

Gameplay in the "Zone of Becoming"

Locating Action in the Computer Game

Extending Alexander Galloway's analysis of the action-image in videogames, this essay explores the concept in relation to its source: the analysis of cinema by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. The applicability of the concept to videogames will, therefore, be considered through a comparison between the First Person Shooter S.T.A.L.K.E.R. and Andrej Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*. This analysis will compellingly explore the nature of videogame-action, its relation to player-perceptions and its location within the machinic and ludic schema.

The all-pervading importance of ludic action in analyzing gameplay is becoming increasingly evident. Recent commentators, like Alexander Galloway, stress this almost axiomatically: "if photographs are images, and films are moving pictures, then video games are actions. Let this be word one for video game theory" (Galloway 2006:2). The nature of this action and the space within which this occurs, however, belies conventional notions. Action in digital games is not merely that of the player acting on a passive object; rather it is more complex in that the machine also acts on the player. Furthermore, this action is not a single unified event: it is a multiplicity that is both different as well as repetitive. Such issues, which have been less compellingly addressed in earlier analyses, are well explained by some key concepts in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. These concepts, originally formulated in the context of cinema, need to be considered in terms of their applicability to digital gameplay. This paper aims to explore the nature of the action in videogames, using a Deleuzian framework. It will do so through a comparative analysis of the videogame

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL (2007) with Tarkovsky's similarly themed film, *Stalker* (1979).

First, however, a brief conspectus of earlier opinions on videogame action is essential. There are not many critical accounts on videogame action and even these vary a lot. Usually these accounts engage separately with aspects of action in videogames. Commentators like Juul (2005) and Lindley (2002) point out how emergent and repetitive action in videogames makes it a phenomenon characterized by multiplicity and complexity. On another level, however, action is analyzed in terms of agency and immersive engagement. There are differences even regarding the nature of agency and engagement, as indicated in the varying analyses by Murray (1997), Ryan (2001), and Frasca (2005) respectively. Though these accounts are all valid in their own terms, the analyses of ludic action that they provide remain incomplete. A more comprehensive and coherent account, which combines the analyses of the various aspects, is necessary to attempt an understanding of videogame action, not as a series of discrete aspects, but as a process.

Galloway's account is a useful entry-point to such an analysis. He rightly states that action in digital games cannot be located in any one entity. In the first chapter of his book *Gaming* Galloway launches directly into a discussion of action as being performed "step by step [and] move by move" (Galloway 2006:2) by operator and machine in digital games. Whereas the action in earlier media was predominantly auditory and visual, that which takes place in videogames also involves the psychosomatic. Further, the action also occurs from the machine's perspective: the code responds to, and creates, situations of action. As the base foundation of his analysis, he reads games in terms of the "action-image" as described by Deleuze (1986:67). Though, in itself, this is a major contribution because it opens up further avenues into researching ludic action in videogames, Galloway's account does not engage in unpacking the advantages of

analyzing videogame action within a Deleuzian framework. A fuller analysis is therefore necessary.

Galloway draws his concept of the action-image from Deleuze's analysis of cinema. However, Deleuze's own description of it is more complex and multi-faceted, and a brief introduction to it may be useful. Before analyzing the action-image, it will be helpful to note the two key ideas in Deleuzian thought that are helpful in understanding videogame action: these are multiplicity and becoming, respectively. Both of these aspects are intrinsic to the same process and an understanding of one will automatically involve the other. Hence, as noted earlier, a comparison with Deleuzian multiplicity and the process of becoming lends itself well to a holistic understanding of the process of videogame action.

A Deleuzian multiplicity is an immanent structure characterized by a variable number of dimensions and an absence of an extrinsic unity. Manuel De Landa, commenting on Deleuzian multiplicity, describes it as the space of all possible states that a physical system can have (De Landa 2002:13). This structure therefore not only includes the multiple branches of the emergent structure or repetitions of ludic action described by game studies commentators, it also includes the as-yet unrealized instances of gameplay. This structure is well described in Salen and Zimmerman's concept of the "space of possibility" in their key game studies text, *Rules of Play*. The concept is defined as the "space of future action implied by a game design the space of possibility. It is the space of all possible actions that might take place in a game, the space of all possible meanings which can emerge from a game design" (Salen/Zimmerman 2004:67). The similarity of this with De Landa's and Deleuze's terminology is, therefore, not mere coincidence.

At the same time, another aspect of Deleuzian multiplicity makes the link with videogame action even clearer. In Deleuze, the multiplicity is characterized by univocity. The concept of univocity is not so

much about a single meaning but rather of meaning existing as a multiplicity that is ontologically the same, but formally different. It can be argued that this is similar to the events (and actions) in digital games: the game is one but is expressed in many iterations. Again, these iterations of the same event occur within an ongoing process of difference. Therefore, there are many varied instances of gameplay for a game sold under the same title.

Within the Deleuzian multiplicity, actions occur as intensities and not as discrete events. As Abe Burmeister, commenting on intensity in videogame action describes it: “not as [a] state that is entered and left, but rather as one that is approached, but rarely if ever entered absolutely” (Burmeister 2005). This is because the actions are actualizations of multiple virtuality and they are best seen in their interconnectedness, which involves an understanding of them as being continually-in-process. Deleuzian multiplicity necessitates an understanding of events as a mesh of actions-in-process rather than as discrete instances of action. When this process is considered in respect to the player and the system, the other key Deleuzian concept is seen in play: the bipartite ludic action is a becoming. In Deleuzian terms:

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification [...] What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that becomes passes (Deleuze 1988:262).

“Becoming” is, therefore, the involvement that results from the being-in-process of videogame actions. Instead of providing a total “holodeck-like” identification, as claimed by theorists like Murray, engagement in videogame actions is closer to the process described by later commentators. It occurs within, and as the result of, a continual passage between actualizations and identities. Having said this, a more nuanced analysis of Galloway’s account of the action-image

and related concepts will be helpful in providing a clearer perspective on analyzing videogame action as a bipartite process of involvement which occurs within a multiplicity involving the player and the game-system.

Galloway's bipartite and multisensory conception of action in videogames, summed up in his use of the Deleuzian action-image, needs more background. It must be mentioned, here, that this analysis is concerned only with examining the implications of Galloway's concept in terms of its Deleuzian sources. A discussion of Deleuze's full account of cinema is not the aim of this paper. According to Deleuze, the action-image is a part of the movement-image, a way of understanding cinema through the flow of actions and perceptions. It is also intrinsically linked to the perception-image and affection-image – both part of the movement-image. The operation of the action-image is described by Deleuze as “no longer elimination, selection, or framing, but the incurving of the universe, which simultaneously causes the virtual action of things on us and our possible action on things” (Deleuze 1986:67). Deleuze's description develops on Galloway's formulation of bipartite action: the virtual action of the ludic machine on us and our possible action on it caused by the “incurving of the universe.” This immediately brings up other considerations. The action is located in the virtual and the possible, which form the core elements of Deleuzian conceptions of multiplicity. Further, the process is an “incurving of the universe”, an intense process of involvement. In the framework of the action-image, the multiple and the intensive can be seen as intrinsic to the functioning of each other. Our analysis of videogame action would therefore find a fuller explanation within this apparatus. The process will be clearer only if the flow from perception to action is studied.

In Deleuze's schema, perception is a fluid process which is related to the thing being perceived but formed in relation to another framing image. In the case of videogames, the gun in the FPS screen illus-

trates this very well: the player is the gun in one sense, while in the sense supported by the game logic, she has the gun – the perception has begun to shift from direct identification to the relation to a frame. Without the perception-image, the action-image is incomprehensible because the boundary between them is imperceptible. Deleuze provides a very vivid description of the transition: “[B]y incurving, the object renders its unstable facet towards me, at the same time my delayed reaction, which has become action, has learnt to use the [...]” (Deleuze 1986:64). To carry on with the gun metaphor, the player now presses the “trigger” (which is a key or a mouse button outside the frame of the game) and the action is carried out – she fires.

Deleuze’s comment, however, brings up more questions. Why is the reaction delayed? The action, at least as experienced on the FPS screen, is instantaneous. Or is it? To analyze this, another state called the affection-image, which comes between the perception-image and the action image, needs to be considered. This is the locale of the “incurving” that Deleuze speaks of and it is also where the reaction is “delayed.” When the receptive facet absorbs a certain tendency instead of acting on it, the process of affection comes into play. In the locale of the affection-image, therefore, there are many tendencies or possible events waiting to be acted upon. Affection, then, is the zone of the possibilities. Deleuze’s description of the movement from perception to action worth noting – the imperceptible shift from one to the other is described as a “becoming.”

Before proceeding further with the discussion of the zone of possibilities and becoming, it will be necessary for a brief digression to clarify a problem with Galloway’s understanding of the affection-image. Following Bergson, Deleuze describes the affection-image as a motor effort over an immovable sensible plate. The latter description is easy to misconstrue. Perhaps based on this, Galloway sees an analogue of the affection-image in what he calls the ambient acts in digital games. He gives the example of moments in games like

SHENMUE (1999) where minor movements continue to take place onscreen even if the player leaves the game on and goes away. There are certain problems with this position. Many games such as RTS games like AGE OF EMPIRES (1997) carry on acting, and the algorithm actually causes meaningful changes to the state of the game, even when the game is left alone. More importantly, it must be realized that the affection-image does not just apply to certain special cases in games. As part of the movement-image, and therefore inseparable from the action-image, affection is an intrinsic quality in digital games. The player does not need to walk away from the game for the affective to be in process. In fact, it is constantly in process in the in-between of the gameplay; this is the part where the actions of both the game and the (human) player are yet to be determined. Having clarified that the Deleuzian affection-image is generally and intrinsically applicable to analyses of gameplay rather than to particular instances, it will be important to study it in more detail.

Deleuze's original concept of the affection-image applies to cinema and he illustrates it through two types of examples from film. One of these is the close-up and the other is the "any-space-whatever", the Deleuzian undetermined and fragmented space. Both of these represent intense situations; there is a clear link to conception of intensity described above.

In the close-up, Deleuze comments, "we find ourselves in front of an intensive face each time that the traits break free from the outline, [and they] begin to work on their own account, and form an autonomous series which tends towards a limit or crosses a threshold" (Deleuze 1986:91). He provides the example of the close-up of the priest's face in Eisenstein's *General Line* (1929), where the close-up shows the priest as man of God changing into the priest who is the exploiter of peasants through a series of affective movements on an otherwise motionless face. The any-space-whatever is similar in its function: "[I]t is not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a per-

fectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as a pure locus of the possible" (Deleuze 1986:109). The locus of the possible is directly related to Deleuze's understanding of multiplicity, as understood from the description of the space of possibility above, and it is also the intense zone where actions are in-process.

In Deleuzian terms, the action itself emerges as a "duel of forces; a series of duels – duel with the milieu, with the others, with itself" (Deleuze 1986:142). Within the space of possibility, the action in digital games is also a series of duels: literal duels with other characters in the game-system, a struggle against the milieu's affordances and restrictions (for example, one can break boxes in *HALF-LIFE* (1998) but not water pipes) and; finally, a struggle with the other identity/ies that we take on in the game.

The close-up and the any-space-whatever seem to be throbbing with possible events about to take place – the events are not yet instantiated but are part of a continuous process of change. This affects identity, location, and diegesis. Actions in digital games involve such a process of "becoming." They occur on an instant to instant basis and in constant interaction between the human and machine. The resultant choices are made from a range of possibilities constrained by many influencing factors, be they algorithmic code or player predilection, mood or strategic plan. Finally, the elements of the system keep changing during gameplay as each one approaches the other. In the digital game, this happens in a zone analogous to the affection-image (exemplified in the intensive face of the close-up or the any-space-whatever) in cinema. The above analysis shows how conceptions of agency and engagement must take into account the interplay between the machine and the (human) player that occurs within an intensive space of moment-to-moment actualizations of

events. The process of becoming therefore both needs and supports the variations in gameplay and the multitelic possibilities that form the space of possibility. The space of possibility in digital games can, therefore, be called the “zone of becoming.” What follows is a brief exploration of how videogame action is located in this “zone.”

This analysis will focus on a literal “zone”: a place which is there and, yet, not there; where wishes come true and, yet, they do not, and finally, which the player is free to explore and interact with. The “zone” in question is the special post-apocalyptic place (hence the quotation marks) in the computer game called S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL and in the similarly named film by Tarkovsky. A second blast at Chernobyl has caused serious radioactive reactions and mutations to life in the region. It has been cordoned off by the government but is nevertheless a favorite haunt of bounty-hunters looking for radioactive artifacts or for the legendary “wish granter”, which is supposed to make one’s wishes come true. In the light of the above discussion, it will be intriguing to compare the affection-image in the film with that in the game, so as to better understand the process of action in the two media. In the game, the player plays as a “stalker” or an illegal explorer/artifact scavenger in the Zone much like the protagonist of the film who also explores the Zone and takes people there as an illegal guide.

The Zone itself is an extremely intriguing part of the game. It is the locale of the game – the space on which the player moves, lives, and survives. Unlike the almost unpopulated Zone of the film, it is beset with mutant animals, zombie-fied stalkers, stalker factions, scientists, traders, the regular Ukrainian army, and the Spetsnaz. The landscape itself, however, is equally stark. The game is in color but the colors are drab, and at times, the landscape verges on being sepia-tinted. The Zone constantly exhibits micro-movements and there are various “anomalies”, or areas of radioactive unpredictability, some of which the player becomes familiar with during the course of

the game, and others which remain unknown. The game has a built-in randomizer function that enhances its emergent properties and makes the anomalies and challenges appear in different places and in different instances of gameplay.

For example, on reaching the level called Pripyat (which can be the penultimate stage of the game unless the player goes back to other visited areas) during a gameplay session, the player was attacked by a pack of mutant “pseudodogs” and killed after a brief fight; but in another session, on retracing the same moves, these dogs were nowhere to be found and it was possible to move to a different section.

An online review makes an important point about the game. Its concluding comment seems to get to the soul of the game: “For those that manage to survive the Zone, the most disappointing thing about the game may be that it may leave you hoping that there was more.” (World 1-1 2004). The key point to note here is that the Zone will, “leave you hoping that there was more.” What the reviewer sees as “...disappointing thing [...] hoping there was more” is actually more complex. The disappointment may arise because the game does not provide a feeling of completion – there is always more of what the reviewer calls “unfulfilled promises.” The Zone is a zone of “becoming” and, as in an “any-space-whatever,” it is a locus of possibility.

The game has seven different “official” endings, of which in five of them the player encounters a mechanism called the “wish-granter”, reminiscent of the wish-fulfillment room in Tarkovsky’s film. The wish that the player makes in front of the wish-granter is decided for the player by the game. A first impression might make this seem like a strange predestined world, but there is more to consider. The wish that the player “makes” depends on his or her reputation (built up as a cumulative of his or her actions) in the game. Therefore, this is not a denial of player action. Rather, it is the result of a series of choices that developed the character of the player within the game. Gameplay therefore results in a becoming-stalker and this becom-

ing is actualized from within a multiplicity of possibilities. The telos that a player reaches may vary in each instance of gameplay, because each time it results in a different becoming and, therefore, different characteristics both for the (human) player and the (machine) algorithm. The characters of the human and machine players, as discussed above, are not discrete and are always interdependent: hence, action is experienced as a complex of the interactive choices of both the human and machine components. In the “wish-granter” endings of S.T.A.L.K.E.R., the wish is made for the human by the machine, but only as a result of the series of choices that the human has made when interacting with the algorithm. Characteristically, even the wish is fulfilled and yet not fulfilled – in one of the endings, the protagonist asks that the Zone disappear and everything around him suddenly grow lush and green, and when the camera turns towards him, reveals that he has gone blind. Besides the “wish-granter” endings, the game has two other possible endings. In these, a further new level is revealed where the player encounters an element called the C-Consciousness. Here, it is possible either to become part of it, or to destroy it, and neither option provides a conclusive ending.

The Zone, therefore, exists as a space of possibility and whatever happens to the player in the Zone (there is always a high chance that he or she will not complete the game and will meet an end not described here) is an actualization of the virtual possibilities. The same can be observed in Tarkovsky’s film. Anna Powell, discussing Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* in terms of Deleuzian ideas on cinema, comments on the “overt stretching out of the affective interval between action and perception” in the film. She goes on to say that “as Zone and viewer, screen and brain intersect, we are the visitors on which it depends. Together, brain and screen make an unformed hiatus of waiting, with potential for unexpected change” (Powell 2007:139). In the film, there is a hint that different alternate states of existence are present within the Zone, and a sudden shift from color to sepia in a

scene showing the protagonist lying in a different place from where he is shown earlier and later seems to illustrate this. The game, too, shows sudden glimpses from what seems another existence: whether these are flashbacks or flash-forwards or alternate possibilities in the protagonist's story is not clarified. The similarities between the digital game and the Deleuzian analysis of film in terms of perception, affection, and action become clearer through this comparison of the game and the film versions of the Zone. Of course, the media-specific differences between the two media forms persist: gameplay allows for a greater degree of multiplicity within its structure and also, arguably, for a more heightened degree of engagement through the act of becoming-stalker. Nevertheless, the Deleuzian analysis of cinema in terms of perception, affection, and action is extremely useful in understanding videogame action.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is about *becomings* and its action is defined by the process of becoming. Indeed, it occurs within, and as, the micro-movements that were observed in the affection-image. Galloway is right in claiming that digital games are driven by action, and his application of the Deleuzian concept of the action-image certainly opens up important avenues for researching the nature of action in digital games. Action is present in the interaction of human and machine, as a choice actualized from the many possibilities in the locus of the affection-image, which mediates between perception and action. What Deleuze observes in earlier narrative media, like cinema, is equally, if not more applicable to digital games. Without considering the space in which ludic action, in its multiterelic and multitemporal dimensions; and the intensive engagement between the player and the machine through which it is conceived; any understanding of gameplay is left incomplete. True, the one word for games research may be action, but it exists only as part and parcel of perception and affection. Action occurs within an intensive and ongoing process of the realignment of possibilities within the deep space of gameplay: or every time we click the mouse and fire into game-space.

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