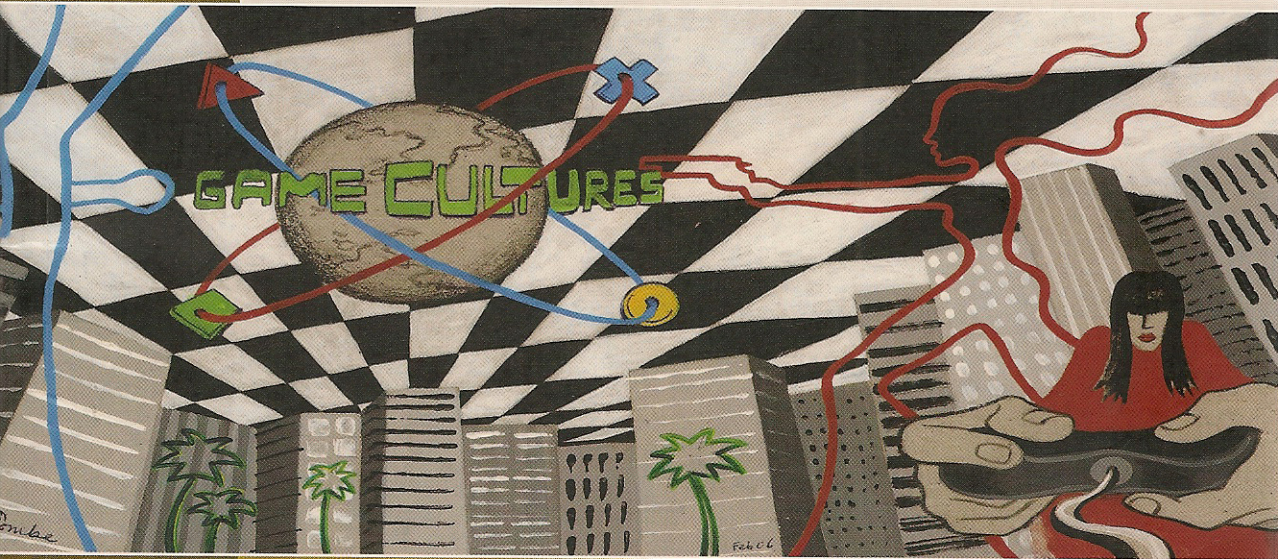


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# Game Cultures

Computer Games as New Media

ISSUES

IN CULTURAL AND MEDIA STUDIES

## Computer games as fictional worlds

By complete contrast, Barry Atkins declares his study *More Than a Game* (2003) as being interested in 'questions of narrative practice'. His book is concerned to explore questions of 'narrative point of view', the possibility of 'subversive readings', 'closure', the meaning of terms such as 'realism', 'counterfactual historiography' and the 'handling of time within narrative' (2003: 8). So far, so conventional. However, when he gets on to discussing the game *Half Life*, Atkins' attempt to use literary theory for game analysis forces him into some uncomfortably defensive corners. He concedes that '[s]tory, such as it is, more often than not provides a wafer thin narrative excuse for the real meat and drink of such game fictions – shooting things to impressive effect' (2003: 57). There exists, he argues, 'an unspoken tacit agreement between player and text to make fewer demands of game fictions than of films or novels – no one expects great dialogue in a game fiction; no one looks for depth of characterisation; no one judges the success of a game fiction on the sophistication of its back story. . .' (2003: 56). (In these respects this clearly narratological method finds itself on very similar ground to Eskelinen's radical ludology: 'stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy' – Eskelinen 2001b).

This tension produces the kind of critical aporia that is often filled by the discourse of upgrade culture: 'You may not think that what this machine is doing now is much good – but, wow, you just wait.' Atkins subscribes to this position: '. . . we are more concerned with the possibilities for the future of narrative telling implied in *Half Life* than what it actually achieves' (2003: 55). Atkins goes on to make an interesting analysis of *Half Life* that concentrates on relationships between mimesis, simulation and

realism – arguing that the computer game is the pre-eminent form in which these terms are being redefined. He observes that the self-conscious realism and mannered genre status of *Half Life* marks a distinctive stage in the evolution of the computer game which is closer to mimesis than to any attempt to simulate reality. These features, he argues, involve ‘the reader in a consciously recognisable act of reading’ (2003: 80). However, in his construction of the computer game as fiction, Atkins makes little or no reference to the rule set or the gameplay structure which a ludologist would argue was central to any game analysis. As a result we are left without too much idea as to what it might be like to play the game or how we move between the actual interface operation and navigation and the wider meanings which he argues for. This account of the approaches taken by Eskelinen, Murray and Atkins illustrates the extremes of game analysis that are in play when we set out to understand a computer game.

We now turn to a review of some of the ways in which these distinctive approaches – ‘conventional’ and ‘radical’ – are in play in the development of hybridized methods for understanding *Tomb Raider* (Eidos 1996, 1997, 1998, 2003). As one of the most significant titles in the history of console computer games’ entry onto the stage of mass popular culture, *Tomb Raider* has already been the subject of a good deal of analysis. Here we focus on articles by Carr, Rehak, Flanagan and Kennedy that offer us a case study in the successes and limitations of the existing analytic methods of Cultural and Media Studies. These articles focus on issues of representation and use this method to address a range of different questions – none of which, it should be noted, has very much to do with questions of either narrative or story, but nevertheless try to look at the broader cultural significance of the *Tomb Raider* series.

### Lara as object and subject

Diane Carr (2002) examines questions of identification, emotional investment, immersion, objectification and agency by drawing on theories derived from a psychoanalytically informed feminist film analysis. Carr begins her essay with an acknowledgement of her own pleasure in playing *Tomb Raider* and signals her reading of Lara from this position of an ‘academic fan’ (Hills 2002). ‘I enjoy playing with Lara Croft; I appreciate her agility, her solitary determination and lethal accuracy’ (Carr 2002: 171). Carr’s analysis of Lara makes reference to the work around cinematic heroines, particularly the 18 years of feminist debate around the representation of Ripley in the *Alien* (1979, 1986, 1992) series. Carr is careful to signal very clearly her acknowledgement of the distinctiveness of the play experience in relation to cinematic pleasures: ‘she is not just viewed, she is played, occupied and propelled by an off-screen agent’ (2002: 171). But Carr still finds a usefulness in existing ‘cinematic models of objectification’, drawing from Mulvey (1975) (as do Kennedy and Rehak, respectively, below) the dominant mode of analysis of visual pleasure, suggesting that it retains a great deal of analytical

force in the understanding of how the female body is constructed as the 'object' of visual pleasure. Even when this body is entirely digital, even while retaining an understanding of how the visual element is always in relation to the experience of playing as Lara, representation is still in play. However, it is 'in play', Carr acknowledges the ways in which this objectification is complicated by the fact that Lara (like the cinematic heroine in a film) is also an 'agent' within the game:

given the unique, specific role of the avatar, as image and as vehicle, watched and played, it is possible that Lara manages to function as objectified on screen woman, even as she functions as sadistic agent relative to those she so effectively and relentlessly annihilates.

(Carr 2002: 172)

This 'duality' is seen as potentially productive of anxiety as well as pleasure on the part of the male player. He finds himself playing as a sexualized woman and he enjoys it. Carr argues that this 'is purged via the reactionary tone of much of her extra-game manifestations' (2002: 179). 'Extra-game manifestations' simply means the many other representations of Croft that exist outwith the game, especially in online fan sites. Kennedy makes a similar point: 'We might also speculate that some of the desperate re-encoding of Lara as "sex object" – on the part of male players – may arise from an anxiety over the fact that these experiences are mediated by a female character and thus signify an attempt to deny any empathy/identification with Lara' (Kennedy 2002).

For Carr at least, the construction of Lara as a sexualized 'object' makes a difference to her experience of playing the game: 'When I play Lara, I play in the company of her creators and in the shadow of the desiring gaze that her breasts and short shorts were formed to address' (2002: 174). Carr remains aware of the sexual hierarchies that exist outside the 'magic circle' of gameplay and these have an effect on how she experiences the game. However, and this is crucial, for Carr, Kennedy and Rehak the distinctions between 'playing as' and 'identifying with' a character are not resolvable by recourse to film theory alone.

## Identification, investment and immersion

Carr recognizes the limitation of her approach by making a sharp distinction between the pleasures of identification in the film and in the game:

The pleasures of cinematic identification involve an emotive immersion or investment in the body, and the environs of the body on screen, in processes engaging the unconscious and fuelled by elements of spectatorial passivity. The games console, by mechanising elements of identification arguably undercuts the pleasure potential of such processes.

(Carr 2002: 177)

Carr argues for a version of cinematic pleasure that involves a passive 'surrender' to the events on the screen. Whereas, in relation to the game, she argues:

Lara is a vehicle, and she will only move if, as and when the player compels her to. While gazing at a film screen, our looking is choreographed and the limits of the frame become naturalised, denied or surpassed. Our motion through the screen space is pleasurably fuelled by a dreamlike disembodiment or surrender.

(Carr 2002: 173)

The fact that Lara is able to be resurrected over and over in the game also undermines any investment in her body, and our control over Lara is argued to prevent our full identification with her and our abandonment to the masochistic pleasures of the cinematic experience. Carr's deployment of a psychoanalytic framework allows for a reading of Lara as the 'sadistic' agent within the game – she is 'subject, not object, within a sadistic formula. She is the agent of repetition, the perpetrator, while her victims are the numerous, the interchangeable and the expendable' (2002: 176). In this version, playing as Lara is productive of a less 'immersive' experience, but a more participative one which affords pleasures of a different order to cinematic ones.

### Avatar as 'vehicle'

The relationship between the player and avatar is understood here as distinct from viewer/character relationships. As we have seen in the earlier quotation, the analogy of vehicular or mechanized embodiment is repeated frequently in Carr's analysis of Lara: 'identification is explicit, we drive, direct and occupy her. The console umbilically links the off-screen participant to the onscreen world and enables their agency within that world' (2002: 177). This also becomes a critical way to understand player/avatar for Kennedy, Flanagan and Rehak. Here the vehicular embodiment analogy also hints at a significant aspect of the pleasures involved. Flanagan observes: 'She shoots, climbs, and runs with mechanical precision; controlling her body is like driving a fine machine' (Flanagan 1999: 81). Flanagan's description of her as a 'fine machine' alludes not only to Lara as a representation but also to Lara as a technology which can be admired, which must be mastered and, once mastered, will be a great source of personal satisfaction.

Lara is simultaneously replete with meaning in terms of the construction of her physique and the availability of a coherent biography through which to make sense of her subjectivity and her actions, but also empty enough to enable the player to inhabit her. Lara is to be 'occupied' or controlled by the player, and this is seen as distinctive to the gameplay pleasures and cannot be understood within existing theories of viewer/text relationships. For Rehak this is a critical aspect of avatar representation: 'She merely extends the essential emptiness of the avatar, a semiotic vessel intended to be worn glove-like by the players' (Rehak 2003: 480). Furthermore, Rehak suggests that

this is what enables her successful migration from one medium to another and is also a fundamental part of her appeal. He concludes: 'Digital stars, as they have developed in video games necessarily hit a kind of representational ceiling that limits their semiotic resolution and thus leaves them open to audience identification' (2003: 482). For each of these authors the visual representation of Lara as well as her capabilities within the game are assumed to be an essential component of the 'gameplay' experience, or as Eskelinen would describe it the 'gaming situation' (Eskelinen 2001), even whilst either implicitly or explicitly recognizing that the gameplay does not solely depend upon this representation. Also, it is evident that representational issues in gameplay can be analysed without treating the computer game as a story or as a narrative form.

## Representation and experience

However, rich as these discussions are, they suggest very real limitations to how far a fundamentally representational analysis of a game text can take us. These limitations come about when we try to account for the difference between watching and doing, between identification with and being. Aarseth, for example, argues:

The dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently . . . When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it.

(Aarseth 2004: 48)

Whilst it is certainly true that a different-looking body would not affect the underlying game mechanic and therefore how we play the game, it would almost certainly affect the experience of gameplay. This is a crucial point in the debate. If we accept Aarseth's point that gameplay is co-terminous with game mechanic then clearly our analysis should be focused there. However, we are more inclined to support Salen and Zimmerman's observation about what would happen if we substituted another set of tokens (for instance, suits of cards called Death, Sex, War and Love) for the conventional pack of cards in a game of poker:

On a formal level nothing has changed at all: the game remains the same. Of course it goes without saying that the experience of playing Poker with such a deck would be different than the experience a player would have with a standard deck. But the formal system of a game, the game considered as a set of rules, is not the experience of the game.

(Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 120)

Kennedy (2002) and Rehak (2003) discuss the fan sites devoted to the celebration of Lara and her world. These fan sites offer plenty of evidence that the fictional world presented in *Tomb Raider* affords particular kinds of experience which allow particular

kinds of investment in Lara Croft. Whilst Aarseth is right to insist that there is more to any game than its visual or story elements, we would also insist that avatar representation (in particular) does matter. This is especially the case in massively multiplayer online games, as other players respond directly to this representation and may play against us in very different ways dependent on this response. Female players often bemoan the hypersexualization of female avatar choices for such games as it tends to produce either mildly irritating or downright insulting responses from other players. Female games designer Sheri Graner Ray (2003) offers a very detailed analysis of the range of ways in which female avatars are specifically hypersexual in a way that male avatars are not. She also offers details of the kinds of sexist responses that these images provoke, indeed seem designed specifically to provoke. This can lead to in-game harassment which can significantly alter the experience (and the pleasure) of the game.

Racial and gender stereotypes abound in the construction of these avatars and an outright dismissal of avatar representation leaves unchallenged the political dimension of these representations. Whilst many have celebrated the ways in which online role playing can allow for identity experimentation, Taylor (2003), for instance, offers a thoughtful and provocative analysis of the ways in which this online experimentation can have offline consequences. We need to consider the ways in which these stereotypes reflect and reintroduce offline power imbalances within the play environment. In this regard, the visual imagery in many mainstream games seems to be entirely ignorant of the critiques that have been made of these stereotypes in other visual media and appear to import some of the worst examples in an entirely unreflexive and uncritical way.

These early attempts to theorize games through the example of *Tomb Raider* show how existing traditions of analysis continue to have some purchase, but they also throw up all kinds of new problems: What is the exact status of representation here? How are we identifying with avatars? If the avatar changes, does our experience of the game change? In order to suggest what a useful toolkit for game analysis might be, we want to draw upon the common ground that emerges from the various methodological traditions and styles of analysis which we have sketched above. We hope thereby to set up a number of key frameworks and areas of inquiry that can guide game analysis. These areas are all produced through the dynamic tension between traditional and innovative ways of looking at media and mediation. Viewed as a totality they point the way towards the development of a phenomenology of games that takes account of both their textual and experiential properties. They point, in other words, to the well-worn limitations of the text/user separation that is characteristic of attempts to understand new media interactive artefacts.