

EPHEMERAL GAMES

Is It Barbaric to Design Videogames after Auschwitz?

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Robert Coover advises readers looking for "serious" hypertext to visit Eastgate.com. Although "seriousness" is hard to define, it is possible to imagine what they are not going to find in these recommended texts: princesses in distress, trolls, and space ships with big laser guns.

Where should players go to find "serious" computer games? As far as I know, nowhere; there is a striking lack of "seriousness" in the computer game industry. Currently, videogames are closer to Tolkien than to Chekhov; they show more influence from George Lucas than from François Truffaut.

One reason is primarily economical. The industry targets male teenagers and children and everybody else either adapts to that content or looks for another form of entertainment. However, I do not believe the current lack of mature, intellectual content is solely due to marketing reasons.

I argue that current computer game design conventions have structural characteristics which prevent them from dealing with "serious" content. I will also suggest strategies for future designers that may help them overcome some of these problematic issues.

My approach risks falling into one of new media studies' deeper pits: to try to fit the characteristics of traditional media forms (in this case, literature and cinema) to the object of study (videogames). I am aware of this danger. However, to learn what the possibilities of computer games are, it is necessary to continue to test their boundaries and confront them with the theoretical tools that are currently available.

I will not discuss why some approaches to a topic are more "serious" than others; I will just stick to the rather naive definition of "seriousness" that Eastgate uses to advertise its products.

"Serious" games

The Holocaust is a typical "serious" topic that is usually treated with a mature approach, even in comedy, as in Roberto Benigni's recent film *Life is Beautiful*.

Many computer games deal with World War II. However, the only games that explore the Holocaust are underground pro-Nazi videogames. While not extremely popular, such games receive sporadic media attention as they emerge, like Camus' pestilent rats, from their hideaways on the Internet. In one game available from many European BBS during the early nineties, the player was offered the role of a concentration camp administrator and had to coordinate mass murders.

Why has this topic inspired only racist videogames? Is the medium of videogames not considered mature enough to deal with a topic like the Holocaust?

It is possible to find successful counter-examples in other "low culture" media. One example is Art Spiegelman's comic book *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (euphemistically categorized as a "graphic novel"). Spiegelman delivers "serious" messages through a medium that is popularly regarded as a violent and sexist time-waster for teenagers.

This same derogatory description is usually applied to videogames, and in fact, both media share similar aesthetics, themes and conventions. One would think that if a comic book can win a Pulitzer Prize, it should not be impossible for a computer game to also gain at least some attention from a "high culture" audience.

Why, then, has no one tried to develop a humanist game about the Holocaust? I can think of a possible answer: a computer game through the eyes of a Holocaust victim might be perceived as even more monstrous than a neo-Nazi game. A comic book representation of an historical drama could be socially accepted. However, an ergodic representation, such as a videogame, is a whole different story.

Our culture has a set of forbidden games. Children learn that there are things they are not supposed to play with. This happened to the children in René Clément's film *Forbidden Games*, who played with death and

religious artifacts.

Computer games can be especially threatening because they combine the fear of representation – for example, "exposure to violent content can generate violent behavior" – with the fear of ergodics: "acting in violent simulated environments is violent behavior."

It is not my intention to review all the possible social, cultural or anthropological reasons for the fear towards certain kinds of play. I will just focus on two characteristics of games, and particularly computer games, that may become direct obstacles to the creation of "serious" games: binary actions, and computer game conventions of life and death.

Binary actions

A game is defined by its outcome. There are two possible results, winning or losing; a draw is just an intermediate result.

Fair players do not worry very much about game results. After all, they can always start over and try their skills (or luck) again. That is another characteristic of a game: it can be restarted.

While traditional games can include representations and specific themes, videogames are able to create textual and audiovisual representations, as Brenda Laurel claims, "in which humans can participate" (Laurel, 1993). In other words, they are able to simulate both actions and environments.

Most videogames are goal oriented: they have particular rules in order to define when the player wins or loses, but also when the player is performing correct or incorrect actions on his path towards victory.

Game actions are typically trivial, because you can always play again and do exactly the opposite. Actually, in computer games you do not even need to wait until you lose in order to restart: you can save the exact situation of the environment at a certain moment for later retrieval.

For example, before fighting against a monster, the player could save the state of the game. If she dies in the battle, she would always be able to reload the previously saved game and try a different strategy. In other words, she does not have to face the consequences of her actions.

This trial-and-error routine is very common in videogames and particularly in adventure games. A player experiments rather than acts: she is free to explore any "what if" scenario without taking any real chance. The problem is that many "serious" cultural products are essentially based

in the impossibility of doing such a thing in real life. Hamlet's dilemma would be irrelevant in a videogame, simply because he would be able "to be" and "not to be".

Actions in videogames are reversible. Therefore, there is no room in them for fate or tragedy. It is always possible to go back and play until you reach a happy ending. For this reason, videogames allow players to fool death itself.

Living and dying inside the computer

Death in computer games is always just a minor detail: it can be fixed.

In Peter Weir's film *Fearless*, the main character survives a plane crash, and this experience changes his life. In a key scene, the character played by Jeff Bridges forbids his son to use his videogame console, arguing, "when you die [in the real world], you don't get another life." His son unsuccessfully tries to explain to him that, "It's not real dying."

Actually, both father and son are right, because they are facing the problem from different perspectives. The boy, who is literate in the computer medium, tries to explain to his father that death in videogames is just a convention; it is different from real death. On the other hand, the father points out the inconsistency of the simulation, which trivializes the "sacred" value of life.

"The Sims": people issues

In real life, the consequences of our decisions are not binary. Unlike what happens in games, there is a broad spectrum of possible results.

If the real world is analyzed from a win-lose perspective, the results are simply pathetic. A clear example is *The Sims*, a computer program that simulates life according to consumerism. (A Sim is a simulated person who lives inside *Sim City*, another popular game by the same author.) The philosophy of the game is as follows: the more expensive your virtual furniture is, the more virtual friends you will have.

Still, *The Sims* is a revolutionary landmark in a realm that previously just housed monsters, aliens, and trolls. The breakthrough is due to a simple

reason: it deals with people. The simulated persons introduce a whole new set of fascinating issues to computer games; ethics and moral are two of the most important.

Nobody cares if an alien monster is destroyed by a laser cannon, but players do pay more attention to issues like whether it is ethical to let a Sim to starve to death, or whether the designers were right in not allowing nudity in the game.

Just like in regular games, if your Sim's actions lead him to a "terrible" life (for example, if he becomes poor), you can always restore a previously saved version, where the sun always shines, the burgers are big, and his bank account is always full.

Sophie's choice

Let's now describe an imaginary Holocaust videogame, based on current game design conventions. Basically, it would simulate a character that is a prisoner in a concentration camp. Through the character's eyes but also through his actions, the player would explore, feel and think about life in such an extreme situation. As a designer, I would be particularly interested in creating an environment for exploring such concepts as moral, hate, solidarity, suffering, and justice.

I believe that such a game would be highly criticized, for the following reasons.

Firstly, it would free the player from moral responsibilities. Since the game could be restarted at will, the player would not have to face the consequences of his actions. For example, he would be able to betray other prisoners and make the guards shoot them. In case the rest of the prisoners react by criticizing or even attacking him, all he would need to do is to restore a previously saved version and he would be able to get away with his crimes. In other words, the environment could become a simulator for sadists.

Secondly, if the game applied the win-lose binary logic, the Holocaust would become a secondary issue, an obstacle to overcome. If he followed that logic, the player could find a "correct" path in order to save Anne Frank from death. And if she happened to die, it would not be important, since she would be alive the next time he restarted the game. In other words, the player would be able to jump back and forth from life to death. Therefore,

those concepts would lose their ethical, historical and social value.

So, it seems that game logic cannot be used to simulate tragic events since tragic agents do not have real choices. The film *Sophie's Choice* gives a clear example of this when the main character is forced to decide which of her children will survive Auschwitz. Sophie's choice is not a real choice. It does not matter what she decides; she is already doomed.

Poetry after Auschwitz

Adorno once wrote "it would be barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz." Based on what was previously described, it seems that it would definitively be barbaric to create videogames about Auschwitz.

However, if it could be possible to design a kind of environment where actions are irreversible, some of the main obstacles to designing "serious" videogames would disappear.

Actually, such an environment exists and is present in role playing games (RPGs), multi user dungeons (MUDs), and online persistent worlds such as Ultima Online. Unlike what happens in single user games, a participant in a multi-user game cannot save the situation of the whole environment for later retrieval. The online world is persistent: actions are irreversible, and you have to assume their consequences. Actually, this is how online social reputations are developed. The other players judge you based on your previous behavior.

Even if their irreversibility is evidently a plus, multiplayer games may not be the right environment for developing a Holocaust project because of the following reasons.

While most players are consistent with their online roles in MUDs, the range of available roles is not as broad and rich as in narratives. Most online environments are quite fair societies; there are generally not situations equivalent to being born with major physical handicaps or in total poverty. Therefore, there are not avatars who have been cleaning toilets for a living for several decades, or avatars with the angst of not having enough money for medical treatment. Of course, bots (computer controlled characters) or hired actors might be able to play these roles, but this would not completely solve the limitations of the characters played by players, who would always behave like an army of protagonists.

The other problem of most online environments is that the fear of death is relative, since it is always possible to log on again with a different avatar or buy another copy of the game and start over. (This is rarer in traditional RPGs, in which, if your character dies, you may not be able to rejoin the game.)

Finally, the designer has less control over what happens in a MUD than on an adventure game or in a single-user simulation like "The Sims". While this is not necessarily a bad thing – simply because a videogame designer and a narrative writer are in essence different jobs – if you are designing a videogame about a sensitive topic like the Holocaust, you may want to have more control over a single player program. For example, multiplayer games could be sabotaged by a real group of neo-Nazis.

While I am not saying that multiplayer environments are necessarily a bad place to build "serious" videogames, the reasons that were just described make me think that a single user game that shared the irreversibility characteristics of multiplayer games might be better.

OSGON: Don't play it again, Sam

If the player's actions in a single player game were irreversible, this program would not have a "save and restore" function. However, even without this feature, you would always be able to start from scratch and do the opposite of what you previously did. An ephemeral piece of software is needed: a computer program that could only be used one time.

A computer program that can be used just once? It does not seem to make sense. People are used to being able to have access to a computer program as many times as they need it. It would be strange indeed to buy a word processor, install it, write a letter, and then not being able to use the program again.

There are a couple of direct antecedents to this idea, even if they were designed with other goals in mind.

The earliest is *Agrippa*, a poem by William Gibson. This poem was delivered on a floppy disk. Once you executed the program you were able to read the content just once. After you did so, the program encrypted itself, preventing you from executing it again. Of course, it took hackers only a short time to break the protection. Nowadays the poem is available on many

web sites and people are free to read it as many times as they want.

Another example is Divx, an alternative DVD video format. It was supported by major Hollywood studios and tested in the United States. Unlike DVD movies, Divx discs were very cheap. However, after you watched each film, its disc would not replay unless you repaid a small fee. This was achieved through a serial number on every disc and the fact that the player had a modem connected to the company's database. If you pushed a special button on your remote control, the fee would be deducted from your credit card account and you would be able to watch the movie again. It was advertised as an alternative to video rental, with the plus that you would never have late return fees and you could keep the disc at home. It was a huge commercial failure, and the format is not longer available.

These two systems broke the replayability paradigm. The first one simply forbids any further access to the software. The second restricts the access unless you pay a fee. However, it is important to notice that in both cases the content delivered was not ergodic.

Agrippa was easy to hack, but the technique itself could still be used. Divx did not really eliminate replayability; it just transformed it into a money generator for the big film studios.

I propose a particular system that would help us to create single user games with irreversible actions. While there can be many different ways to achieve this, I will just mention one.

The most simple way would be that the player must buy a ticket (or serial number) for the single user game. With her ticket number she would log in into the game and play. The game would have no save feature, but after she logged out, the environment would be maintained in the same state until she returned. Even if many users could play at the same time, there would be no interaction between them: everybody would be playing a single user game.

However, with such a format, users would still be able to buy multiple tickets and start over, just like in traditional single user games. Therefore, the only solution would be to transform the game into a happening. The game could be scheduled for, let's say, next Monday at 8 pm. Every player would have to log in at that moment to start playing. After that, nobody else would be able to start playing that game, ever. It would be the exact equivalent of missing a happening: you simply cannot show up three days later.

Let's now analyze the consequences of using this technique, which I will name "one-session game of narration" (OSGON).

1. Irreversibility. Since the game can be played only once, the player would have to carefully choose her actions and decisions and face the consequences of her actions, just like in real life. This would allow designers to deal with more "serious" topics.
2. Death. If you die in an OSGON, there is no second chance. The game would simply end. However, because of this, the game designer would have to minimize the chances of death. In current videogames, it is extremely easy to die. An OSGON would need to be designed in a more realistic ways. The probability of dying would of course vary depending on the genre and topic of the game, but should remain coherent within its context. In other words, players should not die in the first hour, unless they do something really stupid.
3. Criticism. As with any piece of ephemeral art, critics would have a hard time analyzing OSGONs. They would only have the chance to judge their personal experience.
4. Time. As OSGONs can be used just once, they necessarily have to have a limited duration. The designer may have two main options. The first would be, as in many adventure games, that the closure of the program would be a direct consequence of the user's actions. For example, the game may end if the character is put in jail. The other option would be to have a limited time, as, for example, theater plays or movies. The user would be able to experience the program for a couple of hours and then it would end, with or without a narrative closure.
5. Awkwardness. Even if OSGONs could be able to deliver more compelling "serious" videogames, it simply could happen that the concept of ephemeral games might be too awkward for the public. The idea of replayability may be too powerful to be challenged. Of course, I do not see OSGONs as a replacement for current single player games, but just as another genre with its own characteristics.
6. Serials. OSGONs could also be used as one-session chapters in ergodic serials. While producing serial games may still be too expensive with current technology, the structure could allow the design of coherent ergodic serials.

Conclusion

There is a lack of "serious" videogames that use the medium as a way to make a philosophical point or to share an artist's perception of reality. While it is easy to think that this situation might be simply caused by lack of demand and economical reasons, I have analyzed several problems within current videogame conventions that may prevent us from dealing with certain topics.

I have also shown that OSGONs may be a good strategy to explore for developing "serious" videogames. However, without an actual prototype, it is hard to know if the lack of replayability will have unexpected consequences. Still, the technique itself opens a door for computer based ergodic ephemeral artifacts.

It would definitely be difficult to design videogames that deal with topics such as the Holocaust. However, my main goal in this article was simply to focus on some of these design issues. Games are not going to improve simply because of broadband nor simply because of impressive 3D graphics. They will only get better if we keep trying to understand them as a medium.

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