Acousmatics, Video Games, and Situating Play

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INTRODUCTION

Video games are increasingly expecting us to have played *other video games*. "Embodied literacy" and video game controller mediation of a "fundamental conduit through which the videogame reveals its experiences" helps explain the demands video games place on a certain kind of "dressage" to inform (or limit) our play (Keogh 2018). But these expectations of literacy extend past input devices; games increasingly rely on and play with ideas of *remix*.

Video games use common collections of virtual elements to signal to the player they belong to a certain kind of play. A dedicated button to fire a gun usually means a player will have to fire guns at things frequently. The lack of a button to holster the aforementioned gun usually implies that shooting is perhaps all the player will be doing. If the player hits pause and the game responds with a grid of items, the player can assume that they have some sort of inventory. If those items in the inventory take varying numbers of squares in the menus grid, the player can assume they have an inventory like they did in *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2005). As video game developers use elements from *other video games,* they are participating in a form of "musique concrète," or "[game] fragments that exist in reality and that are considered as discrete and complete [game] objects" (Schaeffer 2012).

"Concrète" methods of making games – games that are made from elements of other games – bring a host of considerations about access. If we rely on a dressage of referential literacy, when does situating play through remix become material benefit and when is it an "impassable wall by which the incompetent player is excluded" (Keogh 2018)? I propose using Pierre Schaeffer's concept of "acousmatics" (when you hear a sound without seeing its source) to analyze games that reference – but do not directly reproduce – other video games (Schaeffer 2017). The remixing of cameras, rendering techniques, game mechanics, and visualizations constitutes a *virtual acousmatics*.

This *virtual acousmatics* demands a minimum intertextual literacy between video games where we are not seeing the source of these remixes but recognize what is "put in front of us the [ludic] and its 'possibility'" (Ibid). *Signalis (*rose-engine 2022) situates the player in a certain kind of horror, stealth, or pace by using camera techniques. *Signalis* gives us a birds eye view when moving through the tight corridors and debris of the game's map. In one sense, the ability to see an

entire room at once helps the player navigate. But when compared to *Metal Gear Solid's* (Konami 1998) use of top down cameras for movement, *Signalis's* camera implies that stealthier approaches are how its protagonist (and the player) should move through the space. Seeing the entire outer wall of a space in both games also creates a feeling of being a fish in a barrel: you are aware you do not have much room to move and that the wrong move brings death. *Signalis* does not necessarily inform you of a need to sneak, but its references *signal that you should*. When *Signalis* moves towards other kinds of interactions, the camera and perspective change to re-situate the player. Whenever a puzzle appears in the game, the camera changes to a pseudo first-person fixed perspective and the rendering of the scene dramatically increases in fidelity. The detail of objects in the space invite a tinkering and tactility that the top-down camera lacks. This invitation to fiddle with the game's puzzles (the mechanics where this camera is employed) remixes *Myst* (Cyan, Inc. 1993) and its pre-rendered detailing of intricate puzzles and switches. *Signalis* uses the first person camera in more environmentally focused ways as well. In quiet moments of the game, the player walks through the base and its exterior looking through the protagonist's eyes. These scenes are punctuated by horizonless blizzards, a sterile blanket of snow, and a lack of other characters. This last example of remix is a *subversion* of the virtual acousmatic. Walking simulators emphasize the paidiatic quality to exploring a landscape or space. *Signalis* adopts this camera perspective and control, but does so to deny us the landscape and leaves us in a dead and solitary space. The remixed elements in a game constitute a "*negative affordance*" of the space they create and "limit[ ] the variety of directional autonomy" (Verran 2021). In other words: remix helps wrangle our play space in a game and orients it towards particular kinds of play by calling back to our embodied prior play.

Players will encounter referential objects in a video games where they lack the literacy to understand it is a remix. Nevertheless, these objects still exist for the player, but lack some set of phenomenologically constructed context. Acousmatics rejects the "Cartesian decomposition by distinguishing the 'objective'... form the 'subjective'" (Schaeffer 2017) because we are not remixing *objects* in games; we are remixing the *feeling* our perception of them. Remix is as much a way for us to explore games as it is for games to explore us.

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