

Bisociative Ludos: The Wondrous Tales of Eupalinos Ugajin and Naxos Loon

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Abstract

This text proposes to examine the virtual lives and creative activities of two metaverse avatars, Eupalinos Ugajin and Naxos Loon, by examining the correlations between their acts of creation and the notion of ‘play’. These will be examined against the backgrounds of Arthur Koestler’s book “*The Act of Creation*” and Johan Huizinga’s “*Homo Ludens*”; involving a scrutiny on how these may apply to a strand of art making involving three dimensionally embodied avatars, which can be observed in online virtual worlds today.

Keywords

bisociation, play, avatar, metaverse, creativity.

Overview

Since artistic activity and ludos are inextricably enmeshed in the oeuvre of the two artists whose output will be discussed below, the propositions contained in Koestler’s *The Act of Creation* (1964) and Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938) can be applied to both to cases equally. Nonetheless Koestler’s work will mostly be used in relation to the output of the first artist, whereas Huizinga’s findings will mostly be applied to the latter. Beyond these two books, Freud’s *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* (1905) may also shed light on a strand of virtual creative activity which places the creative self at its very center-stage as the protagonist, particularly when it comes to his definition of non-tendentious jokes to which Freud attributes “*one and the same act of ideation, albeit incorporating two different ideational methods*” (Freud, 1905, 300). This appears to presage Koestler’s definition of the creative act as a process of bisociation, in which according to Koestler, jokes and humor play an extraordinarily large role as matrices which are nothing but alternative instances of the same thought patterns involved in bringing forth artistic activity and scientific inquiry.

Arthur Koestler’s (1964) term of “*bisociation*” defines a mind state according to which any creative act is the result of two (or more) apparently incompatible frames of thought, encompassing a broad range of output from humor and scientific inquiry to art, bringing together the archetypical concepts of Jester and

Sage. According to Koestler bisociation involves mental processes such as comparison, abstraction and categorization, analogies, metaphors, allegories, and jokes, as well as physical states such as role-playing, acting and personification.

Huizinga, whose objective is to “*ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play*”, defines play as freedom, as a state distinct from ordinary life both in terms of locality and duration, demanding an order which is absolute and supreme, and furthermore one unconnected to material interest, or gain. However, beyond this global definition Huizinga also points at the strong correlation between play and “*mythopoesis*”, whereby the representation of “*the incorporeal and the inanimate as a person is the soul of all myth-making and nearly all poetry*” (Huizinga, 136). Some 70 years after they were written, Huizinga’s words bring to mind a particular type of metaverse avatar, one whose being goes beyond a mere representation of the human body of its handler, as well as the diverse creative acts revolving around such three dimensionally embodied virtual bodies.

When examining the relationship between play and artistic activity however, Huizinga distinguishes between music/dance/poetry and the plastic arts: For him the former possess an inherent affinity with play in that they can be seen as immaterial, participatory and performative experiences whereas the plastic arts involve a far more deliberate approach due to the very nature of their building blocks, their materials. Conversely, as described above, Naxos Loon and Eupalinos Ugajin bring together the tangibly visual and the ephemerally performative/poetic in their very avatar beings, closing a gap which Huizinga traces back to Greek mythology, where the musical arts were relegated to the jurisdiction of Apollo and the Muses, while the visual arts were assigned to the domains of Hephaistos and Athene Erganē (1938, 158-172).

What has changed between then and now in terms of eliciting play from visual media (which according to Huizinga are un conducive to play due to the rigidity of their materiality) has been described in Malcolm McCullough’s book ‘*Abstracting Craft*’ (1996) as an overall transformation from autographic to allographic media due to the notational nature of computational language itself. Picking up on Goodman’s 1976 definition of these two types of media, McCullough asserts that since the advent of computation, as a creative environment for visual output, the rigidity of the visual medium has been altered from its autographic properties to one of allographic properties, in which the symbol language of computation provides the building blocks which work now are working upon bits rather than atoms. The outcome are visual artifacts which can be endlessly improvised with, altered, re-worked and ‘played upon’ as it was only possible to do with their indigenously allographic counterparts during Huizinga’s lifetime.

Eupalinos Ugajin and Naxos Loon

Eupalinos Ugajin’s massive assemblages bring together the ‘ludic’ and the ‘ludicrous’ into aggregations which can best be described as the carriers of ‘ludicrum’; i.e., complex stage-plays, situating Eupalinos

Ugajin as their protagonist, who is also the creator of the props through which an elaborate state of enactment is achieved. These props derive their inspiration from a vast array of seemingly unrelated ideas, phrases, artworks and ephemera which the artist makes no effort to disown, indeed proudly proclaims possession of. Almost conjurer-like Eupalinos pulls snippets, sentences, lyrics and visual artifacts out of a bewilderingly large mental repository, which covers the vernacular as well as the high end of technological devices, cultural artifacts and art/design objects, especially with an emphasis on music.

A corps de ballet is provided by a herd of cows of the artist's own creation. These cows fulfill diverse roles, such as transforming themselves into markers of temporality, provoking Eupalinos to exclaim "*it's the season already? How time flies...*," while he and a close friend watch members of the ripened herd fall from their virtual trees (01). Then again, the cows are also often absent and, a la Billie Holiday, Ugajin bemoans this fact by sadly singing "*someday my cow will come*". For some undisclosed reason this lament is particularly evident when Eupalinos Ugajin is in his sky box which is placed at 3000 virtual sky meters above Second Life, where, almost as a substitute for the absent cows, a donkey seems to hold center stage amongst Ugajin's unfathomable associations (02). Besides many other curios this location also contains a huge catapult (03) and a sieve (04). These devices hold hordes of unrelated objects which Ugajin amasses through invitations which he periodically extends to his friends, amongst whom can be found some of the most innovative artists of the metaverse. Furthermore, both contraptions have somewhat dissettling functions, such as hurtling unsuspecting avatars who try to sit on them through many thousands of meters, all the way to locations to where they have no wish whatsoever to go.

Ugajin's obsession with the central role of the avatar, the agent upon whose usage and involvement all metaverse artifacts ultimately depend, is evident in the name which he has given to his most extensive Flickr set, whereby he asks: "*[SL] Will you AV me ?*" (05). However the images in this collection not only illustrate Eupalinos Ugajin's preoccupation with the avatar, they also provide examples to the bisociative process in which the artist is engaged in throughout his work. Noteworthy is his chart of the "*All-in-One avatar*" (06) which shows to us all of the inspirations deriving their sources from places as displaced as modern art, urban decay and a love of horticulture. Granted, Ugajin's bisociative avatar also pulls some of his data from the sub-cultures of the metaverse, including elves, furies and steampunkers. However, instead of pledging allegiance to only one of these groups Ugajin creates his own amalgam, ending up with a creature which seems to reflect upon Koestler's definition of creativity, that is one which involves a mental state that can bounce back and forth between jester and sage, bringing forth a creative end product which transcends the sum total of its disparate parts (07).

Koestler's definition of the creative act takes into account a period of gestation whereby creative breakthroughs often occur whilst "*thinking aside*" (Koestler, 145-148); in other words at times when rational thought is abandoned and instead mental states which are not directly related to the quest at hand

are evoked. However for such a serendipitous state to come about, a previously well informed/prepared mind which can spot the relevance of the associations thus provoked is of the essence. Ugajin's formidable mental repository, which is evident throughout his blogs as well as the diversity of his Flickr stream, in which he archives his many "*discoveries*" (08), is one of the key factors which account for his astonishing assemblages.

While both artists place the avatar at the very center of their output, Naxos Loon distills the importance of this virtual being to its very core essence: Unlike Eupalinos Ugajin who does create and assemble artifacts that are not necessarily attached directly to the body of the avatar, Naxos Loon is homeless; the quintessential metaverse traveler who carries his inventory of tricks, jokes and costumes upon his very own back: Thus, to experience Loon's art, one has to experience Loon himself. In his case, the avatar is the sole artifact with no further extensions, and no domicile within which possessions or output can be displayed.

A further difference between the two artists is that while Ugajin makes a point of fragmenting his avatars by bring together unrelated material, Naxos Loon's avatars and mise-en-scene derive their absurdity and their playfulness from a holistic approach in which all components of the avatar, as well as the tale which is constructed around him, blend into one consistent whole. Thus, each and every costume and prop is assembled with knowledge and loving care, creating a state of "*willing suspension of disbelief*" (Coleridge, 1817) which is achieved through the sheer congruity of all the components involved. And here again, through Loon's thorough knowledge of historic design styles and appended cultural artifacts, we go back to the relevance of the prepared/informed mind to bring forth states of bisociative serendipity which result in creative acts involving "*thinking aside*", which may well be yet another term for a state of play.

Naxos Loon's 'art' is his 'self' - an impish ape whose elaborate visual persona displays a deep understanding of the relevance of costume and accoutrement as vital signifiers from which his everlasting, ever evolving playful state of being cannot be easily separated. A mischief maker with a heart of gold, a collector of practical jokes, a player of toys, an endless inventor and performer of scenarios that once again bring together jester and sage, in a boundlessly fascinating disclosure of 'play'.

Thus, as Naxos the Ape wanders the metaverse, we see him taking on the role of a harried seamstress desperately trying to keep up with the demands of virtual haute couture (09). And then - a swift sleight of hand - the couturier is transformed into a formidable scientist, elucidating a captive audience on the Electron Volt (10). Within seconds of which, the selfsame ape is now presenting us with yet another age old question by taking on a number of incompatible and yet coexistent roles: "*Am I the wolf? Or am I Little Red Riding Hood?*" (11)

The kaleidoscope of personas, of games, of bizarre situations created and shared is almost endless: We encounter Naxos searching for an optometrist for his porcine friend (12), trying to sell french fries to a woodpecker (13); and then on the domestic front, dealing with the vagaries of a leaky shower (14). An elaborate adventure comes about when Naxos Loon decides to take upon his frail primate shoulders the responsibility of curing his fellow metaverse residents of a pervasive malaise of the virtual world: Seriousness! Crowds of avatars flock to Dr. Nax's Institute of Virtual Wellness during the early months of 2011, where the ape, this time manifesting as a Rogerian psychiatrist, conducts strenuous group therapy sessions (15). And furthermore, treatment need never be interrupted since an Eliza chatbot stands in lieu of the good doctor in the unlikely event of his being 'away from keyboard'!

Conclusion: The Rhetorics of Play

An appropriate conclusion to the brief expose on the creative activity of two avatar artists, both of whom have made a state of 'play' their primary tool of expression would appear to be through a partial summation of Brian Sutton-Smith's renowned play rhetorics (Sutton-Smith, 2001), involving animal play, child play, fate play, power play, play of identity, imaginary play, the self and frivolity:

The play rhetorics of the self have their origins in the psychology of the individual player and can also be seen as a means of individuation and obtaining a heightened sense of freedom. In this sense they can also be related to the play rhetorics of the imaginary (2001, 127-151) which, in their turn, are very closely related to artistic activity, incorporating a belief that some kind of transformation is the most fundamental characteristic of play. Thus, unsurprisingly, Sutton-Smith's list of imaginary play states follows Koestler's list of bisociative mental attributes very closely. Sutton-Smith finds an affinity between imaginary play and Romanticism where a strong identification between freedom, autonomy, the individual and the creative mindset can also be found. However, the origins of imaginary play and related creative activity go back far deeper, to the beginnings of life itself, when Sutton-Smith quotes Huizinga, who writes that poetry "*lies beyond seriousness in the primordial domain peculiar to the child, the savage, the visionary, in the domain of dreams, of ecstasy, of intoxication, of laughter*" (1938, 119).

Sutton-Smith's remarkable chapter on the rhetorics of frivolity ends by proclaiming that "*no theory of play would be adequate if it did not leave scope for its own deconstruction and distortion into nonsense*". Thus, 'play' is the Fool who one day might become King; and Eupalinos Ugajin and Naxos Loon may well agree with Sutton-Smith when he finally asserts that "*frivolity may be a mirror of the earthly desires for transcendence that one finds in all other kinds of play. This mode of transcendence or transformation is most extreme in the way which games of frivolity deny both reality and mortality*". (Sutton-Smith, 2001, 213)

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