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Video games, cinema, Bazin, and the myth of simulated lived experience

ABSTRACT

Video games theory has advanced far enough that we can use it to reevaluate film theory as a result, en route to broader, transmedial theorizing. This essay looks particularly at how video games can be seen as participating in and advancing Andre Bazin's "Myth of Total Cinema", and perhaps recontextualizing it as the Myth of Simulated Lived Experience.

KEYWORDS: *Bazin, cinema, simulation, transmedia, imaginary worlds*

The guiding myth, then, inspiring the invention of cinema, is the accomplishment of that which dominated in a more or less vague fashion all the techniques of the mechanical reproduction of reality in the nineteenth century, from photography to the phonograph, namely an integral realism, a recreation of the world in its own image, an image unburdened by the freedom of interpretation of the artist or the irreversibility of time. If cinema in its cradle lacked all the attributes of the cinema to come, it was with reluctance and because its fairy guardians were unable to provide them however much they would have liked to. —Andre Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema"[Bazin, 1967, p. 21.]

Those of us writing about video games who are too old to have been in degree programs devoted to video games are, like myself, likely to have come out of film and television studies programs; and anyone having gone through them will have encountered the works of Andre Bazin, and his "Myth of Total Cinema". In this famous essay, Bazin describes how cinema's advancements, when not made merely for capitalistic gain, propelled cinema ever closer to an attempt at the complete recreation of reality, or what we might more accurately call simulated lived experience. Bazin saw the reproduction of imagery, sound, and motion as the beginning of this endeavor, and the addition of color, sound, and widescreen as bringing cinema closer to our actual sensory experience of the world; and he supposed that other additions like stereoscopy would be

added in the future, as the experience that cinema provided grew asymptotically closer to lived experience.

During his time, and perhaps even more so after his death in 1958, Bazin's stance became placed in opposition to that of another early theorist, Sergei Eisenstein, whose love of formalism, montage, and a screen aspect ratio that was closer to a square, countered Bazin's love of realism, uninterrupted long takes, and widescreen imagery that let the viewer decide where to look. While such an opposition provided a good entry point for film theory students considering the various positions possible, as a dichotomy it often oversimplified both theorists' positions, even as it placed them more firmly in the spotlight as foundational figures in academic film studies. Today, while faster cutting, special effects, and an ever-increasing number of image alteration technologies would seem to work against an increase in cinematic realism (although special effects have at the same time allowed for the increase in the realism of what they depict), other technologies, like the recent return of 3-D, and cinematic technology exploring higher resolution imagery and projection with higher frame rates, suggest that the Myth of Total Cinema is alive and well, as does all the hype surrounding the history of virtual reality technology and its cinematic imaginary as found in films such as *Total Recall* (1990), *eXistenZ* (1999), and *The Matrix* series (1999 and 2003), wherein Total Cinema, with its reproduction of experiences indistinguishable from lived experience, has been technologically achieved. And video games can be included in this endeavor as well, not only due to their continued striving for greater perceptual realism, but also for the additional contributions, like interactivity and navigable worlds, both of which increase the hyperreality of the experiences they offer.

Video games, then, can also be seen as a part of *Total Cinema*, a term which could be seen to be broadly inclusive of all the media available in Bazin's time, and what we might now refer to as the simulation of lived experience. While their ontological connection to reality is different than that of analog photography (discussed in the next section), they nonetheless can provide different linkages and experiences which can not only be seen in the light of film theory, but which can generalize certain aspects of film theory, and Bazin's specifically, to cover more than just the photographic representation of reality.

While Bazin's stance is rightly considered as a realist position, one occasionally finds his position being reduced to something that rejects anything that leads away from increased realism; but this is not the case at all. As Steven D. Greydanus points out in "*Citizen Kane*, André Bazin, and the Holy Moment",

Bazin wasn't against creativity. On the contrary, he believed that the realism of cinema gives it greater creative power because it taps directly into the power of creation itself, to the creative power of God. Bazin's realism was ultimately personalist, rooted in a belief in the world as revelatory and sacramental, the work of God, the Supreme Person. At its best, film can capture transcendence amid transience

and make us aware of sacredness in the midst of fleeting reality: a “Holy Moment,” to cite a catchphrase that is not Bazin’s but has become associated with him.¹

While it remains true that the ontological nature of analog photography, with its direct iconic and indexical linkages to the referent, was championed by Bazin in his writings, the capturing of transcendence and the belief in the world as revelatory and sacramental that Greydanus mentions indicates that these connections are only the first step to an ontology of a higher order that is eternal, one that is revealed in the world through the material but does not end there. Thus, Bazin’s theory can be applied not only to cinema, but to anything capable of also tracing the connections to a higher ontological order; it is not dependent on any particular medium, but rather only on the idea of the existence of media and their revelatory ability.² Seen in this light, one could suggest the motivation behind the desire for Total Cinema or simulated lived experience goes beyond just a technical challenge to be achieved, or a fantasy to be attained; perhaps it could be a way to experience the real world afresh, through comparison with its simulation, and even to begin to consider the real world itself as a simulation of a higher-order world to come, with earthly things analogous to spiritual ones. While Bazin does not discuss the motivation behind the desire for Total Cinema, such speculation is supported by Bazin’s own personalism and Roman Catholicism, which could have provided a foundation for such thinking.

Philosophical musings as to the origin of the Myth of Total Cinema aside, our purpose here is to see how video games might fit into the equation, and whether an ontological theory such as Bazin’s can be applied to a medium notorious for its lack of indexical connections to any real-world referents. Thus we must turn to a discussion of realism, and its relationship to various media, and in particular, film and video games.

CONCERNING REALISM

Realism, as a term, has come to mean a series of attributes or criteria which are used to compare representations of things with analogous entities in the actual or real world of lived, intersubjective experience. While such comparisons were originally made between representations and the real-world objects they represented, implying the presence of a semiotic linkage that was iconic (the picture looks like the object it depicts) and in the case of photography, also indexical (the picture was made from the light reflected from the object itself, providing a direct link between the two), the ability to create images of things that do not exist meant that the comparison which determined how realistic something looked depended not on any particular individual object, but on typical objects of the same type. For example, rather than making a painting based on a real apple, and then asking if the artist had captured how that apple appeared in the representation, an apple could be painted which looked like an apple but was in fact just a collection of traits (redness, roundness, possessing a stem, etc.) which

1. Greydanus, 2011.

2. Here Bazin’s Roman Catholicism clearly separates his outlook from those who have no belief in the transcendental and eternal, and thus only begin and end with the material rather than see it as pointing to something beyond itself; which may account for the more narrow reading of Bazin’s ideas that one often finds.

did not refer to any particular apple, but rather to what apples in general were typically like. Likewise, photographs can be altered so that their link to a referent is broken, and today they can be completely generated algorithmically in the computer, with an object's dimensionality, color, lighting, and so forth all computed from general parameters, and often with the detail necessary to give it the specificity of an actual, physical object. Thus, realism is more about the typicality of a representation than the actual existence of what is represented.

The changeover from analog film technology to digital imaging technology makes such ontologically untethered image production easier than ever. Computer-generated imagery (CGI), however, can still be used to create extremely realistic images, far more visually realistic than even the best photorealistic painters could produce. As I have noted elsewhere, computer-generated images can also be linked to real-worlds referents in a variety of ways, and in new ways that were not possible previously.³ CGI has also brought film and video games closer together, so that an increasing amount of film theory can be applied to video games.

At the same time, game studies has grown enough that it can now be used to refocus the lenses provided by film studies in such a way as to reposition how we think of film studies. If Bazin is right, then cinema's advance to greater perceptual realism is carrying on the same tradition begun many years earlier with technical developments in painting that moved it toward greater perceptual realism, a move which dominated the medium before the advent of photography. Video games, then, aren't so much trying to be cinematic any more than films are trying to be painterly;⁴ instead, video games and film are both moving toward the goal of Total Cinema, the total simulation of lived experience, which can also be seen as the attempt to increase the transparency of mediated experience.

"Why should mediated experiences be transparent?" is a question that is perhaps seen as being so obvious that one forgets to ask it at all. It is the same reason we clean the glass windows of buildings; we want to focus on the view itself, not on the glass in front of us. But, transcendental motivations aside, why do we want our mediated experiences to seem as real as lived experience? There is a need for escape from our present circumstances, but also the need for fantasy, and for new experiences (safe ones that do require risk, and relatively inexpensive ones; which is why so few of us will physically travel to the Himalayas or take part in a shoot-out with live ammunition). New experiences, especially those in a persona unlike our own, may give us greater insight into the Other. Consider the great popularity of the Grand Theft Auto games; the cities they take place in are hardly exotic ones, but the avatar's social position and occupation—that of a ruthless criminal—is quite unlike that of (hopefully) most players. Just as cinema takes us inside the minds of its characters and into worlds outside our own experience, video games go even farther, inviting us to make decisions as those characters and to interact with their worlds. A transparent experience improves the illusion of closeness to those characters and worlds, which can also explain the popularity of first-person perspectives,

3. Wolf, 1999.

4. True, video games do employ cinematic conventions, such as title screens and credits, which do not make the cinematic experience more like lived experience; but these attempts to be cinematic were more to give video games a more transparent interface for their users, since cinematic conventions are currently so ingrained in viewing practices.

real-time action, open-ended sandbox play, and the ever-increasing expansiveness of the worlds to be explored.

Video games can be seen as the next step forward in the journey already begun by painting and cinema. Perspective gave painting its first step along the way, providing a consistent and coherent point of view, and photography added a level of detail that more closely approximated that seen by the human eye, with color photography coming even closer. Vision relating to various subjective states could be simulated with changes of focus, filtering, and other optical tricks, which went beyond merely simulating an optical point of view but tried to convey a sense of the subject's frame of mind and interior state; painting began adding these features along with photography and cinema, from the visions presented by Impressionism to the emotions of Expressionism. Cinematic sound was a further advance along these lines; it expanded the flatness of the image into three-dimensional spaces where sounds emanate and surround listeners, sounds that appeared to be the consequences of actions occurring on-screen. Moving imagery with synchronized sound also gave these perceptual illusions a temporal dimension, and motion picture editing (at least within the classical Hollywood style) developed in such a way as to simulate selective perception, saccades, and even the temporal elisions of selective memory that result with the psychological chunking of long series of events into a comprehensible narrative framework.⁵ As cinema developed, the simulation of experience was not only perceptual in nature but became psychological as well, as it tried to simulate emotions and thought processes and convey them to an audience.

Though video games still fall short of matching the visual contributions to simulated experience made cinematic moving imagery, they have made an advance in the psychological area by featuring the addition of interaction and decision-making, in some cases a controlled and manipulatable point of view and choice of viewing angle, and diegetic acknowledgement of one's participation in a game's imagery, from simulated movement through a world under the player's control to the reactions of characters who react to the player's avatar's actions. While realism in film usually refers to photorealistic plausibility, combined with the emotionally plausible choices made by characters with whom audience members may or may not identify, video games must try to simulate the affordances interactively encountered in the real world; if I see a closed door, I should be able to open it and see where it leads, if I find an object like a gun or a car, I should be able to make use of it as I would in the real world. Thus realism, in video games, requires everything that cinematic realism requires, and more. And whereas the laws of physics need not be simulated while a movie is being filmed (on the contrary, it is the breaking of the laws of physics which must be simulated), video games have no inherent laws of physics in their worlds; all laws of physics must be simulated by physics engines, the abilities of which have developed tremendously in their attempts at realism though they still fall short of what is taken for granted in cinema.

5. Though they differ technologically, the effects are similar. Saccades, for example, occur reflexively and are the abrupt movements of the human eye which jump from one place to another, without focusing on anything between their endpoints. Thus, direct cuts simulate the human visual experience more accurately than swish pans which involve actual movement but end up calling attention to themselves

At the same time, players understand the difficulty that the demands of visual realism, realistic behavior, and realistic affordances place on the production of a video game, and can still be satisfied by depictions and interactions that fall far short of the real world. Even the illusions of presence and free will within the mediated world can potentially heighten the sense of artificiality, since they provide more limitations and boundaries for the user to encounter. So these additions to the Myth of Simulated Lived Experience are more than merely perceptual or even psychological; they add a sense of agency (and diegetic acknowledgement of that agency) that greatly enhances the illusion of lived experience, and this illusion remains even when the imaginary experiences depicted are quite unlike those of the real, intersubjective world that the Myth attempts to simulate. In short, the experience of agency, and of a world in which that agency is active, may be more important to the Myth as that of perceptual realism, at least when it comes to the illusion of a functioning world, especially if that world is unlike that of actual lived experience. After all, our perceptual systems can fill in the gaps and complete gestalten within the game world, but agency is either present or it isn't, and even the degree of agency available is very noticeable, since it involves effort on the player's part and influence and feedback once actions have been completed; agency is difficult to fake.

Realism, then, can refer to perceptual realism (visual and aural imitation of the real world), behavioral realism (actions and physics that seem to follow real-world laws of physics), emotional realism (characters who behave in a plausible manner, who seem to act and make choices like real-world individuals), and what we might call participational realism (the ability to participate in one's environment the way one does in the real world).⁶ While audiences expect film to have the first three, they do not expect the fourth due to the nature of the medium itself; likewise, video game players expect to participate in their on-screen worlds. Just as film audiences were generally content with silent cinema until sound appeared, and black and white imagery until color became more common, video game players do not expect interactivity and affordances to match those of the real world (and once they are aware of video game conventions, they may automatically fill in the gaps), though they enjoy advances in that direction and imagine what greater interactivity would be like. Thus, when one refers to the participational realism of a game like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2014), it is praised in comparison with other games, rather than criticized for falling short of the participational potential found in the real world. Because of this, it can be seen as a step forward toward the simulation of lived experience, and most reviews of the game highlight the number of things that the player can do within the game world.

At the same time, the availability of participational realism in video games underscores the lack of it in film and other less interactive media, where visual realism usually makes up for the lack of participational potential. Such compar-

6. I use *participational* here (instead of *participatory*) to match the adjectival forms of *perceptual*, *visual*, and *aural*, and also because *participatory realism* sounds more like a form of realism which is subjective in nature, rather than one which merely allows participation in an imaginary world

isons and measures of realism, then, lead us to the final topic to be considered, that of the imaginary worlds which films and video games create, depict, and inviting the audience to enter vicariously.

ENTERING WORLDS

Imaginary worlds have a long tradition, extending back into antiquity.⁷ Film and video games are two relatively recent windows through which audiences can vicariously experience such worlds, and as cinema's analog photographic technology gives way to digital imaging technology, computer technology becomes the basis for both media, and the means used to create and depict the worlds in which the stories told in them take place. The technological convergence of all screen media, with computers and CGI as their basis, makes trans-medial moves of franchises much easier, as assets can more easily be adapted between from one medium to another.

Overall, more possibilities for the generation of worlds (whether those of film, television, video games, or other media) have become available. Not only perceptually, with computer-generated imagery bringing objects, vehicles, creatures, and entire locations to life with enough photorealism to seamlessly combine them with live-action, but also in the very control and animation of those things. Computer animation not only simulates lighting and physics in ways that are beyond what could be hand-animated, but artificial intelligence (AI) is used to control the actions of crowds of characters in battle scenes, procedurally-generating action shots which are unplanned by human beings and can surprise even those who set the parameters of such scenes.⁸ Video games also use simulated lighting and physics and AI, but some go even farther by producing entire worlds which are procedurally-generated. Such games as David Braben and Ian Bell's *Exile* (1984), Alessandro Ghignola's *Noctis* (2000), Tarn Adams's *Dwarf Fortress* (2006), Markus Persson's *Minecraft* (2009), Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (2015), and others generate entire worlds and the events in them, leading to not only new experiences from game to game, but even new locations and places. While such worlds are behind their hand-crafted competitors in their perceptual realism, the potential for exploration and new experiences outweighs such concerns in the minds of their players, who value freedom of movement and interaction over graphical realism (perhaps the most popular example of this is *Minecraft*). Video games, then, ask us to question the relative value of agency and free-form exploration in the Myth compared to the value of perceptual realism; perhaps video games have reached a moment analogous to the shift that occurred in painting when, freed by photography from the need to for perceptual realism, it began integrating subjectivity and experience into its imagery. They suggest that there is more to the simulation of lived experience than the need for transparency, since these games are, visually at least, less transparent (although procedurally-generated content is itself growing more photorealistic as technology improves).

7. See the second chapter in Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012) for a history of the imaginary world tradition

8. For example, while creating scenes with the program Massive for Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* films, some A.I.-controlled combatants in a battle scene actually ran away from the battle rather than fight in it, something which surprised the filmmakers. See Koepfel, 2003, p. 44

This focus on worlds, instead of just the narratives taking place within them, is a more recent phenomenon. The increasing amount of scholarship on transmedial narratives and worlds reveals just how medium-specific much previous writing has been, and how limited a critical point of view can result from such an emphasis. There is a shift occurring in media studies which now regards worlds and franchises as the focal point of interest, and media as the varied set of windows through which the world or franchise is experienced.⁹ Decades before the study of transmedia, Bazin wrote of a similar idea, according autonomy to the subject matter depicted, and looking at the common features shared by cinema and other media, anticipating discussions of transmedial works decades before the terminology appeared. Along with “The Myth of Total Cinema”, *What is Cinema? Volume I* contains Bazin’s essays on cinema and theater, and cinema and painting, and “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” which defends newer cinematic adaptations of novels and plays, which, unlike their older counterparts, “serve to supply the film-maker with characters and adventures largely independent of their literary framework”, and which “have become part of a mythology existing outside of the novels. They enjoy in some measure an autonomous existence of which the original works are no longer anything more than an accidental and almost superfluous manifestation.”¹⁰ One can easily change “film-maker” to “video game maker” for a description of what occurs in many video game adaptations; such games are more like evocations of the original works than direct adaptations; the interactivity alone requires more flexibility in the possible events that will be encountered. And the same applies to transmedial adaptations as well, which give their subject matter an autonomy which is free of any particular medium, and which cause one to view the same characters and worlds through multiple media windows rather than only a single venue. The same can be said about narrative itself; thanks to procedurally-generated content (including an increasing amount of narrative content), worlds are being created directly for their own sake, and not merely as a backdrop in which to place a narrative.

Bazin’s essay “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” also makes predictions regarding the future direction that he expects cinema to take, which was prophetic for its time in 1952 when the essay was written;

The days are gone when it was enough to “make cinema” in order to deserve well of the seventh art. While we wait until color and stereoscopy provisionally return its primacy to form and create a new cycle of aesthetic erosion, on the surface cinema no longer has anything to conquer. There remains for it only to irrigate its banks, to insinuate itself between the arts among which it has so swiftly carved out its valleys, subtly to invest them, to infiltrate the soil, in order to excavate invisible galleries. The time of resurgence of a cinema newly independent of novel and theater will return. But it may then be because novels will be written directly onto film. As it awaits the dialectic of the history art which will restore it to this desirable and hypothetical autonomy, the cinema draws into itself the formidable resources of elaborated subjects amassed around it by neighboring arts

9. See in particular chapter six, “Transmedial Growth and Adaptation”, of my book *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* and the section of the book’s Introduction which traces the movement toward considering imaginary worlds as objects of study.

10. Bazin, 1967, p. 53.

during the course of the centuries. It will make them its own because it has need of them and we experience the desire to rediscover them by way of the cinema.¹¹

Here, too, one could change “novels will be written directly into film” to “films will be written directly into video games”, or for that matter, into graphic novels, television series, and so forth; and certainly the “neighboring arts” have supplied a wealth of material not only for adaptation, but for “rediscovery”, as Bazin indicates. Not only can franchises originate in any medium and spread to any other medium, but often works are designed to appear in multiple media simultaneously; for example, the video game *Enter the Matrix* (2003) was released the same month as the movie *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), with storylines interwoven between the film and game, and both film and game sharing the same cast and locations.

Bazin, then, realized at a relatively early time not only the potential for the transmedial movement of material, but the possibility of originating works in other media which carried over characters and story situations, what we would call a transmedial franchise today. Even in Bazin’s day, such things had been going on (to a limited degree) since L. Frank Baum made new additions to Oz which originated in novels, stage plays, comic strips, movies, and more; but Bazin may have been one of the first theorists to notice that this was a direction that cinema would be heading, or to suggest that it had not yet reached its goal. Likewise, imaginary worlds, as the settings of many simulated experiences, are embalmed (or appear to be embalmed) by media just as the actual, physical world is “embalmed” by cinema, as Bazin noted.

Thus, film theory can serve to add to video game theory, without merely overlaying ideas which reinterpret game elements as cinematic ones, precisely where it extends beyond merely discussing cinema itself. Film theory itself, then, needs to be reevaluated, since many of the areas where it departs from strictly looking at film (such as performance, audience response, narrative gestalten and inferences, and the control of viewer attention) may be marginal or underemphasized, although this seems to be beginning to change. Even though he died in 1958, far too early to conceive of the possibilities presented by interactive media, Bazin’s interest in the future of cinema and the unrealized potential it still held helped him to ask the right questions and make predictions that have, for the large part, come true. While his “Myth of Total Cinema” may seem, in retrospect, too medium-specific, the idea behind it, the Myth of Simulated Lived Experience, acts to redefine cinema as something broader than what was available during Bazin’s lifetime, and perhaps why he claimed that “In short, cinema has not yet been invented!”¹² In this sense, all forms of media, whether they strive for ever-greater transparency or try to simulate the free-form exploration of and participation in the imagined worlds they depict, could be enfolded into this project of “cinema”, which is still growing ever-closer to its being completely and fully invented in Bazin’s sense of the term, and video games have brought them one important leap toward that goal.

11. Andre Bazin, 1967, p. 74–75.

12. Bazin, 1967, p. 21.

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