Varieties of Vernacular Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the elaboration of the term 'vernacular' in order to open new ways for game studies to think about the complex relations between production and consumption in videogames. Drawing on assemblage theory, cultural studies and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'minor literature', the paper will explore game concept art and the reception of From Software's 'Souls' series as sets of vernacular productions.

Keywords
Vernacular experience, paratexts, assemblages, playcultures, production, consumption

VARIETIES OF VERNACULAR EXPERIENCE

Does game studies recognise sufficient varieties of vernacular experience and expression? How has the term 'vernacular' been used in academic attempts to understand videogames and 'playcultures' (Flanagan 2009)? Thinking about videogames in terms of everyday, lived experience is common enough in the social sciences that have captured so much of game studies' intellectual direction. But 'vernacular' has a long and complex history across humanities theory that can help transfer and elucidate some of that work from the social sciences.

Recently, Daniel Joseph (2013) deployed DeLanda's (2006) term 'assemblage' to help understand Toronto's independent game development cliques and communities. Joseph proposes that, especially given the international and professional contexts of game development, the terms of reference for theory need to become labile and scalable to respond to the proposed objects of study. Our interest in the term 'vernacular' begins with a similar set of descriptive needs - what best describes daily, long-form game experiences of players? What best describes an ongoing creative fascination with videogames that shapes a lifelong artistic practice? What best describes the rapidly concentering feedback loops between the ways that players articulate the intensities of gaming's ludic structures and the way that these structures are produced?

Jean Burgess assembled the notion of 'vernacular creativity' partially to 'describe and illuminate creative practices that emerge from non-elite social contexts' (2006). Burgess used Chris Atton's idea of 'reducing cultural distance' between forces of cultural production and the ways in which we live. This conception of the vernacular both forestalls a hasty critical rush to either valorisation or opprobrium; or to accusations of either voluntarism or fatalism. Analogous in a way to William James' call to question

totalising questions in the analysis of varieties of religious experience, Burgess asks: "what practices, modes of play, modes of design, modes of communication reduce cultural distance?" That is, what sort of practices can be said to work from that 'non-elite' position, or as is often the case, form broader patterns and consolidations of elite ownership.

In Australia, such an approach speaks to the retreat of large amounts of foreign capital and the concomitant rise of 'indie' production: recent history has seen a proliferation of vernaculars. However, developing concepts of the vernacular is a promising project for game studies writ large due to the potential mediations such discussions may offer between the contexts of production, situated play and wider culture. These mediations will be explored in this paper through two key examples: concept art, and fan discourses that seek to reconstruct the fragmented narratives of From Software's "Dark Souls" and "Demon's Souls".

As videogames culture undergoes the rapid change that comes with a vast number of new independent developers, more and more concept art attached to games is in the public sphere - but it is also increasingly clear that concept art is by no means a universal practice in games. Concept art, in some cases, exists in and around the game's community and underwrites something else entirely - the value of the game to its creative players, which produces new social power for the game and its developers. We might generate productive analyses from understanding concept art as a "videogame vernacular", one that is rooted of course in imaginative capacity of the viewer, but which gives us way to view and understand the work of many thousands of young artists globally, intent on developing artwork intended for the videogame production system, videogame fan culture, or - and this is crucial - a now quite unique ideation-focused game videogame concept art culture.

Vernacular production also characterises the reception of From Software's "Souls" series. Across the various titles, players have produced distinctive responses to both the narrative and the game-mechanical complexities of the series. Exchanging information and speculation through forums, chat rooms, YouTube and Twitch.tv channels - as well as by use of the games' own idiosyncratic blood stains and gnomic inscriptions - players of the "Souls" series have created vernacular modes and cultures of play. The official guide to the latest "Souls" game involved the contributions of several of the most well-known players within the community, raising questions about the co-option of such vernacular practices by established interests.

Comparing these two cases of vernacular videogame production, this paper seeks to open a discussion on the relations between production and consumption of game texts. Game studies has been content in many cases to develop an idea of fan and player art as 'paratextual' (ie, Mia Consalvo's (2007) expansion of the concept); however, as the examples of concept art and Dark Souls fandom show, videogame vernaculars can have effects on production that exceed this characterisation. Through engagement with the assemblage theory and cultural studies approaches mentioned above as well as Deleuze and Guattari's notion of a 'minor literature', an elaborated notion of the vernacular can provide a conceptual tool for exploring gaming's complex interrelations of bodies and apparatuses.

BIO

Darshana Jayemanne completed his PhD at The University of Melbourne. He has written on literature, games and media.

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