

Affective subject formation in video games

Kate Clark

The University of Melbourne
W609 John Medley West
Grattan St, Parkville, VIC, 3052
+614 39 305 917
clark.k@unimelb.edu.au

ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the potential to experience new forms of subjective formation via video games, through their ability to influence bodily and affective experiences. In this analysis I posit that video games can be seen as a form of speculative imagination, particularly in relation to how we understand ourselves and our relationship to environments – both ‘real’ and virtual. To this end I explore a particular video game – *No Man’s Sky* – and how it has the potential to undo or alter our understanding of the modern, western, globalized subject. This paper analyzes not only the ‘exciting’ moments of bonding between avatar and player, where the player-avatar is in danger or in a moment of mutual accomplishment, but the more ‘flat’, or boring, affective responses to video games, and how these have the potential to bond the player with the game-world.

Keywords

Video games, affect, experiential reading, subjectivity, subjective formation, No Man’s Sky, environmental aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

This paper extends upon previous research on the relationship between the experience of playing video games and our understanding of the non-virtual world. As Ian Bogost suggests, video games can provide an insightful experience into the ‘real world’ through their gameplay (2008, p. 98). Using *No Man’s Sky* as an example can provide a speculative experience of how subjectivity might be reconstituted to make way for a more ethical understanding of ourselves, where we become aware that we are embedded and interconnected with the environment that surrounds us. This paper suggests that future scholarship should look at the processes in which video games act as a form of speculation about ourselves and the world around us, as video games provide a procedural representation of abstract ideas to their player through the use of symbolic, rather than verbal, frames (Bogost 2008, p. 98).

This paper also builds on Jenny Sünden’s (2012) exploration of *World of Warcraft* that deals with how bonds are created with the avatar through a playthrough experience. Sünden details her experience of blurring the boundaries between where the player ends and the avatar begins while playing *World of Warcraft* (2012), which suggests an interdependent player-avatar relationship based on an empathetic connection between the two (Wilde and Evans 2017). Affect can be described as the innate forces, or currents, that exist before our conscious thought (Gregg and Seigworth; Tomkins). Affect is also

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described by Sara Ahmed (2010) as the ‘mood’ of a room or space, that you cannot articulate, but nonetheless experience when entering a room. Clare Hemmings (2002) posits that affect is constrained by social structures, and not free-flowing. I take these understandings of affect in order to explain how the affective relations that unfold while playing *No Man’s Sky* are regulated through its programming. In this paper I discuss how video games build affective relationships that move beyond the interconnectedness of the player-avatar, instead looking at how the environment plays a large role in affective bonding between on- and off-screen more broadly. This is particularly evident in video games such as *No Man’s Sky* that emphasize environmental aesthetics, where the game-world is the most dominant character in the video game. I develop an understanding of this relationship through an experiential reading of *No Man’s Sky*, as the experience of playing *No Man’s Sky* cannot be separated from the moments of bonding I discuss in this paper. Therefore, it is necessary to look at these two aspects of video game analysis in tandem.

Experiential readings provide a way for theorists to uncover moments of unease or rupture in the playthrough experience and how these evolve over time, and to understand the shifts that the player can potentially experience throughout their time with the game. Experiential writing provides a point of access to the ruptures, and subsequent transformations, that playing *No Man’s Sky* provides, which would not be possible through mere description of the game. This is of key importance for future games research as it provides a novel way of thinking with, rather than about, video games. Thinking and theorizing about the experiences that particular video games or styles of play engender allows us to begin to think about how the experience of playing video games influences how we perceive phenomena off-screen.

There are several moments where the subjective formation of *No Man’s Sky* shifts that I will focus on in this paper. Firstly, *No Man’s Sky* starts off like many other video games, presenting the environment as resources in waiting and replicating classic progress narratives, but these ways of relating to the world of *No Man’s Sky* fall away as the player progresses through the game-world. Instead the player builds an affective relationship, regulated by the game’s code, to the environment through an experience of what Lauren Berlant terms ‘flat affect’ (2015, p. 193), or the moments of boredom and repetition (Ngai 2005, p. 261, 270) in *No Man’s Sky*. Moreover, the lack of character customization tools and coherent, linear narrative, as well as the focus on the game-world and code in the pre-release materials are all examples of moments of rupture in our taken-for-granted understanding of subjective formation, opening up the possibility to understand ourselves as inherently embedded in the world around us. These elements allow us to begin to think about how our understanding of subjectivity might be altered, potentially opening us up to ways of thinking that reflect modes of thought that are analogous to other perspectives. In the case of *No Man’s Sky*, Indigenous Australian perspectives regarding our embeddedness in nature.

BIO

Kate Clark teaches in the School of Social and Political Sciences at The University of Melbourne. Her area of interest lies in how climate change is understood and experienced through digital media with particular emphasis on new materialist perspectives, and how the experience produced by playing video games can alter our affective relationship to the world around us.

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