Jochen Venus

Simulation of Self-Action

On the Morphology of Remote-Controlled Role Playing

Computer games may be defined as artifacts that connect the input devices of a computer (such as keyboard, mouse or controller) with its output devices (in most cases a screen and speakers) in such a way that on the screen a challenge is displayed. On the screen we see pictorial elements that have to be manipulated to master a game, that is to win a competition, to solve a riddle or to adopt a skill. Therefore the characteristics of the representational function of computer games have to be contrasted phenomenologically with conventional games on the one hand and cinematic depictions on the other. It shows that computer games separate the player from the playing field, and translate bodily felt concrete actions into situational abstract cinematic depictions. These features add up to the situational abstract presentation of self-action experience. In this framework computer games reveal a potential as a new means of shared cognition that might unfold in the 21st century and change the being-in-the-world in a similar way as cinematic depiction did in the 20th century.

On a first glimpse, it seems quite obvious how to answer questions concerning the logic and structure of video games. Video games are technically well-defined artifacts. They are programs that check and control the input and output devices of a computer (devices such as keyboard, mouse, gamepad, screens, and speakers). Video games connect these devices in such a way that on the screen a challenge is displayed, which can be met by time-, event- and/or configuration-critical inputs (Pias 2002). Pictorial elements have to be manipulated in a time-, event- and/or configuration-critical way to master a game,

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i.e., to win a competition, to solve a riddle or to adopt a skill. Thus it should be fairly easy to describe the logic and structure of video games; they observe the functionality of the algorithms that put the devices into relation with each other constituting a virtual playing field and the respective codes of practice.

Video Games as Artifacts and/or Experiences

Such as the above mentioned notions of hardware, software, and codes of practice are only useful to describe the technical scope of video games. They do not contribute to an understanding of the gaming experience. And the gaming experience is crucial when we want to come to terms with the logic and structure of video games, because unlike other technical artifacts that fulfill purposes beyond their application, video games have no other rationale than just the experience of their application, the aesthetics of the gameplay. *Video games are technical artifacts that attain their aims in the experience of their use.* In other words: Video games are aesthetically motivated and have to be understood in this perspective. They are produced only for the sake of the experience of their execution, and if we want to understand the logic and structure of video games, we should concentrate not on the technical *scope* but on the technical *purpose* of video games, and that is the gaming experience. Devices, programs, and rules are only necessary but not sufficient conditions for the actuality of the gaming experience. A video game has to be played in order to produce that experience. And in the course of playing not the devices are the focus of attention but the consistency of the aesthetical agency, the pictorial elements, diagrams, moving images, sounds, written and/or spoken texts, and last but not least the bodily felt performance of input activities like button mashing, the fine control of analog sticks, or the physical gesturing with motion-sensing controllers. The rationale of video games – the gaming experience – cannot be reduced to the logic and structure of devices, programs, and rules.

Yet, the gaming experience is not easy to observe because it is not a physical fact that can be gauged with measuring instruments. The gaming experience is a *gestalt* in the medium of situational self-awareness, and that means that it is subject to an infinite variety of singular situational circumstances, which cannot be reduced to a common denominator. The gaming experience is elusive, ambiguous and never the same. It changes drastically the more the player gets used to the gaming mechanics and adopts the requisite skills to master the game. Most video games provide different difficulty levels. These different difficulty levels and the use or non-use of cheats make up relatively different gaming experiences. Moreover, the gaming experience varies along with the different types of expertise. Casual gamers have different expectations and skills than heavy gamers. Thus, to talk of a general gaming experience in respect to a particular video game is nothing but a hypothetical construct. However, it is an inevitable one, because if we would not have any general expectations as to what the purpose of the given technical artifact is – namely, a certain kind of gaming experience – we would not have any situational framing and motive to use it. The general gaming experience (however vague and open to specification) is the *validity claim* of the artifact known as video game. It is a necessary idealization, one that should be treated as such.

The general gaming experience is a regulatory idea that shapes the design of video games as well as the expectations of gamers. It emerges historically on the basis of singular game experiences, technological innovations, empirical observations of consumer adoption behavior, and the public discourses in which game experiences are communicated (the discourse of advertising, the discourse of video game critique, the media violence debate, the discourse of Game Studies, and others).

Thus it would stand to reason not to consider the logic and structure of video games but the logic and structure of their discursive framing. And I do believe that this indeed is a fruitful option clarify-

ing the discursive repertoires from which certain descriptors of video game experiences are drawn. It would show how the public discourses of the digital, the cinematic, and the strategic, the public discourses of addiction, violence, leisure time, education, adolescence, and so forth shape our notion of the general gaming experience.

On the other hand, a discourse analysis does not exhaust the conditions of the possibilities of the general gaming experience because it points only to the momentum of its contingency and social constructedness. Beyond this contingency and constructedness, it has to have some sort of fitting with the individually perceived gameplay. The aesthetic experiences are not just epiphenomena of the public discourses. On the contrary, they are constraints to the discursive drift. If our perceptions of our gameplay were only epiphenomena of the video game discourse, if we would only perceive the very properties of gameplay as they are addressed by the public notions of the gaming experience, then we could never experience anything that exceeds our expectations. Video games only could either fall short of our expectations or just barely meet them. And this is obviously not the case. Some video games set new standards of what a video game experience is all about and exceed all of our learned expectations. We may even perceive ourselves as not yet ready to appreciate the general gaming experience that a particular video game offers to us. Moreover, most gamers are convinced that public notions of general gaming experiences are inappropriate; hence, the motive to deconstruct these notions as contingent and socially constructed. So the general gaming experience in terms of the validity claim of a particular video game, hypothetical as it is, has to be more than just a discursive effect.

As a regulatory idea, the general gaming experience emerges on a historically changing background of particular notions that are open to debate and deconstruction, yet at the same time it transcends the realm of mere discursivity. At the risk of arguing slightly paradoxically, the general gaming experience could be described as a

noumenal gameplay that cannot be actualized entirely in a singular gaming session.

The general gaming experience is the gaming experience as it is in itself independent from the individual gameplay. Like the Kantian 'thing in itself', the general gaming experience conceptualizes a negativity that we encounter by the impossibility to realize the general gaming experience as a whole. Although we perceive a kind of completeness in each gaming session, we still know at the same time that this is only a particular aspect of the general gaming experience, an aspect that is conditioned by our particular skills, needs and gaming knowledge in the very moment of playing.

If this is true, the aesthetics of the general gaming experience can only be a general assumption, maybe a tentative guess, but not a positive definite statement because we can only encounter aspects of this general experience but not the experience as a whole. An inquiry into the logic and structure of video games would then be an experiment with different perspectives rather than a methodologically secured routine. It would not result in the assertion of a structured whole and a logically closed functionality but in the disclosure of formerly undisclosed experiential perspectives.

Perspectives by Incongruity

A paradigm of this kind of perspectivist inquiry into the logic and structure of video games may be derived from the perspectivism of the American literary theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke (1945:503-504), who explicates the logic of perspectivism by the logic of metaphor:

> Metaphor is a device for seeing something *in terms* of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that or the thatness of a this. If we employ the word "character" as a general term for whatever can be thought of as distinct (any thing, pattern, situation, structure, nature, person, object, act, rôle, process, event, etc.) then we

> could say that metaphor tells us something about one character as considered from the point of view of another character. And to consider A from the point of view of B is, of course, to use B as a *perspective* upon A.
>
> It is customary to think that objective reality is dissolved by such relativity of terms as we get through the shifting of perspectives (the perception of one character in terms of many diverse characters). But on the contrary, it is by the approach through a variety of perspectives that we establish a character's reality. If we are in doubt as to what an object is, for instance, we deliberately try to consider it in as many different terms as its nature permits: lifting, smelling, tasting, tapping, holding in different lights, subjecting to different pressures, dividing, matching, contrasting, etc. […].
>
> By deliberate coaching and criticism of the perspective process, characters can be considered tentatively, in terms of other characters, for experimental or heuristic purposes. Examples may be offered at random: for instance, human motivation may, with varying degrees of relevance and reward, be considered in terms of conditioned reflexes, or chemicals, or the class struggles, or the love of god, or neurosis, or pilgrimage, or power, or movements of the planets, or geography, or sun spots, etc. [I deal] with such perspectives as an 'incongruity', because the seeing of something in terms of something else involves the 'carrying-over' of a term from one realm into another, a process that necessarily involves varying degrees of incongruity in that the two realms are never identical.

Along these lines of thought, an inquiry into the logic and structure of video games would begin with the question of choosing which incongruent perspective to apply in the process of perceiving the general gaming experience in terms of something else. Two of the most prominent incongruent perspectives in the Game Studies discourse would certainly be the perspectives of gameness and narrativity. Considered in the light of Burkean philosophy, the debate

on whether video games are essentially games or narrations would instantly appear as pointless. We would have to acknowledge that video games are neither conventional games nor well-established narratives but that they reveal their gameness and their narrativity respectively when perceived under these perspectives, and it would be clear that this is not a mistake, that there is no such thing as the video game perceived in itself, that the general video game experience is just a regulatory idea that constitutes the intersection of incongruent perspectives by which the complexity of their aspects can be perceived.

The challenge of game studies then would be to put an existing perspective into perspective, not to argue against any particular perspective but to enrich the notion of the general gaming experience by the application of a series of incongruent perspectives.

Immersion and Remote Control

So far, to a large extent the public discourse on video games has revolved around the notion of *immersion*. For the time being, it seems to be the single most significant perspective on video games. And, indeed, if we compare video games with other representative arts and ask for their single most significant feature, the unique feature that marks the essential innovation of video games, most people point out the immersive character of video games. And so it is justifiably appropriate that in the games studies discourse the topic of immersion may well be the most often described and theorized perspective on video games.

The almost classical reference, of course, is *Hamlet on the Holodeck* by Janet Murray (1997:98-99):

> The experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content. We refer to this experience as immersion. *Immersion* is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in

> water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. […] [I]n a participatory medium, immersion implies learning to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible […] the enjoyment of immersion as a participatory activity.

Now this perspective, regardless of the conceptual critique it has attracted, is remarkably illuminative. No one would deny that video games enable experiences in which our remote-controlled acting with pictorial elements captures our attention in such an intense way that our whole notion of being-in-the-world is absorbed by the perceivable features of the virtual playing field. The absorption of our attention is so complete that we forget about the abstractness of the pictorial elements we are manipulating. The 'here and now' of our situation facing the screen with our hands on the input devices and the situational abstract 'there and then' of the pictorial elements we are manipulating becomes an integral fictitious 'here and now', just like in sports activities or board games. And this is a fruitful perspective in so far as it highlights the difference of being immersed and standing, so to speak, outside the pool. The metaphor of immersion points to a main structure of the video game experience; namely, the dunking into it on the one hand, and the bobbing up out of it on the other. We then can compare the conditions of immersion (and emersion) in different media; we can compare the seductive surfaces that invite us to dive into the medium and we can compare the moments of aversion to jump right in. We would notice that the threshold of immersion corresponds with its intensity, and that video games have to deal with a much more complex *rite de passage* than most other media. We would have to acknowledge the importance of the seamless series of cinematic headings, tutorials, and actual gameplay to

overcome the aversion of immersion. So the perspective of immersion is quite illuminating in terms of the structure and logic of the general gaming experience.

On the other hand, along the line of a perspectivist approach – the notion of the general gaming experience that is provided by the perspective of immersion – may be enriched by an incisive incongruent perspective on the same subject. And if we consider the logical properties of immersion, we can deduce the logical properties of an incongruent perspective fairly easily. The perspective of immersion highlights the *loss* of frame-awareness. A counter-perspective then would point to an *increase* of frame-awareness, an increase of artificiality, abstractness and reflexivity. If video games can provide the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, could they as well, on the other hand, provide the sensation of being deprived of any reality, the sensation of being purely artificial? The sensation of remoteness to ourselves?

To my mind, the perspective of immersion points *ex negativo* to the incongruent perspective of remote control. In simulated action games, we experience ourselves not only immersed in the playing field but by the same token we are deprived of ourselves. We are deprived of our alter ego, the avatar (Klevjer 2007, Sorg 2010). And this deprivation operates by the logic of remote control. If we concentrate on the aspect of remote control, we discover primarily the following: In contrast to conventional games, video games separate the player from the playing field, and they translate bodily felt concrete actions (the button mashing, the fine control of analog sticks, the gesturing) into situational abstract cinematic depictions of totally different actions. This adds up to an alienated and situational abstract presentation of self-action experience. Our remote-controlled roleplaying lets us sense action; we experience self-action, but in an odd, somewhat stylized way.

Along with Lambert Wiesing (2005) (who has emphasized the experiential remoteness of media content), one could argue that, just like pictorial media establish a situational abstract view and allow the

direct communication of *pure visibility*, computer games establish an 'artificial sameness' of general self-action experiences and allow the direct communication of *pure self-action*. If we play a first-person shooter, for example, we get immersed in the virtual reality of pictorial objects that behave in a certain way, but we do not get immersed in the action of shooting. On the contrary, we encounter the action of shooting in an alienated, stylized way allowing for the artificial presence and communication of a certain shooting experience.

By comprehending the incongruity of immersion and remote control, we gain a richer perspective on the general gaming experience, in so far as we can describe both the fascination of diving into a different reality and the artificiality of the gamic depiction of self-action experiences.

Media Analysis as Profiling

The discursive enrichment of media perspectives is a process that can be traced back in media history. Whenever incisively new media technologies emerge, we get confronted with new structures and practices to differentiate between our 'here and now' and a general, artificially specified "there and then" that is situationally abstract. And these new structures always have to be socially adopted. Lacking the adequate conceptual schemes in the first place, the public discourse cannot differentiate between the portrayal of a practice and the practice portrayed. Particularly with regard to the portrayal of objectionable behavior, this must lead to hysterical reactions. Like the reading revolution in the late 18th and the film debate in the early 20th century, the video game controversy of the last decades indicates conceptual difficulties in grasping the nature of new media forms. By the coaching and criticism of an open series of perspectives, the aesthetics of the new media form becomes more and more distinct. There seems to be a new and unique type of iconic resonance, a mutual shaping of the empirical performance of the player and the virtual acting that is exposed on computer displays. The general gaming experience thus

amounts to an artificial portrayal of the phenomenology of practices, an artificial presence of self-action. In respect to video games, we are but at the beginning of the historical process of socially adopting its aesthetics of mediatization. *Immersion* and *remote control* are only two of the possible perspectives to come to terms with the general video game experience that have to be coached and criticized by co- and counter-perspectives.

As Kenneth Burke (1945:504) puts it, real facts "possess *degrees of being* in proportion to the variety of perspectives from which they can with justice be perceived". Thus, the general task of games studies may well be defined as a broadening and enrichment of the perspectives on video games so that they, too – like the above-mentioned suggestion – can become real facts as reflected and configurable realities.

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Biography

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Rune Klevjer

Response

Jochen Venus' paper is a piece of two parts: first a methodological statement, which I would imagine could also work as a separate contribution, and then the main part, which deals with the question of immersion and action.

The methodological argument is in itself an interesting contribution to the field, however brief and tentative in the present version. The key idea, "the general gaming experience as a regulatory idea", addresses a central question of computer game theory: what is the object of study in game analysis, and what is the methodological status of the knowledge that is being produced? Venus' answer, in my understanding, is that our object of study, unless we simply want to describe the game software as an object in technical terms, must be a hypothetical construct, a regulatory idea, an idea of a *general gaming experience*, which we hold up as the aesthetic purpose of the technical artifact. The general gaming experience, Venus argues, is the core validity claim of a computer game; without it we would not be relating to a game as an aesthetic artifact, approaching it with a certain set of assumptions and expectations. Still – and this seems to be the key point for Venus – this gaming experience must be understood as a heuristic tool, a pure negative. *The* gaming experience, seen apart from any actual and particular gaming experience, cannot be captured in positive terms, all we can do is experiment with different experiential perspectives, different *metaphors*; "The assertion of a structured whole" will forever be beyond our grasp.

The concept of the general gaming experience is a promising idea, attempting to wrestle out a domain of 'logic and structure' while acknowledging the slippery nature of the computer game as an ideal artifact. One could imagine a number of different objections to this

approach, much depending on one's own position within the general methodological problematic of hermeneutic self-reflexivity. My own view would be that Venus' position is too weak. Even if we expand from merely technical description into the domain of the experiential and the aesthetic, I do not see why we should not go for an 'assertion of a structured whole', which would be governed by the imperative to reach beyond what is "conditioned by our partial skills, needs, and gaming knowledge in the very moment of playing" – in other words, which would go beyond associative or metaphorical thought, beyond literature.

In other words, I would argue that the game as an independent object (independent of our experience of playing it) is part of the defining validity claim of a computer game, and part of the central promise to the player. A commitment to the aesthetic object as a structured whole draws attention to the tensions, ambiguities and unresolved conflicts between different dimensions of the gameplay experience. It also implies that a given perspective may be judged as entirely misapplied or irrelevant. In contrast, a 'perspectivist' inquiry, it seems to me, would invite ever new perspectives to add to existing ones, none of them irrelevant or ill-fitting but some less productive than others.

On the other hand, the notion of 'perspectivist inquiry' as suggested by Venus could be quite flexible, so that for the purpose of theoretical analysis and debate, the difference between a negative and a positive formulation of (general) gaming experience may not necessarily be of great consequence. Venus' assertion that *immersion* is "the single most significant perspective on video games" would certainly indicate that 'perspectivist' should not be taken as 'anything goes'.

In any case, the way in which Venus links the concept of immersion to *self-action* and *remote control* seems to be a promising approach, and I would agree with its basic premise: the experience of

being immersed, understood as analogous to being immersed in water, is a key element in computer game play, and – I would also add – a key differentiating factor in terms of genre. The central questions in addressing the dimension of immersion, as Venus also implies, have to do with agency and player position: Who acts? Where am I? The notion of remote control points to the experiential duality of being immersed while still acting from the outside, in a strange way, as if – in Venus's words – 'being remote to ourselves', in a "certain shooting experience".

What I would want to question, in spite of the brief format of Venus's argument, is, firstly, the seemingly general nature of his concept of immersion. When he advocates that we should 'compare conditions of immersion in different media', the implication seems to be that different media simply show variations over the same basic principle, the same basic experience that we call 'immersion'. This leaves the question open as to whether, or to what extent, immersion in games is of a different kind because it is linked to agency, and as to whether immersion could mean something rather particular and unique in games that simulate perceptual and embodied presence through real-time 3D. It would also be interesting to know if the notion of remote control is meant as a unique computer game phenomenon or if it would also capture the kind of 'remote' mimetic play that we find in for example board games, in which players act from outside a miniature world while at the same time also act – in a certain 'alienated' sense – from within the world.

Secondly, I would suggest that the notion of *telepresence*, or teleimmersion, could capture a similar dynamic as immersion vs. remote control, but in a different (and possibly complimentary?) way, by conceptualizing the there-vs.-here or immersed-while-alienated as an unavoidable constant rather than as a field of experiential movement and fluctuation.

Finally, I find the comparison with a *cinematic* depiction as suggestive as it is unclear. While the notion of the 'situational abstract' seems relevant and productive (and would be, as far as I am aware, an original contribution to the field), the comparison to cinematic depiction seems to suggest quite a radical understanding of 'remote control' – pointing not only to an alienated or distanced 'morphology' of action but to the lack of action (or 'self-action') altogether, so that only disconnected moving images remain...?