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Videorec as gameplay:

Recording playthroughs and video game engagement

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines an alternative genealogy of “non-narrative machinima” by the means of tracing a parallel with different cinematographic genres. It analyses the circuit of production and distribution of such material as a field for modes of superplay, in which users both compete and collaborate. Doing so, it proposes that the recording of playthroughs, a practice seemingly secondary to videogame consumption, might constitute an essential part of its culture and development, creating meaningful interfaces between players and industries.

KEYWORDS: *Machinima, Cinema, Appropriation, Superplay, Videogame culture.*

INTRODUCTION

The conventions of filmmaking are not entirely strange to videogames, one could presume, given the prevalence of movie genre plots and imaginary among Triple-A franchises. Following the lineage that Lev Manovich traces from cinematographic montage to the digital aesthetics of continuity (2001, p. 143), this kinship would seem operational as well as semiotic. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the very act of filming could take part in the dynamics of playing, as it is demonstrated by the vast culture around recording playthroughs in video. This practice garnished popularity around 2003, due to fictional machinima series such as those produced by the company Rooster Teeth, which promoted it as a quick-and-dirty form of 3D animation. Employing scenes captured from mainstream titles, overdubbed and re-edited, works such as *Red vs Blue* and the discontinued *The Strangerhood* could be reasonably classified as sitcoms. Years later, the genre would reveal a documental vein with the short *French Democracy* (Alex Chan, 2005). Made with the game *The Movies* (Activision, 2005), this puerile

docudrama portrays the uprisings in Parisian banlieus through the eyes of its author, a young immigrant. Thanks to it, machinima also earned some legitimacy within mainstream media: soon after the short's release, a headline in the traditional *The Washington Post* loudly proclaimed "Game Turns Players Into Indie Moviemakers" (Musgrove, 2005).

Nevertheless, before having their place in the cinematographic circuit thus acknowledged, the fundamentals of machinima already existed in subcultural gaming practices. In 2005, the production of movies from videogame playthroughs was well established, having started around a decade before – and, ironically, in an eminently documental way. In the article "High-performance play: the making of machinima," researcher Henry Lowood will find the origins of this genre amidst the culture of speedrunning (2006). In general terms, speedrunning consists in finishing a game (or one of its stages) in the shortest time possible. Already popular among the players of first-person shooters during the 1990s, this practice motivated an extra-official form of competition. One of the ways the players had to compare their achievements was to record the playthroughs in video and exchange the results with one another. In such videos, produced primarily as a proof of dexterity, there is no "narrative" besides pure gameplay – however, not any kind of gameplay, but a rather skilful one, which Lowood qualifies as high-performance play. Thus, before anyone had even thought about staging a performance in the game to tell a story, the very performance of the game constituted a source of spectacle. The origins of machinima lie in this particular way of playing, attached to a hardcore gaming subculture.

Extrapolating the analogy between videogame and cinema, one could trace a parallel between early machinima and what Tom Gunning has called cinema of attractions: a form of "exhibitionist film" that privileges visual spectacle over storytelling (1990). Constituting the primary mode of spectatorship until 1906, it is a genre particularly characterized by its sensual and psychological impact on the viewers (Gunning, 1990, p. 60).

For Walter Benjamin, the heavy stimuli of these first films helped preparing people to cope with the shocking environment of modern cities (Singer, 1995, p. 94). Similarly, early machinima taught players to navigate and act in the new gamespace: beyond their function as evidence in ability contests, speedrunning videos were also watched by the players in order to study each other's performances and improve their own technique (Lowood, 2006, p. 30). Even so, this does not seem to have exhausted the use or poetic appeal of such operations. Nowadays, we got so used to virtual worlds that we have started to appropriate them as stages or backgrounds for representation. The very idea of machinima seems to have developed into forms of virtual puppetry and interactive performance. On the hand, the pure audiovisual recording of videogame playthroughs still exists, giving body to a diverse range of subcultures. In a rhetorical move similar to

Gunning's, we should avoid theorizing speedrunning under the hegemony of narrative machinima, paying attention instead to the different forms it takes nowadays, as an autonomous form.

This paper hopes to demonstrate that the recording of videogame playthroughs pervades many forms of gaming culture. These recordings might constitute a legitimate way of engaging with the game, as well as an intrinsic part of its experience. In that sense, we could evoke the work of James Newman, who proposes that playing videogames is necessarily supplemented by many different forms of playing with videogames (2008, p. 13). Newman departs from the idea that any match, as isolated as it might be, is:

always and already located within a community-authored set of meanings, readings and interpretations and the collective knowledge of players, commentators, critics and fans alike who have contributed to this very public understanding and evaluation of the game through public performances, readings of previews, and reviews, for example (2008, p. 13).

Therefore, Newman states that a videogame cannot be reduced to its mere “formal structure or mechanism,” but must be also understood in terms of “what happens to it, what can be made with it, in the playing – how it is made real, transformed, used and abused” (2008, p. 12). That means to say that a videogame acquires meaning and value due to the “inherently social, productive and creative nature” of the different cultures that surround and support it (2008, p. VII). In other words, the context of interactions that go beyond gameplay informs the way videogames are played and watched. As we shall see in the following sections, the video recordings of playthroughs should be considered first and foremost as an element of the discursive and operational networks that result in videogaming. Such recordings are relevant to the medium even when they are not deployed in favour of a seemingly autonomous, creative practice – in other words, even when they do not result in isolated “artworks.”

Attentive to this fact, we can further develop the warning made by Lowood, concerning how speculations about the possibilities of machinima substituting traditional cinematographic expedients might obscure its connections to gameplay (2006, p. 26). While evaluating machinima as a mere form of audiovisual production (and a form to be perfected as such), we are already framing this practice within parameters specific to cinema. By doing so, we lose from sight that the very definition of a videogame and of what it means to play are dynamic processes, in continuing iteration. One way of understanding this iteration is by organizing such processes dialectically: on the one side, there is the public that occupies and appropriates the gaming system – on the other, the system itself, incorporating and crystallizing the activity of the public. Based on this

organization, one could highlight the fact that video production, a practice entirely collateral to the gameplay of *DOOM*, instituted by the players themselves in a particular subcultural niche, years later would become the main appeal of a title such as *The Movies*, and therefore central to its gameplay. In that sense, the genealogy of machinima as an audiovisual format or genre could be approached as a rationalization of this normative cycle in an historical narrative. Supplementary to the evolution of videogames, this narrative takes care of its boundaries, causing the impression of a stability that the medium does not have, and in fact never had. Videogame, as a practice as well as a territory, is in continuous transformation.

The transformations of the medium can be perceived more clearly if we address some of the activities instituted through videogaming that still have not acquired complete autonomy, and therefore do not have their genealogy rigidly fixated. Departing from this proposal, I intend to analyse different cultural forms based on the recording of playthroughs – forms that, extrapolating the analogy between machinima and the cinematographic tradition, could be classified as genres of “non-narrative machinima.” These activities, instead of subverting the videogame performance in order to build fictional representations, mean to explore it to its full extents. Hence, I will present examples of ways in which video recordings can be employed for the primary engagement with the game; for its critical analysis; and even for its development.

SPEEDRUNNING, RETROGRAMING AND EMULATION

Our investigation can start by following up on Lowood’s study and examining the latest advances in the speedrunning scene, progressively mingled with the practices of retrograming and emulation. In his paper, Lowood focuses on that which is considered the inaugural trilogy of machinima: *Diary of a Camper*, *Quake done Quick* and *Operation Bayshield*. As their names suggest, these three pieces are based on the first-person shooter *Quake*, released in 1996 by id Software. *DOOM*, the company’s previous title, already allowed the players to record their matches as demo movies – videos composed not by real screenshots, but as “scripts that could reproduce the movements and actions of players in the game, thus re-generating the images” (2006, p. 30). *Quake* upgraded this function by allowing the virtual position of the camera to be different from that of the player, producing third-person perspectives much more appropriate for cinematographic fiction, therefore making it possible for the sheer documentation of gameplay to be turned into a great variety of staged stories (2006, p. 33).

Lowood believes it is important to consider that these seminal projects were made by hardcore gamers that participated of a “technical community” established around *Quake*. Creating mods such as *Capture the Flag*, which allowed a new mode of competition, these superusers contributed to the development of the game and of its gameplay in many meaningful ways. In the context of machinima, for instance, Lowood call our attention to the work of Uwe Girlich, who programmed specific editors for demo movies, as well as a script that exported them to standard video formats (such as MPEG), thus amplifying their reach amongst an audience that did not had the original game (2006, p. 32-33). Id Software, far for recriminating this sort of practice, encouraged it as “the seed of an ongoing relationship with the player community” (2006, p. 28). In that sense, Lowood localizes the “convergence of filmmaking, animation and game development” (2006, p. 25) as part of a “new cultural economy,” within which the user becomes a coproducer of content, and the game exists as “as much a set of design tools as a finished product” (2006, p. 29).

What should be noticed in the consolidation of machinima as an audiovisual genre is the specialization of this aspect of the game as a tool, employed for a sole specific use – that of filmmaking. Upon its specialization, the system frames certain operations according to predetermined functions, inhibiting its free exploration. Therefore, we could say that the difference between playing a game and using it to produce a movie becomes crystallized: from a continuum of possible practices, an almost binary separation of functions arises.

The speedrunning scene, on the other hand, seems to have gone on the contrary direction. In that milieu, what can be noticed is the growth of the production of “films” based on games that are not especially cinematographic. Instead of devoting themselves to the latest tri-dimensional releases, full of possibilities for camera control and image filters, today’s speedrunners pay special attention to classic games from the 8- and 16-bit eras, with their flat, low-resolution visuals. This change of focus – which implies in a multiplication of techniques for the détournement of any videogame – can be attested by the history of the websites dedicated to the practice. The Speed Demos Archive, one of the most important ones, created in 1998 after the fusion of two pages dedicated exclusively to *Quake*, from 2004 onwards would accept videos made with any game (Speed Demos Archive, 2010).

This new scope of speedrunning seems to be directly related to the development of emulators, applications that “enable one piece of hardware to manifest the operational and functional behaviours of another” (Newman, 2008, p. 160). Thus, with the appropriate software, any PC

might operate as a virtual gaming console, becoming able to execute the original code of its games recorded in a ROM image file. As a rule of thumb, since the possibilities of emulation are limited by the power of the system to be emulated, it is unlikely to find an application able to deal with the current generation of videogame consoles. Nevertheless, already in 2004, many consumer-level PCs were able to emulate machines such as SuperNES, PlayStation and even some arcades. Complete collections of ROMs could be found in sites such as Romhustler and Romnation, providing players with an almost unrestricted access to the game library of these systems.

As a case of computerized hybridization of media, emulation fosters what Manovich has termed a deep remix of the fundamental techniques and properties of different systems (2013, p. 46). Thus, it allowed old console titles to be played in ways that were so far exclusive to PC gaming, incorporating functions such as saving and loading states in real time; isolating audio channels and image layers; rewinding and fast-forwarding the playthrough; and even recording demo movies from any compatible game. Given that range of possibilities, it seems natural that speedrunners would turn to the 8- and 16-bit classics with an interest beyond the archaeological.

THE TRICKERY BEHIND TOOL-ASSISTED GAME MOVIES

More than the proliferation of speedrunning, emulators provoked their transformation, originating the modality of the tool-assisted game movies. In this genre, the users employ all the resources available in order to play better than it would be humanly possible. According to the website TASvideos,

the emulators we use allow for undoing mistakes, slow-motion gameplay, and even in some cases utilizing robots to do our bidding. [...] Using these tools, we overcome human limitations to complete games with extremely high precision, entertaining our viewers as our players tear through games at seemingly impossible speeds (TASVideos, 2011).

Therefore, the main objective of this modality is to produce infallible performances, whether by exploring bugs in the game code or by programming the joystick controls in advance. Taking the spectacular character of speedrunning to its last consequences, the tool-assisted movies promote this (almost circus-like) division between the performers and the audience – a separation that did not seem to exist in the scene during the 1990s. But this division does not imply in a stiffening of roles; on the contrary, it expresses an amplification of the speedrunning public beyond the players directly involved with it – a growth that follows the multiplication of

platforms employed for the practice beyond one singular title (as it was with *Quake*). Thus, means of interaction are established between a subcultural niche and the more general, mainstream gamer culture.

The quest for perfection is another factor that restricts the autonomy of tool-assisted movies as artworks, challenging a conventional regime of authorship. More than the skills or the style of a particular player, what these recordings mean to show is a performance that is super-human, hence ideal: movements that fit into the game design with the exact precision. Therefore, a video is relevant only while it is the shortest one; when it loses its place in the podium, it is also deprived of its meaning and value. Consistently, the author becomes just a small element in the title of these videos, less important for their identification than their running time. The case of HappyLee's NES *Super Mario Bros* "warped" in 04:57.31, one of the actual "champions" at TASvideos, is exemplar: it assumed this position by overcoming the previous challenger by only one frame.

As the perfect negative of game design, this modality of speedrunning should expose its mechanisms working without any obstructions. It is no coincidence that among the most popular tool-assisted movies there are a number of platformers, such as the many Super Marios, Sonics e Mega Mans: these are titles prized for the highly precise organisation of their levels. The pleasure of watching them being solved in the most efficient way is similar to witnessing the chain reaction of a Rube Goldberg machine, as already demonstrated by hypnotic movie *The Way Things Go* (Peter Fischli & David Weiss, 1987).

Sometimes, the playthrough might be so perfect that the game is not prepared to support it. In such situations, what the tool-assisted movie reveals are the very limits of the gaming system, by the means of absurd visual effects. One example of this happens in NES *Excitebike* (JPN/USA) in 05:29.44 by Thomas Seufert (Lord Tom), based on the classic game of motorbike racing. Without missing any of the track's jumping ramps, the player manages to accumulate so much speed that its biker is thrown outside of the screen – only to immediately return by its bottom, getting into a loop that is repeated several times over the course of the playthrough.

Finally, it is important to foreground two significant differences between tool-assisted movies and traditional speedruns. The first is the fact that tool-assisted movies employ a certain kind of editing. However, it is not conventional cinematographic montage, such as the one used in the manufacture of regular machinimas, but rather a kind of trickery, which is made during the very recording of the playthrough. In that sense, inasmuch they are based on cheating, tool-assisted movies involve a very specific kind of performing skills. In them, one does not only play for the recording, but also through it. The video not only registers the specificities of this kind of gameplay: it makes them exist.

While on the one hand the tricks are performed live (for instance, when the player rewinds a jump that went wrong, or reduces the speed of the game to be able to dodge some bullets), the gameplay of a tool-assisted movie is far from “real time.” As it is revealed in TASvideos’ page of works in progress, it entails a calculated activity, which might take months to be concluded.

The other distinction refers to the legal status of these practices. While the modding employed in the first speedruns was not only accepted, but even encouraged by a certain commercial model, the emulation and the exchange of ROMs, essential for the tool-assisted movies, are vehemently recriminated by game developers (Newman, 2008, p. 163). The legal information section of Nintendo’s website, for example, states that emulation “represents the greatest threat to date to the intellectual property rights of video game developers” (Nintendo, 2011). At the same time, the company offers an official alternative for emulation: Wii’s virtual console, which allows the videogame system to run titles from old ones – obviously, without the functions required for the making of tool-assisted movies. In that sense, the practice goes on existing in a completely unauthorized way.

A FORM OF DIRECT CINEMA IN THE LET’S PLAY VIDEOS

Another modality of audiovisual recording to be considered are videos in the let’s play (LP) format, which constitute extensive playthroughs of diverse games, captured by the means of screenshot applications such as FRAPS. This genre has first appeared in the videogame forums of the Something Awful website, one of the catalysers of Internet folklore (Janitor, 2010). From there, it has spread all over the web, finding an official repository in the Let’s Play Archive – which thus describes the format:

LPs show a videogame being played while the player talks about what he is doing in commentary with video, screenshots or both. Generally the playthroughs are spread over several segments of play (varying in time). Rarely some action is done “off screen” or speeded up to not get too repetitive, but in most cases the playthrough is a complete run of the game including all “Game Overs” and deaths, done in informative or humorous style so as to keep your attention (Let’s Play Archive, 2011).

Thus, contrary to the diverse kinds of speedrunning, in the let’s play there is no competition. This modality is characterized less by demonstrations of the player’s skills than by their humour or by the diversity of titles explored. More than exciting the spectators, the objective of such performances seems to be amusing or teaching them how to play. In that sense, one way of thinking about the let’s play is as video walkthroughs: tutorials that “record playing styles, encourage the adoption of new styles of engagement, and perhaps even seek to regulate the way videogames are played” (Newman, 2008, p. 93). Such is the case of the series Achievement Hunter, which could be easily classified under this rubric.

Made by the traditional machinima studio Rooster Teeth, the episodes of Achievement Hunter explain how to get the achievements and trophies of newly released games. Even though the casual voiceover narration of these videos is very characteristic of the let's play format, the efficiency demonstrated by the players/filmmakers is an exception to the rule. Since a great number of let's play videos come from the uninterrupted, almost automatic recording of gameplay, with the narration produced in synchrony to the recording, they normally exhibit considerable disorder. The players spend precious time navigating menus; miss their chances and are forced to try again; lose track of their own explanations. Thus, after having compared tool-assisted movies to a cinema based on trickery, it would be coherent to relate the let's play to a form of direct cinema, which does not avoid documenting the effort and emotions of the filmmaker during its manufacture.

This aspect is throughout evident in the video “Super Mario Brothers – Frustration”, in which someone seems to try for the first time a hacked (and extremely difficult) version of this game, without using any kind of cheat. Already in the beginning of the recording, it becomes clear that we will not be seeing the filmmaker simply play, but mostly fail and die at an impressive rate. Each time this happens, the narrator cannot manage to hide his frustration, rampaging and cursing the game. On the other hand, when he finally makes something right, he does not hesitate to celebrate either – only to die again in the following second, and in an even more ridiculous way.

In these circumstances, the game design reveals itself by leaps, in a process of trial and error. Certainly, the main appeal of such slowrunning is not the player's skills, but his reactions, which become a source of amusement. The voiceover narration confirms that he is human – too human –, thus evoking the spectator's sympathy. This feeling of complicity highlights another dimension of the video recording, which the Let's Play Archive describes as “going round to your friend's house after school and watching them run and jump around madly in Sonic 2” (Let's Play Archive, 2011). In other words, the let's play promotes a remediation of those fundamental circumstances, as if it was implementing its characteristics in another medium (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). With this, the genre emphasizes the naturally spectacular character of videogames, reminding us that spectators were always around in many situations of play.

By the means of this analogy, we can identify another function of the recording of playthroughs: sharing discoveries or, to keep our cinematographic metaphor, explore unknown territories. The widely experimental scope of let's play makes it the ideal field to test and get to known obscure games. On YouTube, there are a great number of videos of this genre devoted to games such as *Mighty Jill Off* (Auntie Pixelante,

2008) and *Mondo Medicals* (Cactus, 2007), independent titles that do not get equivalent attention from mainstream media. The rhythm of the genre favours a kind of audiovisual review, which, instead of demonstrating a videogame working, analyses the way in which it works. Therefore, even the initial hesitation of the filmmakers is positive, since it exposes narrative and aesthetic mechanisms that, otherwise, would not be perceived – including interface elements such as menus and game over screens that (for obvious reasons) very rarely appear in speedrunning.

THE DOCUMENTATION OF INTERVENTIONS IN THE UNIVERSE OF MINECRAFT

In the tool-assisted movies, the video recordings become part of the game procedures; with let's play, they are employed to describe or analyse them critically. However, its effects in videogame culture can go even beyond, influencing the very production and development of titles. This can be perceived if we pay attention to how the recording of playthroughs have been used by the players of a game such as *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) – and how its original designer, by its turn, reacts to this community.

Originally released only for PC, *Minecraft* is an independent title that, while still in beta version, had already sold more than a million copies (Reilly, 2011). At first glance, it seems to be a very low-resolution first-person shooter. There is no predetermined objective: the game dynamics consists of the sheer exploration of a tri-dimensional world made of colour blocks. During the day, the player is free to collect such blocks, as if they were natural resources that can be used to assemble tools and build constructions. These structures are important so that, during the night, the player can defend himself from the monsters that roam the game universe.

With such minimal background, the game consists of a legitimate example of the sandbox genre, in which the player is free to do whatever he wants – and, apparently, what a great number of them wishes for is to play Lego. Among its adepts, the great appeal of *Minecraft* is the possibility of using the colour blocks as the prime matter for sculptures, creating a sort of tri-dimensional pixel art. The results of this practice are wide and diverse: from simple castles and sprites of 16-bit characters up to literally monumental objects – including the Titanic, the USS Enterprise spaceship, and a complete recreation of the underwater city of Rapture, from the game *Bioshock*. These objects are normally created on private servers, configured to run the game on “creative” mode, which provides the player with an infinite amount of energy and blocks to be used. In this situation, the screenshots and video recordings become a necessary means for sharing the sculptures with the rest of the game community, whether on YouTube or specialized websites such as the Minecraft Museum.

If we were to insist on the analogy between the recordings of playthroughs and different cinematographic genres, we could say that here the video assumes the character of the documentation of in situ interventions, which diffuses them outside their immediate location. But that is not all.

Spreading gameplay beyond the game environment, the videos also foster its presence and cultural value. On YouTube, a *Minecraft* trailer made by fans has already achieved two million and a half views. The video that portrays the building of the Enterprise, by its turn, more than eleven million. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the recordings also work as advertisements for the game, turning the players into “viral agents” of its commercialization and development.

Hence, we return to a situation in which aspects of “community-based tools and content development” are entrenched in the economic model of the game, as it was in the case of *Quake* (Lowood, 2006, p. 26). In that sense, Markus “Notch” Persson, *Minecraft*’s creator, seems to be much more radical than id Software has ever been. Notch kept himself attentive to the community of players, following their demands and questions in the official forums. Once, he public declared that he does not condemn piracy, and the best way to demotivate this practice is to think of games not as consumable goods, but as services (Notch, 2010).

A final example of how the recording of playthroughs might influence the universe of *Minecraft* in a radical way is the story behind Herobrine, a supposed ghost-user that haunts the videogame. This hoax was created by two players and spread by the means of a video streaming that made it credible. When he was asked on Twitter, Notch admitted that Herobrine was not a real ingame entity, but “it might be soon” – suggesting that the player imagination could be incorporated into one of the game’s future updates (Minecraft Wiki, 2011). Even though this possibility had been later denied and readmitted many times, it seems coherent with *Minecraft*’s logic of open development, which entails frequent updates that bring game-changing novelties. The Beta 1.2 version, for example, released in January 2011, introduced the note blocks that play different musical notes when activated. Two days later, the players were already posting on the Internet videos in which they employed this new resource to perform songs such as “Billy Jean” e “Still Alive”.

In the light of those mutual appropriations, the recording of playthroughs demonstrates a fundamental importance: more than a quick-and-dirty method to produce short movies, it is one of the ways through which videogame unfurls into a dialogical field. Willing or not, video recordings may propagate very specific practices, playing rhetoric and imaginations beyond their restricted niches, becoming a means of communication between publics that are normally kept separated – different sorts of players, designers, academics, journalists, etc. While inscribing these practices into a wider circuit, the recordings of playthroughs seem to produce a collective, multiple vision of what medium could be, enabling meaningful interactions between subcultures and the videogame mainstream.

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