On Simema: The Radical Passivity of Self-Playing Games

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PRELUDE: FREUDENHEIM'S *SCHEMA* (2023)

At first blush, Will Freudenheim's installation appears to be a beautiful animation: We follow an ethereal grey blob meandering through a forest of rich, vegetal colors, occasionally interacting with its sylvan surroundings. A peculiar heads-up display overlays the image, though, one that suggests we're supposed to do something. It turns out these are representations of our intrepid explorer's emotional state, and while we can't directly control the character, we can manipulate its emotions. Via a Twitch chat interface, multiple players affect how it feels – from aroused to placid on one scale, from extroverted to introverted on the other – and this affective disposition dictates how the creature engages with its environment: anxiously, aggressively, inquisitively. To play with any intention, therefore, one must become "attuned" to three schemas of affect that map onto the AI state machine (Ash 2013): a facial diagram that recalls *Tron* (Lisberger 1982), a graph where a dynamic conglomerate of bubbles marks the emotional coordinate, and the creature's own animated expressions. In a perpetual cycle, the day brings a hunt for pearls, and at night, these treasures determine a particular musical performance. This aleatory composition results from a number of indeterminacies, both human and machine.

Posthuman Play?

Our age is inclined to think ecologically. "Posthumanism" marks one manifestation of this tendency, now capturing a range of approaches critical of assumptions about the human's autonomy, exceptionality, and duality in favor of a "philosophy of mediation" that foregrounds the matrix of relations that constitute reality (Ferrando 2020, 22). Over the past few decades, scholars working in various fields have attempted to reconceptualize faculties typically attributed to individual humans – action, perception, creativity, and so on – as, instead, emergent properties of systems that enfold the "non-human" (Hörl 2017).

It's no surprise, therefore, that game studies has started following suit (e.g., Mckeown 2018; Mäyrä 2019; Ruffino 2020; Janik 2021), especially when it comes to challenging one of the field's most well-worn concepts: agency (Chia and Ruffino 2022). Indeed, psychologists have long understood play to be the joy "of being a cause" (Groos, 1901,

44), and the fact that the player must do something to progress a video game struck early game scholars as a defining feature of the new medium (e.g., Aarseth 1997; Murray 1997; Galloway 2006). From this perspective, video games like *Schema* that involve more watching than doing mark a break from tradition – one researchers have rendered in posthuman fashion.

In *Playing at a Distance* (2022), Sonja Fizek contends that games eliciting "little direct or close action" require new forms of analysis that don't hinge on "concepts such as participation, interaction, ergodicity, and human agency" (x-xi). Along these lines, Bo Ruberg argues that Brent Watanabe's *San Andreas Deer Cam* (2016), which entails watching a computer-controlled deer roam *Grand Theft Auto V*, is a "work of queer posthumanism" (2022, 413). Likewise, Ian Bogost interprets David O'Reilly's minimally interactive *Mountain* (2014), in which one mostly looks at a mountain, as an alienating experience of "the chasm between your own subjectivity and the unfathomable experience of something else" (2014, np). In both cases, the human player is no longer centre stage. Some form of artifice occupies the starring role – a phenomenon that, according to Fizek, reveals play to be "neither a human nor a nonhuman act;" it "emerges out of complex material, human and nonhuman… entanglements" (2022, xvi-xvii).

Simulation + Cinema = Simema

Is it truly posthuman to watch a video game? Despite eliciting little to no interaction from us, are these simulated spectacles not very much for us? And don't we already have a name for non-interactive, moving images that play themselves? Arguments about the posthuman nature of passive play veer close to claiming that it's radical to watch a movie – and perhaps it is. But in emphasizing the break from video game tradition, we neglect the instructive continuities between self-playing games and cinema, continuities that, I contend, help clarify why passive spectatorship can take us outside ourselves. Instead of treating "autoplay" (Fizek 2018) as a new form of gaming, therefore, this paper argues that self-playing games are fruitfully conceived of as forms of "post-cinema" (Shaviro 2010; Denson and Leyda, 2016; Chateau and Moure 2020).

"Post-cinema" is employed to characterize twenty-first century moving-image media that, while meaningfully distinct from traditional, twentieth-century cinema, perpetuate their forebearers' traits (Denson and Leyda, 2016, 2). One could treat all video games as post-cinematic media (Denson 2020, 10-14, 214-23), and plenty of game researchers have. But where others have focused on cutscenes (Klevjer 2002, 2023), cameras (Brooker 2009; Krichane 2021), and various other stylistic transactions between films and games (see Kryswinka and King 2002; Papazian and Sommers 2013; Giordano, Girina, and Fassone 2015; Krichane 2023), this paper grapples with the passivity of self-playing games like *Schema*, games we might think of as "simema:" "When the player becomes a spectator, the NPC… an actor, the video game… a movie, and the cinema… a ceaseless simulation" (Stark 2024). Unlike those films recorded in game engines known as "machinima" (machine + cinema) (Lowood and Nitsche 2011; Ng 2013), "simema" (simulation + cinema) refers to works primarily performed "live" (Auslander 2022).

Conclusion: Radical Passivity

Do we need another neologism? What's wrong with "zero-player game" (Björk and Juul, 2012), "self-playing game" (Fizek 2017), "autoplay" (Fizek 2018), or "live simulation" (Cheng et al. 2015)? The purpose of "simema" is not to replace these terms, but to place them in conversation with discourse on a medium we seem to have left behind. On the contrary, I argue that film scholars have much to say about being passively subjected to the "alien" patterns of AI-driven art because the likes of Gilles Deleuze (1989) conceived of the cinematograph as, itself, a form of artificial intelligence (Parisi 2019). For the French philosopher, both the promise of thoughtful revelation and the peril of ideological indoctrination derive from cinema's "radical passivity," and by means of an analysis of Freudenheim's *Schema*, I update his theory for game engine art.

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