

Splendid Isolation: Optimistic Relations Towards Virtual Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper adapts feminist theory, applied psychology, and Lauren Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' to problematise the optimistic relations that players construct with videogames and VR technologies. Drawing from analyses of player experiences and videogame-adjacent media, the present work questions the pursuit of verisimilitude as a means to achieve full separation from empirical reality, and ultimately interrogates the role of videogames and play in the construction of "the good life".

Keywords

Videogames, VR, cruel optimism, magic circle, affect

INTRODUCTION

Videogames promise an untenable separation of fantasy and reality that ultimately manifests more substantially in shared belief than virtual space. Commercially-developed virtual worlds are developed from fundamentally escapist principles — a characteristic of flow, for example, is a loss of self-consciousness (Sheldon, Prentice, & Halusic, 2015) — whose endpoint is the construction of life absent other people, positions, and sensory stimuli: in other words, a locale governed by common *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990; Tyack & Wyeth, 2017). In preventing the intrusion of the other, such insular, insulating space would ostensibly limit awareness of "the emptiness of life's chatter" (Ahmed, 2010) and thereby (from this perspective) guarantee happiness.

The perceived utility of VR technology in this context — as a means to produce total isolation — is self-evident. The trajectory of VR represents an ongoing effort to literalise the magic circle (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), to actually become (and join) the "magic circle jerk" (Zimmerman, 2012), such that attention to regular life may be more or less abandoned. The production of verisimilitude is foundational to VR (Weinbaum, 1935) for this reason. However, whether VR (or its successors) ever approach sensory exactness is secondary to their recapitulation of undesirable qualities of empirical reality, which necessarily intrude in the attempt to dissolve it. The promised "freedom to avoid proximity to whatever compromises one's happiness" (Ahmed, 2010) in videogames and VR technology is unattainable.

Relations of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) result, and their persistence obstructs actual fulfilment. This paper operates from within this impasse, elaborating three themes that suggest new perspectives on the ways that videogames fit (or are made to fit) into ordinary life. The first of these relates to the content of attachments that players form with the medium and its commercial mouthpiece, discussed in the context of the Assassin's

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Creed series and its advertising materials. The second theme draws on flow theory (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) and the Zeigarnik effect (Zeigarnik, 1967) to contrast the experience of self-abeyance in play with play's requisite physical and mental exertion. Third, the threat of losing videogames as objects of optimistic attachment is examined by contrasting patterns of ongoing engagement with Diablo 3 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012) with fan reactions to the announcement of Diablo Immortal (Blizzard Entertainment, 2018). The present work therefore asks to what extent the experiences produced by VR, videogames, or play can contribute to realising a coherent version of "the good life".

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