

# Travelling with Giuliana Bruno to the Videogame

**Dr. Dan Golding**

Lecturer, Swinburne University

Hawthorn, Victoria

[dgolding@swin.edu.au](mailto:dgolding@swin.edu.au)

## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore art, film and architectural theorist Giuliana Bruno's body of work and offer some suggestions for its application to game studies. In particular, I wish to focus on two key concepts: the spatial imaginary and the surface. Both of these ideas allow the game scholar to better locate the videogame within the broader history of representational media.

## Keywords

Representational media, spatiality, surfaces, Giuliana Bruno

## INTRODUCTION

In works such as *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* (1993), *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film* (2002), and *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (2014), Giuliana Bruno traces a complicated pathway through space, media, history, and art. Her highly-reflexive writing has constructed a framework of sorts for understanding media as, apart from her many other contributions, fundamentally *placed*. Media are objects that exist, reflect on, and are reflected by their environments. Even the spaces that we exist in on a daily basis are to some extent actually constituted by their representational forms: for Bruno, the very idea of the city, is inscribed in the 'spatial imaginary', as 'a canvas to be imaged and imagined' by media (2009, 38). We see the city with our eyes, but we also see it with our media and our collective imaginations as a result. Places are not simply made out of bricks and mortar: New York exists in the opening credits to *Manhattan* (Woody Allen, 1979) or as in *True Crime: New York City* (Luxoflux, 2005), just as it does in material form on Manhattan island in 2016.

It seems fitting, then, to offer Bruno and her work as an example *par excellence* for thinking about videogames and wayfinding. Though Bruno rarely follows any research thread all the way to videogames in her own writing, her meandering approach through visual media offers a complex model for locating videogames within broader approaches to media and representation. If it is clear by this point that videogames are a spatial medium (Aarseth 2001), then it must also follow that there is something to be

learnt from how theorists of other spatial media have navigated their own forms. Exploring Bruno's body of work may be useful in this context.

Equally significant is Bruno's concept of the 'surface' across media. Though traditionally, culture has imagined surfaces to be shallow, and regarded them as interchangeable with superficiality (such as with special effects or *trompe l'oeil* illusions), Bruno sees in the surface a thickness and depth of meaning. 'In our virtual age,' writes Bruno, '[materiality] manifests itself on the surface tension of media' (2, 2014). To combine this concept with that of the videogame as a medium of Bruno's spatial imaginary is to offer another conceptual pathway beyond what is commonly critiqued by scholars as 'screen essentialism' (Kirschenbaum 2008, Sample 2013). Where some scholars and players alike see critical depth in the videogame as only achievable through the investigation of gameplay, mechanics, hardware, code, and material, borrowing Bruno's conceptual reworking of the surface illustrates the productive limitations of engaging with the representational power of the videogame as a primary site of analysis.

Accordingly, in this paper, I wish to explore Bruno's work and suggest some possibilities for its uses in game studies. In the process I hope to point to several avenues to help find videogames within broader studies of visual and representational culture and its associated theory; to wayfind, in a sense, both through game studies, broader academic theory, and within the videogame's own intimate spaces.

## BIO

Dan Golding is a Lecturer in Media and Communications at Swinburne University of Technology, and director of the Freeplay Independent Games Festival. He is also a writer, has published on videogames for *ABC Arts*, *The Guardian*, and *Crikey*, and is currently a contributing editor for *Metro Magazine*.

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