Video Games as Literary Devices

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1. The Mechanism/Device

"Time is a child playing at dice. The kingdom is a child's."[1] So said Heraclitus some 2500 years ago. An image of time, of eternity. Of how it proceeds. A notion of the larger meaning of play and game. A description of cosmic power and perhaps an intimation of the nature of earthly power. Disturbing, perhaps, in its evocation of a cosmos or a kingdom at the mercy of chance and the whims of a child.

Heraclitus uses the notion of the game within a metaphor, a *literary device*. We read at dictionary.com that a literary device is "a literary or linguistic technique that produces a specific effect, esp. a figure of speech, narrative style, or plot mechanism."

The basic thing about games is that events in a (usually imaginary) structure/world are generated via some mechanism (throwing dice, for example, or moving), and the events are interpreted and meaningful within the world of the game. Each event introduces a change to the game world that the player responds to, which is the next event. What I would like to do in this meditation is consider several net-based works of digital art which use games *as and within* literary devices.

The artists creating these art pieces were more intent upon creating works of art than computer games. The works we'll look at subordinate the videogame dimension to the literary or visual art dimension, to different extents. The videogame is used *as and within* literary devices whereas, in typical videogames, the game is not subordinated to anything. Like Heraclitus, the artists are most interested in seeing game and play in relation to the world. For instance, *immersion* would be in the literary dimension, typically, not the videogame dimension, or would be more in the literary than the videogame.

Even the process of reading a poem or book or viewing a picture or listening to a piece of music etc can be thought of as a process whereby events are generated by some mechanism and the events are interpreted and meaningful within the world of the piece of art. When you read a poem, you make something different of/from/with it than the next person, just as two playings of a game may differ. At every turn in the reading, you will have probably responded differently from the next person reading the same words. The events are reading/interpreting the words or sentences etc of the work of art.

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[1] The word *eternity* is sometimes used instead of *time*. Sometimes *kingly power* is used instead of *kingdom*. Also, the original refers to something like *draughts*, not dice; apparently philologists are unsure if this refers to something like knucklebones/dice or something like a checker board.

2. Devices in Bookchin's *The Intruder*

In Natalie Bookchin's Shockwave piece *The Intruder*[2] (bookchin.net/intruder), we are presented with a sequence of eight videogames, most of which are adapted from classics such as Pong, Space Invaders, and Textual Vagina Blood. We interact via moving or clicking the mouse. And by making whatever we make of/with/from the story. Meaning is always constructed, never on a plate. The interaction is less focussed on videogame play than it is on advancing the narrative of the story we hear throughout the piece. The story is Jorge Luis Borges's *The Intruder* with a few changes. The female in the story is "the intruder." She is as a possession of the two closely-bonded miscreant brothers enmeshed in a hopeless triangle of pyscho-sexual possession with homo-erotic undertones. Finally one of them kills her to end the tension between the two men. Game over. Story over. Bookchin presents an awareness of being an intruder, herself, in the (previously?) male-dominated world of video game creation and play. The videogame paradigms are subverted, mocked, and implicitly criticised for their shallow competitive and violent nature related to the nature of the violent males.

Although moving and clicking the mouse is associated with advancing the video games, the videogames are subordinated to the story; the videogames are used *as and within* literary devices. The videogames *are* literary devices in that they are programmed machines functioning less to advance game play as triggers for the advancement of the audio of the story. The videogames are also functioning *within* other comparitive/metaphoric literary devices. We compare the worlds of the games with the worlds of the story. Metaphor is operational here. We compare ourselves in the world of the games with ourselves in the world of the story, ie, we compare the goals of the games with our goals in reading/listening to and understanding the story. We cannot enjoy the games in the way that videogames are usually meant to be enjoyed. Partly because they are not as attentively programmed as well-crafted videogames. But mostly because they are subordinated, in every sense, to the literary dimension. Structurally. Morally. Narratively. Etc. The artist mops the floor with the videogame. Art 10. Videogames 0. Women cheer this art work like few other net-based works. It is deservedly famous both as statement and for its formal literary innovation. It is not innovative as a computer game. That isn't what it aspires to. It aspires to literary/artistic innovation and literary depth. It is a darkly comic, blistering critique of the typical mentality involved in both the design and playing of videogames.

It is a kind of anti-videogame/patriarchy work of media art. But it also explores the relation of game and art in a different way: both video game and story are presented as make-believe activities which proceed via the generation of events that change the game/story world and that the player/wreader responds to, generating further events.

Heraclitus poses the game amid the amoral attentions of a child playing dice. Bookchin poses it amid the evil of men.

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[2] *Intruder* and *Arteroids* require the free Shockwave plugin from get.adobe.com/shockwave; Chrome does not support this and many other plugins; you have to use a browser such as Firefox.

3. Art Play in Regina Célia Pinto's *Viewing Axolotls*

Regina Célia Pinto's Flash piece *Viewing Axolotls* (arteonline.arq.br/viewing_axolotls), like Bookchin's piece, uses a story. *Viewing Axolotls* uses the Julio Cortazar story "Axolotls" from his collection *The End of the Game*. The Cortazar text is included in its entirety. We might describe Cortazar's story and Regina's use of it as an exploration of transformative *immersion*. In the Cortazar story, the narrator does and does not become one of the axolotls[3] he views with fascination at the aquarium. He does, insofar as he realizes with immersive, imaginative intensity a possible 'mentality' or existential condition of an axolotl, ie, he becomes fully *figuratively* an axolotl. But the story is unlike Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," wherein the main character *literally* becomes a cockroach. In Kafka, the metamorphosis seems the tragi-comic consequence of the character not having fully lived. In Cortazar's story, the figurative metamorphosis is a kind of imaginative achievement. The narrator remains a human being and somehow his humanity is complemented or extended via this realization of axolotlness.

The Cortazar story explores the nature and limits of *figurative* immersion, which is the existentially strong assumption (necessarily figuratively) of a point of view different from the normal ones. The character experiences figurative immersion and, in parallel, the reader may experience figurative immersion. Regina's adaptation explores immersion in a work of art (Cortazar's) and offers the wreader immersion in a virtual work of art (Regina's and/or Cortazar's). How *immersive* is the experience? Like Bookchin's piece, *Viewing Axolotls* is not as smooth or visually/sonically compelling as a professional videogame. It seems to me that the term *immersion* is used more literally in connection with videogames than in literature. Yet of course it must remain figurative: we are who we are where we are when we are and there isn't any getting around it. The transformation to realize is not so much becoming an axolotl as becoming Regina (reading Cortazar) becoming an axolotl. The piece is as immersive as you make it. Which, it seems, is part of the nature of immersion. Building a compelling world to immerse in is only part of the task for those who would permit an immersive experience; the other part is allowing/encouraging the imaginative leap that humans can make to figuratively assume perspectives outside of themselves. And that is as well accomplished via the literary as anything else.

Viewing Axolotls also involves a 'game'. "The objective of the game is to make the avatar and the axolotls exchange glances." The "avatar" is a silhouette of Regina or the speaker of the piece. You cannot literally get them to exchange glances because the silhouette has no eyes. The goal is figurative. The game is even less gamey than Bookchin's efforts. It is playful, however. Again, the notion of the game is used figuratively, as a literary device, in this case perhaps to think of the notion of a game as simply play toward the goal of imaginative or literary realization.

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[3] "…axolotls are the larval stage (provided with gills) of a species of salamander of the genus Ambystoma." From Cortazar's story.

4. Game as Device to See Anew: *Pac Mondrian* by Neil Hennessey

When Toronto's Neil Hennessey and friends released *Pac Mondrian* (offline at this writing) in 2004, the New York Times wrote about it. And then so did the Globe and Mail and National Post, the two national Canadian papers. And many bloggers linked to it and discussed it. What was all the fuss about? *Pac Mondrian* uses a Piet Mondrian painting called "Broadway Boogie Woogie" as the playing surface. As you play *Pac Man* on it, the surface/painting changes according to the graphical logic of the old *Pac Man* game. And the audio is boogie woogie.

One of the main things people comment about is how it lets them experience Mondrian's work anew. Again, the emphasis is on art, not the computer game. Hennessey and friends have also made an arcade version of it that can show in a gallery.

Another of the common observations goes something like this:

> Video games, meet modernist art; modernist art, meet video games. Now that you two are aquainted, please mash up two of your most iconic symbols. Pac-Man and Piet Mondrian? Okay, sounds good to us. So, anyone for a game of Dali Kong, Warhol the Hedgehog, Man Rayman, or Super Kahlo Brothers?
>
> From engadget.com

The emphasis here is not on either art or the videogame, but on a more or less equal "mash up" of the two. *Pac Mondrian* is not solely for those interested in visual art but also for anyone who likes *Pac Man*. There is movement here from videogame as solely figurative (Regina) or strictly subordinated to the art (Bookchin).

It is still possible to see the videogame as device: if we look at it from the point of view of someone interested mostly in visual art and the work of Mondrian, we can see that they will see the videogame as device that allows us to see Mondrian afresh.

However, we can also see *Pac Mondrian* from the point of view of someone interested not at all in Mondrian, at least initially, but interested in videogames. They will find *Pac Mondrian* an OK implementation of *Pac Man* and may move from that interest into some engagement with the artistic dimension of the piece.

Comparing the previous work with *Pac Mondrian*, it seems that Natalie's and Regina's works are more complex in their emotional depth and intellectual range. The notion of the game is fully figurative; the notion of play is art play, not game play. *Pac Mondrian* bops lightly upon the surface of pop and modernist art, yet is more deeply realized as a programmed piece and as a juxtaposition of art and videogame. It is a work of strong delight in both art and game and provides people with a sense of the relation of both; it also gives people a sense of the relation of Mondrian's piece to Manhattan, conveys something of the spirit of Mondrian and boogie woogie in Manhattan.

5. Arteroids: Twin Devices

I've worked on *Arteroids* (vispo.com/arteroids) since 2001. It's never really finished. I call it the battle of poetry against itself and the forces of dullness. It's based on the ATARI classic arcade game *Asteroids* ('ATARI', by the way, is 'art' and 'ai' mixed together). Instead of a space ship, the id entity is a text. Instead of asteroids, you encounter texts.

Some of the features I wanted to program into it were appropriate to game play. Other features were more appropriate to a different notion of play. So I separated the piece into two 'modes': 'game mode' and 'play mode'. In 'game mode' you play with what you're given and scores are saved. In 'play mode', you can compose/save/edit the texts you encounter when playing; and you can adjust all the parameters of the app: textual density, velocity, fictive friction, whether the texts can 'kill' you, etc. 'Play mode' is more a Do It Yourself combination of odd poem editor and videogame adjuster so that you can mash poetry and game together in a way that permits you to think about both without worrying about being killed. 'Game mode' is a videogame, though there also you can read the text at low velocities. The velocity increases as you progress through levels.

At high levels of play/velocity, text is a device for the game. At low levels of play and in Word for Weirdos, the game is a device for the poetical text. The idea was to try to deal both with poetry and videogame on a more or less equal basis in order to be able to observe their interaction well. What do you get when poetry and shoot-em-up video game collide? I didn't go in with a lot of preconceptions.

Once I had the videogame working, I found that the game was dominating poetry. That's when I started building "Word For Weirdos", which you reach via the 'edit' menu option in 'play mode'. That's also when I made the program capable of 216 levels of play. So that it goes from a manageably—and readably—slow speed up to speeds that defy reading altogether. This was also a help to the 'game mode'.

The relationship between poetry and videogames is mostly of the oil and water variety. Poetry is not a game somebody wins. Just as art is not a game somebody wins. It wasn't long before I realized that there was no resolving this conflict. But exploring the conflict and also exploring the meeting points is interesting to me. There is great energy in their collision. One of the main intersection points of art and game is in the notion of play. And there are various types of play, some more appropriate to art, some more appropriate to games.

As we move into a situation where poetry is more electric and net-oriented, and where videogames are maturing into their art possibilities, there will be more exploration of the meeting ground of poetry (and other arts) with games. Because games need to be literate, in some sense, to attain art in which language is handled with depth and precision, and poetry needs to move into the digital and find new ground rather than simply porting print to the digital.