OCAD University Open Research Repository

Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2007

Play with me: Exploring the autobiographical through digital games

Poremba, Cindy

Play with me: Exploring the autobiographical through digital games

Cindy Poremba
Concordia University
Montreal, QC, Canada
cindy@docgames.com

ABSTRACT

This paper uses two game-based artworks by Mary Flanagan (primarily *[domestic]* and to a lesser extent *[rootings]*), to examine autobiography in the form of digital games. Specifically, it explores the ways in which these games construct/represent subjectivity, how they negotiate agency (both within the work and within the realm of cultural production), and how the game form structures self-narrative. This is framed in relation to theoretical work from both autobiography and game studies.

Author Keywords

Autobiography, non-fiction, documentary, agency, subjectivity

[DOMESTIC] AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

There is a current surge of interest in documentary game works, including works that can loosely be described as biographical, such as *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* or *Waco Resurrection*. In an already limited field of non-fiction digital games, autobiographic works are even more rare. This paper uses two game-based artworks by Mary Flanagan (primarily *[domestic]* and to a lesser extent *[rootings]*), to examine autobiography in the form of digital games. Specifically, it explores the ways in which these games construct/represent subjectivity, how the game form structures self-narrative, and how such games negotiate agency (both within the work and within the realm of cultural production). This analysis reveals both the structural challenges and representational affordances of autobiographic games.

Figure 1: Screen capture from *[domestic]*, Flanagan, 2003.

[domestic] is an art modification (mod) for the game *Unreal Tournament* (GT Interactive 2003) that premiered at the Playthings game exhibition in Sydney Australia in 2003. Created by media artist Mary Flanagan, it is both an autobiographical exploration of memory and feminist intervention into game culture. Game modification is a popular means for artists to work with digital games, as the process (more often than not) involves appropriating and altering audio/graphical assets and scripts in existing works that provide a core game engine (reducing the need to reinvent game systems like physics components and the construction of 3D game space.) The core game is a "first person shooter" (FPS), i.e. the game attempts to simulate the audio/visual point of view of the lead game character. According to Flanagan, *[domestic]* investigates the cognitive interrelation of space and memory, and questions whether games can provide a means of "replaying" recalled experience [4]. In the work, players explore the "space" of Flanagan's childhood memory: where upon returning from church, she discovers her house on fire, with her father inside:

> "Through the
> fields on
> the path
> The house
> looks changed
> Smoke coming out
> of the windows

Where is dad?."
(wall text, [*domestic*])

The game environment is constructed from two primary elements: text (consisting largely of a poetic recounting of the event), and childhood photos of Flanagan. Flanagan describes the space as a "claustrophobic conceptual environment in which images take on iconic meanings." In particular, the use of photos and text (sometimes standing in for objects, e.g. "wall wall couch") create a distorted and often disorienting gameworld. As players advance in the space, fire imagery encroaches on the environment. Players are able to counter this element using a variety of represented "coping mechanisms" (both text and image) within the space.

[*rootings*] is an earlier work also dealing with memory and time using a series of smaller interactive game elements. It was commissioned in 2001 for Turbulence. [*rootings*] may be considered autobiographical as well in that the materials used to provide context for the various interactive explorations come from Flanagan's personal memories and photos (indeed the work is identified as autobiographical by Flanagan). [*rootings*] also addresses the physicality of personal memory as mapped on to the game form (for example, through abstracted actions such as "tracing" out a memory on a synapse.)

CONSTRUCTING A SUBJECT

The cross-modal nature of the game experience creates a challenging context in which to examine the presentation of subjectivity. Lev Manovich has noted the fluctuating process of gaming, which shifts between immersion (situated) and hypermediated (critical) subjectivities [8]. The structure of the game shifts the player from identification with an actionable environment, to the process of decoding the game structure necessary to play the game. The player-in-play is present in multiple spatial domains— including the represented game space and the physical gaming space [14], and the level of interface. Games are also double coded in the sense that they contain not only references to the real world, but also meta-communication about the meaning of these references in the context of the game [11]. So even identifying a subject as "in the game," we need to consider the multiple meanings of this "location". As such, it may be extremely difficult to locate the "I" at any point in the experience, as it fluctuates between internal and external positions. This naturally problematizes the relationship between the subject and his/her representations.

Alexander Galloway notes the first person configuration, while rare and problematic in film, is well suited to the actionable game experience [5]. As an autobiographic game [*domestic*] presents an interesting design challenge with regard to situating the player. By removing most (but not all) signs of a physical body, it avoids challenging configurations such as the confusion as to whom the body

represents. Laurie Taylor observes that, "first-person video games seek to remove not just the subject, but all the ambiguous mis-identifications that accompany the subject which include questions of embodiment, the gaze and the paradox of the subject's own perception of self." [14] This suggests in a FPS like [*domestic*], players function *on* the game world, but are not present *in* this world. While this solves some problems for autobiography (for example, the conflict over encountering an obviously artificial and ambiguously identified avatar), it may create difficulties in engaging and feeling present within the gamespace (assuming this is the design intent). [*domestic*] goes so far as to remove all visible traces of the represented player-body—including weapons (but interestingly not sound cues such as footsteps).

By avoiding presenting an avatar, ownership of the viewpoint is left in contention— as the player, we could be playing *as Mary*, as ourselves, or even as a separate imagined character (perhaps an objective observer). This has implications for reception. Choosing to *play* Mary as a character presumes taking up the (limited) situatedness of this position to access a truth inherent in the game action (even if we, even *as* Mary, are not fully part of this game world). Alternately, we can *identify* with Mary (taking a more filmic position), and draw in our own personal experience in relation to the game. Perhaps it reminds us of a similar experience in our past, in which case, we can draw in the emotional affordances of the play dynamic, and make this history our own. Finally, we may play the "avatar" as someone or even something else entirely—as a camera, or as a disembodied entry point into the space. As an art game encountered primarily in an installation-type setting [1], a relative disengagement with the avatar may simply be a function of environment and context.

The first-person shooter genre itself hails (in an Althusserian sense) the player as a particular kind of play subject. This is particularly important in a mod like [*domestic*], because while the narrative is constructed by Flanagan (to a certain extent: the text perhaps moreso than the photographic images; although their selection and relational presentation most certainly demonstrate authorship); the rules for performance are appropriated. Further, this ruleset originally hails a very different sort of subject: a male demonstrating mastery and domination within a combat environment. This creates a tension in the work; and as Flanagan remarks, an "anxiety between action play and exploration." As Peter Bell observes, choice within the preinscribed game context is indicative "not so much that interpellation is overcome in an act of independence, but that an alternate interpellation is being responded to instead [2]." Flanagan presents a further alternative discourse, that of the reflective explorer, more

---

[1] Like many "art mods," [domestic] is not publicly available and must be set up by the artist.

commonly found in audiences of fine art. Ironically, this may be most apparent to audiences expecting to be hailed as traditional FPS subjects.

While games are a promising medium for representing processual models of actualities—including subjectivity (perhaps the enacted subjects of Louis Althusser or Judith Butler), the play action necessarily is contextualized in a system of rules in which agency is constrained. While a secondary agency is afforded in the choice of experience produced within the system, the player must subvert the game itself to operate from an external position in the autobiography. As a *[domestic]* player you may question your agency in relation to the game structure; and on a larger critical level question Flanagan's agency in relation to this representation of memory.

In the context of a female autobiography *[domestic]* also presents an intertwined model of gendered subjectivity. Although the body is absent, and thus largely desexed, the game itself may be viewed as internally gendered. In part, this is due to a play dynamic that centers on masculine-identified skills such as mastery and spatial acquisition (I will return to this later in the paper), but this may also relate to the FPS subject. In presenting a lack of body, *[domestic]* first evokes, in its "disembodied universality," a masculine gender [3] However the ambiguity surrounding this role, in particular Flanagan's coding of the work as autobiography, complicate this gendering. As Butler suggests, "cultural configurations of gender confusion operate as sites for intervention, exposure, and displacement of the masculine/feminine binary [3]." *[domestic]* may work in this way by taking the universal male first-person perspective and overlaying the specificity of female experience—and not just the feminine experience, but the experience of a specific female.

A GAME STRUCTURE OF SELF NARRATIVE
The medium in which an autobiography is produced directs and sometimes constricts the self narrative. Games by definition are systems: sets of rules and constraints. Galloway argues games are material actions (as opposed to images, like photos and video)[5], and as such are instantiated through the play process. William Huber describes how subjectivity is created in a number of non-game media: from the novel which privileges interiority, to film which constructs the self as evidenced by exterior signs. Videogames, Huber theorizes, frame the subject as systems of state and value, "of implicit and explicit rules." He posits a number of possibilities for the game subject, including (but not restricted to) depicting tension between explicit models and implicit structures, portraying emotional and relational systems, and revealing ambiguity between corporeal and symbolic selves [6]. The selves produced by games are processual, systemic, data-driven: the game self is a self of/in practice. Flanagan uses several techniques to reinforce the acts of practice of play and identity in her works. In *[rootings],* players trace synapses to lock in

(Flanagan's) memories. The remembering is symbolically re-performed, much in the same way Flanagan's memory is performed through the repeated tracing of patterns in the brain's synapses. In *[domestic]*, the enacting of (and the reacting to) Flanagan's represented memory provides some form of the experience of being this self , and encountering this memory, even as it is not our own.

In Flanagan's work the appropriated play dynamic of the first person shooter becomes recontextualized: reforming the game world into an abstract, non-acquisitional exploration environment, and presenting an alternative (female) context for contestation (the defense against emotional pain). Rather than a fantasy space about dominance and mastery, in the recovered *[domestic]* space players "shoot" coping mechanisms at an encroaching trauma. This act of defensive shooting makes a statement of agency and pro-activity—an ability to do something, rather than passively being re-victimized by the game's media elements. The game format creates a visceral sense of both empowerment and disorientation of perspective: a performative pathos if you will.

[domestic] is both a performing and re-documenting experience— a reclaiming of the image-repertoire. Like other forms of feminist postmodern autobiography (for example, artist Jo Spence's *Beyond the Photo Album* project) Flanagan not only deconstructs the process of memory, but also reconstructs by re-contextualizing images and creating new reception dynamics for them. The collage aspect of the work—combining poetic writing and images that revive the traumatic memory—is particularly important in this context. *[domestic]* makes apparent the webs of connotation and memory surrounding photographic images. Their inclusion in the game allows Flanagan to explore new ways of perceiving the past, rather than iconifying them as image-memories. If (to paraphrase Roland Barthes) photographs fill the sight of memory by force, Flanagan's re-presentation both disrupts this process and reinscribes it.

The addition of the game structure is an active control system. In bringing these memories into the game, Flanagan moves them from the form of memory trigger, and re-forms them into a space to move and work through—to unmap and control. This space now has rules, and it has roles: most importantly an active, powerful player-character who has the tools to defend this memory space. In this way the game becomes a technology of memory with ties to both architectural (spatial) and processual (temporal) models of autobiographic representation (17). *[domestic]* takes the symbolic retouching of the world to a literal level, where the player-character can directly manipulate the autobiographical imagery. The powerful player role presented in the game may assist the process of giving voice to personal trauma [13]. Still, it is Flanagan who defines the parameters of this space and defines the system of interaction—a vision that can be accepted or rejected— and in this case, manipulated—but not essentially changed.

NEGOTIATING AGENCY

The commercial videogame industry has been widely cited for its male gender bias and lack of diversification among audience and content. *[domestic]* is a two fold tactical intervention into this cultural space. First, it is an infiltration of women's creativity into a first person shooter, a predominantly male genre in a form, videogames, which is for the most part created and marketed towards men. It is also an intervention of the personal/specific into symbolic game space. As Celia Pearce reveals, the game form typically presents universal subjects and hollow characters in an attempt to create a space of imagination for the player within the game [9]. The personalization of *[domestic]* disrupts this model, forcing the specific and the actual into the fantasy space. Games are commonly built to support leisure, present space for acquisition and consumption (with a player often required to enter all created areas—frequently in pursuit of bonus items that serve little other purpose than to encourage players to uncover the entire game map.) Games are not (popularly) expected or encouraged to reflect back on our real lives—as is implicit in the popular phrase "it's just a game." The positioning of a game work as an autobiographic space for exploration and engagement with memory is contentious within this context.

While Flanagan maintains pieces of the play dynamic, they are appropriated to different ends. The game's "weapons" are explicitly defensive, shooting coping mechanisms to repel aspects of memory and the encroaching trauma represented by the fire. While *Unreal Tournament* is a commonly modified game, as a modification, *[domestic]* resists the extension² theme prominent in the FPS modding subculture [10]. The alterations in pace, mood and content craft an intentional incongruity and unease. This might support a reflective viewership, or it might serve to affectively reinforce the feeling of traumatic memory. Typically first person shooters strive for visual realism (for example, through increased polygon count), resulting in a common aesthetic—a readily recognizable "look" of FPS videogame characters and environments. These are synthetic images; images without memory or history. As Flanagan transposes photographic images on the 3D polygon filled gamespace, this environment becomes active. It is no longer a space to pass through and acquire, but one to explore and engage in.

While postmodern autobiography commonly highlights the constructedness of the images (noting inconsistencies, staging, gaps, manipulation, etc.) Flanagan works in an already de-naturalized space. The presence of the mixed media elements in the game is natively fragmented. As such, *[domestic]* works less within naturalized fictions, and instead attempts to construct modernist "truths of me" within a postmodern form. As players/viewers, this is key

---

² Modifying the game with the intention of improving the work (within the same genre) or adding functionality [10].

to both to understand the piece (as it is clear there is something that must be understood), and determining the possibility space for the work—part and parcel of learning how to play the game. However, there is also a way in which creating an autobiographical game presents different ways of *seeing* the self. The self here is in action, it is fragmented, it is dislocated—it is a system of recorded memory, symbolic trauma, and active resistance.

The active imperative of the game may have some similarity to film (as opposed to photography), in that as an audience we pass through images in space/time. Where in film it is the images that move, in *[domestic]* it is the player who is in motion. To stop and meditate on any one image or text is resisted in two ways: one, the norm of action within the game world (you have, in a sense, stopped playing, stopped advancing and revealing); and two, by a game dynamic that you must take action against (the consuming fire). This affects the frame of analysis for the images themselves, and redirects attention on the interaction between the images and the play system. It is the manner of this agentification that draws attention to the player's interpolation as a certain kind of subject: an *active* subject. This is also one aspect of the work that may conflict with Flanagan's design goals of creating an exploratory and reflective environment.

Figure 2: Agency in *[domestic]*; reinscribing the space of memory.

The production context of the autobiographical project is as relevant as its reception. In [*domestic*] the production and reclaiming of the process stands as a significant part of the work, and Flanagan herself is a significant, perhaps even primary, audience for the game. Part of the intervention here is of Mary herself—that she chose this form and recreated her memory as a game subject. For Flanagan, encountering the work means something different: she has what Barthes would call the *punctum* (an emotional evocation) from the photos as memory triggers [1], and she can call upon the emotional affordances present in the coping mechanism dynamic. In addition, reframing life as a game may be a method for gaining control. Games are spaces set apart from life [7], they have rules and systems that are presumed to make logical sense, and the goal is simply to figure out how to play the system. On a metaphorical level, the game form itself provides an attractive model for integrating stability and control into self narrative.

CONCLUSION

While it may seem incongruous to produce an autobiographical work in the game form, Flanagan's explorations suggest this work is not only possible, but presents interesting possibilities for self-narrative. Although games represent a challenge in the presentation of specific (non-fiction) and stable selves, this could prove to be an asset given a postmodern desire to disrupt stable identify and subjectivity. Particularly in the context of the art game, this ambiguity may support a stronger critical reception of the autobiographical subject position. Games, as artificial rule-based systems, also craft the self as an active agent, and in the performing of game, may encourage connections beyond identification. Artists that take advantage of the hypermediated, fragmented and procedural qualities of the medium may find additional tools at their disposal for the crafting of self-narrative, and present works in which the play between the self and its representation is all part of the game.

REFERENCES

1. Barthes, R. *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

2. Bell, P. "Realism and Subjectivity," in *Gnovis*. April 2003. <http://gnovis.georgetown.edu/includes/ac.cfm?documentNum=17>

3. Butler, J. *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York : Routledge, 1990. pp. 12, 31.

4. Flanagan, M. *Online Portfolio*. <http://maryflanagan.com/>

5. Galloway, A. R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. p. 2

6. Huber, W. *Weblog*. <http://zang.org>

7. Huizinga, J. *Homo Ludens*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950. p. 13

8. Manovich, L. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001.

9. Pearce, C. "Towards a Game Theory of Games," in *First Person. New Media. as Story, Performance, and Game*. Eds. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.

10. Poremba, C. "Player as Author: Digital Games and Agency." Unpublished Masters Thesis. Simon Fraser University, 2003.

11. Salen, K, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003. p. 14.

12. Spence, J. *Putting Myself in the Picture: A Political, Personal, and Photographic Autobiography*. Seattle: Real Comet P, 1988.

13. Smith, S and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. p. 22.

14. Taylor, L. "When Seams Fall Apart: Video Game Space and the Player," in *Game Studies* 3.2 (December 2003) <http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/taylor/>