

Gaming and the Virtual Sublime

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Gaming and the Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games

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Abbreviations

AC:Or	Assassin's Creed: Origins
E:D	Elite Dangerous
FANF	Five Nights at Freddy's
GOW	God of War
GTA V	Grand Theft Auto V
Odyssey	Assassin's Creed: Odyssey
PoP:SoT	Prince of Persia: Sands of Time
RDO	Red Dead Online
RDR2	Red Dead Redemption 2
Sekiro	Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice
SH2	Silent Hill 2
SMG	Super Mario Galaxy
TDC	That Dragon, Cancer
Isaac	The Binding of Isaac
TWD	The Walking Dead
W3:WH	The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt
NPC	Non-player character (an in-game character who is other to your avatar and controlled by the game)

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Author Biography

Dr. Matthew Spokes is an Associate Dean for Sociology and Criminology at York St. John University. He has published a number of pieces on video games, including work on structural violence, pro-social behaviour, procedural rhetoric, methodological approaches, and narrative architecture and mortality.

His previous book was *Death, Memorialization and Deviant Spaces* (Spokes, Denham and Lehmann), published as part of Emerald 'Death and Culture' series.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: What are Games for?

1.1 Peacock Hey!, Byron and the Significance of Skeletons

My daughter has had an imaginary friend called Peacock Hey! since she was two years old (she has just had her 4th birthday at the time of writing). Peacock Hey! is a 100-foot tall mermaid whose age varies wildly depending on the context of the story she is the protagonist of. These stories all have a similar thread: something my daughter has been asked to do has previously been experienced by Peacock Hey! and, because Peacock Hey! has done something before, it's okay for my daughter to do it too. Peacock Hey!, despite not being real, makes the world a more familiar place, a less frightening place.

Although not as well-known as *Don Juan*, Byron's (2004) poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* still manages to capture the awe of those men – and it was ostensibly men – fanning out across Europe on the original 'Grand Tour'. In the section titled 'There is a Pleasure in the Pathless Woods', Byron writes

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore
There is a society where none intrudes
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more [...]

Byron's poem was written following his travels through the Mediterranean (Heffernan, 2006) and this passage sees him considering the vitality and inspiration of nature; the enjoyment of losing oneself in the forest, the power and ferocity of the sea. What Byron is describing is the ability of nature to instill in a person a sense of awe, or even what some would term the sublime (see Needler, 2010).

Now the obvious question is what connects my daughter's imaginary friend to Byron's Grand Tour? The answer is that both exemplify, in different ways, attempts to codify and comprehend experiences that initially transcend our ability to understand them. For my daughter, this is framed largely through her life course. She is four, going on five, so many of the things that adults take for granted are new and daunting – the unknown that only becomes known through

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experience. Byron, as he identifies in the poem, uses the verse to try and explain that which is perhaps beyond explanation. Both of these examples get to the root of the sort of issues this book will explore in how we try to make sense of experiences that challenge our perception of ourselves and the world around us.

Further in to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron contrasts his admiration for the wonders of the natural world by offering a description of late eighteenth century Greece that Shaw (2013) describes as 'withering' (p. 148). In Byron's work, Shaw sees elements of the sublime, in identifying a connection between the isolated exemplar and the universal, the individual experience connected to the whole which may or may not have something to do with that 'fatal divide between the human and the divine' (p. 153) often identified in what came to be called the Romantic sublime. For my purposes, it demonstrates at the very least a classic example of the relationship between subject and object, and the range of impacts each can have on the other.

Before proceeding, it is perhaps worth giving some context to the book. My first piece of published writing as an academic explored the ways in which communities of video game players and fans (I will endeavour to use 'gamers' throughout) used a single-player role-playing game – *Fallout 4* (Bethesda, 2015) – to discuss their own fears of dying (Spokes, 2018). Specifically, the game is set in a post-apocalyptic future where the East Coast of the United States has been largely destroyed as part of a nuclear war. Gamers navigate a hellish landscape of collapsed buildings and mutated animals, trying to make sense not only of what happened, but where humanity is headed. The totality of the destruction is immense, but what chimed most with gamers were the day-to-day tragedies of individual deaths, typified by skeletons placed in the game environment. Some of the skeletons were arm-in-arm, suggesting a final embrace at the point of impact, others were going about their everyday lives, shopping at the supermarket with their children in the trolley when the bomb fell. Gamers used these skeletons to situate and try to imagine their own deaths, or avoidance of death, in a similar scenario: the game was an opportunity for discussion, and also a way or attempting to deal with the magnitude of the death of humanity (albeit in a representational sense).

Video games, and virtual worlds more broadly, engage us on both micro- and macro-levels. As Muriel and Crawford (2020, p. 140) observe, 'video games and their culture can help us understand wider social topics such as agency, power, everyday life and identity in contemporary society' and in working through this book I am keen to consider in detail the relationship between video games as the individualistic pursuit they are frequently typified as, and video games as virtual and simulational spaces for testing us, for allowing us to explore their wider ramifications as reflective of the social conditions, practices and processes we engage in and with: in the context of the latter, much like Peacock Hey!, video games may act as a proxy for making the macro more manageable. But equally I want to explore the ways in which they push us towards connecting with ideas and environments that challenge and antagonise our understanding of how things are.

Using case studies from contemporary video gaming, this book can be thought of as an experiment in applying various philosophies of the sublime in an effort to see how well they work in the context of interactive media. My focus is on

unpacking a variety of philosophical ideas in relation to four key areas: rhetoric, awe, fear and death. I am interested in whether or not it possible to experience the awe of a Byronic landscape through the television screen, if fear can be propagated in a pizzeria staffed by animatronic animals? Can repeating the same action over and over and over again be the path to a transcendent experience?

More than that though, the central question this book is asking is how useful the concept of the sublime is in understanding our recent entanglements with representative virtual and simulational spaces: is the sublime fit for purpose, or does it need recasting for the virtual age?

Where best to begin...

At this early stage, it is already worth reflecting on the why this chapter and indeed the book is about 'gaming'. By 'gaming' I mean specifically the processes, practices and experiences of playing video games (which is what gamers do!). Throughout I will be exploring ideas that may be applicable to games more broadly, including things like 'play' and 'affect', but my primary interest is in the application of the sublime to the video game. To caveat this, I am not suggesting that the sublime is something applicable to all games, but rather that our understanding of video games might be enriched – or at least more thoroughly scrutinised – through a conceptual framework based on sublime ideas. Throughout the book I will use 'game(s)' and 'video game(s)' interchangeably, much like 'player' and 'gamer': if I refer to 'games' in a broader sense outside of the video game, this will be clearly demarcated.

The bulk of this chapter then will set some groundwork for exploring video games as well as developing some of the associated terminology that will be used in this book. Firstly, it is important to understand what a contested term 'video game' is, so some definitional work is definitely in order to establish a working description to problematise later on. Secondly, I'll double-down on differentiating the focus of this book from 'games' more generally as this will enable us to better understand competing arguments about what games do and why we play them. Here I will reflect on both Huizinga and Caillois' discussions on things like 'play'. Stemming from this, contemporaneous research that outlines an ontological distinction between games as objects and games as processes will allow the interrogation of dominant schools of thought in the associated field of Game Studies. Thirdly, research on the impact of games, in terms of their power to offer new 'possibility spaces' (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), socio-political engagement and critical tools for understanding a changing world will begin to show the affective resonance of this form of popular culture, and how far removed it has become from simplistic notions of passively consumed entertainment.

1.2 What are Video Games?

An obvious question, right – but what a video game *is* is heavily contested. Initially, a 'video game' can be challenged terminologically: Perron and Wolf (2009, p. 6) acknowledge this by explaining that although the field of academic research into video games has developed exponentially in the last 20 years or so, 'a set of agreed-upon terms has been slow to develop, even for the name of

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the subject itself (“video games”, “videogames”, “computer games”, “digital games”, etc.). This issue is compounded, they continue, by games journalists using a variety of different terms, and professional organisations similarly muddying the waters.¹ The video games industry also uses all sorts of terms, for example, ‘electronic entertainment’.² It is important then to identify that there is by no means agreement around terminology, but also that it is useful to have a term in use for the sake of clarity. Following Crawford’s (2012) detailed discussion, this book will adopt ‘video games’ as the standard term throughout, for the simple reason of frequency: it is after all the most used term.

What a video game is could be understood definitionally. I could say that a video game is ‘a computer game that you play by using controls or buttons to move images on a screen’ (Collins Dictionary, Video Game, 2019) but as with the use of the term ‘video game’, this definition is also problematic. For a start, the definition suggests a video game is a ‘computer game’ – a terminological concern – before stating that you ‘play’ it using controls. What you do with a video game depends very much on your understanding of ‘play’, as well as arguments about the nature of active versus passive engagement though the manipulation of ‘images on a screen’. So not that helpful.

Perhaps a video game can be understood simply as a form of interactive media? There are a few ways of situating games here – again, Crawford (2012) is invaluable in detailing the arguments for and against the view that games are media – including how video games are entertainment products first and foremost. This certainly chimes with their rise to prominence as a cultural product (Donovan, 2010); for example, in 2018 *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) became the most profitable entertainment product of all time (Donnelly, 2018) when compared to film and literature.

In addition to this, lots and lots of people play video games. Video games can be thought of as products of culture industries spread across the globe, where large development teams spend many years and many millions of dollars designing products to sell to gamers. Video games have considerable reach in terms of how many people come into contact with them, directly or indirectly. *Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2)* (Rockstar Studios, 2018), according to some estimates (Takahashi, 2018), had 2,800 employees working on its development for seven years at a cost of around \$170million, but given that *Take Two*, the owner of the developer, made \$725million in the three days after the release date (Sarkar, 2018) selling 17 million copies of the title, this seems like both an indication of the size and scope of the industry, but also what a sound financial investment video game development appears to be at present.

If video games are media, it is worth thinking about them in relation to both their production and their consumption. As Warde (2005) argues, consumption is not simply the end result of production, and is not entirely about

¹For example, the principle academic organization for scholars of video games is DiGRA, the Digital Games Research Association.

²This accounts for two of the three e’s in the games industry’s annual E3 shindig.

passive engagement with particular objects and practices, but is instead an active series of processes and relationships that reinforce as well as challenge a variety of socio-cultural structures (consumption as a type of subcultural capital for instance). As a form of material culture, video games offer a way of exploring these relationships as a type of social reality, where different consumers use video games in a variety of ways that complicates any simplistic binary between production and consumption: simply put, video games are a lens through which we can explore contemporary culture (Denham & Spokes, 2018; Muriel & Crawford, 2018).

The scale and scope of video games makes them a viable locus of academic study and research, and research into video games as I'll detail throughout, is necessarily diverse and is able to draw on a variety of perspectives. As Grey (2009, p. 1) contends, games can 'be read critically, not simply as expressions of culture or as products of consumption, but as objects through which we can *think*'; this thinking might involve the formal qualities of the game itself in relation to interactions between programmers and players (Cremin, 2012), methodological issues around capturing and detailing what constitutes 'play' (Giddings, 2009) or the role of memory in creating players identities and associated narratives (Mukherjee, 2011). Bogost (2010, p. ix) argues that video games have important persuasive powers in terms of how we see the world around us:

Video games can ... disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change. I believe that this power is not equivalent to the content of video games, as the serious games community claims. Rather, this power lies in the very way video games mount claims through procedural rhetorics. Thus, all kinds of video games ... possess the power to mount equally meaningful expression.

As Nieborg & Hermes (2008) tell us, a multitude of disciplinary approaches and analytical tools can be used to explore video games, and reciprocally video games may help to illuminate current debates in other disciplines. We can also see these sorts of activities in the related field of Games Studies, and it is worth spending some time working through the development of key arguments in this area of research to shed more light on what a video game is and what a video games does.

1.3 Video Games and Play

Play is something intrinsic to all games, video or otherwise, and the notion of play is central to numerous positions in the field of Game Studies. Debates around what play is and what happens to us when we play – echoing the opening question about what a video game is – typically emerge in response to the work of two scholars: Dutch cultural theorist Johan Huizinga (particularly his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*) and French sociologist Roger Caillois (in *Man, Play and Games*,

originally published in 1961).³ Huizinga (1955) defines play in relation to its form, as something that stands outside of quotidian experience but that completely encapsulates a person in the sense of its absence of utility and its emphasis on the imaginary: he also describes it as a ‘free activity’ (pp. 34–35). Play, he goes on, takes place in a demarcated spatio-temporal location and is governed by specific rules that result in group coherence which again underscores the separation from everyday life. In the context of video games, on a rudimentary level we can already see the ways in which play is operationalised: imaginary worlds, a leisure pursuit separate from work, rules as defined by developers. But what Huizinga speaks to is essentially a series of binary distinctions, a dialectic of sorts. The absence of utility suggests that Huizinga sees play as the opposite to seriousness (Ehrmann, Lewis & Lewis, 1968), that play cannot form part of our everyday experience that the imaginary runs counter to reality. This binary is important when thinking about video games, because not only is play frequently considered a quotidian experience, the philosophical notion of *the virtual* challenges these distinctions, particularly the representational and the real (see Chapter 4).

Huizinga’s work has had considerable impact on the field of Game Studies including academic research in relation to video games: for example, Salen and Zimmerman’s (2004) landmark study on play-through-game-design is titled *Rules of Play*, and expressly unpacks Huizinga’s work in defining ‘meaningful’ play (pp. 31–36). Likewise Juul’s (2005) work on the constituent elements of the video game again draws on both the power of the imaginary and the need to see play through codified systems of rules (p. 1).

Caillois’ (2001) work, situating games and play as conditional in many social structures and behaviours, reproduces some of Huizinga’s original contentions (free, separate, rule-based, make-believe) through ‘six characteristics’ including the notion of games being unproductive. Whilst many binary distinctions remain, the interplay between ‘play’ and ‘games’ is more pronounced, with Caillois developing a spectrum that runs from *ludus* (codified rules for structure action) through to *paidia* (or playfulness, the more unstructured spontaneous nature of play). His argument, crudely distilled, is that the push and pull between *ludus* and *paidia* is what leads to potential instability in cultures as rules are routinely established and reformed. Ehrmann, Lewis, and Lewis (1968) acknowledge the important ways in which Caillois attends to this neglected area of Huizinga’s work, but decry his obsession with categorisation (p. 32). Thankfully his expanded categorisation does push past Huizinga’s focus on competition in the aforementioned two types of *play* (*ludus* and *paidia*) and four differing *forms*: these forms – *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (role play) and *ilinx* (perception altering) – have in turn informed scholars of Games Studies, including Walther’s (2003) application of these categories to video games, notably *Hitman: Codename 47* (IO Interactive, 2000). For Walther, the suitability of these categories rests firstly on accepting the ways in which the categories may interrelate. *Hitman* is initially about mimicry in that the player must locate their ‘play-mood’ in response to the role (which

³Sutton-Smith (1977) is an important touchstone also, but I’ll come to this elsewhere.

is make-believe), but this itself involves a complicated relationship between the gamer, their avatar and the game space. Following this, mimicry becomes agon, whereby the game design directs gamers towards rule-specific competitions (missions that need completing). Gaming here is clearly multiple, challenging the simplistic delineations previously discussed.

Sutton-Smith, in his two-volume study of games cunningly titled *The Study of Games* (Avedon & Sutton-Smith, 1971) considers multiplicity in terms of how, various groups – from academics and educators to the military – have their own definitions so that the meaning of games and play are not inherent, but vary depending on the people thinking about them and engaging with them. This resonates in van Vught and Glas' (2018) analysis of *games as objects* and *games as processes*. They consider these positions as 'opposing ontological strategies' with the former occupying a space where 'the game object provides some core structure that encourages or even enforces certain play actions to be performed' (p. 4) and the later more about the action or processes involved in play, rather than the object itself ('this mission that happens to feature in *Hitman: Codename 47* is exciting!'). Play is bifurcated depending on the view of the gamer. In the first instance, play is more of a methodological concern and in the second, play is the 'object of analytical interest' and whilst this again implies a dialectic, it is one underscored by multiple meanings of gaming and play that are gamer-dependent.

Despite not engaging with video games explicitly,⁴ Sutton-Smith's appraisal is still regarded as helpful interjection, recognising as it does the multiple ways in which play can be conceptualised in relation to video games (Juil, 2001). Similarly, Tavinor (2009, p. 32) argues that scholars of video games need to 'construct a definition that offers the possibility that there may be more than one way to be a videogame [*sic.*]'. Indeed, in Game Studies there have historically been two frequently oppositional approaches to understanding the video game – ludological and narratological – and both these positions are worth exploring to strengthen the foundations of this study.

I have already detailed a handful of binaries in studies of games, both in a historical and contemporaneous sense (play as structured vs. unstructured, games as objects vs. games as process) and, in terms of video games, there is a similar distinction that has previously seen video games scholars framing games as either ludological or narratological. It is worth saying that much of the initial antagonism between key players in this debate has abated, but it nonetheless demonstrates entrenched views on what video games are, what they do, and how they can be understood. In addition, these debates can also be understood through the sublime, where ludology maps on to the embodied, affective experience of a sublime happening and narratology could be seen as the more traditional, pseudo-Longinian emphasis on rhetoric (see Chapter 2). For clarity I am going to present these debates in chronological order, rather than by perpetuating the binary.

⁴It was 1971 after all, so he would be limited to *Galaxy Game* or dying from a snake bite in the original text-version of *The Oregon Trail*.

In *Hamlet on the holodeck: The future of narrative in cyberspace*, Janet Murray (2017, p. 10) situates video games in terms of their ‘promise to reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework’. By contextualising video games this way, Murray imposes narrative sensibilities on the medium, or rather she shows how video games are narratological in that as a ‘new compositional tool [they should be placed] as firmly as possible in the hands of the storytellers’ (p. 284). At the time, Game Studies scholars were less than conducive to what they saw as a type of reductionism. Aarseth (1997) sees video games not as passively read texts, but as ergodic experiences, whereby the gamer is required to actively participate instead. More dramatically, Juul (1998) states that ‘computer games are not narratives [...] rather the narrative tends to be isolated from or even work against the computergame-ness of the game’, which sets the scene for a divorcing of story from play. Further to this, Eskelinen (2001) argues how

outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don’t expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories.

From here we might characterise a series of skirmishes between the two camps. For the ludologists, a sustained critique of games-as-narratives can be found in the work of Frasca (2007) and Mäyrä (2008) to name a few. Another notable battle played out between Jenkins (2004) and Eskelinen (2004), with Jenkins attempting to offer spatialised dynamics as an inbetween space – because ‘it makes sense to think of game designers less as storytellers than as narrative architects’ (p. 121) – which Eskelinen characterises as a position ignorant of key critiques which breaks no new ground in theorising video games. These arguments are increasingly met with calls for a middle ground from both narratologists and games designers/developers (see Mukherjee, 2015). Murray having perhaps unwittingly instigated the initial conflict, appeals for calm, stating that ‘Game studies, like any organised pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multidimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving’. She calls it ‘the last word’ (Murray, 2005), and I am inclined to agree.

What we glean from these disagreements are the impassioned positions that some scholars take over what a game is and what it does. Is it a narrative or is it about play? Once again, the discussion is sometimes reduced to an unproductive binary distinction, whereas, as demonstrated earlier, there are multiple readings of what games are. Perhaps the most useful thing to take from these arguments, as Crawford (2012) does, is the sorts of features we tend to find in games: things like agency (what the gamer does or is able to do) and interactivity, both of which will thread throughout the empirical chapters of this book (Chapters 5–8). Games involve an interrelationship between play and narrative, the locus of which is where successful titles afford gamers affective experiences that both have a lasting impact and push towards what might be considered a sublime encounter.