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**Original Citation**

Solidoro, Adriano (2008) Narrative and Performance: Reconceptualizating the Relationship in the Videogames Domain. In: Narrative and Fiction: an Interdisciplinary Approach. University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, pp. 53-59.

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# 6 Narrative and Performance: Reconceptualizating the Relationship in the Videogames Domain

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Should videogames be treated seriously? The time itself children and teenagers spend on them and the actual amount of money invested in such games by the media and entertainment industry ought to tell us something about the significance videogames have attained. Time spent by adults, as well as children, in this kind of entertainment is increasing, and the average British consumer (together with average consumers from other European countries and the US[1]) now spends more time playing videogames than going to the cinema or renting movies. Furthermore, the publication of numerous books, reports and complete issues of academic journals (as well as the establishment of institutions[2] and conferences being held) which investigate the technological, psychological and sociological aspects of videogames underlines the fact that this kind of entertainment has become a part of our culture and that there is a growing interest in discussing this phenomenon from a broadening cultural perspective.

Research on videogames is also related to several branches of the humanities (investigating what the medium of the videogame is, as a cultural artifact with embedded meaning) and there are also ever growing 'videogame studies' which are being treated as a distinct subject, and bringing about novel distinctions and intricate sets of theories. For example, a current debate amongst videogame studies theorists highlights a conflict between 'Narratologists' and 'Ludologists'.[3] This debate might bring to mind the

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1 With the introduction of innovative products the video game industry has grown by 50% in the period 2004 to 2006. The growth in this market is driven by the increased hours of videogame consumption that are taking time away from other forms of entertainment, including radio, recorded music, daily newspapers, consumer magazines, and consumer books.

2 See for example the Center for Computer Game Research, a research group at the IT University of Copenhagen involved in the journal Game Studies, and also hosted the 2005 iteration of the Digital Arts and Culture conference.

3 See, for example, Frasca (1999).

dichotomy between the literary analysis of theatrical plays as 'text' and the analysis of their realization as 'live performance'. The former puts an emphasis upon meaning and imagination and upon how videogame stories are told; the latter highlight the actual game being played as opposed to the story being told – ie. the experience of playing it, the motivation for playing it, the pleasure awarded by playing it, etc.

However, I personally think that the question of whether videogames are more of a 'game' or of a 'narrative' is not a constructive way of approaching the subject. I am inclined to believe, rather, that videogames demand further consideration as an independent form of fiction and that their status as a mere 'game' should not induce us to neglect investigating this aspect of the phenomenon. I believe this since videogames represent a new type of rhetorical artifact (albeit linked and blended with others offered by the entertainment industry) since they are a form of fiction that can be recognized as storytelling beyond language. Videogames are therefore suitable to be critically investigated in a way that is different from the critical investigation of novels, films or television texts because of their very 'gameplay' quality.

As noted by some authors,[4] videogames reflect vaster cultural background and context, as well as narrative, discourse, and imagination, all functioning on multiple levels. For example, further psychological and sociological studies of games and their effects are needed in order to investigate in greater depth how (and whether) videogames reflect and, at the same time, determine discriminatory attitudes, or even violent behavior.[5] Do videogames have the potential to amplify certain 'values' (eg. women as victims; Arabs as terrorists or criminals; violence as the only solution)? The issues are complex, and for this reason we should suspend our judgment.

But, since videogames are played and consumed as a form of entertainment, we need a critical framework that will allow us to discuss their impact on videogamers' imaginary and compare videogames to other types of fictional entertainment, like books and movies. In order to do so, we have to bear in mind the very special process of engagement, participation, appropriation and even incorporation which videogames offer during a player-text interaction. The latter is qualitatively distant from that offered by other visual or written forms of narrative. Since in videogames, simulation and make believe are the end result of playing, in a textual context where 'winning' is

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[4] See for example Bogost (2006); Newman (2004); Wardrip-Fruin (2004); and Wolf (2003).

[5] After the 1999 Columbine High School murders, questions about the effect of videogames on teens have become more prominent given that the perpetrators of the murders enjoyed a particularly violent game, *Doom*, which, it could be argued, provided a model for their actions.

everything, analyzing intervening fictional processes becomes necessary. We should investigate and critique videogame text consuming behaviour, also with the aim of raising students' awareness and critical approach. It would be shortsighted and pointless not to engage in this kind of critique and ignore questions concerning how our students 'use' videogames, how they enjoy engaging with them, how they get to understand meanings and imagination as communicated by videogames. Even more so nowadays with ever increasing Internet usage and media consumption, as well as the growing offer of online education and 'edutainment'. For all these reasons we simply cannot ignore questions concerning just how our students consume and enjoy videogames as much as they do other forms of textual artifacts.

But what are we speaking about when we speak about videogames? For the purposes of this article, I am using the term "videogame" broadly, as a fictional artifact played at a computer/console screen by one or more players. It might seem, at first, that under the "videogame" label, are a wide range of very different genres. These genres, or categories, at a first glance may appear quite diverse: eg. 'first-person shooters'[6] (eg. *Doom* and *Half Life* series), 'third person adventures'[7] (*Tomb Raider*) and 'management games'[8] (also called 'God games', eg. The *Sims*). All of these seem to be creating fiction in new ways. Many of these videogames show different kinds of 'realism' and forms of fiction. These forms are different, not only for mere technicalities, from those shown by books, comics, television or cinema. The videogame type of fiction may at times not be even associated to the types of fictions of other media which have already been accepted as narrative media, such as cinema and theatre. Nevertheless most games tell a story, even if this can often be summarized in very few words. Even non-narrative videogames are often set within a narrative, paratextual framework, and a story may be present, even if not actually narrated. Since the earliest *Dungeons and* Dragons videogames,

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[6] A first-person shooter is an action videogame which involves an avatar, one or more ranged weapons, and a varying number of enemies. These kind of videogames are distinguished by a first person perspective, that renders the game world from the visual perspective of the player character. Graphic realism combined with violence has also made this kind of videogame a common topic in current controversies over videogames.

[7] Third-person adventure is a genre of videogames in which the player character is seen at a distance from a number of different possible perspective angles, as opposed to the first-person model in which the player views everything in the game world as if through the character's own eyes.

[8] A management game, or God game, is a simulation game that casts the player in the position of controlling the game setting on a large scale, often as a entity with divine or supernatural powers or simply as a great leader, and places them in charge of a game setting containing autonomous mortals to guard and influence.

the stories of classical myths have been echoed in plots, heroic characters, and monsters and more and more Hollywood film franchises are routinely translated into games.

In some games, the narrative essentially consists of killing people and driving (eg. *Grand Theft Auto*), but in others, as in one of the most popular video games, *The Sims*, there is no violence at all and the 'plot' has nothing to do with winning or losing. It resembles soap operas and *Big Brother* rather than mythical epic or an army attack.

When thinking of the videogame fictional process, we should not to think of strong, emotional narrative. In fiction, in order to convey emotions, dramatic events need to be irreversible, while in videogames there will always be the chance to try again. And yet, it is debatable whether a player would actually wish to participate deeply and empathically in the emotions of a character/avatar who typically undergoes much suffering during a game session. Furthermore, even though many kinds of videogames often imitate the mimetic narration of cinema, it's not easy to find videogames displaying a purely classical structure, since structural aspects more often are a reminiscent of a minimalist structure or an anti-structure approach. After all, terms such as 'first-person shooter' and 'third-person shooter' seem to be derived from terms coined in narrative theory. They remind us of Genette's work about the differentiated models of points of view, eg. who sees? who speaks?

So, how are stories told by videogames? and how are these stories received by the players? Let's take, for example, the so-called 'wargames genre' including games such as *Close Combat* or *Medal of Honor Series* or *Call of Duty* which display the utmost accuracy in terms of weapons, uniforms, and geographical environment reconstructions. Nevertheless, despite the underlying realism of the game, the players are not engaged in questioning themselves about what is right or what is wrong, or in separating the goodies from the baddies. The situations offered by the videogames are just a series of plain facts freed from all moral judgment. This is because the facts displayed are not linked to the human, political, economic, and social context. And so, what kind of history do we perceive from videogames? How is meaning made out of the clues suggested? And how does all this challenge traditional History as taught at school?

As already mentioned, research on videogames relates to numerous branches of the humanities, drama and performing arts included. Some academics working in the field of theatre and performing arts have argued that in order to construct a more comprehensive analysis of the engagement and appropriation of videogame players we would have to think of videogame sessions as a dramatic experience, since many games are more similar theatrical drama than narrative artifacts.[9] According to this approach, given the

[9] See, for example, Laurel (1991) and Dixon (2006).

player's active involvement, investigating videogames, not only from the point of view of narrative studies, but also from that of drama and performance studies, could be useful in order to better comprehend the player's relationship with the videogame and his/her use of it. Of course, in stating this, we need to be sufficiently detached, since more qualitative problems arise in relation to the essence and content of videogames. The latter in comparison to theatre (at least some theatre) and performing arts could, of course, be regarded as trivial, and childish, just to say the least. Correlating the too often brutal and sensational caricature form of videogames with the great complexity and depths of theatre drama should represent, however, only a functional frame-work of analysis, given the fact that videogames employ a dynamic/visual narrative rather than verbal/textual. Furthermore, videogames involve enactment rather than spectatorship, and unity of action rather than an episodic structure, since the events are unfolded in real-time, and the player him/herself performs this kind of performance. The player's active participation within the videogame fictional environment, in fact, could suggest that the player experiences the game more from the subjective point of view of an actor within the game than from that of a spectator. The player performs the role of a character central to the videogame story, since the game itself cannot progress if the players refuse to play the role assigned to them. The audience is the participant/actor, and the participant/actor is also the player, and the player plays the role (albeit very distant from the psychological complexities of theatrical characters). Spectatorship and active performance are here, surely, merely functional categories and they are not mutually exclusive since most videogames offer the player both the role of passive audience and that of 'actor'; and the player's role may vary not from videogame to videogame, but also from scene to scene in the course of the same game.

We cannot deny that playing a videogame can be an intensely subjective experience. When playing a 'first-person shooter', for example, the player is encouraged to feel as though he/she were there, right inside the fictional situation (ie. 'immersed' as some authors have noted). The player sees and hears everything from the point of view of the character he/she is playing, while he/she is immersed in a game-mediated world.

The player is always more than mere audience. However, he/she may be even more than an actor in a play, as, listening to videogamers relating their 'first person' game experiences, one soon realizes that players often make no distinction between themselves and their characters/avatars. It seems, then, that in the videogame engagement there is much more subjectivity involved than there is in other media – examining the performance aspect of videogames would also help shed some light on this specific issue. This is, in fact, an aspect in which videogames diverge greatly from other forms of narrative media. There is, in fact, a whole genre (or category) of videogames in which the

player spends most of the game seeing through the eyes of his/her character/avatar.

As regards the player's range of action, we know it to be limited in most videogames. However, in those videogames in which the player's authority and control over the development of the plot may be greater, the player has some sort of creative freedom in fulfilling his/her role, albeit limited by the possibilities offered to him/her by the videogame text. Thus, in these cases the player does not perceive the fictional world only through the eyes of his character/avatar, but he/she actually directs it in a fashion more typical of a director of a play than an actor. The theatrical metaphor of the player/director can be also used as framework of interpretation for those videogames in which there are no *dramatis personae*. Such videogames are, for example, the so-called 'management games' (also referred to as 'God games'), in which only the voice of the player giving instructions to the inhabitants of the fictional world can be heard.

We can easily admit, then, that videogames involve fictional and imaginary worlds which are displayed by the most advanced technological devices although largely constructed within the renowned conventions of narrative and theatre, simulation and make-believe. For this reason, this new mode of digital storytelling is prone to be analysed by a Cultural Studies approach, although demanding at the same time a somewhat different critical approach. However, videogames ought to be treated with the seriousness they deserve, considering their status as extremely popular form of cultural expression. However, this clashes with the fact that videogames are cultural artifacts still too often perceived as a mere form of fiction for children and teenagers, with all the negative associations (eg. the violent and sexist characters, the commercial and mindless entertainment) that such an association bears. Nevertheless, to merely condemn or ignore this developing form of fiction and entertainment as nonsense might well be a mistake.

Issues concerning videogames are complex, and for this reason we should tend to suspend our judgment. It cannot be all reduced to a debate about the links between real and virtual violence, or about the need, or lack of it, for an age rating system similar to film classifications.

Developing a theoretical perspective on videogames is necessary in order to be able to provide our students with the cultural references and tools with which they would be able to think about them critically. Even if most games are violent and sexist, and hence not worthy of attention as great works of fiction, a well articulated framework of analysis may give both scholars and videogamers a basis for the discussion of these issues. While psychological and social studies have, and will even more so in the future, led to a criticism of videogames and their effects, the Humanities should offer the narrative and performing theoretical structure in order to help investigate them for what they

are (that is, investigate how videogames engage players and the reasons why they are so vastly loved) rather than for what their effects are.

This wants to be done now, since it seems that even if the medium has reached an incredible popularity, it is still far (especially if we consider mainstream products) from becoming a form of artistic communication able to deal with such things as human relations, politics and issues in a complex and articulate way.

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