

More of the Same: *ECHO*'s Aesthetics of Stuplime Repetition

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INTRODUCTION

Drawing on recent accounts of videogames as sites of posthuman encounter (see Fizek 2018), this paper situates Ultra Ultra's *ECHO* (2017) within a tradition of posthuman horror games, arguing that by pitting players against uncannily intelligent abhuman creatures, aliens and automata, such games pose questions about nature and status of humanity in an era of 'smart' technologies.

ECHO's headline contribution to this tradition is its 'adaptive artificial intelligence' system. Player-character En is faces off against an army of doppelgangers (known as 'echoes') who learn by observing her behaviour, periodically integrating abilities she uses into their own palette of possible actions. If this scenario resonates with contemporary anxieties over workers being asked to train algorithms that may one day replace them (see Upchurch and Moore 2018, 59), in other respects, too, *ECHO* can be seen as a game that thematises the dynamics of digitization and automation.

TRADITION AND INNOVATION

For all its talk of innovation, the videogame industry often prefers to make incremental tweaks to established formulae. Developed by a team comprising eight veterans of *Hitman* (2000-2019) developer IO Interactive, *ECHO* sticks closely to the conventions established by earlier stealth and survival horror titles. Disincentivising combat, games of this kind inculcate a particularly intimate relationship with non-player characters (NPCs), requiring players to reverse engineer and internalise NPCs' habits and capacities in order to survive. Drawing on posthumanist reconceptualisations of the Freudian uncanny (Liu 2011, 208-220; Botting 2013, 128-137), I have argued elsewhere that such games are 'scary' not because they pit player-characters against eerily lifelike foes, but because they reveal how machine-like supposedly intelligent humans can be by periodically jolting players into realising how absorbed in the game they have become (Gallagher 2017, 118).

ECHO follows this pattern while giving it an additional twist via the conceit of NPC clones who gradually learn to use the player's own tactics against them. While the first echoes we encounter are crude and shambling – akin to the dopey, jerkily animated zombies found in early 3D games like *Biohazard/Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996) - their more evolved counterparts prove uncannily adept at mimicking the player. In some ways, then, *ECHO* works to demystify videogame AI, showing how simple rules and scripts concatenate to give the impression of intelligent behaviour. If anything, though, this only renders the echoes eerier. Crude as their AI may be, they are more than intelligent enough to repeatedly thwart the player. Here, as in other posthuman horror

games, the player-character's repeated 'death' provides a corrective to the hubristic '(mis)perception that humans are the only important or relevant cognizers on the planet' (Hayles 2017, 11).

Similar principles inform the game's environmental design. Inspired by the palace of Versailles as much as science-fiction cinema, *ECHO*'s architecture creates a sense of awe-inspiring scale and complexity by repeating, rescaling and recombining a relatively small number of geometrical forms. If all digital media are composed out of discrete 'elements assembled into larger-scale objects' that can 'themselves... be combined into even larger objects' (2001, 30) then *ECHO*'s levels dramatize this "fractal structure of new media" (Manovich 2001, 30). In doing so they exemplify what Eugenie Shinkle, drawing on the aesthetic theories of Sianne Ngai, has described as the 'stuplime' duality of the videogame - a form that simultaneously confronts us with 'the banality of the artifact as a mass-produced consumer object, and the sublimity of its distance and difference from the human' (2012, 105). For Shinkle, a sense of stuplimity is usually a result of games failing to affect us as advertised; in *ECHO*'s case, however, this response is entirely in keeping with the game's bleak vision of a future in which transhumanist dreams of immortality foster distinctly inhumane behaviour.

These stuplime aesthetics also speak to the financial constraints facing the development team. Created by a small studio on a comparatively tight budget, *ECHO* is thriftily inventive in its deployment of a small asset library. Making a virtue of limited resources, the game both reflects and *invite players to reflect upon* the nature of contemporary 'gamework' and the double-edged nature of technological 'progress' (De Peuter and Young 2019, 748). For while *ECHO* attests to the role of 'middleware' in enabling small studios to approximate AAA production values, its commercial failure and Ultra Ultra's subsequent closure speak to the harsh economic realities of the contemporary games industry, in which such tools have helped to foster a marketplace saturated with more-or-less familiar spins on familiar genres.

CONCLUSION

ECHO's premise - a human hero threatened by marauding machinic doppelgangers - is hardly groundbreakingly original. The game remains noteworthy, however, for the way that its concern with computation and cognition informs its interface design, aesthetics and mechanics - and for its onus on fostering playful engagements with NPCs. Allowing users to pleasurably indulge their fear of intelligent machines, *ECHO* suggests how games are evolving a vocabulary for addressing the complexities of human-machine entanglement in the posthuman era.

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