This Could Be Us: Networked Intimacy in Single-Player Games

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Keywords

narrative, social media, sexuality, censorship, surveillance

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen sustained academic attention to the affective dynamics of social media platforms, and to modes of self-representation and 'life-writing' emerging online (e.g. Hillis, Paasonen and Petit 2015; Poletti and Rak 2014). Within game studies, meanwhile, a brace of new edited collections attests to a widespread interest in games' portrayals of sex, love and relationships (Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart 2015; Lauteria and Wysocki 2015). Drawing on such work, this paper analyses three single-player games which explore machine-mediated intimacy and the narrative affordances of social networking platforms: Christine Love's *Don't Take It Personally Babe, It Just Ain't Your Story* (2011), Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris' *Redshirt* (2013) and Robert Yang's *Cobra Club* (2015). As examples of how games can meld generic conventions familiar from fictional genres with design elements cribbed from digital apps and devices in order to communicate, these games have much to say to both scholars and designers of digital games. By incorporating ersatz social media into storyworlds indebted to science fiction serials and high school movies, these games exploit the affordances of the videogame medium to dramatize issues of identity, privacy, surveillance and consent – while also asking what players expect from single-player games in a world where social networks are turning solo play into a collective experience.

Don't Take It Personally casts players as a teacher with access to both his students' public social media profiles and their private messages. Love uses the conventions of the visual novel genre to show how networked devices facilitate friendship, fandom, romance and projective identification, but also hypocrisy, prurience, gossip and abuses of trust. As the game's title hints, she also interrogates the promises of agency with which single-player games attract players, asking us to consider the appeal of vicarious participation in an unfolding narrative. *Redshirt*, meanwhile, uses a sci-fi premise to suggest how social media encourage users to treat relationships in instrumental or 'gamified' terms. As a menial worker trapped on a doomed space station, players are challenged to escape – not, as in the likes of *Dead Space* (Visceral Games 2008), by shooting their way out, but by making powerful friends. Echoing Rodenberry's *Star Trek* in its concern with 'alien' cultures learning to get along, *Redshirt* gives this theme a contemporary twist via a Facebook-style interface, foregrounding the terms on which social media allow people of different genders, classes, ethnicities and sexualities to interact.

By comparison, Yang's 'dick-pic simulator' *Cobra Club* is rather more down to earth. Dismissed by some as a lewd joke, it in fact follows artist and theorist Hito Steyerl in arguing for the sociopolitical import of explicit selfies (2014). By sneakily uploading images the player has taken in-game to a Tumblr blog posing as a National Security Agency website, Yang highlights government surveillance and stages an experience of 'context collapse' (boyd and Marwick 2011), showing how easily media created with a particular audience in mind can go astray online, jeopardizing relationships, reputations and careers. *Cobra Club* was itself thrown into the spotlight when video streaming site Twitch.tv blacklisted the game – a move that, for Yang, testified to regressive attitudes to nudity and sex in gaming culture (2015b). Especially resonant in the wake of the 'Gamergate' movement's misogynistic harassment of developers and critics, Yang's comments about the ban also suggest how social media are reconfiguring notions of privacy, obscenity and free speech. Such shifts show that questions of sexuality and self-representation are also questions of politics and power - a truth that all three of these games acknowledge through their portrayals of bosses, teachers and government spies behaving badly. Raising questions about social networking that multiplayer and social games seem unwilling or unable to address, these games demonstrate that if single-player games remain relevant in our networked world it is not least as a way to explore the vicissitudes of online intimacy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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