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Hybrid Moments: Using Ludonarrative Dissonance for Political Critique

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Abstract

Game criticism, from a historic perspective, traditionally follows an objectively oriented approach. But in recent years a new tide of personally oriented writing has been emerging in online spaces alongside more traditional publishing models. Game scholars, motivated by the large audiences that online pieces can attract, are not only participating in this scene, but also promoting it as the primary source for progressive criticism. While such pronouncements are correct in many cases, the video game blogosphere is also not immune from the cultural privileging of "gamers," a problem that has been identified by feminist and critical theoretical approaches to the study of gaming culture (Kubic, 2012; Shaw, 2012, 2013; Consalvo, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). To better illustrate the aforementioned point, this article will both examine and comment on the recent online debate that arose over use of the term "ludonarrative dissonance" (Hawking, 2007), a critical concept referring to formal, thematic, and ideological disconnects between ludic and narrative meaning. It will begin by contextualizing the ludonarrative dissonance debate within a brief history of methodological approaches to game criticism. The focus will then shift to discussion of the term itself, and how it provides a useful critical framing by treating simulation and representation as interacting components with the capacity to coincide and contradict. Ludonarrative dissonance, understood as a formal problem, has entered the vocabulary of many critics, but the term is also dismissed for a variety of reasons, including the insistence that experienced gamers learn to ignore inconsistencies between story and design (Yang, 2013). Rejecting this argument, this article concludes by drawing upon assemblage approaches to play (Taylor, 2009; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009; Parikka, 2010) to argue that ludonarrative dissonance does exist and that the concept provides a useful starting point for examining the political tensions implicit in many games—tensions that are often acknowledged but frequently downplayed in existing formal and political approaches to criticism. The analysis of ludonarrative dissonance, from this perspective, not only pushes criticism beyond the aesthetic appraisals gamers, it can also provide insight into the nuances of games that reinforce problematic political discourses while simultaneously simulating potential systematic alternatives to neoliberal corporate capitalism.

Author Keywords

Near the beginning of *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, San Diego, 2010), protagonist John Marston awakens to find himself in unfamiliar surroundings after being shot by his former

partner's gang. But fortunately for him, the MacFarlane's stumbled across his unconscious body and paid a doctor to treat his wounds. Marston is eager to repay the fifteen dollar debt, so he promises to do work around the MacFarlane's ranch. However, when the cut-scene ends and game-play begins, the player has no debt: ranch work is rewarded with in-game capital, including upgrades and access to previously unexplored locations.

Following Hawking's (2007) widely read blog post, discrepancies like the one mentioned above are commonly referred to as ludonarrative dissonances, and they are often thought to plague story driven games. But criticism, until very recently, has traditionally ignored such discrepancies by choosing to focus on representation or gameplay. Expanding on Hawking's (2007) use of the concept, this article will draw on assemblage theory (Delanda, 2006; Deleuze & Guattari, 2009) to describe ludonarrative dissonance as a real phenomenon that contextually emerges from particular player-game relationships. A digital game's capacity to create political meaning, within this framework, cannot be reduced to a discussion of representation or simulation because dissonance between both components can also be understood as a real relation. By contextualizing ludonarrative dissonance within a political context, this article also goes beyond a common critical approach to the concept—which views it as a formal flaw that design need to overcome—to demonstrate how the term can serve as a useful starting point for examining political tensions. Investigating ludonarrative dissonance, from this perspective, not only expands the spectrum of game criticism beyond the critical appraisals of gamers, it also provides a useful starting point for examining the discrepancies emerging from games that reinforce problematic political discourses while simultaneously simulating potential systematic alternatives.

A lack of Serious Criticism?

Before getting into the political nuances of ludonarrative dissonance and debate over the use of the term, it is necessary to begin with an overview of methodological approaches to digital game criticism. Doing so demonstrates how the concept bridges a recurring theoretical divide amongst scholars and critics existing between those who privilege the political analysis of representation and those who prefer to focus on the primacy of gameplay. Going all the way back to Kunkel and Laney's Arcade Alley column, which first appeared in *Video Magazine* in 1978, commercial criticism has focused on playability. Conversely, the early academic analysis of game content focused on the study of representation. According to Consalvo (2013), early content study was dominated by the analysis of gender stereotypes with research taking a critical and occasionally nuanced approach (p. 408-408). Notable early works include Provenzo's *Video Kids: Making sense of Nintendo* (1991), and Kinder's *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games* (1991). Both authors identified a pattern of gender stereotypes that persisted in mainstream games, and subsequent researchers made similar findings. Researchers like Deitz (1998) identified a lack of non-sexualized female representation in mainstream digital games, a pattern that subsequent studies continue to confirm[i].

While the study mentioned above is quantitative in nature, the in-depth analysis of particular games has also drawn on feminist methods. Amongst well cited research is a highly contested debate that erupted over Lara Croft, the female protagonist from the popular *Tomb Raider* franchise. For critics like Greer (1999), Lara Croft's overtly sexualized depiction is nothing more than eye candy for a predominantly male audience, in a manner keeping with mass media stereotypes. Taking a

more nuanced approach, Milkula (2003) acknowledges the characters' exaggerated sexual appearance while also citing Lara Croft's popularity amongst a contingent of female fans.

Implicit in the discussion of Lara Croft[ii] is the problem of ludonarrative dissonance, as the debate revealed the challenges of applying existing feminist frameworks (rooted in the study of mass media representation) to the study of digital games (Kennedy, 2002). However, instead of investigating emerging tensions between story and design, game studies quickly moved past them, as many theorists abandoned a representational approach. Following a focus on playability that has always been a staple of commercial criticism, Newman (2002) directly addressed the example of Lara Croft to argue that "the degree to which the player considers themselves to 'be' the character – is not contingent upon representation" (para. 24). Similarly, Aarseth (2004) insists that Lara's body is "irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently" (p. 48). Game studies subsequently moved away from mass media oriented methodologies, and scholarship became more aligned with a traditional approach to game criticism. But at the same time, online writing was moving in a more personal, political direction following Shanahan's (2004) visceral account of racism in multiplayer games and Gillen's (2005) subsequent call for a new games journalism.

While many still lament a perceived lack of quality game criticism, others are beginning to notice change. Citing recent debate over *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013), Suellentrop (2013) insists:

> We do not live merely in a golden age of video games but also in a golden age of video game criticism. There has never been more, and better, writing about games and what they mean, how they work and how they fail.
>
> (para. 2)

Despite the above pronouncement being somewhat exaggerated, as few titles get the extensive attention *BioShock Infinite* received, it does point to an emerging trend currently taking place. Most online work is still consumer oriented, but a game literate critical community is giving rise to a diversity of voices, including viewpoints influenced by critical theory. Such work often exists on the fringes of traditional publishing models, however, crystallizing "around websites" (Keog, 2014, p. 10).

According to Abraham (2011) this "critical videogame blogosphere" is an important emerging knowledge episteme concerned with "radical conservatism and neoliberalism"(p. 7). Parker (2014) echoes a similar sentiment noting a shift towards "ideological critique" among "essayist critics" playing an "increasingly important role in promoting indie, amateur, and otherwise non-mainstream games" (para 8). While the above pronouncements are certainly true, the video game blogosphere is also not immune from the cultural privileging of gamers, a problem that has been identified by feminist and critical theoretical approaches to the study of gaming culture (Kubic, 2012; Shaw, 2012, 2013; Consalvo, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). To better illustrate this point, the next section will both describe and comment on an online debate that arose over use the term ludonarrative dissonance, before insisting that the term provides a useful starting point for examining the politics of story/design tensions that game critics traditionally ignore.

The problem of what the game is about

On October 7, 2007, Clint Hawking posted an influential critique of *BioShock* (Irrational Games, 2007) that was carefully distinguished from a traditional game review. From an entertainment standpoint, he praised the game for asking "important and compelling questions" (Hawking, 2007, para. 3); however, from a philosophical standpoint, he derided the game for providing confused answers that were "frustrating, deceptive, and unsatisfactory" (para. 3). At issue was the disjuncture between the game's narrative premise and the mechanics experienced during play. According to Hawking, *BioShock* suffered "from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story" (para. 4).

Integral to the discrepancy was a series of interactive moral options that allowed players to choose between altruism and objectivism,[iii] as well as a successive string of indifferent bonuses that provide similar rewards. Further compounding the problem was the narrative setting of an objectivist dystopia and the protagonist's decision to help a stranger escape. Choosing to take the selfish, objectivist route, Hawking identified three main problems with *BioShock*'s narrative contract:

> First, this contract is not in line with the values underlying Randian rational self-interest; 'helping someone else' is presented as the right thing to do by the story, yet the opposite proposition appears to be true under the mechanics.
> Second, Atlas[iv] is openly opposed to Ryan,[v] yet again, as mentioned above, I am philosophically aligned with Ryan by my acceptance of the mechanics. Why do I want to stop Ryan, or kill him, or listen to Atlas at all? Ryan's philosophy is in fact the guiding principle of the mechanics that I am experiencing through play.
> Thirdly, I don't have a choice with regards to the proposition of the contract. I am constrained by the design of the game to help Atlas, even if I am opposed to the principle of helping someone else. In order to go forward in the game, I must do as Atlas says because the game does not offer me the freedom to choose sides in the conflict between Ryan and Atlas.
> This is a serious problem. In the game's mechanics I am offered the freedom to choose to adopt an Objectivist approach, but I also have the freedom to reject that approach and to rescue the little sisters [...]. Yet in the game's fiction on the other hand, I do not have that freedom to choose between helping Atlas or not.
>
> Hawking, para. 12 – 16 (2007)

When considering the above critique, it is important to note that Hawking's main issue is with *BioShock*'s lack of narrative options. Instead of criticizing the mechanics for not matching the story, he attacks the story for not matching the mechanics. By describing a ludonarrative dissonance, Hawking goes beyond a remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) perspective, which attributes the meaning created by commercial games to elements borrowed from television and film (p. 91). Additionally, his analysis avoids the pitfalls of completely disregarding representation by assuming that commercial games are suffering from a bad case of "cinema envy" (Zimmerman, 2004, p. 157). For Hawking, representation and simulation are equally political and deserving of

attention, particularly in terms of logical correspondences and illogical contradictions. A game, following this logic, can represent neoliberal ideological undertones while simultaneously simulating a radically different ludic system which may hint at potential economic alternatives to neoliberal corporate capitalism.

Ludonarrative dissonance received some attention within game studies, but it was bloggers who really latched onto the term, prompting Keogh (2012) to declare a new wave of post-*BioShock* criticism. Its use became particularly pervasive when *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) was released and multiple critics (Alexander, 2013, April 11; Turner, 2013, April 16; Chuluunbaatar, 2013, April 14; Brainy Gamer, 2013, April 9; Cook, 2013) drew inspiration from Hawking's post. As commercial reviews praised the game's storytelling, the blogosphere erupted in harsher tones, criticizing the relationship between a supposedly progressive narrative and strikingly conservative first-person shooter mechanics. According to Alexander (2013, April 11), *Infinite* "was supposed to be a game about the nuance of fundamentalism, exceptionalism, Occupy, and some other slurry ideals I can't hear over the noise of my own bullet addled grunting" (para. 18). Likewise, Turner (2013, April 16) insists that the game's mechanics work to completely undermine the story, and Brainy Gamer (2013, April 9) claims that the problem is not the shooting, but that "*BioShock Infinite* has nothing to say about the shooting" (para. 1).

Harmony and Dissonance

After the above critiques, ludonarrative dissonance spread through the blogosphere in the subsequent discussion of other titles. *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) was successively criticized for repeated moments of ludonarrative dissonance (Sawrey, 2013, April 26; BullToad, 2013, July 18; VStheUniverse, 2013, March 25)[vi], as Lara Croft was anxious during cut scenes, despite being coldly violent during actual gameplay. Expressing similar sentiments, multiple critics wrote manifestos on ludonarrative dissonance, describing it as the primary design problem plaguing AAA games. For Makedonski (2012, September 9) the concept can be understood as a roadblock to realism that works primarily by undermining "every gaming experience" (para. 2). Offering a more constructive perspective, Sawrey (2013, April 26) argues for a new approach to game design that places an equal emphasis on story and mechanics (para. 13).

Similarly, others flipped the term around to describe ludonarrative harmony as a feature of good design. A recent trend in criticism, following this critique, focuses on special gameplay moments in which simulation and representation are no longer misaligned. In an in-depth discussion of *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Icho, 2005), Fortugno (2009) describes the successful integration of a wide variety of elements that combine to create a "genuine experience of tragedy" (p. 178). Exploring *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2010)*,* Zook (2012) identifies a similar internal consistency arising from the constant metaphoric use of blood. Similarly, Fernandez (2009) describes how *Monkey Island* (LucasArts, 1990) achieves an impressive level of cohesion by interweaving story and puzzle elements (p. 51).

Inside game studies, the push for tighter story-design integration is spearheaded by *Well Played,* a journal that publishes close examinations of internally cohesive games (Well Played, 2011, para. 3). Among bloggers, the discussion of ludonarrative dissonance has also expanded into essays on games that presumably achieve high levels of cohesion and harmony. According to Dawn (2014,

January 6), "mechanics which do their job and help draw the player in are referred to as having achieved 'ludonarrative cohesion'" (para. 4), while Abraham (2013, August 17) describes a particular experience from *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) as an example of ludonarrative harmony (para. 3).

Instead of privileging story at the expense of design, readings emphasizing harmony cast simulation and representation as interacting components with the capacity to coincide and contradict. Despite lacking a defined ontology and critical vocabulary, this approach coincides with an assemblage preference for experimental realisms seeking to understand games not "according to their innate, morphological essences but as expressions of certain movements, sensations, and interactions with their environments" (Parikka, 2010). Contrary to claims of nonexistence, ludonarrative dissonance is subsequently treated as a real emergent phenomenon, contingent upon recurring narrative interpretations and the persistent emergence of play.

It isn't dissonant and no one cares anyway

As ludonarrative dissonance began entering the vocabularies of game critics, many questioned the usefulness of the concept, with some providing careful critiques and others dismissing the term altogether. Chipman (2013, September 8) addressees ludonarrative dissonance on his YouTube channel, insisting that the term "makes a lot of sense," but also poses the problem of "undermining player agency" (7:30 - 8:11) in an effort to ensure narrative consistency. Taking a more combative tone, Sterling (2013, September 23) describes ludonarrative dissonance as a form of "pseudo-intellectual wobbling" used by the gaming intelligentsia to make the point that "violence and storytelling have become mutually exclusive" (2:48-2:57). Such responses, while citing formal concerns, frame use as anti-violent ranting when many critics were simply questioning whether violence made sense within a particular narrative context. Similar retorts reject the term on the grounds of it sounding pretentiously academic, even though it was coined by a developer. Speaking on a panel at Pax, Carboni (2013, September 12) described ludonarrative dissonance as:

> …something that we all came up with one night when we were all out drunk...when we decided to see if we could actually take the very nature of video games and make it sound negative to the people who love video games.
>
> Carboni, 46:25 - 47:00 (2013)

Such remarks clearly misinterpret the term; however, one of the most widely read critiques insists that ludonarrative dissonance does not exist, specifically because it does not bother experienced gamers. According to Yang (2013),

> Becoming an 'experienced gamer' means learning to readily resolve a game's dissonance and ignore it […]. Some academics might call this a "lusory attitude" or make references to a semi-porous "magic circle." Or maybe it's a suspension of disbelief, or maybe you're in a flow state and you're not in a mental place to criticize. Whatever you call it, a lot of players seem pretty good at ignoring stuff that gets in the way of playing video games.
>
> Yang, para 6 – para 7, (2013)

A central problem with the above argument is Yang's critical privileging of an experienced "gamer" perspective. According to Shaw (2012), gamer identification is closely linked to a history of marketing practices that exclusively target affluent young men.[vii] As a result, "those who do not have access to the necessary resources cannot claim gamer status" (p. 10). Yang's rejection, from this perspective, marginalizes alternative points of view by unwittingly privileging a marketing niche. Conversely, ludonarrative dissonance is easily recognized by less experienced players, who will often call attention to the fact "that you just took food out of a trashcan and didn't get ill, or fell from a height of 10m and didn't so much as feel it" (Caveshen, 2013, May 13, para. 11-para. 12).

While the rejection of ludonarrative dissonance on the grounds of experienced players not caring about it is not surprising, the term is also frequently reduced to a formal flaw that needs to be overcome, an argument which presumes that greater story design cohesion offers a better playing experience. According to CClose,

> To generalize and categorize ludonarrative dissonance as inherently 'bad' does disservice to the burgeoning world of scholarly game criticism. Ultimately, it is the critic's duty to explain why ludonarrative dissonance is a bad - or good - thing on a case by case basis.

> CClose, para 14 (2013, May 21).

Within this framework, commercial games are understood as complex hybrids with capacities that cannot be reduced to organic relations between internal components. Play is understood as a complex process holding "multiple, often contested, meanings" (Taylor, 2009). Contrary to always opposing narrative meaning, simulation actually interacts with it in ways that critics can choose to acknowledged or ignore.

When considering the aforementioned tensions, ludonarrative dissonance is both complex and diverse, as opposed to being a formal flaw that needs to be overcome. Appropriately, greater cohesion may not result in a more engaging gaming experience, nor may it be desirable in all cases. Consider the example mentioned in the beginning of this article in which John Marston's debt disappears. Debt forgiveness has been a key demand of contemporary activist movements responding to the political economic effects of neoliberal corporate capitalism,[viii] which can be understood as a form of profit accumulation that relies on the structural expansion of credit (Harvey, 2010). Ludonarrative dissonance, in the case of *Red Dead Redemption*, provides a useful means of examining how a game can represent the political anxieties associated with debt while simultaneously simulating a ludic economy where the state is noticeably absent. John Marston is figuratively dripping with debt, in the games narrative, but in *Red Dead Redemption*'s meritocratic economy, players are always debt-free.

The above example is merely one brief case amongst a plethora of instances that illustrate the political contradictions present in many games. Contradictions that cannot be separated from broader political forces in general and the economics of gaming industries in particular. Studios faced with smaller profit windows often target gamer demographics presumed to favor playability over narrative consistency. Conversely, emerging developers may put more effort into telling

diverse stories, instead of focusing on innovative gameplay. The recent explosion of games built using twine[ix] provides a good example of the latter occurrence, as many titles explore themes of "marginalization, queerness, and discrimination" (Friedhoff, 2013), often by favoring personal narratives over graphics and playability. Due to its relative ease of use, the Twine platform has been celebrated for introducing people who do not fit the traditional gamer stereotype to the pleasures of game design (Anthropy, 2012). However, twine games are also repeatedly regulated to margins of gaming culture, where emerging developers struggle with material insecurity (Kopas, 2015, p.8). Criticism plays a role in this process, so for gaming to be appreciated on a much broader scale it necessary to move beyond a narrow, long-held focus on playability. If becoming a "gamer" means learning to resolve or ignore a game's dissonance, it is important to be wary of the reductionism inherent in such a position and the potential consequences associated with privileging it. The analysis of ludonarrative dissonance, from this perspective, can help push criticism beyond a narrow focus on playability and help foster more diverse critical viewpoints—including viewpoints highlighting efforts to represent and simulate alternative states of political being.

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[i] See Williams, Martins, Consalvo and Ivory (2009).

[ii] See Schleiner (2001) and Kennedy (2002) from some of the most widely cited discussions of Lara.

[iii] Objectivism is a philosophy dedicated to the pursuit of self-interest.

[iv] Atlas initially appears as a young father trying to escape Rapture with his family

[v] Andrew Ryan is the founder of Rapture and a staunch supporter of objectivism.

[vi] Once again, these arguments do not condemn Tomb Raider for being violent. Criticism simply calls attention to dissonance between conservative mechanics and story.

[vii] Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003) connect gamer identity to a culture of militarized masculinity and Shaw links identification to high levels of consumption tied to industry marketing.

[viii] See https://debtcollective.org/ for more information.

[ix] Twine is a free open source hypertext platform that can be used to design games and interactive fiction.