

Nothing Beyond the Sea: Facing the Videogame Void

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INTRODUCTION

Environments made in 3D engines straddle an 'out of bounds' or void space that is an unavoidable byproduct of Cartesian coordinates. This void is sublime in Lyotard's (1991) sense: it is a 'here' devoid of representation (84), a 'there is' saturated in unactualised potential (88), here, code. It is the presence of nothing, and it points to the fact that there could be something more, but there isn't. In this paper we investigate the way that our relationship to the computational void is mediated by the finitude of invisible walls in videogames. We argue that players desire the infinity of the void, and that this desire is stoked through its being veiled rather than in attempts to fill or represent it.

What we refer to as 'invisible walls' are decorated façades delimiting player movement; our relationship to these walls is a matter of aesthetics. Less an investigation into artistic categories, aesthetics probes the way subjects are formed by their milieu, and how artistic texts are used to make sense of subjective finitude (Ashfield and de Bolla 1996; Shinkle 2012). Twenty-first century aesthetics concerns subjects faced with an industrial drive to computational infinity (Gilbert-Rolfe, 112), and map more-than-human entanglements (Lee-Morrison 2023; May and Wilde 2024). Recent attempts to domesticate the void have resulted in the elimination of human desire and subsequent finitisation of the infinite, as Paolo Ruffino (2024) discovers in *No Man's Sky*'s (Hello Games 2016) inhuman aesthetics. Videogames announcing their finitude to the human subject inaugurate a very different relationship to the void. Alfie Bown (2017) writes that players inhabit virtual worlds aware that "there is nothing beyond the sea" while still yet believing in the beyond (107), and Brendan Keogh (2018) argues in actively making sense of games' spatial incongruities "The player makes the world" (53). We ask how spatial discontinuity implicates us in the imaginative generation of the world, and the role of the finite object in preserving the void's sense of the infinite.

We turn to art criticism and Lacanian game studies to investigate this, focussing on the invisible walls of 3D platformer compilations *Spyro Reignited Trilogy* (Toys for Bob, 2018) and *Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy* (Vicarious Visions, 2017. Michael

Fried (1990) writes that we become aware of looking at a painting when two-dimensional and illusionistic space are made to coincide (11). These “noncommunicating axes” (11) produce “a direct address to the beholder” called “facingness,” that at once beckons and rebukes us (1996, 196). In the way of psychoanalysis, Benjamin Nicoll (2022) argues that player desire produces a “gaze” in the visual field of the game, which is an absence we consciously intend to domesticate or overcome through play, and unconsciously hope to fail at (545). Nicoll proposes that when a text reveals its internal lack, it looks back at us (545), making us aware that we’re “culpable” in the play of desire (547). Finally T.J. Clark (2018) argues that two-dimensional planes in illusionistic space at once reveal the finitude of the picture plane, and indicate the presence of the unrepresentable in what’s before us (55).

The synthesis of art criticism and psychoanalysis allows us to see how the subject is implicated in the construction of gamespace, make-believing spatial extension through planar incongruity. When the internal lack of the text is disclosed (here the unassailable void), the subject becomes aware of their own lack, and the inability of the text to absolve them of it. We find here a model of desire that mirrors the computational void. Mari Ruti (2012) claims what we desire is always *beyond* the object, and that all desire is directed at the sublime Thing: an imaginary lost object that can only be represented through emptiness (129). It’s “the abyssal void of subjectivity itself” (Nicoll, 536), infinite as its computational counterpart, exceeding every attempt to fill it. We can see then how invisible walls in their very decoration foster rather than extinguish desire, and point us to an infinite ‘beyond the sea’ that is paradoxically already here.

An aesthetics of the void centres on the appreciation of finitude. The appearance of decorated walls in videogames induces a theatrical rendering of space, in which the void remains a site of desire, and the finitude of the here-and-now the means by which we must access it. These walls mediate our relationship to computational infinity by veiling it, giving us parts to play in a ruse through which we become active participants in the construction of a world as lacking as we are. Demand for bigger videogames dictates we build computers capable of programming into and annexing the void, but this is built on an impossibility that defers joy and the void’s horizon. The pleasure of videogames lies not in expansion, but in the finitude that stokes desire for that which is beyond the sea.

BIO

Max Coombes, PhD, is a writer and illustrator working at the University of Auckland, Waipapa Taumata Rau, New Zealand. His research is concerned with embodiment and the *unheimlich*, and the uncanny textuality of videogames.

Gabriella Stead is a collections Registrar at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki. Her Masters thesis, *Environmental Ectoplasm; manifesting the damp in Aotearoa landscape photography*, investigated veils, ghosts, and non-human agency in the construction of the photographic image.

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