

At the Crossroads of Art and Games: NPCs in Contemporary Video Art

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INTRODUCTION

As digital games become increasingly popular and pervasive, it is becoming more common to see concepts, aesthetics and terms which originated within gaming communities spreading to other domains of culture and politics. One example of this phenomenon is the way in which the acronym NPC (non-player character) has entered the popular vernacular. In the late 2010s it was reactionary online subcultures who were accusing *others* of being NPCs: Trump-supporting Reddit users deployed NPC memes to ridicule progressives for what they saw as an unthinking commitment to irrational progressive dogma, while far-right meme-makers on 4chan used them to perpetuate ideas of women and ethnic minorities as irrational and inferior (Dafaure, 2020; Gallagher & Topinka, 2023). More recently, TikTok was swept by a craze for 'NPC streams' that saw content creators robotically rehearsing set gestures and phrases in response to gifts from viewers. Here, and as commentators like Rachel O'Dwyer (2023) have observed, comparing *oneself* to an NPC became a means of acknowledging the ways in which economic and sociotechnical systems constrain our agency, motivating us to behave in ways that are more predictable - and thus more profitable. But it is not just within popular culture that the figure of the NPC is assuming new meanings and functions. This paper explores how works of 'game art' - that is, artworks that 'either reference[] videogames or directly appropriate[] game content' (Richardson, Hjorth and Davies, 2021: 103) - are using the figure of the NPC to address questions of agency, identity and subjectivity. It offers a close textual analysis of two recent works of video art: Larry Achiampong and David Blandy's 2023 video *_GOD MODE_* and Total Refusal's 2022 video 'Hardly Working'

GOD MODE

GOD MODE was shown at the Wellcome Collection as part of Achiampong and Blandy's exhibition *Genetic Automata*. The exhibition as a whole constituted a meditation on the histories of scientific racism and eugenics, their role in shoring up forms of racial capitalism founded on the belief that non-white populations possess 'lower degrees of genetic worth' (Wynter, 1994, 49-51), and the role of popular media like videogames in shaping understandings of biology, heredity and "race." *_GOD*

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MODE_ uses both gaming jargon and imagery created using game engines to reflect on the position of racialised subjects within contemporary culture. Achiampong's narration differentiates between *the player*, who is free to leave gamespace at any time, and the *NPC* who is 'forced to labour... my very movements pre-ordained, tormented by the cursor that dances around me.' In doing so it echoes arguments made by scholars including Alex Anikina (2020), Alexander R. Galloway (2012) and Sam Srauy and John Cheney-Lippold (2019), all of whom have called for attention to the ways in which digital games' systems, structures and mechanics reflect key tenets of racial thinking.

HARDLY WORKING

Hardly Working tracks the activities of NPCs in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018). It reveals that while the carpenters, farmhands and barmaids staffing the shipyards, farms and taverns of Rockstar's virtual Old West may *look* like they are working, theirs is in fact a Potemkin productivity. Cycling through the same animations without ever meaningfully affecting the state of the gameworld, their performances of labour quickly break down upon closer scrutiny. Rather than seeing this as *compromising* the game's claims to realism, however, the video posits that these NPCs are highlighting a deeper truth: that 'in a capitalist economy, where the goal is not to satisfy demands but to accumulate, there is no option for the grind to stop' (Total Refusal, 2022). The video mounts this argument via a game that became notorious for the prolonged periods of 'crunch' (industry for periods of prolonged overwork) that its development team was subjected to (Schreier, 2018). By doing so it asks us not just what we can learn from the terms on which games simulate the nature of labour under earlier phases of capitalism, but how we should understand contemporary 'game work' (Bulut, 2020).

CONCLUSION

At the level of their diegeses and that of their underlying systems, videogames often perpetuate troublingly regressive, even dehumanizing ideas about work, identity, subjectivity, and the ways in which these are entangled. Yet this very fact makes the medium a powerful vehicle for critical perspectives on these same issues (Gallagher, 2017). These two recent video works show how artists are repurposing not just games and game engines, but concepts and metaphors with roots in gaming culture to address these topics. Part of a rich traffic between the artworld and videogame culture (Sharp, 2015; Schrank, 2014), they highlight gaming's status as a source technological and conceptual tools with which to make sense of contemporary culture.

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