Finding a Time to See: Videogames and Aesthetic Contemplation

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Abstract

Videogames present incredibly rich visual environments that can be studied from a variety of perspectives including those germane to the visual arts. The medium has evolved to such a degree that evaluation should not rest on whether an individual game can be considered art, but what types of aesthetic engagement the medium affords. A key figure in the study of the visual arts is aesthetic contemplation, in which extended attention reveals aesthetic differences. Although the videogame presents many sites and scenes worthy of such contemplation, this mode of spectatorship requires sufficient time and space to attend to a visual object. In order to open up a space for aesthetic engagement, many of the ludological and narrative demands of the game must recede. In this paper, we will investigate the degree to which players have choice in how, or how long, they attend to a game's visual environment.

Keywords

Aesthetic perception; Video games; Immersive environments; Visual arts; Aesthetic pace

Over the course of videogame history, the capacity to render visual and sonic environments has continually improved and unlike early arcade games with flattened perspectives, visible pixilation and 8-bit sound, many contemporary videogames are

characterized by rich three-dimensional spaces that can be navigated in real time. As technical limitations recede, much more attention can be given to art direction and design (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2015), which opens up many more ways of thinking about the relationship between videogames and the other arts. If videogames can create a world as rich and detailed as any gallery space, then they could also invoke types of aesthetic engagement that are usually reserved for the plastic arts. In this article, we focus on a type of aesthetic experience that has been a feature of aesthetics since the 18th century and is characterised by disinterested spectatorship and an attentiveness to the sensual properties of aesthetic objects. We ask if videogames, which are definitely grounded in types of gameplay, could also afford a type of experience comparable to aesthetic contemplation? The simple answer to this question is yes, as videogames are incredibly varied in the types of sensual engagement they afford, from minimal haptic response mechanisms to fully immersive environments, and, like animation, they can incorporate a wide range of types of visual media, from written text to cinematic montage. However, there is a difference between what a medium is capable of doing – in which case an analysis would have to include all the exceptional cases – and what the medium is likely to do based on the expectations of players and game designers. Most players will expect that a game will allow them to affect the storyworld (narratively, ludologically but also visually), which is not readily associated with the type of aesthetic contemplation often celebrated in the visual arts, where the object remains fixed and the viewer's experience changes over time through attention to the art object. What is important in aesthetic contemplation is a productive relationship between the viewer's perceptual position and the work itself, which can easily be undermined by requirements to act upon the world or constantly modify what is seen. In order to project a similar concept of aesthetic engagement onto videogames, the ludological and even narrative aspects of the game may have to recede, which would allow the player to stand outside the

action, or find a time in the game when they can slow down or limit the intensity of interaction. It may only be in this context that playing a game can be aligned with looking at a sculpture or painting. This is not to say that videogames should follow such a path, but the question, nevertheless, remains valuable when considering how games both shape and respond to the player's expectations.

Between Art and Aesthetics

It must be stated from the outset that we are not directly interested in the question of whether videogames should be considered art. The videogame is unquestionably an art form that can be evaluated from a range of aesthetic perspectives, and an individual game could be considered an artwork depending on its inherent properties and how the player or viewer engages with it. In many respects, the question of whether any object can be considered art depends on institutional factors that frame and delimit interaction rather than on the formal and material properties of a work.¹ These institutional factors often work against the proper appraisal of videogames, for, as Scholten et al. (2016) argue, undue attention to the medium's negative aspects, principally its association with violence, has led to insufficient discussion of the medium's aesthetic dimensions. However, institutional variability and the lack of enduring aesthetic criteria do not mean that attempts to conceptualise videogames in terms of the discourse or philosophy of art are futile, for speculating on these issues can lead to a rethinking of how games operate but also raise questions about the horizons of the medium – what the medium is

¹ Even over the course of the last century, many new forms have emerged like performance and installation art, as well as narrative forms, such as comic books and film, that would not have easily been accommodated into a late nineteenth-century conception of art.

capable of doing. In this paper, approaching videogames from the perspective of aesthetic contemplation and aesthetic experience in the visual arts opens up debate on how a game can lead a player or observer to attend to the sensual aspects of the visual environment.

There are many ways of approaching aesthetic experience depending on which historical tradition is embraced. One of the most prominent is what Jacques Rancière (2006, p. 23) refers to as the “aesthetic regime,” which posits the autonomy of the art work in production, as the product of genius and inspiration, and in reception, in terms of a sensibility that operates distinctively from other modes of engaging with the world. This approach requires an attention to the sensual and material specificity of the work, its haecceity, over and above the generalities of representation and epistemology. One of the most enduring ideas within this tradition of aesthetic autonomy, is the notion of disinterestedness which rose to prominence in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgement* (1790). In aesthetic attention, the perceiver suspends other forms of non-aesthetic judgement, such as the commercial value or utility of a work, in order to focus on the sensual properties and agreeableness of the object. The perceiver freely attends to the sensuality of the object with regards to pleasure rather than to a concept, principle or universal idea of truth (Kant 1914). More than simply indicating taste, Seel (2005, p. 3) argues that aesthetics foregrounds a type of attention in which the aesthetic object is neither conceptualized nor theorized in terms of its social value or practical purpose, but rather “perceived solely in the presence of its appearing.” There is greater interest in the transitory aspects of perception rather than pragmatic concerns or those aspects bound to “logical thought and action” (Seel, 2005, p. 16-17). In this tradition of autonomous aesthetic perception, aesthetic attention precludes any mode of interpretation that reduces the aesthetic object to systems of meaning that stand above how it appears, for example, reading a painting in terms of the subject’s social status or as a text for religious instruction, or indeed foregrounding narrative over pictorial properties. The problem

with such interpretative practices is that they are not grounded in a particular sensible present connecting the viewer to the painting, as narratives traverse mediums and social status can be determined without reference to the actual physical work.

This notion of the autonomy of aesthetic experience is, of course, subject to much criticism because it somewhat separates the act of reception from its social context. The philosopher Noël Carroll (2010) argues that the theory of disinterest in aesthetic judgement must “hive” off many of the constituent elements of each of the arts with the aim of ensuring the internal consistency of the arts in general. This process creates a false image because historically art has always had a social purpose – for examples, poetics often served an educative or moral purpose – and artists have produced works with this purpose in mind. This criticism is certainly valid, if the aim is to create a general theory of the arts in which disinterest becomes the sole means of judging value. However, the aim of this paper is not to make a normative claims as to what should constitute the basis for aesthetic judgement in general, but rather to highlight a type of aesthetic experience that is not often considered in the analysis of videogames. The problem with many studies of videogame aesthetics is that they seek to incorporate every aspect of playing the game and, accordingly, do not sufficiently attend to the particularity of types of aesthetic experience.² This is certainly demonstrated in *Understanding Video Games* by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2015), in which the term aesthetics is applied “to all aspects of video games which are experienced by the player, whether directly—such as audio and graphics—or indirectly— such as rules” (p. 117). In their list, the authors include such varied features as the number of players, the geography of the world, the rules that organize and delimit the player’s

² Niedenthal (2009) argues that many early studies of videogames have tended to focus on social and technological concerns rather than aesthetics.

engagement, as well as ludology. While these aspects are necessary in understanding game experience, they do not contribute equally to an understanding of aesthetics, and could, more appropriately, be referred to as game design features, which, under certain conditions, could contribute to aesthetic experience. This is not to diminish the various aspects of gameplay and design, but rather to accord aesthetic experience a much more defined role in evaluating video games. Indeed, it is important to not overly bind aesthetics to the description of an art object, because, as the philosopher Andrew Benjamin (2004) argues, aesthetics refers to the conditions of sensible experience that can exist even without reference to an artwork. It is only under the constraints of a “philosophy of art” that aesthetics is tied to specific works and conditions of spectatorship and production. From this perspective, videogames should not be evaluated in terms of a set of intrinsic, aesthetic attributes, but rather in terms of how these attributes serve as a condition for aesthetic engagement, of which disinterested attention is one variety.

Some perceptual objects are more disposed to disinterested aesthetic engagement than others, but it should also be noted that the same features can engage the player non-aesthetically. For example, two players may, while taking the point of view of the protagonist Ezio Auditore da Firenze, might both contemplate the same roof of a building in the open world video game *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2010), but this does not mean that their visual attention serves the same function. One player may marvel at the variations in light on the surface of the terracotta roof, imagining the possible relationship between point-source and reflected light, while the other may simply scrutinize the wall in order to find a handhold. In the latter, observation only continues until the point at which the wall reveals its utility. Inasmuch as it is reduced to furthering narrative aims – i.e. by finding a higher position the player might be able to complete a mission – such visual scrutiny does not automatically invoke aesthetic contemplation. Moreover, one player might consider a cut scene as a break in game play that

must be endured, while another player might find pleasure in its rhythmic properties with little regard to its narrative content.

Videogames can certainly draw attention to sensual specificity of the game environment and foster aesthetic contemplation especially if they disregard or challenge the usual patterns of gameplay. Drawing upon Peter Wollen's notion of countercinema, Alexander Galloway (2006) argues for a notion of countergaming, in which the defamiliarisation of the gameplay or a reconceptualisation of visual form provides the condition by which the player dwells on sensual differences. One technique is "foregrounding," in which the game highlights visual features and programming principles, which underpin the rendering of the environment or the gameplay, outside of their narrative function. This foregrounding privileges "aestheticism" for the gameplay cannot easily be interpreted through the narrative and the player cannot follow a definite set of rules. An example of countergaming that employs foregrounding is *SOD* created by the art collective JODI (Joan Heemskerk, Dirk Paesmans), which uses the *Wolfenstein 3D* game engine. The game retains some of the visible structures and gameplay of *Wolfenstein 3D* as well as many of the sound effects, but the game appears in black and white and most of the usual spatial indicators of depth have been removed. There are no consistent textures to articulate the continuity of the space even though the viewer can see some of the frames, such as doors and wall panels. The floor can only be inferred through negative space, and the gun is little more than a black dot. In this reworking of the game, the player is prevented from engaging with the three-dimensional space and the limited realism of the diegesis. Without a recognisable visual landscape, the player must attend more directly to the abstract shapes that form the architecture of the game. The game appears like a moving Cubist work in which the various facets take on a life of their own. Galloway (2006) notes that such games are visually radical or "progressive" in ways that align with avant-garde cinema and art, but argues that for games to truly advance a

new aesthetic, they must develop completely new ways of thinking about gameplay. Irrespective of whether counter gaming should be developed through gameplay, Galloway's argument is important insofar as proffers two types of aesthetic, one that is a form of attention akin to aesthetic contemplation in the visual arts, and the other a developing awareness of the artificiality of gameplay.

The application of the theory of disinterest cannot apply equally to gameplay and the perception of a visual environment. Gameplay requires a certain interest in what it means to play the game and to adopt a strategy that will optimise this play, whereas disinterested visual perception does not have a definite or final outcome – the observer only needs to become aware of differences in the aesthetic object over time. Jesper Juul (2018) states that one of the problems with analysing video games from an aesthetic perspective is the emphasis on rule driven and purposeful activity. Games may constitute a form of play that is separated from other forms of practical utility, but they nevertheless can demand that the player adopt rational “work-like” practices to best achieve the goals set out in the game. It is difficult to apply traditional aesthetics, based on disinterest and aesthetic contemplation, to videogames that are largely conceived in terms of “winning”; a quality that is associated with the inauthenticity of “instrumental reason.” In order to break away from work-like optimization and the demands of instrumental reason, the type of gameplay that most readily affords aesthetic contemplation is the walking simulator. It often uses a standard first person viewing position, however, because the player is not subject to the pressing demands of the gameplay, she has greater opportunity to commit to the act of looking. Juul (2018) argues that these simulators do not sufficiently explore interactivity and, like Galloway, argues that games could actually foreground the processes and experiences of game playing as aesthetic objects in their own right. Art as playfulness is a key feature of Dadaism and much performance art and that these much more recent manifestations of

artistic practice could provide a platform for the revaluation of videogames as art.³ Undoubtedly videogames can and do create new forms of aesthetic interaction and that playfulness itself could be regarded as a function of disinterest, however, to return to the main object of this paper, the notion of aesthetic contemplation in the visual arts also has a definite temporal dimension. The question is whether the player has time to attend to visual aspects of game world and this is why walking simulators are important, for they do not require immediate and constant action. The player is not occupied with the question of what should I do, but rather with the question of what it means to see over the long duration of aesthetic engagement.

The separation of seeing from action raises the question as to whether aesthetic contemplation can be scripted into the game design, or does it occur irrespective of the gameplay? In his editorial for *Rhizome*, “Lingering Patience,” O’Brien (2013) questions the capacity for video games to foster aesthetic contemplation, and argues that many games offer remarkable visual environments but due to narrative and gameplay demands, the player has little time to contemplate them. The player is usually situated as the protagonist and is constantly called upon to respond to a series of narrative cues, and as such cannot attend to the full visual complexity of the game. In fact, the player is often “punished” for contemplating visual form even in cut scenes, because they might miss information that is crucial to narrative progression. O’Brien (2013) proposes “that games could be built to accommodate a more contemplative player” and to demonstrate this, refers to the fan made video *A man Digging* (2013) created by

³ One way to conceive of such a change is in terms of what Nicholas Bourriaud refers to as a “relational aesthetics,” in which the main role of the artwork is to mediate intersubjective relationships and this involves participation (2002, p. 59). Videogames could defamiliarise these relationships within the space of the game, as much installation art does through the gallery space.

Jon Rafman. The short video comprises game footage from *Max Payne 3* (Rockstar Studios, 2012) with additional voice-over narration in which the narrator muses over ideas of time and memory. Unlike many online videos depicting a campaign or providing a walkthrough, the footage does not recount a series of achievements or accomplishments, for Rafman decides to kill off every agent in the game before recording the game's footage.⁴ This is recounted in a thirty second opening montage sequence replete with corpses and glimpses of past moments from the game and accompanied by a sparse soundtrack. It is only once the game has finished that the player's contemplation of the aesthetic space of the game can commence. This is indicated by the voice over, "There were days for recollection and tranquility not marked by any particular experience, nor were they connected with any other days, but stood out entirely from time" (Rafman, 2013), and a much more protracted montage sequence in which aspects of the city are shown in movement, such as falling snow on a city street and the slow movement of an empty train carriage. As the narrator states, the viewer is now looking back upon the game as an object for contemplation, which is only possible because he or she is no longer subject to the demands of present action.⁵

⁴ There is a fundamental difference between a fan video and actually playing a game, as the former has much more in common with film and animation. However, what this example points to is a particular tension in videogames between gameplay and aesthetic engagement.

⁵ In many respects, the structure of this video is similar to the opening scene in Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), where a voice-over narrative accompanies slow pans of wounded bodies and deserted corridors, each of which serves as a metonym of the atomic bomb. Narration is only possible after the event, never in the immediate moment of its unfolding. In both cases, the potential for action must be exhausted before a space for contemplation appears.

The notion that contemplation can only occur retroactively seems to run counter to one of the fundamental aspects of aesthetic attention in the visual arts, sensual presentness, founded in the concrete time of viewing as the spectator stands before the work. Likewise in videogames, a concrete time of playing and being present to a particular scene could form the basis for aesthetic attention. However, it is not enough to posit a phenomenal present, as it is important to also consider how the medium shapes the spectator or player's relationship to sensual features. The difference between video games – and indeed any performative art form such as dance, theatre and cinema – and the visual arts, is that the viewer has less opportunity to return to the image or to linger over particular features. Benjamin (2004) states that in painting “the eye moves back and forward across the painting – moving through the focal point to establish a depth of meaning and a range of possibilities” in which case, attention is underpinned by the “aleatory” movement of the eye as it wanders across the work seeking out new features (p. 5). The present of painting combines the relatively fixed form of the work with the variable time of contemplation, as the gaze continues to dwell on the work new aspects are revealed even if the material form does not change. In contrast, a glance at a moving object is a completely different optical experience, as the eye only seeks out its basic form and trajectory without sufficient attention to its sensible becoming. Seel (2005) states that a central aspect of aesthetics is becoming aware of the “repleteness” of sensual objects. Any one object can reveal a range of nuances, which are transitory and change in the time of viewing and for a perceiver to notice them requires a sufficient duration of aesthetic attention. While spending a significant amount of time in the Rothko chapel, James Elkins (2004) noted that initially unrecognized brushstrokes became visible and that as daylight faded colours began to change. He could see the works as paintings with a particular history and value upon first viewing, but an extended viewing revealed their phenomenal variability. Comparably, Jon Rafman must kill off all the agents in *Max Payne 3*

before he can attend to the specificity of the visual environment, for in doing so, he effectively slows down the time of the game. When the agents are still alive, the time of engagement is determined by the relationship between their movement and the player's movement – a relationship that is largely underpinned by speed and the effectivity of action.

Videogames and the time of navigation

One of the distinguishing features of painting is the singularity of perspective, which is significantly different to contemporary videogames that utilize virtual cameras to change the point of view. In many games, particularly open world and sandbox games, the character/player has significant control over their movement through and across the virtual landscape. Should this perspectival change undermine attention to the repleteness of the aesthetic object? If sculpture is presented as the example, then the answer is no. Navigation can provide the necessary condition of aesthetic engagement. If we take Jean Arp's *Torse des Pyrénées* (1962) as an example, at first glance the sculpture appears as a sinuous dark torso that is readily classified among other truncated nudes in the history of art, however, upon visually and spatially navigating the work, new relationships between the planes appear. The gently curved stomach transforms into the arch of a back, and the volumes contract and expand to accommodate this. The work acquires a formal malleability through the extended time of navigation, because navigation itself is a means of revealing nuances.

Navigation could serve as a ground for aesthetic engagement in videogames, and it is noteworthy that many early games that are attributed aesthetic merit often allow for an extended time of navigation. This is due to the provision of what Gordon Calleja (2011) calls "aesthetically pleasing environments" that "can be very appealing to navigate" (p. 138); a judgement that is made without a proper distinction between the environment's representational

and sensual properties. The most cited example is *Myst* (Cyan, 1993); an adventure game in which the player has significant freedom of movement and time to attend to the painting-like scenery⁶ and ambient music. The game was so distinctive that it continues to provoke nostalgic reverie: “I can literally just enter a room, close my eyes, and just sit there listening to the ambient noise. It’s like meditation, a calming of the soul. It’s a feeling that stays” (Nordberg, 2014). Although the game created appropriate spaces and times for aesthetic contemplation, this came at the expense of the gameplay, where the player is afforded very few opportunities for complex decision making. The lack of appropriate challenge in the gameplay might relate to particular insufficiencies in *Myst*, but it also highlights a relationship between two types of navigation: navigation structured around narrative goals and the navigation of visual environments as evinced in walking simulators. The accentuation of one could lead to a diminution of the other. In looking for clues, the player might only give cursory attention to phenomenal variations in the visual field. Indeed, the reduction in narrative aims is a feature of many games celebrated for capacity to foster aesthetic engagement. The more recent *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012) promotes feelings of solitude and contemplation because the protagonist is a man who has lost his wife and roams an island aimlessly while reflecting on his past. There is no pressing objective in the game and the player can move forward at their own pace. This lack of a definite task and plot to follow, combined with enchanting music and captivating scenery, results in the game becoming, as described by one player, “a space of meditative calm in our turbulent times” (Quinnae_Moon, 2016). Clearly games like *Dear Esther* and *Myst*, by not forcing the player to

⁶ McMahan (2003) states that the game’s main distinguishing feature was its realistic and naturalistic images and textures.

rush through the game and complete objectives, are naturally more likely to promote contemplation and attention to the sensual properties of an environment.

Although there is a compromise between narrative and aesthetics, even fast-paced action games can provide some time for extended engagement with the sensual environment. For example in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), there exist “breathing spaces” in which, according to Solarski (2017), “the player does not have any pressing tasks to perform and is free to pause actively for as long as he or she wishes” (p. 130). Even in one of the most frenetic of all games, *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008), a player explains on a forum that there are still moments “where I would park my car on the city edges at night, switch on Vladivostok FM and just sit there, watching the rain pour down” (Dragonlayer, 2015). Likewise in the *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) another player states that “Who could not sit down and admire the nights of Skryim? When the northern lights were in the sky and the moons burning bright above it” (Elflore, 2015). It is open world sandbox games that present many more opportunities for pausing or standing outside the action. One of the most celebrated is *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego, 2010), which gives the player plenty of opportunities to “sit,” often literally and attend to the richness of the virtual environment (See figure 1).

The capacity to occupy a place of viewing for an extended duration, of course, owes much to the open-world structure in which, as Wysocki (2013) argues a player can choose between “playing through the established narrative of a game to achieve specific objectives or *merely existing in the game world*” (p. 151). The notion of “merely existing” implies a relationship to the game world that is temporally defined but without the imposition of a definite narrative path. To exist is to be present to a world in its becoming, which is quite different to a narrative act, which encloses time in terms of key events. The player thinks of the environment

in terms of the future perfect and the tasks they will have achieved, rather than an immediate present of phenomenal variation.

Speed, Pace and Aesthetic Engagement

Another way of conceptualizing aesthetic attention is in terms of the pace of gameplay; an issue that is not reserved for videogames. Virilio (2003) argues that cinema has been driven by a type of pace that is vastly different to painting and has, consequently, created different expectations for viewers as to what it means to attend to an image. In *Art and Fear*, he argues that painting has been characterized by a form of engagement organized around silence, whereas the “speeded-up” images of cinema much more thoroughly overwhelm the viewer’s attention and preclude contemplation and silence. For Virilio, a culture of speed underlies much contemporary art⁷ which has a “shrillness in its bid to be heard *without delay* – that is, *without necessitating attention*, without requiring the onlooker’s prolonged reflection and instead going for the conditioned reflex, for a reactionary and simultaneous activity” (p. 90). The speed in the presentation of images delimits how a gallery goer engages with the work, for the faster the pace, the less opportunity there is to attend to the specificity of a single image. In the visual arts, this is metaphorically and metonymically signalled as silence – the viewer stands silent before the work and the work remains mute despite the scrutiny – but with an increase in pace, sound becomes the means of instructing the viewer on what to expect and how to respond to the images. We do not have to accept Virilio’s thesis that there is decline in aesthetic value in contemporary art due

⁷ It is likely that Virilio (2003) is referring here to video and installation art, as both mediums that are more likely to request an immediate or direct response from the viewer.

to the imposition of speed and its sonic accompaniment, but his distinction between two different ways of attending to aesthetic object is still valuable. It raises the question, can those works that are structured around the “conditioned reflex” still support truly aesthetic attention?

The question is certainly pertinent to videogames for, as with cinema,⁸ there has been a technical drive to increase the number of ways that games provoke a response from the player. Certainly the movement of the player affects the screen contents – from the movement of an avatar to changes in perspective – but videogames are also structured in such a way as to demand corporeal responses. Indeed, this is one of the defining features of videogames (Grodal, 2003). This circuit between perception and a motor response operates in very short intervals in many games from *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) through to the contemporary first-person shooter. The capacity to respond quickly through sighting, shooting or changing the orientation of blocks is integral to the gameplay, whereas waiting and deliberation undermine the capacity to play the game. The player certainly has choice, they can choose the orientation of the blocks or the location of the sight, but this choice is overdetermined by the required time of response. Even in a section of play where the player has more time to consider their action, for example in the stealth sections of a first-person shooter, the screen is still addressed through the schema of possible action – any movement within the visual field has the potential to trigger a response. In those games in which the circuit between perception and action is short, the glance is privileged over the gaze, because it is more efficient (faster) way of perusing the image with respect to possible cues for action. Like the cinemagoer confronted with fast editing – and this applies as

⁸ In Hollywood cinema the average shot length has decreased, and this has been accompanied by an increase in the speed of action in what David Bordwell (2002) refers to as “intensified continuity.”

much to the work of Sergei Eisenstein as it does to a contemporary action director – or insistent audio cues, the player has little time to silently address the image as a site of visual plenitude.

In the *Call of Duty* franchise, the level of cinematic action has increased in scale and spectacle with each iteration. There are increasingly frenetic scenes of buildings collapsing, large scale explosions and rapid troop movements. The action passes by quickly and usually occurs over the expanse of the visual field, such that the player has to make rapid decisions about where to direct their attention. Although the player has some control over their movement, theoretically they can stop and contemplate such scenes or stay hidden while the action unfolds, the gameplay requires that the player must always move, which is manifest in constant appeals from the NPCs (non-player characters) and the ever-present hand grenade. According to Anderson (2014), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward & Sledgehammer Games, 2011) fails to create a contemplative experience for it “requires rapid responses from the viewer/participant such that there is no time for reflection” (p. 91). The game is most certainly organized around a spectacle – the spectacle of warfare – but not one that is available for ongoing sensual attention because it serves another role, to contribute to and frame player movement.⁹ Due to the pace of the gameplay, the broader moving spectacle of warfare recedes from view – becoming a background for player movement – in the degree to which the player must control the action in the foreground. The player might momentarily marvel at the cinematic verisimilitude of a scene, but

⁹ The relationship between movement and the spectacle depends on the affordances of a medium. Any image that is repurposed will be seen differently. For example, Paul Atkinson (2014) argues, in an article on the inclusion of existing paintings in comic books, that the sequencing of the panels creates a movement that diminishes the reader’s attention to the visual properties of the paintings. Similar shifts can also occur in the reception of images within videogames.

they are jointly engaged in a perceptual-movement circuit, which at its most frenetic can be characterized as stimulus-response and therefore, according to Virilio (2003), undermines aesthetic attention.

The emphasis on contemplation in traditional aesthetics should not be restricted to a particularly slow and distanced gaze, for this would preclude audience engagement with a range of art forms, including cinema, music and dance. Rather it provides another rubric for thinking about how videogames could accommodate traditional aesthetics as well as a type of aesthetics derived from playfulness, as Juul suggests. The stimulus-response structure of some aspects of gameplay might not sit easily with a notion of contemplation grounded in the plenitude of an image or even an attention to the experience of playfulness.¹⁰ Aesthetic attention could be extended to include a broader notion of sensible experience outside visual or sonic pleasure. Grant Tavinor (2009) states that videogames foreground non-visual perception and experiences, of which the most prominent are the “kinaesthetic pleasures” that contribute directly to the feeling of playing a game. Terms such as “*flowing, fluid, jerky,*” or even the feeling of “heft” when driving different cars, are qualities that are immanent to the movement of gameplay (p. 181). Likewise, Grodal (2003) argues that videogames explore different aspects of cognitive engagement that are often concordant with how our consciousness operates. The feeling of flow is created through the linking together of perceptual data, affectual contours and motor actions that can even operate within a game as graphically simple as *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) (Grodal, 2003). In the early arcade game, the player experiences the “pleasure of control” (Takacs, 2014,

¹⁰ This interest in an aesthetics of speed was also integral to modernism and the plastic arts, in particular Futurism, in which many artists sought to recreate the feeling of rapid movement associated with the contemporary industrial city.

p. 158) that is contingent on the increasing efficiency and speed of the player's movements. Indeed, any slowdown in the action would allow the player more time to attend to the paucity of the images, which could in turn undermine the pleasure accrued through rapid gameplay.

These qualities of gameplay are contingent on movement and can be readily associated with a range of traditional aesthetic properties, such as grace and elegance. The fin-de-siècle philosopher, Paul Souriau (1983) argued that one of the guiding principles of an aesthetics of movement is the diminution of the feeling of effort. Movements can be judged graceful because they properly distribute effort in accordance with the affordances of the body. In the context of videogames, gameplay could be considered graceful if the player's body is perfectly coordinated with both the haptic and optical interfaces, such that each movement employs only necessary effort. But Souriau (1983), among others, also recognized that aesthetics is not reducible to pleasure or the expenditure of effort, for, if this were the case, all pleasures would qualify as aesthetic. It is not enough to experience flow through the gameplay, the player also has to attend to this experience as an aesthetic object. A necessary condition is that there must be some critical awareness that extends beyond the phenomenal properties of the object (Crowther, 2010). When applied to a game like *Grand Theft Auto IV*, does the pleasure of driving through the streets at high speed appear as a proper object of aesthetic attention, in which the player can attend to its contours and variations, or does the experience of flow supplant attention to the qualitative specificity of the experience?

Seeing into Worlds: Aesthetic Attention and Immersion?

The difficulty in answering these questions relates in many respects to the structure of interpellation and the status of phenomenal presence in videogames. In the traditional notion of disinterested aesthetic engagement, attention to the work requires a critical engagement with the

material and the phenomenal presence of a work. The work must be present to the viewer as a concrete object and not just as a means of conveying a story. When presence is discussed in relation to videogames, it often refers to a different concept, that of immersion, which Scholten et al. (2016) argue is grounded in the medium's dynamic and interactive features. Immersion describes a feeling of presence that is achieved through accentuating those aspects of the gameplay that allow the viewer to forget the interface and instead attend to the storyworld of the game. Lombard and Ditton (1997) describe this type of presence as "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation," which is simulated in mediated environments in a variety of ways. This includes the user's sense of control, which may be manifest as the capacity to move freely in a mediated space, have a minimal number of restrictions, or feel that the space is responsive to action. They also argue that the feeling of presence is dependent on the pace of events and the degree to which they approximate "real time," in which case any delays in the responsiveness of the medium, for example lag, can disrupt the sense of verisimilitude by drawing attention back to the medium (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). In videogames, the feeling of presence is generally facilitated by the user's responsivity to the perceptual contents of the screen, as well as the latter's perceptual and functional correspondence to real world features. This feeling can be undermined upon discovery that the world is limited, or that a door in a building is nothing more than a visual surface, or that an NPC continues to repeat a gesture. Moreover, there is a tendency in gaming, underpinned by an increase in the speed of computing, to create environments that emphasize the presence of the game space by de-emphasizing the material aspects of the game playing. The use of large screens or VR (virtual reality) headsets that remove interference from the world outside of the game, the improvements in motion capture and rendering that diminish the differences between real world and virtual action, and the development of haptic devices that respond to the whole body's movement, all work towards creating the feeling of presence.

For many gamers, immersion is often present as a key condition for aesthetic engagement rather than material and formal features, or the variability of experience found in the interface between body and work. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), a role-playing video game based on works of the Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski, has been heralded by players and critics for its landscapes and art style, but also for its capacity to create immersive experiences, as one player notes: “in the first few scenes I swear I can smell the fresh cold air in the game. This game should be in art museums” (Tysim, 2017); and another states, “Wish I could be in that world, just riding my horse through the fields and mountains!” (ZiggyDiggy, 2017). Here verisimilitude and presence are proposed as the main principles of aesthetic judgement – the game should be in art museum because it resembles a world that exists outside of art museums. It is not necessarily a question of whether the environment truly resembles an existing world, for videogames often create fantasy worlds, but the degree to which the game simulates a world in a way that allows for feeling of presence. It is about admiring the game world from within that world, as this player of *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) outlines:

It was nighttime, I was wandering the open wastes outside of the Capital, and had Dogmeat with me. I didn't have the radio on, and a strong wind blew up, whistling through my headphones. That coupled with the ambient music they play if you aren't listening to the radio, coupled with the gentle panting of Dogmeat at my side, as the stars and moon shone down from above, all merged into a lovely little moment of pure immersion. (HappyNinja42, 2015) (See Figure 2)

Although there is a brief reference to headphones, the world is celebrated for the fact that the player can focus instead on the phenomenal properties of the game space rather than the interface. Similarly with reference to the landscapes in *Shadow of the Colossus* (SCE Japan Studio & Team Ico, 2005), an exemplar of art video games, the player TheVampwizimp (2015)

exclaims on the *Escapist Magazine*'s website: "The sun was directly ahead of me, just above the top of a line of cliffs, and the dusky light bathed everything orange. For some reason, I teared up at this breathtaking sight, and almost cried at the silent, serene beauty."

In each of these cases, aesthetic judgement is foregrounded in a way that does attend to some of the phenomenal aspects of appearing, in particular the qualities of colour, light and sound, but this is always underlined by a fascination with the simulation of an environment. The capacity to create the feeling of presence should be regarded as a notable factor in the appreciation of such games, however, it should not be confused with a notion of aesthetic presence used in the plastic arts, because its broad aim, at least on one level, is for the player to forget the material conditions of videogame play, which are found at the juncture between body and machine. It is similar in many respects, to talking about literature solely in terms of its characters and narrative rather than in terms of the language used. These types of aesthetic judgements raise questions about which phenomenal properties should be highlighted when referring to videogame. Should the videogame world be discussed as a visual and sonic environment that exists beyond the screen, with its own material surfaces, or should aesthetic engagement always take into consideration the conditions of appearing that is afforded by various interfaces (screen, the speakers, the handset, etc.)? It depends on whether the notion of aesthetic contemplation is linked to the virtual world, or to what is germane to videogames, a particular way of engaging with that world.

Conclusion

Investigating videogames through the lens of aesthetic contemplation provides a way of rethinking the relationship between sensual experience and gameplay, rather than a means of judging the medium's place as an art form. It asks under what conditions, we can speak about

aesthetic engagement and how this can lead to further discussions about the relationship between videogames and the other arts. We have focused mainly on the visual organisation of videogames, as this affords direct comparison to some aspects of aesthetic attention in the plastic arts. In its complex opticality, any game could create an environment in which aesthetic contemplation is encouraged, for example, an open world game could include a gallery in which the player is encouraged to do little more than observe works of art and navigate around gallery spaces – similar in many respects to the Google Art Project. However, when thinking about a medium, it is important to not only consider the exceptions or possibilities, but also general tendencies in gameplay and design. In most games the requirement that the player respond directly to what is seen, usually through some form of tactile interface, is an underlying feature that is not easily eschewed. In the short history of games, there has been an intensification of this perceptual-motor circuit, as it is linked directly to the pleasure of playing games. The problem that video games have in fostering aesthetic attention is in accommodating the pleasure associated with gameplay and the type of interrogative viewing associated with some of the visual arts. They involve different speeds of engagement that are not easily incorporated into the medium without disrupting player expectation. The other main tendency is the drive toward lived verisimilitude, in which games are hailed for their capacity to create truly immersive environments, where the player looks through the medium rather than upon it. These games operate according to a popular aesthetic, which has much in common with the popularity of hyperrealism in the visual arts. But again, this tendency has to be contrasted with aesthetic approaches that assume an attention to an object's conditions of appearing, in particular, the constitution of the work as a material artefact. In examining videogames aesthetically, it is not a matter of making grand claims for the medium but considering the particular tension between aesthetic attention and the expectations implicit to gameplay.

[INSERT HERE Figure1_Campsite.jpg.]

Caption: Figure 1 - *Red Dead Redemption*, 2010. Developed by Rockstar San Diego. 2010.

[INSERT HERE Figure2 The_Capital.jpg.]

Caption: Figure 2 - *Fallout 3*, 2008. Developed by Bethesda Game Studios. 2008.

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