

Synthesising the Real: How Players Navigate The Representation of Reality in Video Games

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Keywords

realism, reality, representation, video games, syntheses, Deleuze & Guattari

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there have been many instances of players vocally rejecting video games they believe do not ‘realistically’ depict or represent the world. Prominent examples include *Battlefield V*, in which a vocal number of players expressed their outrage over the presence of female soldiers in a World War II setting (Plunkett 2018). To these players, the presence of women in the game detracted from the realistic representation of the historical context, prompting the players to review bomb the game on various platforms. Similarly, when *The Last of Us: Part II* was released players responded to the depiction of a muscular woman as (supposedly) unrealistic given the scarcity of food resources expected in a post-apocalyptic setting (Tomkinson 2023). These responses appear to have a political undertone, as certain depictions are problematised as unrealistic while others – possessing a backpack that has a near-unlimited storage capacity, for example, are not.

Players have certain expectations concerning video games which are, in part, influenced by frequent play (Heeter and Winn 2009, 96). Over time players develop somatic and analytic attunements that “shape their expectations and understandings of how to play” (Ash and Mukherjee 2013). Indeed, player expectations have risen over time. According to Consalvo and Paul (2019, 68), these expectations include developer pedigree (what games are to be expected from a certain developer); game length (longer is better); platform (PC is often desirable as “a richer, more sophisticated, and graphically superior product”); visual aesthetics (the more

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

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impressive the better); social richness (good games provide space to players to do things outside of the game); perceived difficulty (difficulty, of the right kind, is prized). While previous research has examined the expectations of players concerning the above-mentioned themes, as well as game mechanics, control mapping, and rules of engagement, comparatively little scholarship has addressed how and why players accept or reject certain elements of games based on their *realism*. In this paper, we seek to understand what prompts players' acceptance or rejection of representations of reality, or reimagined representations of the world. We consider why players are willing to suspend their disbelief about some aspects of a game, but not others, regardless of whether the representations map onto reality accurately.

Using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the syntheses, we consider how players come to view, interpret, and understand the world. The passive syntheses are the three ways that reality is produced. Each synthesis has a 'legitimate' form, which is more flexible, open, and immanent, and an 'illegitimate' form, which is more restrictive, reductive, and transcendental. The connective synthesis of production refers to what happens when one thing encounters another. In its legitimate form, it is "partial and nonspecific", while in its illegitimate form it is "global and specific" (Deleuze and Guattari 2000, 70). The disjunctive synthesis of recording refers to what happens when a connection is made, and an imprint or memory is left behind. In its legitimate form it is "affirmative, nonrestrictive, inclusive", while its illegitimate form is "exclusive or restrictive" (2000, 76). Finally, the conjunctive synthesis of production refers to the pre-existing thing that is thought to exist prior to the other two syntheses. In its legitimate form, it is "nomadic and polyvocal", while in its illegitimate form, it is "segregative and biunivocal" (2000, 105). The syntheses are unconscious, meaning they are always at work, regardless of our awareness of them.

The syntheses help us understand how both their legitimate and illegitimate forms shape the way we perceive the world. When we encounter something (connective synthesis) we engage with it; then we form a memory of that connection; and finally, we refer back to that 'prior knowledge', some kind of 'organising principle', when assessing further connections. So, when players connect with a game or a specific game character, they then form a memory of it, relating it back to an organising principle. That is, depending on whether the legitimate or illegitimate forms of the syntheses are at work, they are more or less likely to accept or reject a given representation of reality. In this conference paper, we present our interpretation of the synthesis for the purpose of assessing attitudes towards realism in video games, and explore examples including *Battlefield V*.

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BIO

Dr Sian Tomkinson is a media and communications scholar who specialises in video games, gender, and Deleuzoguattarian philosophy. Her core research focus revolves around player engagement with video games, meaning-making, and communities of play. Sian's work has been published in *Games and Culture*, *Continuum*, and *gamevironments*, among others. She co-hosts a game studies podcast called *Meaningful Play*.

Dr Benn van den Ende works across the humanities and social science departments at various universities in Western Australia. His research examines the relationship between technology and subjectivity, with a focus on how digital technologies shape our sense of self and how individuals and groups are made productive through social technologies. Benn's broad interests include the history and philosophy of technology, science and technology studies, and political and social theory.