

A POSTMODERNIST READING OF SELECT VIDEO GAMES

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Abstract: *The artistic and cultural merit of video games is a matter of constant debate and discussion. Owing to the technological advancements, video games have developed profoundly in manner and matter. Currently it has reached the status of an interdisciplinary art form and technological artefact. Unlike fiction, video games treat its subject as co-author rather than a passive recipient of meaning. And there lies its affiliation with the waves of postmodernism.*

Key Words: *Video Games, postmodernism, artistic and cultural merits.*

Game Studies is a transdisciplinary and burgeoning new discipline which is linked to diverse areas like anthropology, psychology, sociology, computer science, media studies and cultural studies. A history that traces as late back as the 1950's, video games has come a long way. Not just in terms of graphics or the immersive experience, but also as a cultural milestone. Though they're still viewed in hostility among the elite scholarly circles, their position in arts is now incontestable. The pattern has already shifted and their importance acknowledged in countries like the US, where the generation that grew up playing games are much older and already established compared to the younger generations elsewhere.

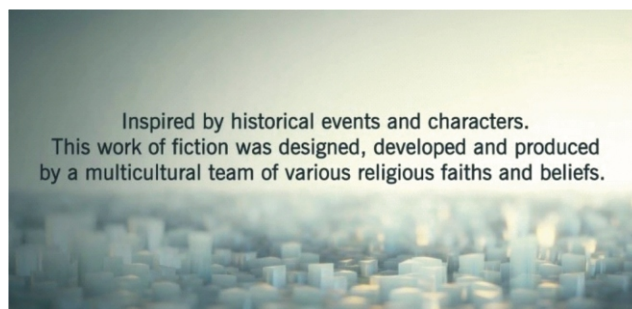
As anticipated, game theorists fall to a variety of approaches, including narratology, cognitive studies, theories of representation, ludology (the study of play) etc. An interesting case is that between ludologists and the narrativists. Narratologists search primarily for stories in games like a movie or a novel, whereas ludological perspective is postmodern; they feel players are actively taking part in the games. They are the co-creators rather than mere players. Ludology considers games as nothing more than a simulation like a game of chess, with the entertainment stemming from the confrontation of set rules and challenges. Ludologists such as Gonzolo Frasca believe that researchers ought to treat video games not as narrative texts but as “rules-based systems structured around game play mechanics rather than representational narratives”. However, narrativists view video games as an inherent medium to telling stories. Narrativists such as Janet Murray claimed that “games are always stories” and the ludological theory as restrictive.

Frans Mayra defines game as a multi-layered systems and processes of signification that mix representational and performative, rule-based and improvisational modes in their cultural character. A later critic like Espen Aarseth answers this tug-of-war similar to how Kant responded to the impasse between the empiricists and rationalists. Aarseth opines that the wide disparity between different games as well as the variant elements within one game makes it difficult for any such characterization. He suggests a fluidic Ludo-narrative model with no hard and fast rule but accounts for all multiplicities. He argues that, “‘games’ are not simply games, but complex software programs that can emulate any medium, including film, text/novel, graphic novel, and, for that matter, simulate board games and sports.” (Aarseth). However, for the time being, researchers ought to analyse games using pre-existing theories and methods relating to traditional narratives.

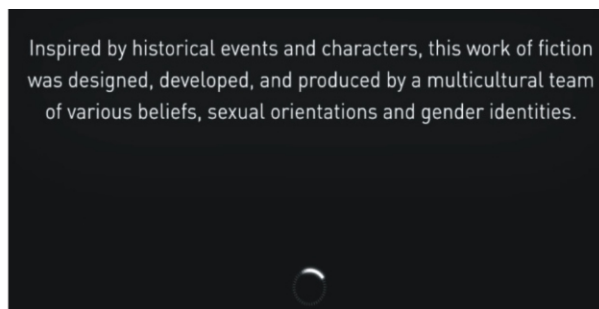
Thinking in line with literary theory, there is no theory that aligns to the nature of video games as postmodernism. One may go as far as to hypothesize that, had the identification of the movement been delayed for a few more decades (wouldn't have been an impossibility considering the long span of literary history), then the postmodernist wave could've been more anticipated through video games than any other medium. Because, by its very nature, video games are postmodernist. The study here aims to trace out such elements through the examples from popular video games.

Espen Aarseth's earlier comment carries on further; citing the example of *Max Payne*, he asks, "Is Max Payne a story [narrative] or a game?... it seems clear that it is not purely a game, but a piece of software that does contain, among other things, a game." (Aarseth). The 2001 game is a complex blend that contains graphic novel pages, movie-like cut scenes, a six-episode tv melodrama etc. over the action-packed gameplay. The part two also contains references to literary texts as in Mona's line, "I turned out to be such a *damsel in distress*" or, when Vlad mentions he would rather "*reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.*" Though this pattern called hyper textuality is observable in early texts as well, it is generally cited as a feature of postmodernism.

Following Aarseth's comment on the multitude of elements that contribute to a video game, the popular *Assassin's Creed* franchise provide a notable commentary. A change in the disclaimer screen of the 2015 *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* from earlier versions caught much attention, as it emphasized more on sexual identity than religion. Moreover, this game is the series' first to include a transgender character. This development can be seen as the influence of theory [here, Queer] in games.



1. *Assassins Creed Unity* (2014)



2. *Assassins Creed Syndicate* (2015)

The disclaimer is also a commentary on the blending of historical facts and fiction, which creates a hyperreal scenario, one in which the gamer is potentially incapable of distinguishing what is real and what is fiction. The concept of hyperreal is derived from Baudrillard, a typically postmodern feature. This pervades into the nature of most video games, which are essentially programs that created parallel worlds to escape into. "By their very nature, computer games are designed to deceive. They are designed so that the player is deceived into believing that the flickering pixels and digitized sounds amount to something real" (Clay, et.al.). The use of actual weapon names as well as names of places and buildings in most games also account to this hyperreality.

The *Assassins Creed* franchise is a classic example of such a hyperreal scenario, with two levels of simulations. Each game of this series is known for its historical setting, ranging from The Holy Land or Constantinople to as far back as Ptolemaic Egypt or Ancient Greece (431 BC!). However, "the *Assassin's Creed* games are actually one long fictional simulations within actual simulations so they're never really about what they appear to be about." The setting is in fact present day, within the office of a company, Abstergo Entertainment. The company created a device called 'the Animus', which is a projector that renders genetic memories in three dimensions. The ancient world that makes up the game is actually a simulation from this machine. Thus, the player is an employee with the Abstergo, who is within the device

and the whole thrilling adventure of the Assassins are merely rendered through such an in-game simulation. It's thus a play within a play, a meta commentary if one may say so.

The term simulation is interesting as there is a category of games now defined under 'simulation games'. One can pursue multiple hobbies, relationships, career paths or he can furnish his home with a huge variety of items. It features an entirely different gameplay experience with the relative autonomy. They imitate real life activities and therefore an alternate picture of reality. Another game, *Euro Truck Simulator* portrays the life of a truck driver, without any excitement of usual driving games, through tediously long drives on less faster wheels.

As video games expanded to 3-dimension from the retro 2-D games, it came with a massive surge to the autonomy of the player. From choices in movement to action, this came with striking developments to the overall in-game possibilities. The trend of 'open world games' delves into the depths of player agency. Games belonging to the GTA series have a central plotline which the player may choose to follow. Or else, there's a whole world of other things to explore. The last one of the series is *GTA 5*, released in 2013, which is a massive world of activities. The storyline is only one fragment to it. It comprises various genres in a single game; shooting, racing, hiking, flying, playing tennis or even scuba diving! Moreover, the plotline follows three characters instead of one. The perspective constantly changes, accounting to their different lives and behavioural patterns, ranging from a reckless psycho living alone in a desert town to a retired bank robber living in an affluent neighbourhood in Los Santos with his family. Player can choose between any of the three characters (or avatars) during a free roam. This can be seen as an example of the postmodern feature of multiple perspective within games.

The multiple perspective isn't merely a factor of the number of parallel characters. Games may have an omniscient narrator that explains the plotline. The perspective maybe first person (FPP) or third person (TPP) for the game's avatar. The player may have the autonomy to shift between two in many cases. The FPP is more immersive, aiming to capture the player into the world of the game. This is why war games like the *Call of Duty* always come in FPP. It is interesting to note that in the earlier mentioned instance of the *Assassin's Creed*, the employee of the Abstergo Entertainment is always in FPP while the gameplay as the Assassin is TPP; a hierarchical arrangement of the gamer playing the role of the employee, spectating the assassin. Thus, the perspective in video games has multiple dimensions, both horizontally and vertically.

The script of most games leaves the player with much agency. Open world is only one way of expression of this freedom. The nature of interactivity with each game provides different ways to exercise this agency. Beginning from the choice of attire to a whole range of customizable weapons, players are made integral to the game's development. The weight of choice is heavy in games like *L.A. Noire*, *Fahrenheit* or *The Witcher 3* where the player's choice leads the further plot. There are several endings to such games, depending on the choice made by the player at an earlier episode. In a game like *Far Cry 4*, one can even choose to skip to the ending of the game, hardly some fifteen minutes into the gameplay.

Minecraft takes this autonomy to a whole new level, even beyond the simulation games discussed earlier. It's the second most sold game of all times, reportedly "between console, mobile, and PC sales, the game has reached nearly 200 million people. Factoring in the free-to play mobile title, *Minecraft* has a player base of nearly 500 million." The game is basically like working with Legos, with players building unbelievable worlds out of simple cubical blocks.

Following are few of the popular creations made in the game;



3. King's Landing, *Game of Thrones*

As more autonomy is given to the player, more creative and engaging the game becomes. However, the role of the developer cannot still be overlooked. Each game can only run within certain precepts, which brings into question the extent of player agency. The case of narrative games makes it worse. Even if a game has multiple endings depending on player's choices, they're already anticipated and built into the game's code by the creator

An attempt to break this would only create confusion. In the 2005 game *NFS Most Wanted*, the plot is set on by the avatar losing his car on a bet in the very first race. The car is programmed to run into an engine failure during the race. But a decade later, a youtuber tweaked the game's file and manages to win the race. The result was obvious, during the next mission; the game runs into an error and crashes. In *Stanley Parable*, the narrator reveals his omniscient or metafictional presence at the very beginning of the game as the player is to go through one of two open doors. Even before decision of gamer what to do, the omniscient narrator claims that "Stanley went through the left door". The author, thus, cannot be completely killed. The awareness of this condition also becomes a subject matter in many games. This accounts to the self-reflexive nature of video games, furthering the postmodernist temperament.

Video games are by nature meta. They cannot exist without referring to itself. Even the most immersive game cannot help reminding the player of this fact. The in-game instructions that explain various game controls or, sentences like 'game over', or 'round one fight' that appear in the screen of the player reemphasize this meta nature. The fact about these meta-reflections is that they stand outside the actual game. One can take this either ways, as a flaw to the gaming experience or as a positive reminder. Albeit, this meta element pervades every game. No matter one tries to smoothen it, the fact that this is a video game still resounds one way or another. Take the case of *Max Payne 2* quit screen, which replaces the conventional "Are you sure you want to quit? Yes/No" message by a more subjective appeal as if addressing the player as the avatar. However, intimidating it is, the message is still removed from the in-game world. They exist in the intermediary matrix between the player and his avatar, and are essential communication signals between both.

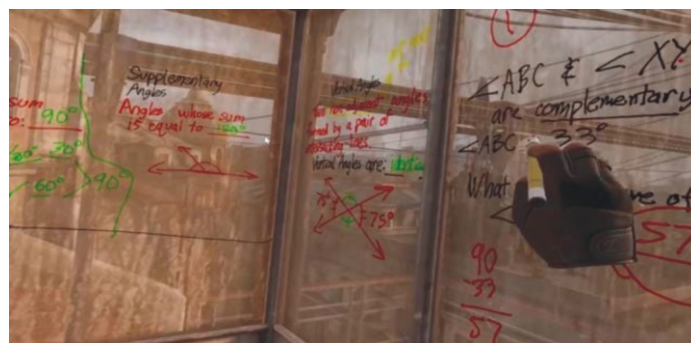


Games that evolved much later are filled with the postmodern elements like parody. Take the case of the 2012 military shooter *Spec Ops*. A mission in it mimics a similar instance from *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. Similar to CoD, the game takes a satellite view of a battlefield as we are to bomb a battalion of soldiers. The player, as in CoD, is subconsciously attracted to firing upon large groups and vehicles (represented by white dots), as concentrating on them leads to more casualties. This tricks the player to kill a group of innocent refugees. By recontextualizing *Call of Duty 4's* revered mission, *Spec Ops* deconstructs player expectations of what actions are rewarded, causing discomfort and rage to the players.

As the game concludes, Colonel Konrad states that everything would have been better if Walker (the avatar) had simply left Dubai. This is directly addressed to the player, suggesting that leaving the game unfinished would have been a far less destructive option. He further adds, “You're here because you wanted to feel like something you're not, a hero”, he concludes. Similarly, in *GTA IV* and *San Andreas*, the popular radio and Republican politicians are parodied on the in-car stereo, revealing the politics even in entertainment.

Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern as an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard). The same temperament can be observed in video games as well. Importance is given to micronarratives, creating plot and characters in diverse environments. It is most notable in the shift in importance given to low budget indie games (developed by a single person or a small group) over the AAA titles (by large studios). The latter has caused much disillusionment over the recent years due to excessive DLC's (downloadable content) and micro transactions even after a game is purchased. Moreover, even in big budget productions, a repository of micronarratives can be observed ranging from random paintings on the wall to the music employed. Also, satellite stories (apart from main narrative) are also employed to explore them to the most. As an example, *Far Cry 4*, created by Ubisoft in Montreal, Canada, is set in the Himalayan forests of Nepal and Tibet. It even plays a Tamil song; the first of its kind!

Video games of today even further these postmodern traits. The popularity of newer titles has even the WHO concerned; recognizing video game addiction as a mental health disorder in 2019, a first in the realm of arts. It suggests the immense impact video games have on this generation. With multiplayer feature and the recent VR (Virtual Reality) gaming, they're leaping ahead in time, unimaginable to most other fields of art. The multiplayer feature modifies the man-machine interaction with the machine withdrawing into merely a virtual medium for man-man interaction. Games like *Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG)* have shaped a whole generation of players. We're already in the future with VR games like the *Half-Life: Alyx* and the world they offer with the level of interactivity has reached unimaginable details. During the recent pandemic lockdown, a San Diego-based teacher, Mr. Charles Coomber at Otay Ranch Academy for the Arts, has gone viral on YouTube with his math lesson on angle vocabulary. The whole thing is recorded in *Half-Life*, with Mr. Coomber using the game's window panes as a whiteboard! How more postmodernist can it be! Definitely more in the future.



8. Mr Coomber's lecture in *Half-Life*

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