

‘Something that is ours’: VR and the values of gaming’s field

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of enthusiast media coverage of virtual reality around the time of Facebook’s acquisition of Oculus VR. Coverage of VR before and after this key event reveals struggles over the value and authenticity of platforms, games, companies, and developers. Enthusiast publications sought to establish the autonomous values of ‘gaming’s field’ around the promise and potential of virtual reality, but these efforts were undermined by Facebook’s sudden stake in VR development. A conflict over the values of gaming’s field is therefore evident in coverage of VR at this time. This paper uses this example of VR coverage to critique the role of enthusiast publications in establishing exclusionary value hierarchies.

Keywords

Virtual reality, value, authenticity, gaming’s field, Oculus VR, Facebook

INTRODUCTION

On 25 March 2014, Facebook announced that it was acquiring the virtual reality company Oculus VR for US\$2 billion. This was a major event in the recent re-emergence of VR as a consumer technology platform. As a technology that is often described a ‘new’ gaming platform, virtual reality is invested with desires, hopes, and expectations by game players, developers, journalists, and more. This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of enthusiast media coverage of VR technology in the websites Eurogamer, Polygon, Gamespot, and Gamesindustry.biz around the time of Facebook’s acquisition of Oculus. This media coverage reveals attempts by enthusiasts to establish forms of value and authenticity in ‘gaming’s field’ (Kirkpatrick 2013). At this time, VR was hailed for its potential to deliver the ‘dream’ of fully immersive gaming. The construction of this dream was realised in discourses of potential, creativity, innovation, and technological progress. VR was placed into a narrative that held immersion in game worlds to be the ultimate goal of developers and the desire of players. This dream was deemed to be achievable through the creative and innovative efforts of developers motivated by a passion for VR gaming. Together, these discourses constructed VR as a legitimised, authentic form of gaming according to the forms of value espoused by these publications.

However, the acquisition of Oculus by Facebook marks a turning point in this coverage. Prior to the acquisition, VR was seen as emerging from gaming and intended primarily for gaming. The Rift headset was seen as developed by and belonging to a game technology company, Oculus—and, as a result of the earlier Rift crowdfunding campaign, belonging to some degree to gamers themselves. With Oculus leading the way, the

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'future' of gaming was being claimed by a company that was considered credible and authentic. The acquisition of Oculus by a large social media company suddenly derailed the narrative of a small game technology company succeeding against the odds with the financial help of 'ordinary' gamers. The Rift could still be used for gaming, but it no longer belonged to gaming. Gaming was now only one use among many for this 'new social and communications platform', as Facebook described it. Following the acquisition, these publications expressed fears that Facebook's interest in VR was driven by an economic motive rather than by 'passion'. Furthermore, Facebook's history with 'casual' and 'social' games tarnished its credibility with these enthusiast publications. As a result of these concerns, scepticism about VR technology itself began to appear in the enthusiast websites.

This event therefore reveals significant, ongoing tensions in gaming's field regarding the authenticity of platforms, games, companies, and developers. This presentation locates the contestation over the 'ownership' of VR in attempts to establish autonomous forms of value in gaming's field. Enthusiast publications sought to establish the autonomy of the field around the promise and potential of immersive virtual reality, but these efforts were undermined by the sudden intrusion of Facebook into VR development. These struggles over forms of value have important consequences. Establishing the value of gaming around particular platforms and play experiences results in a value hierarchy that is always exclusionary. By upholding VR as the 'dream' and the 'future' of gaming, these enthusiast publications implicitly devalue games, platforms, and developers that do not accord with this vision of immersive gaming made possible with advanced technology.

BIO

John Pike is a PhD candidate studying the value ascribed to digital game play as a social practice. Approaching the topic from a cultural studies background, his research interests involve how these values are realised in media discourses of games and play.

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