Affect, Responsibility, and How Modes of Engagement Shape the Experience of Fiction

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ABSTRACT
The textual structures and modes of engagement that are common to videogames create a situation where it is possible to 'feel responsible' for fictional characters within the world of the game.

Keywords
Affect, cathexis, ergodic literature, modes of engagement, responsibility, structural incoherence, world-of-concern

INTRODUCTION

When considering the elements which shape our experience of fiction, the line distinguishing the text itself from the processes we go through in negotiating that text is easy to miss. Even something as simple as knowing roughly how far through a book we are as we read will influence our experience of the story.

Affect is the nebulous zone of potential emotions which makes fiction matter to us and have an impact that spills out into our lives (Kavka 2008 *x*, 30-31). Affect functions through a process of investment which is contextual and grounded in our situations and what we find individually relevant (Grossberg 1997 158, Nyre 2007 26). When we engage with fiction, we are invested in relating to the characters *as if* they were real. Affective investment is how we can feel so strongly for characters who we know are fictional.

The textual structures and modes of engagement that are common to videogames create a situation where it is possible to 'feel responsible' for fictional characters within the world of the game, together with feeling responsible for the decisions you make in that context. This is part of what makes the experience of engaging with videogames so distinctive: even if the narrative is completely linear and unchanging, the player can experience it as if it were an outgrowth of their own decisions (Veale, 2012b).

The immediacy and intensity of our responses to games is grounded in this lack of affective mediation, meaning that because we are responsible for events and decisions within the game, they are happening as much to *us* as to our characters on an experiential level (Veale, 2011).[1] The revelation in *Bioshock* means that the person playing has been

betrayed and manipulated, casting their decisions and actions in a different light. *Bastion* and *Shadow of the Colossus* can have us doubting whether we are doing the right thing, for the right reasons. *Kentucky Route Zero* makes us keenly aware of our responsibilities by highlighting that what we *don't* choose matters as much as what we select, and makes each decision keenly felt. *Gone Home* explicitly places the player in the same context as the young woman who is the protagonist: exploring an unfamiliar building during a storm and trying to figure out exactly what happened here. *Portal 2* can make us feel guilty for dooming the protagonist to an untimely death despite the fact it will occur off-screen and outside the boundaries of the game itself.

Games are not 'better,' 'more immersive' or 'more immediate' than traditional modes of storytelling, like cinema, prose, or comics. However, the modes of engagement common to videogames do produce distinctive experiences when compared other forms of mediated storytelling. Understanding how different modes of engagement shape our experiences of fiction will be helpful not just for the analysis of videogames and new media storytelling, but for understanding how we have already been telling stories for a very long time.

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ENDNOTES

1. Affective responsibility is relevant to game experiences beyond the fictional: it is a fundamental element of how and why players respond so strongly (and frequently, *badly*) to losing within online multiplayer games (Tassi, 2014). When a player knows that they played as well as they possibly could but lost decisively despite this, their affective frustration is grounded in helplessness. This is made worse if the loss is seen to be caused by mistakes made by team-mates, or glitches in the game, but players are still likely to lash out or carry their tension from the game out into the rest of their lives even if it was simply that they were outplayed by more-practiced opposition.

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Bio

Kevin Veale is a PhD graduate of the Media, Film, and Television department of the University of Auckland in New Zealand, and currently employed by the School of English and Media Studies at Massey University in Wellington, NZ. He is terrible at actually playing games, but they fascinate him. His current academic work focuses on how processes of engaging with textual structures shape the experience of storytelling in different media forms, essentially applying a form of medium theory to experiencing fiction. He has written for the *Nightmare Mode* website which critically engaged with videogames, game design, and broader social discourse around the subject, and can be found online on Twitter as @krveale.