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34.COMPUTER GAMES AND THE COMPLEXITY OF EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT
Computer games are usually studied on the basis of a sensory-motor model related to classical cinema, a model which is almost exclusively oriented towards the actuality and causality of action. This assumption of an action-driven, Aristotelean dramaturgy does not only concern the possible world which is represented in the game, but also the playing of the game itself. We argue that such an approach does not sufficiently recognize the complexity of the experience represented in the game and gone through by the game player. In order to determine the complexity of experience, two other –this time modern-cinema related – models are used, based on Peirce's phenomenological categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness, and on Deleuze's cinematographical categories of the movement-image, the time-image, and the thought-image. According to these triadic theories the actuality and causality of action is broken through by the predominance of the intensity of experience and/or the reflexivity of thought. We develop a conceptual framework which provides us the tools in order to understand the three dimensions of the experience of the game and of the playing of the game in their triadic relations.

KEYWORDS
Firstness, secondness and thirdness; lyric, epic and dramatic; time-image, movement-image and thought-image; deconstruction; device paradigm

" ... um es endlich einmal herauszusagen, der Mensch spielt nur, wo er in voller Bedeutung des Wortes Mensch ist, und er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt"
(Friedrich Schiller, Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen, 1795)

INTRODUCTION

Computer games are usually studied on the basis of a sensory-motor model related to classical cinema, a model which is almost exclusively oriented towards the actuality and causality of action. This orientation presupposes an action-driven, Aristotelean dramaturgy not only with respect to the possible world that is represented in the game, but also to the playing of the game itself and to its

effects in everyday life. Such an orientation is characteristic for the narrative, the ludological and the effect research approach and does not do justice to the complexity of the experience as this is represented in the game and gone through by the player of the game.

The aim of our contribution is twofold: on the one side to argue that the complexity of experience is also (more or less) present in those games that have reductively been seen as only action games, on the other side to advocate the design and development of more complex—that is to say not only action-driven—computer games. In order to determine the complexity of the experience, we will introduce two other models related to modern cinema, in which the dominance of the actuality and causality of action gives way to the dominance of the intensity of experience and/or the reflexivity of thought. We develop a set of conceptual tools with which the three dimensions of the experience can be clarified in their mutual relations.

Firstly, we present a phenomenology of experience in reference to the universal or phenomenological categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness, as these are distinguished by the American philosopher and scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). (1) Secondly, we apply these categories to computer games in order to specify the different positions that can be taken up by the 'player' with respect to the possible world that is represented in the game, namely the lyric, the dramatic and the epic position. (2) Thirdly, we refer, by means of the triadic image theory of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), to the historical and political-ideological implications of these positions. (3) We finish with some concluding reflections.

1. The triad of feeling, action and reflection

We may distinguish human experience in three dimensions: the emotional dimension of feeling, the volitional dimension of action and the cognitive dimension of reflection. These three basic dimensions of the human experience correspond with the "universal categories" which Peirce distinguishes in his phenomenological approach of reality and the human mind: firstness, secondness and thirdness. As modes of orientation, they determine the way in which the world is opened up for us in our experience. Every orientation is led by a specific interest and has, in both theoretical and practical respects, a normative meaning.

Firstness is the category of the immediate presentness. Experiences of firstness are qualities of feeling. It is, so to say, the first experience of the world without any distinction or a consciousness of one's own existence. The world is experienced as "first, present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious and evanescent" (EP 1.248 [12.13]), in short, as something which has no cause outside itself.

As a mode of experience, secondness is the hard, tangible reality, which we run into—are confronted with—and which we cannot think away; it is the reality whose existence we as subjects have to recognize as an object outside ourselves, as something which offers resistance and which we have to react on by acting. It is the practice material of the will and the subject matter to experience (EP 1.253-254 [12.13]).

Thirdness is, in its proper form, the objectified thought, in which we wonder how we relate ourselves to the world. Thirdness is reflection, without which experience is impossible. Thirdness manifests itself in this consciousness and underlies every orientation: Being with the world is at the same time being with yourself.

In the categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness we can easily recognize the three dimensions of

experience as distinguished by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant in, respectively, feeling ("Empfindung" or "Gefühl), imagination ("Vorstellung") and reason ("Verstand"). Firstness corresponds with the emotional, secondness with the volitional and thirdness with the cognitive dimension of our experience.

We assume that playing games comes about in a "free play" of feeling, action and reflection. In this free play, the player is appealed to in his imagination ("Einbildungskraft", Kant: 1986 [1790] [6]), which is also a creative power in aesthetic experience and expression. As far as a computer game offers the player the opportunity to play the game in a free play of imagination, which implies that none of the three modes of experience is suppressed by the others or instrumentalized for therapeutic (cf. Turkle, 1996 [17]) and educational (cf. Prensky, 2001 [14]), economic (advertisement and marketing) and political (propaganda) purposes, it belongs to the domain of art. The notion of "free play" demands also an "open dramaturgy" which leaves space for escape routes, for going underground and dismantling the system of consumership—in short, where the play leaves space for anarchy.

The free play of imagination positions the player not only in (relation to) the possible world which is represented in the games, but also emphatically to the world of his own experience, in terms of both the intensity and reflexivity of his experience. A computer game offers in principle the opportunity to play with experiences and to risk experiences. Usually the interactivity of computer games is understood as the player's capacity to play a part in the represented world or to intervene in an other way into the narrative, but rarely as a tool to express his own subjectivity and to intensify his experience or to reflect on the represented world and to examine the rules according to which the game is constructed.

2. The lyric, dramatic and epic position

The intensity of experience, the actuality and causality of action and the reflexivity of thought correspond with the different positions which can be taken up by the 'player' with respect to the possible world which is represented in the game and/or constituted in playing the game. We characterize these positions as subject positions, as these are inscribed in the text, with the tripartition of the lyric, the dramatic and the epic (Kattenbelt, 1994 [7]).

The lyric position primarily concerns an emotional orientation towards and an affective perception of the world; the dramatic position primarily concerns an action-motivated orientation towards and a senso-motorical perception of the world; and the epic position primarily concerns a reflective orientation towards and a contemplative perception of the world. The lyric and the epic position have in common that the player is liberated from the necessity of action.

Why is in our media culture the dramatic mode of representation so dominant? In order to answer this question we have to make a detour via the film. The dominant position of the dramatic mode in cinema can be considered as an effective strategy to define the audience as a mass audience. A medium is not a mass medium because of its massive accessibility, but because it definies its audience as a mass. In the still-dominant mode of the classical film, the spectator is an anonymous, invisible wittness, who gains access to the possible world which is represented in the film by identification with the hero. The aim is transparency, which means that the medium wipes out its own grammar (Benjamin, 1936 [1]), its own traces (Metz, 1977 [10]). This striving for transparancy is often considered as a natural tendency (cf. Murray, 1997: 26: "Eventually all successful storytelling technologies become 'transparant': we lose

consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film, but only the power of the story itself." [11]) or need (cf. Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 24: "The transparent interface is one more manifestation of the need to deny the mediated character of digital technology altogether." [2]) of all media. We understand the dominance of the dramatic mode of representation as an example of the "device paradigm" (Borgmann, 1984 [3]; Kattenbelt, 2002 [8]). According to this paradigm, modern technology functions to a large extent as a concealed machinery which delivers on demand all kinds of products, services and experiences. This paradigm is a necessary condition for an optimal functioning of the consumer society, indeed, but it obstructs our view on the social conditions under which the production processes take place (cf. Klein, 1999 [9]).

Many computer games draw upon this classical mode, because the playing of the game is primarily defined in a functional relation to the action of the hero. The individual player is not himself, but all the players are that one specific hero (for example Solid Snake in *Metal Gear Solid*). As in cinema, this tendency in computer games can be considered as erasing the heterogenity of a mass audience. This erasure does not only injustice to the diversity of the audience, but also to what is for computer games the characteristic moment of deconstruction, in which the device paradigm is broken through and the political and ideological implications are revealed (Raessens, 2004 [16])

3. The movement-image, time-image and thought-image

The actuality and causality of action, the intensity of experiece and the reflexivity of thought are to link with, or, show a similar structure to the movement-image, the time-image and the thought-image. The richness of these two approaches is that, together, they combine a theory of phenomenology of experience (i.e., the Peircean approach) and, more concrete, different strategies of representation (i.e., the Deleuzian approach). We thus combine in a systematic way different dimensions of the experience with different dimensions of the expression of experience. This combination makes our approach something of a phenomenological one, in that we take as our point of departure the inseparability of experience and expression.

Both theories want to develop an alternative to the Aristotelean dramaturgy. The Deleuzean image theory adds another dimension, namely that these alternative dramaturgic strategies are being developed in accord with modern rather than classical models of cinema (Raessens, 2001 [15]). We think that Deleuze's typology of images, even though developed for the cinema, can be used for the domain of computer games. According to Deleuze, the classic is to be found there where there is an automatic connection between a perception and an action, whereas the modern breaks this connection. This opens the possibility for the perception to stand on its own (the perception-image), or to connect with different forms of the movement-image, as in the affection-image or the impulse-image (cf. Deleuze, 1983 [4]). It is also possible that, freed from the necessity for action, the perception connects with all sorts of time-images – the dream-image, the memory-image, etc. – and thought-images (cf. Deleuze, 1985 [5]). It is the goal of Deleuze's work to show in a systematic way that there are all kinds of strategies to break through the dominance of the classical action image, and, from a historical perspective, that these strategies take different forms over time. The political impact, however, stays the same: to develop strategies ensuring that human experience is not reduced to cliché-like action-perspectives and to give space to new forms of subjectification in which there is room for intensity and reflexivity. It is our goal to explore whether these alterna-

tives already exist, and if not, to advocate the development of those, more complex games.

How the lyric (time-image), dramatic (action-image) and epic position (thought-image) could be inscribed in the text, will be illustrated with an analysis of the computer game *Metal Gear Solid* (Hideo Kojima, 1999). In this game the secret agent Solid Snake is ordered to dismantle a terroristic organization. Although in this game the dramatic position is dominant, indeed, we would like to argue that the game has lyric and epic tendencies as well. The dramatic position in *Metal Gear Solid* (MGS) provides the player with a third person view of situations in which Solid Snake is taking on actions, which are controlled by the player. The possible world in the game is represented as is manifest in the third person view which offers the player action-contexts in which Solid Snake is an agent. The first person views – the player looking through the eyes of Solid Snake – which the game also provides, might, because of their subjectification, be regarded as lyric tendencies, but these tendencies are overruled by the the dramatic mode, in that their emotional impact is not considered in its own value. The same goes for the epic tendencies in MGS, although there are moments in the game that the player is forced to look beyond the limits of the world represented in the game in order to continue the action taking place in this world.

Conclusion

Usually the intensity of experience and the reflexivity of thought are subordinated to the actuality and causality of action. In this sense many computer games are more about reflexes than about reflection. Only the breaking through of the dominance of action leaves space for other domains of experience. This breaking through should be regarded as a challenge for game designers to develop games in which the experience of playing the game becomes more a part of the game itself. So far, most game designers have restricted themselves to remediating the formats of the classical cinema. We are curious to know what will happen if they have the creative daring to develop games which do justice to the complexity of experience.

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