

Beyond Weenies: The Narrative and Ludic Potential of Immersive Multimedia Environments of the Postwar Predigital Era.

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Keywords

Environmental Storytelling, Ludo-Narrative, Expanded Cinema, Labyrinth, Cerebrum

INTRODUCTION

When Don Carson first described the potential for ‘Environmental Storytelling’ in video games, he drew comparisons to the theme park industry (Carson 2000). This connection receives regular affirmations by Disneyland imagineers (Rogers 2012, Ackley and Purvis 2013, Strong and Thacher 2019) and scholars of video game spaces (Pearce 2007, Nitsche 2008, Totten 2014). Together, they extol the ludo-narrative power of individual park attractions, curated within a landscape of monuments – called ‘Weenies’ – which incentivise and orient exploration; techniques that prove useful in signalling questlines in open-world RPGs.

The reciprocity between theme parks and video games invites us to trace their shared genealogy to a recurring tradition in art history of creating Immersive Multimedia Environments (IMEs); works that combine performance, media, and architecture to surround and suffuse audiences within alternative realities. Echoes of this impulse ring through Richard Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, the Futurist and Bauhaus’s Total Theatre, and the enthusiastic rhetoric of cyberspace at the turn of the millennium (Packer and Jordan 2001, Smith 2007). Although academics have thoroughly explored how the constitutive elements of IMEs can improve game design – including architecture (von Borries et al. 2007, Nitsche 2008, Totten 2014) – more attention could be cast upon the figure-ground effects caused by their merger.

To this task, this paper investigates the ludo-narrative environments of the Expanded Cinema movement of the 1960-70s. Although created in the same postwar and predigital context, Expanded Cinema positioned itself as a countercultural response to Disneyland, where immersive and interactive media would reveal the psychedelic potential of its audience, and cast them into global cybernetic networks (Youngblood 1970). Beyond embracing future media, this techno-transcendentalism dreamed of returning to the mythic narratives of tribal societies, and playful impulses of childhood; a similar intersection of interests currently occupied by video games. To illustrate this contention, this paper compares the narrative and ludic qualities of two projects, the Labyrinth and Cerebrum.

Representing the narrative ideal is the Labyrinth, a multiscreen presentation within a brutalist cave, designed by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) for the Montréal World Exposition, 1967 (Lovell and Brennan 2021). It corralled audiences through three chambers, each exhibiting unique figure-ground relationships between cinema and architecture, coding ‘software spaces’ that represented the different

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

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chapters of life. Here, chambers modulated between Marshall McLuhan's two models of space – visual and acoustic – to evoke the phenomenological conditions associated with meaningful and affective modes of communication (McLuhan 1961). Chapters of clarity were bound within the cone of visual distance, whilst those of terror were scattered to the unbounded sphere of acoustic immersion.

The modulation of discrete moments afforded the NFB precise control over their environmental storytelling, employing what Henry Jenkins later described as the 'evocative' and 'enacted' potential of video game spaces (Jenkins 2007). However, this came at the expense of audience agency. In game design, unicursal labyrinths provide less player options than mazes or rhizomes (Fernández-Vara 2007), but are still used in moments that demand narrative impact over ludic interaction (Upton 2015). In particular, by modulating clear spatial motifs against a linear sequence, the Labyrinth charts the narrative arc of human life in a manner similar to *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), whilst sharing the same fearful formula of confined and crooked architectures used by horror games like *PT* (Kojima Productions 2014).

Providing a greater ludic experience was Cerebrum, a hybrid of nightclub and gallery, designed by Ruffin Associates Absolutely Unlimited Ltd, in 1968 (Lovell 2021). Here, 'guests' passed through a derelict Manhattan storefront and anteroom to reach a white hall and don white robes. Upon these blank canvases, the club 'guides' released waves of media and performance art, aimed at all five senses. Cinematic projections, figurative and abstract, coloured the walls. Some sounds filled the hall, whilst others were channelled to a matrix of headphones. Guides delivered scents, tastes, and touch to their guests. All this indulged the countercultural obsessions with the synaesthesia and kinaesthesia evoked by psychedelic and playful experiences. With analogue methods, guests ventured on a three-hour journey across multiple augmented realities.

These served as sites for 'paidia' (free play), built on 'ilinx' (sensory manipulation) and 'mimicry' (roleplaying), which Roger Caillois described as vehicles for transcending the alienating effects of normative sensual and social existence (Caillois 1962). To this task, Cerebrum sought to invent a non-verbal mode of communication, reliant on the reciprocity between embodied and environmental gestures; a strategy later adopted by games like *Journey* (Thegamecompany 2012), *Monument Valley* (UsTwo 2014), and *The Gardens Between* (The Voxel Agents 2018). However, unlike these linear games, Cerebrum provided a sandbox of continuous and contingent possibilities, where 'emergent' narratives depended on the playful interactions between guides and guests (Jenkins 2007).

Beyond providing new precedents to the established discourse of environmental storytelling, this paper demonstrates the value of analysing other iterations of IMEs – and their constituent elements – through concepts developed by video game scholarship.

BIO

Dr Jonathan Lovell is an architectural historian whose research explores architecture's potential as a medium of communication. He has recently completed a PhD at the University of Melbourne, which investigated how the artists involved with the Expanded Cinema movement of the 1960-70s used the combined force of media, performance, and architecture to evoke the phenomenological conditions associated with transcendental experiences. He is currently researching how postmodern architecture is represented within contemporary digital subcultures, and how games can serve as pedagogical and participatory tools for designing the built environment.

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