Virtual Bliss, Analog Horrors: reading the imperfect digital image in film and the video game
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One challenge for the serious study of video games has been the categorization of the medium as a locus of meaning. Steven E. Jones (2008:2) for instance discovers that the aspect of the video game that separates it from film, from literature, from painting, and so on, namely its interactive format, creates problems of attributing meaning that may more unproblematically be applied to media that do not have this level of unpredictability. Early video game studies, as pointed out by Jones, sought to discuss the idea of games as games, in order to prioritize the medium's uniqueness ahead of discourses that open up the debates that offer generalized emphases on the "cultural significance" of the video game. As game studies has developed through the twenty-first century, the interactive aspects of the video game have been accepted as 'read,' so that greater academic attention has been devoted to measuring the maturation of the medium into an art form, so that, in Jones words, Mario may be read as The Hero With A Thousand Faces (2).

In this scholastic environment, debates over the importance of narrative have emerged with regard to video games. The extremes of the arguments, that story should have no part in the video game (Eskelinen, 2001; Jones, 6) or that video games are inherently narratological artefacts (Mateas and Stern, 2005) has, as pointed out by Gonzalo Frasca, become "tiresome" (2003, in Jones, 2008: 5). Nonetheless there is an intriguing correlation between the ludology versus narratology debate and the state of cinema in the digital age.

Cinema in its most popular form has become a narrative medium, but as Sean Cubitt reminds us, this need not have been the case. "It is important to remember that narrative is neither primary nor necessary to cinema," he writes (2004: 38). Furthermore Kristen Daly reminds us that for Gilles Deleuze, narrative "was the direction that cinema took in order to become a language, but that other directions were possible" (2010: 83; also Deleuze, 1989: 25). As such observations leak into our understanding of cinema in the digital age, the question of narrative becomes foregrounded so that certain tendencies of storytelling are discovered as comparable to the effects of living under the aegis of computer technology. Thus Lev Manovich talks of film in terms of "database logic" (2001) and Thomas Elsaesser of "mind-game films" (2009). The suggestion here, perhaps, is that the mediated, pleasurable

experience of engendering meaning through movie-watching has become fragmented, demonstrated both in the structure of films that reverse or jumble chronology such as *Memento* (2000) or *Syriana* (2005) or the availability of the DVD format, which passes agency from exhibitor to viewer by offering a plethora of features. These range from being able to select chapters, soundtracks or special features at the click of a button (as discussed by Brereton, 2011). In short, film has become an interactive experience, enabling the viewer to become, in the words of Daly, a "viewser" (2010).

In this cultural environment of interaction with the media text, it is tempting to synchronise the 'viewser' and the gamer into one entity. As we construct texts from the material presented to us, we are also, it is assumed, creating meanings, creating narratives. However, as we explore the aesthetic qualities of the film and the video game from our perspective as spectators, players, academics and consumers in our digital society, cracks begin to emerge between the meaningful characteristics of the digital, filmed image from the digital, game image. These cracks emerge at the level of aesthetic competence. This is particularly evident when we view each medium's construction of special effects in their diegetic worlds.

In film, digital special effects offer a synthesis between the 'real,' analog world and those aspects designed via a computer program. To cite just one example of this, take the Na'vi in *Avatar* (2009), Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* (2002, 2003); here is the development of the "synthespian" (North, 2008), a fusion of digital technology and actor. We cannot precisely detect where the enhancement of one and the performance of the other begins or ends, just as we cannot exactly fathom where the cuts occur in a fast-paced sequence from *The War of the Worlds* (2004) wherein the camera appears to duck in and out of traffic as it tracks the trajectory of a speeding car (discussed by Connelly, 2011). Video games, meanwhile, are entirely constructed as digital programs, so that not only is there little if any synthesis between the video game image and a 'photographed' reality, but the reality games purport to emulate are far inferior to the competency of the effects designed for *Avatar*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and so on. The video game, then, may be seen entirely as a procession of special effects, from the character modelling to the landscapes and even the movements of the 'camera.'

Clearly, the reduction in the possibilities for verisimilitude in video games when compared to film is linked to the realisation of 'actual' interactivity, whereby we can control certain actions onscreen via our own input of commands, versus a more cerebral concept of user

agency, with less direct control. In other words, we might piece together the events in a "mind-game" film, or select to view only certain of a film's chapters, according to our own preferences. However, we do not actually impose upon the events of the story as they presented to us, we cannot 'save' a character who is fated to die, nor can we kill a character because we wish it. Interactivity in the video game as compared to film is entirely relative.

More interesting than the relative competence of film's 'smooth' digital image and the video game's less precise rendering of images, at least for me, is what the latter's 'break' from verisimilitude means at the level of meaning-construction. The medium's inherent imperfections, coupled with the possibilities engendered by user agency offers a potential for the game to be amended in ways that both goes against the narrative grain and reveals the cracks in the aesthetic; the very cracks the producers, designers and coders of the game text attempt to conceal. These can be discovered by accident or on purpose, such as the glitch of the ghost island in *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) and end up as machinima videos on YouTube;[1] or break the game entirely, such as a save game bug in *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010) that disables the opportunity to proceed further so that the game is essentially 'broken.'

A way of conceptualizing these tendencies in video games is to broaden the definition of 'digital' itself. According to Cubitt, the understanding of the word 'digital' (that is, as we have discussed the term thus far) as a rendering of the aesthetic dimensions of the filmed image through computer-led manipulation is informed by a "utopian" reading (2004: 206). To use Cubitt's own example, the opening "panorama of Egypt" in *The Mummy* (1999) is informed by a sense of order: the crowd in this sequence has been realised as a virtual entity. Choreographed by computer programming, there is no "randomness"; no chance, no "chaos" (251, 252).

Here, the digital manipulation of the filmed image is controlled, so that there is an attempted "assimilation" of the spectator with the world of the film. Digital, then, is a synonym for possibility of aesthetic perfection, whether this is actualized or not. However, 'digital' may in an older form be understood, more generally, as a way of describing language. In particular it can be applied to semiology, the science of signs, conceived by Ferdinand de Saussure (2009 [1916]) and structured around the relationship between, say, a written text and its interpretation. In written and spoken language especially, this relationship is seen to

be arbitrary, based on the conventions of the culture within which we evolve as sociological groups.

In its definition in the age of the computer, digital can be described as arbitrary in its definition in semiology as the image we see has no aesthetic correlation with the programmer's language of ones and zeros used to design that image. Nonetheless this 'hidden code' is invisible to our eyes as what we see is resolutely perceived as being 'realistic': the Na'vi, Gollum or an Egyptian crowd scene. The perceived reality of the digital image cannot, therefore, adequately be described in terms of the arbitrariness of written and spoken language, but by its opposite, as an analog of creatures or scenes that, if they were to exist in the real world, would absolutely 'look like this.'

Defined in terms of semiological readings of the image then, the words 'digital' and 'analog' can be seen to be reversed, so that the filmed, digital image is in fact an analogical representation of things in the same way the pre-digital image may be perceived as identical to its real-life counterpart. As Christian Metz has it, a filmed dog "is like a dog" (1974: 109). Similarly, a filmed Na'vi is like a real Na'vi, if it were to exist outside the diegesis of the cinematic frame (also Furze and Brereton, 2011).

The definition of digital as understood to describe language, therefore, operates in an opposite way. As Rabate writes, this semiological reading of the word 'digital' proposes a condition of the text that "never adheres to reality; its arbitrary nature introduces a differential space" (1997: 1). This differential space, I argue here, very much exists in the machinima of the video game. In other words, the imperfections of the video game image that emerge through the process of interaction have an arbitrary quality that breaks the smooth logic of computer-generated perfection. In some cases, of course, these glitches can be ignored as part of the immersive experience of playing. However, the examples I choose to highlight here are, I feel, indicative of ways in which the language-oriented definition of 'digital' problematizes and resists an interpretive reading of the image as a holistic, complete and meaningful entity.

In re-defining the digital in this way, I have chosen two very different texts: one a game, one a film. The game is 2009's *The Path*, made by the small, independent production company Tale of Tales, which describes it as "a short horror game inspired by older versions of Little Red Riding Hood, set in modern day" (Tale of Tales, 2009). The film, first released in 1982, is David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. The film's distorted, refracted version of reality is

filtered through the perceptions of the protagonist, Max Renn, a cable TV producer exposed to a pirate satellite signal that may or may not be causing him to hallucinate.

The apparent randomness of these selected films of course bespeaks the arbitrariness of the digital/semiological image I find in their aesthetics. However, certain tentative connections can be made between these two examples at the level of meaning. Hence *The Path*'s gameplay and story is rooted in folkloric traditions fictionalized as film, television, literature and so forth and consequently analyzed on many cultural levels. *Videodrome*, too, has undergone intense academic scrutiny, not least because – as Ernest Mathijs has it – "Every motif and metaphor explored in any Cronenberg film originates or resonates in this film" (2008: 105). In both these cultural artefacts, we might say, the locus of meaning has been closed off. They can, in short, be 'understood.' My main focus here, however, is to indicate the essential facet of each of these examples that I would like to discuss. This is that *The Path* is a computer-designed product that, as we shall see, contains moments of imperfection that break the illusion of verisimilitude. Meanwhile the special effects in *Videodrome*, of which there are many, are created in an analog era before the possibilities opened up by computer generated imaging. In both cases, as I will argue, there are elements of the image that do not make sense in the creation of meaning in the larger text. Let us begin with *Videodrome*.

Six consecutive shots from *Videodrome* show the work of the analog special effect in action. Essentially a series of close-ups, the sequence records a moment in which Max Renn observes his hand fusing with the gun it is holding, a tragic synthesis of flesh and technology that demonstrates Renn's penetration of a "transformed realm of 'human reality'" (Beard, 2005: 132). The sequence of shots evidences analog cinema's adeptness at employing sleight of hand to create its special effects: the transition from Renn actor James Woods' real hand to a prosthetic hand, to a prosthetic hand equipped with wires that worm into the skin, to a final fusion of actor and prosthetics. The sequence invokes the thrill of a "conjuring show" (Pohl and Pohl, 1981, in Cubitt, 2004: 260) with each transition occurring on either side of a cut-away that details Renn's reaction, including the final shot of the sequence, which begins on a close-up of Renn's face in profile, in pain but transfixed by what is being created here. The camera pans to follow his gaze, settling on the effect's completion: the casting of the human and the machine in one image. Cronenberg says in his director's commentary on this series of shots (on the Criterion DVD), which is "basically puppetry", that, because they were not

filmed with CGI, there is a "lack of slickness. But there is a certain palpable quality to it: it's sculptural, it's physical, you could feel it; it was really there [...] It has weight."[2] The lack of slickness communicates through an inevitable reliance on editing to allow the effect to develop as much as the elastic texture of the prosthetic flesh and the sponginess of the cylindrical wires as Woods flexes his glued fingers against the gun butt in the final shot. The cut from make-up effect to reaction shot betrays this crude mechanism at work: the necessity of the cut offers no flexibility for a filmmaker who refuses to escape the diegesis; he must observe the clichés of genre through the limitations of the reaction shot.[3]

However, within this sequence two extraordinary, but interrelated details arise. The first is the uncertainty of point of view. A close up of Renn's face shows him watching the transformation of hand and gun taking place, his eyes set on discovering what happens next. The effect itself though is not viewed as a point of view from Renn's perspective; rather, it occurs as a demonstration of how a special make-up effect moves: a laboratory of synthetic flesh, wire and metal. As such the close-ups of Renn do not command empathy: the viewer simply watches as Renn watches. The prosthetic effect, meanwhile, as Cronenberg notes, is hardly slick, but it is palpable. There is then a tension between the limitations of the special effect and what it embodies; the viewer's reaction to a cosmetic ontology consequently fluctuating between awareness of a trick that exposes itself and the horror it signifies. This destabilization of the image can be emblematic of the horror film at its most sophisticated.

This sequence from *Videodrome* thus withdraws as much as it performs, belying the expected role of the special effect as a performative and theatrical aspect of cinema. How far one may regard this as unusual can be revealed in comparing the analog effect here to Elsaesser and Buckland's reading of the digital effects in Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *The Lost World* (1997), which observes that digital techniques can not only create believable structures with which analogue elements are able to interact, but can also emulate such effects as point-of-view, camera movement and motion blur to "strengthen[...] the illusion that the humans and dinosaurs occupy the same diegesis" (Elsaesser and Buckland, 2002: 215): "With the aid of digital technology, film-makers can fabricate a believable photo-realistic effect without being limited to the physical imprints left by profilmic events" (218).

Videodrome's montage of face(s) and hand(s) occupy the same location (the peeling stone wall at the back of the mise-en-scene is the same in each shot) but its meaning (change) is undone by the plurality of faces and hands chosen to represent a singularity. When

Cronenberg says of the effect, "there is a certain palpable quality to it: it's sculptural, it's physical, you could feel it; it was really there; it has weight," the additional knowledge that these aesthetic elements are frankly synthetic in their appearance can have a tendency to undo the illusion of sense and meaning in the context of a narrative film.

This leads us to *The Path*. As with *Videodrome*, this short horror game is ostensibly driven by narrative, alongside memories of the meanings inherent in the Little Red Riding Hood story. Nonetheless, as with *Videodrome*, the aesthetic succeeds in problematizing the relationship between image and story.

Yet as is immediately apparent from the moment the game starts, the producers are intent on immersing the player in the folkloric experience. This is clear from the opening graphic: a tableau vivant of the six characters the player will guide around the world; girls from the age of nine to nineteen (according to the Tale of Tales website, 2009) who connote a sisterly bond by their proximity and the richness of red and black in their clothes, even as they are each determined to express individual styles. In this opening 'menu', each of the girls is repetitively doing something (reading, stroking a docile rabbit), but the atmosphere of the *mise-en-scene* is of ennui, not engagement with a task. As the player moves the mouse cursor – shaped as a wicker basket – around the room, hovering it over any of the girls will trigger that girl's interest: she will look up, an action simultaneously accompanied by a close-up of her face, superimposed but transparent, covering a large portion of the screen. The face, however, is a blank: it is not an expression that can be read. Clicking the mouse button over the image of the girl will cause her to shift her body as if ready to leave, still looking 'out' at the player. The screen fades to black and the game begins.

Developer Tale of Tales writes of *The Path*'s importance as a narrative experience, one whose meanings are glimpsed through the interactions chosen by the player. Instructions, indeed, are minimal: after the initial decision is made (that is, of which girl to 'play') the black screen fades in to a travelling shot, following a concrete road viewed from above. Trees line each side of the road, which abruptly stops, becoming a dirt track: the path. At this border between the urban and rural stands the girl, and as the view settles behind the character, the game's only instructions appear on the screen and flower into organic shapes: 'Go to Grandmother's House and Stay on the Path'. Following these instructions creates an uneventful experience: the path is straight and leads directly to Grandmother's picket fence,

the cottage within. The player is told he has failed and both he and the character he has chosen are returned to the menu. Implicitly, one is encouraged to disbelieve the instructions and 'stray from the path', exploring the expansive forest on either side. In order to 'win' the game, it transpires, one must lead each girl through the trees in order to find the wolf, which – as evidenced in psychological readings of the original fable – can be read as a manifestation of fear and desire.

There is clearly much in this scenario that has potential to unnerve the player; particularly in its explicit reference to a folkloric tradition that has undergone rigorous "psychoanalytical interpretation": the "redness" of the hood "reflecting a construction of the female body as blood-filled container leaking at regular intervals"(Pettitt, 2009: 114) and the inclusion of the wolf – a predatory male – from whose violent relationship with the girl is built a "story of gendered violence, of sexual violation with a specific history in which certain elements have been emphasized to fit particular conceptualizations of gender and sexuality [...] Little Red Riding Hood, like constructions of rape victims in contemporary discourses of law and media, was in unauthorised territory, the forest rather than the home, talking in a free and uninhibited way to a male who wasn't her husband or father. In popular parlance, Little Red 'asked for it'" (Marshall, 2004: 266).

The re-imagining of Little Red Riding Hood as a video game character in *The Path* occurs at the intersection of various levels of graphical competence and Tale of Tales' aspiration to evoke older versions of the story.

To take this second point first, as Pettitt witnesses, the story of Little Red Riding Hood goes through profound and subtle changes "as it modulates from oral tradition to printed fairy tale" (Pettitt, 2009: 104). In the Grimm brothers' version, "the wolf has respectively 'swallowed' (*verschluckte*) and 'gulped down' (*verschlang*) his victims, rather than eating and perhaps chewing them, as may be implied by the *manger* of the French versions where the girl is killed." The possibility of rescue – the hunter cutting the victims out of the wolf's belly – is therefore made 'possible' within the fabulist logic of the fairy tale in the German version (118). *The Path* navigates these indeterminacies through the implementation of six different but connected Red Riding Hoods, each with her own wolf; whose wicked intent is never made explicit.

Such ambiguities of narrative are achieved extensively through the characters' journey through the digital environment: as each Red Riding Hood encounters her wolf (who, it is worth pointing out, is not always male nor characteristically 'vulpine') there is certainly a suggestion that a violent *denouement* is to come, but as player control is relinquished (and in a manoeuvre borrowed from cinema) the tableau of 'wolf' and 'victim' dwindles in size, the virtual camera pulling back, framing the two in an extreme long shot, until the wood engulfs them. The image then fades to black. The subsequent fade-in reveals Red Riding Hood prone on the path. Player input is returned, but in lifting the character to her feet, one notices how wretched she has become: she walks sluggishly, her body moving limply towards Grandmother's House. This image is undoubtedly unnerving; an effect achieved through the connotations of what could possibly have happened during the fade-out, and in the uncertainty of the answer.

Connotations, however, appear *within* the text; frightening propositions – his hand is fusing with a gun; she has been violated – that are nonetheless part of the language of the text. The possibility of arbitrariness in *The Path* – as it appears in *Videodrome* – occurs as a rift in the text. Thus in *The Path* it is not a thing: not the wolf, nor even the broken body of the child, but in a conglomeration of elements; it is the collision of Red Riding Hood with a tree that appears to eat/swallow her – echoing Pettitt's observation about the elusiveness of a correct, unifying translation; it is the wood that has no specific geography through which one can orientate oneself – once the character wanders from the path, there is no way back to it as every direction one walks eventually leads to the wolf, thereby constructing a bond between player and character, the former feeling distaste over leading the latter to her ruin, no matter how prescribed. Then there is Red Riding Hood herself: her blankness of character instils a sense of unease: she has no history, a fact drawn out by her physical depiction, illustrated by a minimal iconography of colour and shape. Thus at the close of each girl's narrative, the twist of her body suggests, but does not explicate the nature of the violence: as with *Videodrome*'s hand-gun transformation, what is *not* explicitly written into the body of the text cannot be readily articulated, not even through the visual language of the moving image.

The analog-era *Videodrome* and the digital-era *The Path* co-exist then at one crucial point. Within these explicit, loaded narratives there are aesthetic elements that resist interpretation. Video game studies have navigated the territory between the analysis of gameplay and the importance of narrative, often deciding to prioritize one over the other. What has been

suggested here is that there are other considerations – what we might call a mode of resistance – that emerges from the interdependence of these two competing aspects of the video game. Moreover, by acknowledging the existence of diegetic elements that resist interpretation within the game, there is the potential to find other ways of interacting with the analog image of cinema: not simply as an aesthetic or narrative device, but as something that exists outside of such sense-making constructs. Hence, by viewing both the video game and the cinematic image as digital in the way that language is digital, there is the possibility of liberating that image. The acknowledgement of a meaningless image offers a release from the orderly representation of CGI, but also proposes a frightening proposition: that sometimes there are aspects of otherwise intelligible images that have no analog with the supposed true nature of a world of objects; even if – or perhaps because – this world emerges as a fabrication of writers, technicians and directors; or, indeed, processed by a computer's hard drive.

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[1] I am grateful to the Irish-based video game sound designer Rob Marshall, for pointing out the importance of machinima videos for the YouTube audience

[2] The companion piece to *Videodrome* is possibly Cronenberg's later film, *eXistenZ* (1999) which also details the exposure to the stimuli of electronic media that engenders bodily transformation and confusion over what is real. Here, the locus of exposure occurs not through connection with the analogue television signal, but in the interactive realm of the video game. Interestingly, despite the virtual characteristics of the world into

which the characters enter, the world itself remains entirely physical. In fact the film's striking palette of colours, walls with vivid islands of peeling paint evokes digitality no more than any other of Cronenberg's films that explore altered states. Indeed, the production design for *eXistenZ* is overseen by long-time Cronenberg collaborator Carol Spier, whose unearthly, submarine colours dominate *Dead Ringers* (1988)

[3] The limited system through which physical transformation is expressed using special effects in an analogue medium of course necessitates the cliché. It itself becomes a perverse parody of the shot-reverse-shot, often concerning two characters: the first being the one who is transformed, and the second a feminized (if not always feminine) onlooker who may scream in horror at the changes taking place before his or her eyes. In this sense the transformations that take place in much of Cronenberg's work are explicitly different, containing as they do both subject and onlooker within the same body, if not the same frame.