS, sport, action and adventure videogames, functionality is something that still differentiates the point of view of videogames and cinema; the filmic

¹ Interestingly, watching the trailer of *The Terminator Salvation* (McG, 2009) which will be released on 3rd of June 2009 in the United Kingdom and consecutively the commercial of the game *The Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena* (2009) it was difficult to distinguish both media. The film is commercialised using colours, rhythms and camera angles that resemblance a FPS videogame and the videogame, respectively, is presented with similar aesthetics and appearance to any action film released in the digital image era.

camera intends not only to transmit information but also tries to achieve a certain degree of emotion and aesthetical values whilst in videogames, apart from the (limited degree of) freedom to choose a viewpoint by the player, the information is essential whilst aesthetics and emotions are considered secondary. Similarly, the editing of videogames, which is obviously made in real-time with preconfigured parameters, has incorporated elements of cinematographic montage but maintains the same principle of functionality, preserving certain continuity in the image and sound to keep the player immersed in the game.

The narration in videogames genres has two general structures, a simple 'achieve the goal' in those based on sport or in car races or a more similar narration to Hollywood cinema with a structure composed of introduction-body-ending. This structure is more evident in videogames that are adaptations of big cinema blockbuster productions such as *Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001-2003) or *The Matrix* (Wachoski and Wachowski, 1999-2003). In this sense, the adaptation of videogames to the big screen of the cinema can be interpreted, following McLuhan's (2001) theory of adaptation in media, as an attempt to gain legitimacy as a new medium. The most famous adaptations are those of successful blockbuster films such as *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*, but nowadays any big film production is conceived with the idea of extending the product and the economic impact in the videogame market. However, the adaptation of a videogame does not necessarily mean the imitation of the original film but the translation of scenes in environments and actions. In certain videogames such as in *Peter Jackson's King Kong: the Official Game of the Movie* (2005), these levels are connected using cut-scenes, which are mere cinematic scenes with no interaction (Cheng, 2007) where the player is momentarily transformed to the role of spectator, making visible the double function acquired by the consumer of these big productions.

2. Filming videogames: How cinema analyses videogames

Cinema, a contemporary storytelling medium, is not only assuming plots taken from videogames, but is also reflecting the consequences and

fears provoked by their sudden relevance in contemporary society and culture. In the 80s, with the social introduction of videogames, it appears the first notable film based on one of them, *Tron* (Lisberger, 1982), in which the protagonist Kevin Flynn (Jeff Bridges) is literally absorbed by the game. The social consequences of videogames were mixed with the fear provoked by the Cold War in *War Games* (Badham, 1983), in which David Lightman (Mathew Broderick) demonstrates, playing a game that is in reality a military simulation of a nuclear war, how the extinction of the human race depends on a multitude of 0s and 1s that are slowly slipping further from our control. In the 90's the current technological virtual culture is reflected in *eXistenZ* (Cronenberg, 1999) a film that fictionalizes a deep confusion between reality and virtuality: within the overarching game the characters play further successive games that remind us of the old sensation of dreaming that we are dreaming, of the immersion of unrealities inside unrealities. *eXistenZ* certainly reflects the potential development of videogames when the game converges in the player and also demonstrates the current fear of losing the perception of reality with the simulation of technological (un)realities.

3. Playing cinema: How videogames are influencing cinema

Since the social influence of videogames has expanded from marginal minorities to an increasing portion of the population, in some cases the revenue from games has started to exceed those from big cinema productions, as the film industry targets profitable videogames to attract the players to the cinema. The clearest examples are *Super Mario Bros* (Janken and Morton, 1993), *Mortal Kombat* (Anderson, 1995), *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (West, 2001), *Final Fantasy* (Sakaguchi, 2001), *Resident Evil* (Anderson, 2002) and *Max Payne* (Moore, 2008); blockbuster films based on the success of videogames and which illustrate the transition from the small screen of the monitor to the big screen of the cinema, exposing the permeable boundaries existing between both media.

Also, many films adopt the visual and narrative conventions of videogames, and a film such as *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998), with its

exploitation of a videogames aesthetic within a filmic structure, is a perfect example of this.² In much the same manner, *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) with its use of computerized special effects, non-static camera and the slow motion movement, the already famous ‘bullet time’, originated a new, influential videogame-filmic aesthetic that has had important repercussions for the audience.

It is true to say, therefore, that the filmic apparatus has been very much affected in recent years by the electronic culture of video and the computer generation of images, based on the formula of temporal simultaneity and freedom of movement of the image. Taken from the three dimensional worlds of computer games, where it is possible to choose an angle from which to perceive the action, cinema has developed a way to approach the ‘infectiveness’ of virtuality beyond animation films (King, 2005: 158). After all, a substantial amount of the pleasure experienced when playing videogames comes from the delight of observing (and ‘participating in’) the development of technology. Cinema has found a way to share this amusement and can be summarized, much in the same way as the cinema of the beginning of the 20th century was, via the notion of ‘fascination’ (King, 2002: 37).

The most important difference existing today between cinema and videogames is clearly the lack of interactivity in classic cinema. The current absence of satisfactory interfaces to link the fictional world of the player/spectator with the diegetic world of the screen is the biggest obstacle that cinema encounters to become interactive and the videogames are probably the best mirror with which to study it. During the short history of videogames the medium has managed to be more immersive than cinema connecting the physicality of the spectator (brain/body) with the (un)reality of the game. It is possible to affirm that in videogames we are virtually transported to the screen whilst cinema provides an experience closer to a dream stage in which we project ourselves in the screen. Certainly, in a videoconsole such as the Wii to play games requires mental interactivity and

² For Richard Grusin, the film is just a ‘cinematic representations of the increasingly common and widespread experience of watching other people play video games’ (Grusin, 2006: 15).

simultaneously physical dexterity of hand-eye coordination and this contrast with the exclusively audiovisual and 'non-physical' activity of cinema.

Today, films have also stepped towards videogames capability to give certain control of the content to the player. In this sense, the DVD's of *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) and *Time Code* (Figgis, 2000) offer the possibility of watching the film differently, giving, with clear limitations, the control of the story to the spectators (Grusin, 2006). Simultaneously, *Time Code* splits the screen into four and gives the spectator the chance to decide the point of view that he would like to watch. However, the freedom of the audience is not absolute, as it is not possible to choose the angle and move freely within the screen, and also the soundtrack emphasizes the relevance of a particular screen over the other three. In this sense, *Time Code* is just an incipient 'sample' of what interactive films can offer to us.

Indeed, cinema has tried in the last three decades to incorporate different levels of interaction, as the 'odorama cards' in *Polyester* (Waters, 1980) and the old and new 3D technology but the results have not provide satisfactory levels of immersion and interactivity. Therefore, the challenge for the future relating interface in audiovisual mediums is to create a connection between technology and the nervous system, producing a perfect symbiosis between both elements and reproducing reality with total fidelity. This is the dream/nightmare that Cronenberg shows us in *eXistenz*, demonstrating the potentially dangerous aspect of this technology.

4. The audiovisual future: a transmedia product

Today, videogames are the perfect example of a global, post industrial cultural product, a product that represents the fusion of digital technology and the culture and economy of the late 20th and early 21st century. The connection between cinema and videogames has also now become an economic matter illustrating the 'media convergence' of today (Jenkins, 2004). The convergence of both mediums with a shared technology, narrative and characters intends to close the existing gap between videogames and cinema to secure economic success in a 'transmedia' product.

Today, many Hollywood productions intentionally include CGI action scenes, as seen in films such as *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas, 2005) and *The Matrix*, in order to sell the videogame and, at the same time, videogames trailers include cinematographic conventions, montage and narration to gain currency amongst videogames consumers (Chien, 2007: 26). In this way, games adapted from films, and films inspired by videogames, acquire an advantage as they allude to diegetic worlds that very often are familiar for the spectator/player, facilitating, in this way, their 'immersion' within these worlds.

The *Enter The Matrix* (2003) game, which was released on the same day as *The Matrix Reloaded* (Wachowski and Wachowski, 2003), is an illustrative example of the transmedia storytelling of today: 'media conglomeration provided a context for the Wachowski brothers' aesthetic experiment - they wanted to play with a new kind of storytelling and use Warner Bros blockbuster promotion to open it to the largest possible public' (Jenkins, 2006: 108). Game and film thus constitute at once alternative but entirely complementary mediums for audiences to follow the story of *The Matrix*. Acutely aware of the existing link between games and films, as well as videogame players and cinema audiences, Warner Bros secured the economic success of the game and film with the simultaneous release and mutual promotion of both products.

It is also possible to find an alliance of videogames and films in an uncommercial manner, these productions have started to appear as experimental films, not only based on computer games or that adopt their aesthetics, but actual games recorded and dubbed in order to provide them with a 'filmic plot' to attract videogames consumers. This phenomenon is known as 'Machinima': 'animated filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment' (Marino, 2004: 1), which has its origin in videogame players who wanted to share their skills and tricks with other players. Irene Chien remarks on the self-reflexivity of machinima and points out that 'the way these game-movie hybrids use cinematic narrative to challenge video-game logic, and game culture to question filmmaking paradigms is what makes them, for the moment, so arresting' (Chien, 2007: 24). Machinima develops

an entirely new film language, one that is not necessarily confined by the real world. With its hybrid nature, Machinima, has merged art and videogames, the commercial product with subversive and popular art forms and in this way illustrates the notion of '*remediation*, the appropriation of content of one media or art form by another' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). Machinima films include postproduction films such as *Dance Voldo Dance* (Brandt, 2005) or *The Journey* (Kirshner, 2004) and on-line versions, that are somewhat reminiscent of theatre plays, such as *Deviation* (Griggs, 2006), produced when actors and director were not sharing the same physical space.

5. Conclusions

The keyword to understand the current difference between film and videogames is interactivity. This can be the future of cinema: interactive films with active spectators. Currently, the missing ingredient is perhaps the lack of interfaces that produce a good immersive and interactive experience, but the fast development of technology indicates that it will be achieved sooner than we might think. The appearance of interaction in a medium such as cinema suggests a need for further knowledge about the technology that our society is producing and also the potential that this technology has and how it can be applied. Entertainment being the most obvious source, educational uses should be considered in interactive products that combined cinema and videogames. Cinema, a medium originated from the fusion of culture and technology, should not be afraid to face the new technological developments and cultural momentums; in fact cinema has always benefited from the contributions from other arts, such as photography or theatre and therefore assuming an immobile traditional position and denying potential advantages of a fusion with videogames does not respect the nature of cinema and its continuous technological developments. Videogames are not marginal entertainment products, but successful economic creations that reflect certain social and cultural elements and as such, cinema should look at them as an additional medium of expressivity and immersion.

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