

Ansh Patel

Professor Clara Fernandez Vara

Game Studies II

18th May 2015

Postmodernism in Videogame Narratives

Postmodernism as a Concept

The concept of postmodernism has been highly contested in its short history and has been used in a wide variety of contexts and situations. Postmodern is essentially a break from the modern - the value systems and structures that have guided society and culture through large parts of history.

One of the central concepts of postmodernism is the breakdown of the conventional subject-object relations. In both media and art, this translates to the deconstruction of the traditional power dynamic between the artist and the participant. This stands in stark contrast with modernism which emphasized more on the intentionality of the artist and the message they meant to convey through their art. Jean-François Lyotard explains that the modernist era was dominated by imposing sets of values, which he describes as grand narratives, or metanarratives (Lyotard 16). These grand narratives create subjects out of individuals and force them to identify within their narrow boundaries. He is explicit in his assertion that postmodern theory represents the breakdown of these imposing sets of values: "*I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives*" (Lyotard 24). Lyotard proposes that in place of these metanarratives are many little narratives that compete in the creation of culture and meaning, leaving a greater possibility for a more equal society. It also inverts the traditional top-down power structure in favour of a more bottom-up model.

In the context of media and art, this has resulted in the usage of the term “active spectator” who is essentially the postmodernist participant engaging with the work of art entirely on their own terms. The active spectatorship theory suggests each viewer is different and many people in the audience will question the work and react to it in different ways to others, not just blindly accepting artist’s messages.

Videogames as a postmodern medium

Video games provide an interesting challenge to the postmodern theory. Even within the field of digital media, the participatory nature of games has led some to classify it as a postmodernist medium (Brown, Alistair, *Alluvium*). That is not surprising considering that the videogame player shares many similarities with the postmodernist active spectator. Just like the active spectator without whom the work has no existence, videogames rely upon the input of the player. It is the participatory act of the player which makes the videogame more than a software executing algorithms. Not only does the player negotiate the meaning of the game to a certain degree, they also interact with the narrative, controlling the pacing and the editing. At times they even dictate the order in which the story is told, what dialogue is spoken and the gender and race of their playable character.

In participating and reconstructing the narrative, the player breaks down the established subject-object positions, thus aligning the medium closer with the postmodernist understanding. This implosion of the subject-object positions in videogames is significant as it allows individuals a greater degree of freedom to develop their own understanding and carve their own identity through play. It also invokes Lyotard’s championing of the rise of the individual’s little narratives, in opposition to the metanarratives or artist’s intentions in dictating what its subject should believe.

Through their interaction, videogame players create their own little narratives which emerge and stand distinct from those intended by the artist. By creating meaning through their interaction, players also invert the top-down power structure prevalent in the modernist to a bottom-up one. Thus, in many ways the videogame player is an evolution of the postmodernist active spectator, as someone who derives and constructs their own meaning and narrative from the work.

Inherent in the Medium?

Despite all of the above elements, which might indicate that videogames are closer to a postmodernist medium, a game is still defined by the sets of rules described by the code it runs on. Academic Ian Bogost explains in his book *Unit Operations* that computational systems “rely on unit operations as their primary mode of representation, and thus unit operations have a special role in how works like videogames function” (Bogost 65). In addition, the words of the writers involved in the game’s production and how they are presented in conjunction with the code, describe a very specific version of the videogame. It is within this framework that the player comes into the picture and begins to interact with the game. Summarizing Bogost’s *Unit Operations*, Cameron Kunzelman writes, “The player is always “living” in ideologically-driven inclusions and exclusions at the whim of the programmer/designer/director. The bounds of the game are predefined, especially in video games, and so we are forced to operate within those bounds if we play the game”. (Kunzelman, Cameron, *this cage is worms*)

In other words, there are aspects of a game that already exist apriori to the player’s interaction. The code and words described by the programmers and writers respectively can potentially strongly influence the kind of experience the player will have. As a result of which,

the little narratives and the personalized meaning that the player creates through their interaction arguably exist within a framework bound by the developers' code and words.

Kunzelman equates Bogost's ideas about ideological conclusions and exclusions in videogames to Ranciere's notion of the distribution of the sensible. Kunzelman writes, "*For Ranciere, the distinction rests between what is understood as reasonable or speech versus the excluded parts, the part-of-no-part that ceases to exist because the dominant order cannot imagine that it does. For a video game, this is extended—the excluded, the non-sensible in the game world, does not exist.*" (Kunzelman, Cameron, *this cage is worms*)

Considering the extent to which videogames are defined by the code and words that they run on, it is important to cast a critical look at the equation of videogames to a postmodernist medium. Not simply in the sense of how a videogame's defining aspects shape the way the player derives and constructs meaning, but also how it differs within the medium.

Postmodern Genres?

If we consider the latter for a moment, most games are primarily classified based on their genre. Videogame genres, like those from other media are constructed by linking discrete elements for cultural convenience. As academic Marie Laure-Ryan writes, "*Genres are defined by more or less freely adopted conventions, chosen for both personal and cultural reasons, medium imposes its possibilities and limitations on the user.*" (Laure-Ryan, Marie, *Image and Media*) Laure-Ryan's definition suits videogame genres which share similar features like puzzle or shooters or more abstract identifying characteristics like adventure and role-playing. Genres are distinct from medium, in the sense that they are Foucauldian discursive clusters. Laure-Ryan further distinguishes between medium and genre as "*Genre conventions are genuine rules specified by humans, whereas the constraints and possibilities offered by media are dictated by their material substance and mode of encoding.*"

So, if we invoke Kunzelman's interpretation of Bogost and how the bounds of the game are predefined in light of both Mittel and Laure-Ryan's definition of genre, we can understand that each videogame genre has a distinct style of creating a framework within which the player can interact.

Thus, it would be easier to break down our question of whether videogames are a postmodernist medium by analysing texts from different genre. In doing so, we shall look into how the conventions of each genre symbolize the tension between the coded framework of the designer and the free-form interaction of the player.

Example 1: BioWare's *Mass Effect*

Role-playing videogames might at first seem like the most ideal genre to analyse as postmodern texts. The characteristic features of role-playing videogames generally revolve around player choices, defining identity through play and creating a personalized narrative. *Mass Effect* shares many such characteristics of its genre, primarily having a narrative that branches based on player choices. In addition, it offers the player a variety of options which are largely cosmetic in nature, allowing them to customize how their playable protagonist looks like. Each of these features offers the player a degree of expressiveness, allowing them to play the game's largely pre-determined scripted sequences in their personalized vein.

However, from a postmodernist perspective, it is important to interrogate the narrative choices and customized representation that *Mass Effect* offers. Most of the interaction with the narrative occurs through dialogue options which broadly fall under two categories – a by-the-books Paragon path or a maverick Renegade one. Both of the branches have scripted dialogues and a pre-determined path that lead to either one of the two possible endings. In addition, majority of the narrative takes place in cutscenes which are framed in a scripted way allowing very little room for interpretation. Likewise, the customized character creation exists within

specified parameters. It allows player to customize specific aspects of their playable character like hair, nose, skin tone but even those parameters exist within pre-determined values decided by the game's designers.

In many ways, *Mass Effect* seems to symbolize the tension between the postmodernist active spectator and the interactive nature of the medium. By conventional expectations placed upon it by the genre, it's obliged to allow its players to make choices that influence the narrative while being restrained by its nature as a software itself. *Mass Effect* as both a role-playing videogame and as a software takes input from its players to generate a specific pre-determined output. However, the underlying processes which dictate such input-output decisions are opaque to the player. They are essentially what academic Fontana calls as a "black-box" approach. According to Fontana, *"This "black box" approach could be traced back to Behaviorism and classic learning theory, in which the learner or the subject is treated as a black box. In Behaviorism, only stimulus (input) and responses (output) are emphasized for controlling behaviors. In this system the details of underlying structure, mechanism, and dynamics are either unknown or regarded as unimportant"* (Fontana 1984).

Applying Fontana's understanding of "black box" to *Mass Effect's* narrative structure, we can say that it clearly emphasizes on showing the appropriate outcome to a player's choice without making the underlying processes transparent. In doing so, it conveys a top-down power dynamic where the designer's decisions regarding the code and narrative system shapes the player's own experiences.

Mass Effect offers its players a variety of options to be expressive and construct their own narrative, but that power is still nested deeply inside a top-down model where the code of the designer dictates which scripted path the player follows. As a result of which, the game despite allowing a participatory player to choose their own path doesn't fully succeed in

creating a narrative that fulfils the postmodernist ideal of successfully inverting the power structure into a bottom-up one.

Example 2: The Chinese Room's *Dear Esther*

First-person perspectives offer a unique insight into videogame narratives, particularly for the purpose of analysing them from a postmodernist standpoint. This is primarily because a videogame that has a first-person perspective allows its players a certain degree of freedom to frame aspects of its virtual world. This is particularly interesting in case of *Dear Esther* which uses the environmental storytelling technique in conjunction with its first-person storytelling perspective. It spatially arranges elements significant to its narrative as environmental props through a space that the player *may* pass through.

According to Andrea Pitzer who quotes Harvey Smith and Matthias Worch's GDC 2010 presentation saying that "*environmental storytelling technique relies on the player to associate disparate elements, interpreting them as a meaningful whole...Fundamentally integrates player perception and active problem solving.*" (Pitzer, Andrea, *Nieman Storybaord*) This draws environmental storytelling closer to the "pull" narratives where the player draws certain inferences based on what they observe. According to Smith & Worch, "*the designer still places those [narrative] elements. But instead of the designer pushing it to you through a conversation, you pull it from the environment yourself. You walk past it, you observe the scene, and you infer what happened. Or you might miss it. That's the thing.*"

That is applicable for *Dear Esther* which provides the player the freedom to move in the virtual space and frame their first-person camera in different ways, such that they may or may not see certain environmental narrative props. This allows a more organic creation of "gaps" in the narrative which the player constructs based on what they observe in the game's environment. It also implies that the designer has a lesser degree of control on what the player

does. *Dear Esther* may use eponymous character's audio voice-overs and ambient cues to subtly guide the player but it doesn't overtly hand-hold the player down a specific path. The designer may place the narrative elements in the environment, but it is up to the player to observe them and draw their own interpretations from it. This edges *Dear Esther* closer to the Lyotard's postmodernist little narratives which the player constructs based on what they see.

Dear Esther chooses to further push the designer away from dictating the player's emergent experience by making the narrative procedural. This means that it breaks down all the narrative content – comprising of the audio voice-overs and environmental props that the player can potentially come across into distinct units, which are then selected at the start of a new game by an algorithmic process. Considering that only a small quantity of such narrative units are chosen by the algorithm, the majority of *Dear Esther's* narrative content is unlikely to appear in a single playthrough of the game. But as Bogost writes in *Unit Operations*, "*Unit Operations are biased. They always show a way of things working that are limited by human thought*" (Bogost 133). Regarding procedural algorithms, Kunzelman adds while summarizing Bogost's ideas, "...*they can never be neutral. They are always biased, and when you combine unit operations, what you are getting is a debate of subject matter, mini-ontologies that are different and heterogeneous but also organs of the same assemblage*".

This implies that the procedural algorithm which defines the narrative content of a playthrough of *Dear Esther* merely serves as a proxy for the designer. Thus, even if what may appear in any playthrough of *Dear Esther* is determined by an algorithm, it still maintains certain ideas and biases from its creators. Despite that, the narrative structure of *Dear Esther* makes the subject-object relations fuzzier than *Mass Effect* and doesn't clearly convey a clear power dynamic. While the procedures written by the designers dictate the narrative elements that may appear in any playthrough of the game, the observation and interpretation of

environmental props and the subsequent construction of the narrative still takes place within players' minds.

Example 3: thecatamites' *Crime Zone*

Crime Zone by the experimental game developer thecatamites incorporates aspects of pop culture particularly hard-boiled detective fiction and noir, while initially presenting itself as a conventional point-and-click adventure. However, it takes those expectations arising from the conventions of the genre and immediately subverts them. *Crime Zone* opens on a screen that's from the perspective of Officer Trinson, a police officer who's patrolling the eponymous area. The game presents itself as a mashup of text adventures like *Zork* but with a point-and-click interface. However, the moment player spatially moves to the next screen, it breaks all the conventional rules of the genre. You are suddenly Officer White continuing your patrol. Every spatial movement the player makes through different screens, changes the game's perspective to one of the many police officers patrolling the area.

To further complicate the narrative, *Crime Zone* doesn't simply jump through different perspectives, it also jumps to different points in time. With every click, each perspective you jump to also takes you to a different temporal point. As a result, *Crime Zone*'s narrative situates itself non-linearly both spatially and temporally. In many ways, *Crime Zone* evokes post-structuralist theories. While summarizing architect Bernard Tschumi's book *Architecture and Disjunction*, writer L.B. Jefferies defines post-structuralism as, "...a branch of post-modernism, is the idea that the meaning of a place comes from events and spaces relationships to other parts of a whole. Meaning is not controlled by any one specific design, person, or action but rather by all of these things working together."(Jefferies, L.B., *PopMatters*)

According to Jefferies, this stands in stark contrast with videogame design which is generally structuralist in nature, "*Video game design is extremely structuralist in this sense, all*

spaces are built around playtesting and studying how people respond to them. Changes are made to change the space to fit a designer's vision for what people should be doing in that area."

This is important in the context of *Crime Zone* which structures its space in a specific way according to the developer's design, but is entirely reliant upon the player's construction of the narrative from loosely, disjointed elements. By scattering its narrative elements spatially and temporally, *Crime Zone* avoids enforcing a specific sequence of events that would influence the players into constructing the narrative in a certain way. Instead, the meaning of the narrative is constructed by the player as they play through the game. Regarding the interactive nature of games, Jefferies comments "*Meaning is created in a participatory manner from the influence of outside forces in this way, never independently of them. Video games are interesting in that there is the content aspect where meaning is clearly up to the player, however, they also have a more concrete foundation in their design.*"

The concrete foundation in design that Jefferies mentions is the tension between developer's design and player's participatory act that we saw in earlier examples like *Mass Effect* and even in *Dear Esther* via procedural algorithms. However, *Crime Zone* doesn't fight against this conflict. Instead, it embraces this inherent conflict and instead scatters its narrative elements across its virtual space in a temporally disjointed fashion. By bringing the aspect of time within the narrative to the fore, *Crime Zone* adds a layer to the complexity. It also blurs the "black box" action-effect framework we saw in *Mass Effect* by never explicitly implying the sequence of events. Instead, it leaves it up to the player to connect the disjointed and disparate dots of the story, and draw their own meaning from the narrative. In doing so, it makes it harder for the designed aspects of the game to interfere or influence the players' own emergent little narratives.

Commenting on implied narratives Tschumi adds “*an implied narrative is always there, whether of method, use, or form. It combines the presentation of an event (or chain of events) with its progressive spatial interpretation (which of course alters it). Such, for instance, are rituals and their routes of initiations where, from points of entry to point of arrival, successive challenges await the new candidate. Here, the order of sequence is intrinsic. The route is more important than any one place along it.*” (Tschumi 163) In other words, *Crime Zone*'s post-structuralist narrative encourages players to draw their own interpretations of the narrative from its spatially and temporally separated elements. It places a greater importance on the process of the player reconstructing the narrative than the consequence of their actions like *Mass Effect* or the selection of individual elements like *Dear Esther* does. In doing so, *Crime Zone* despite its inherently static nature subverts conventional expectations placed by the genre and uses it to provide a more significant space for players to interpret and construct their own narrative.

Conclusion

As we have seen, it would be difficult to call videogames as a postmodernist medium because there is nothing inherent within the medium which facilitates the inversion of the subject-object relations and convey a bottom-up power dynamic. Instead, videogames are mired in the tension between designer's imprints in form of the algorithms and narrative structures they have built and players' own free-form participation. As explained through examples, each of the three games we have discussed face complex challenges in making their narratives postmodernist.

While *Mass Effect* offers personalized playing features, its' narrative is ultimately bound in a “black box” action-effect framework which conveys a clear top-down power dynamic. On other hand, *Dear Esther* uses environmental storytelling to a good effect allowing players to construct their own narrative. But by trying to remove its designer's traces by making

its narrative procedural, it further conveys a bias that's inherent in any computational system. However, *Crime Zone*'s post-structuralist narrative isn't interested in that tension between the designer and the player. Instead, by spatially and temporally separating its story elements, it allows significantly greater room for player to interpret and construct their own little narratives. As a result, *Crime Zone* neatly circumvents the issues that *Mass Effect* and *Dear Esther* are dealing and thus comes closer to Lyotard's emergent narratives.

Digital Works Cited

BioWare (2007). *Mass Effect* (Xbox 360), Electronic Arts, USA

The Chinese Room (2012), *Dear Esther* (PC), The Chinese Room, UK

thecatamites (2011), *Crime Zone* (PC), Independent, Republic of Ireland

Works Cited

Lyotard, J. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Brown, Alistair. "Are Video Game Narratives Postmodern?" Alluvium RSS. 13 May 2013. Web. 18 May 2015.

Kunzelman, Cameron. "Bogost's Unit Operations and the Strangeness of Simulation." This Cage Is Worms. 18 Jan. 2012. Web. 15 May 2015.

Pitzer, Andrea. "Harvey Smith on Environmental Storytelling and Embedding Narrative: "It Has to Be Possible to Miss Some Things to Make Finding Them Meaningful"" Nieman Storyboard Harvey Smith on Environmental Storytelling and Embedding Narrative It Has to

Be Possible to Miss Some Things to Make Finding Them Meaningful Comments. Web. 18 May 2015.

Bogost, Ian. *Unit Operations an Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2006. Print.

Jefferies, L.B. "Post-Structuralism in Video Games." PopMatters. Web. 18 May 2015.

Laure-Ryan, Marie. "On Defining Narrative Media." Image and Narrative. Web. 18 May 2015.

Tschumi, Bernard. *Architecture and Disjunction*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1994. Print.

Fontana, D. (Eds.). (1984). *Behaviorism and learning theory in education*. Edinburgh: Academic Press.