Character, Audience Agency and Trans-Media Drama

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Television is changing. The internet is becoming ever more widespread and culturally important. Governments are making plans to switch off analogue signals and cement existing digital, multi-channel environments as the norm for television viewing. Broadcasters such as the BBC are increasingly offering online gaming elements connected to their television content. Mobile phones are becoming ever more pervasive and newer models are offering increasingly diverse, media-related features. These changes are having a rippling effect, not only on our understanding of the capabilities of technology but also on our expectations of what can and should be offered on them. What these changes indicate is the need for a new model of understanding audience engagement with audio-visual fictional entertainment. The fictional worlds of audio-visual drama are not only available through a television set and as such it is becoming increasingly useful to think of drama as 'trans-media', a term previous used by Henry Jenkins (2003, online), Noël Carroll (2003, 279) and Jason Mittell (2006, online). In essence the concept of 'trans-media' describes the way that new technologies have been used to extend dramas onto multiple media outlets in addition to the television set and takes into account the shifting patterns of movement, by both texts and audiences, across distinct but interrelated media platforms.

The drama series <u>Spooks</u> (BBC / Kudos Film and Television, 2002-) is one of the most interesting and high profile examples of how multiple audio-visual media platforms are being used to create a variety of elements contributing to one trans-media drama text. The television series follows the activities of Britain's intelligence service, MI5. Each episode follows a small team of characters as they investigate a range of terrorist threats to the United Kingdom whilst simultaneously coping with the stress of their jobs on their private lives. As the series has developed, it has become one of the most high profile drama series on BBC One, as well as a test programme for many of the corporation's innovations in terms of interactive and digital technology. Alongside the television episodes a number of games have been created for the programme's website (www.bbc.co.uk/drama/spooks), set within the same diegetic world as the series. These games work with the episodes to form a matrix of interconnected fictional texts that are not only an extension of the television text, but are capable of providing different kinds of entertainment in their own right. The level and type of interactivity offered in the television episodes will be different from that offered in the games and therefore the audience's level of activity or passivity is complex and varying throughout the different elements of the overall trans-media text of <u>Spooks</u>. However, as I shall explore in this article, those who engage with trans-media drama transfer values between media, desiring a combination of the audience positions available in television drama and in a more 'interactive' form such as games. Subsequently there is a need to develop an alternative view of the pleasure of trans-media drama that takes into account the specific values of one medium, such as television drama, that are applied to another, such as gaming.

In order to explore the issues raised by these developments within the television industry and the effect they have had on audience engagement with drama fictions I conducted an audience study with fans of <u>Spooks</u>. The aim behind this research was to explore the attitudes and behaviours of those who actively partake in trans-media drama and in order to do this I utilised a number of different methodologies. After an initial questionnaire I used email diaries to gather information on the group's behaviour in relation to television and the internet. These diaries, essentially a short questionnaire that was answered each week that the fourth season of <u>Spooks</u> was broadcast on BBC One in late 2005, were followed by a series of focus groups. I received an average of twelve diary responses per week and a total of fourteen people, some who took part in the diaries and some who did not, took part in three focus groups. These diaries informed the discussion in each focus group which forms the basis of the following analysis[i].

The Trans-Media <u>Spooks</u>
The games that have been made available since the second season of <u>Spooks</u>, the ones that those taking part in the diaries and focus groups were most familiar with, took two forms[ii]. The first are a series of computer animated puzzles available through the BBC website for the series, that test the player on their abilities to perform tasks seen in the programme. For instance the first game, 'Defuse', requires the player to copy a sequence of lights in order to deactivate a bomb, an act that features in the final episode of the first season. Similarly more common activities, that the audience will be familiar with from multiple episodes of the series, are presented in games such as 'Bugging' which involves placing microphones to record conversations in a room, or 'Firewall' which features breaking through a computer security system. These games can either be played

individually or as part of a narrative consisting of the player's MI5 training and first assignments.

The second set of games made available in connection with Spooks were transmitted via the BBC's digital television service[iii]. After each episode of seasons three and four a continuity announcer would invite viewers to 'press the red button' that launches the BBC's interactive channel BBCi, and take part in either 'Training' or a 'Mission'. The 'Training' game ran for the initial five weeks of each season and consisted of a series of separate activities testing skills of observation, memory, decision making and puzzle solving. The 'Mission' game then ran during the second five weeks of each season, and involved tasks similar to those from the 'training' game but strung together into a brief narrative. As with the initial internet games, the activities mimic those seen in the episodes but due to the technological differences between a television and a computer, those on the interactive television service are based around multiple choice questions that can be answered via a remote control.

What is most important for understanding these games as part of a trans-media text, however, is the way they are constructed to closely fit into the diegetic world of the television episodes. The games are created to specifically fit with the look and style of Spooks as a television series and in this respect are created to appear as another part of the Spooks trans-media text. For example, the digital television games open with a credit sequence featuring a collection of shots edited from the credits that opens each television episode, complete with the distinctive vertical stripe graphics, title cards and music used

in the series. With the internet games, the connection with the television series is mainly established through the design of the games' homepage which resembles the central office space from the programme, complete with a distinctive crest that also appears in the series' meeting room. The camera is positioned to provide the player with the point of view of someone sitting at a desk in front of a computer. It is then by clicking on this computer and activating a close up of the screen that the player can access the game files, which in turn appear as computer folders and files. By combining a first person point of view, seen in computer games such as Quake (1996) and Halo (2001), with the production design of the series, the website for the games places the user in the diegesis of the series.

Despite the strong sense of coherence that the games have with the style of the television episodes they do offer a different kind of engagement, one that can be most helpfully approached by considering issues of interactivity. The notion of interactivity and how to adequately define an interactive medium has been the source of much debate within new media theory. This debate is often explored in considerations of whether interactivity is actually possible. Aphra Kerr, Julian Kücklich and Pat Brereton argue that 'the term "interactivity" must be regarded as a political, rather than a descriptive, term as it is used by many new media advocates to emphasize the user's control over the medium, whilst de-emphasizing the medium's control over the user' (Kerr et al., 2006, 72). They believe that interactivity is best understood as a marketing term and a truly interactive relationship between a user and a medium is impossible, a view that is shared by Nickianne Moody who talks of the 'interactive myth' (Moody, 1996, 60). In contrast

Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska question the use of the term 'interactive' but still maintain a difference between the activities of watching a film and playing a game. However they also argue that this difference does not form a clear binary between a passive film viewer and an active game player:

> Cinema-going, or film-viewing in other arenas, such as on videotape, is far from an entirely passive process. It involves a range of cognitive and other processes in the act of interpretation. Games, however, place a central emphasis on the act of doing that goes beyond the kinetic and emotional responses that might be produced in the cinema (responses such as laughter, tears, shock, physical startling, increased heart-rate, and so on, that might also be generated by games).
>
> (King and Krzywinska, 2002, 22)

For King and Krzywinska then, despite the inadequacy of interactivity as a term, the difference between engaging with a film and playing a game remains and it is focused on how active the audience is in shaping what appears on screen.

In many ways it is helpful to work through this debate using James Newman's description of interactivity as 'a simple, mechanical measure of inputting controls or commands in order to influence on-screen action' (2002, 409). With television, although the viewer can change channels or turn the set off, there is not normally any action that the audience can perform in order to alter the content of the programme[iv]. Games however are dependent on the audience's action, on the player making decisions on where to move and click the onscreen pointer, and in taking that action the player

changes what is happening on the screen in front of them, therefore 'interacting' with the text. This different level of activity on the part of the audience when they play the game has consequences on how the player engages with a gaming text compared to how they engage with a television text. However, this approach can be seen as too simplistic, making the distinction between 'interactive' and 'noninteractive' too stark. Whilst some texts are undoubtedly 'more' interactive than others, this difference is not necessarily to the same degree in each case and does not account for the potential nuances in engagement with different audio-visual forms.

It is more useful to consider the concept of interactivity not as a single form or binary between what is 'interactive' and what is not, but instead as a spectrum, encompassing not only different media forms but also different forms of interactivity itself. The multiplicity of interactivity is discussed by several writers examining the emergence of new media technologies and their relationship with older media forms. Marie-Laure Ryan for example describes two types of interactivity, 'selective', which describes many activities including evaluating or interpreting a text, and 'productive', which deals more with active participation in a text's construction (Ryan, 2001, 211-212). These two types are then 'distinguished on the basis of the freedom granted to the user and the degree of intentionality of his interventions.' (Ryan, 2001, 205).

Andrew Darley takes this argument a step further when he writes that engagement with media that have traditionally been considered 'passive', such as film and television, can in fact be seen as offering greater levels of interactivity that the more obviously

'interactive' form of the computer game. What Darley argues however is that watching a film or television programme involves a <u>different kind</u> of interactivity compared to playing a game. Whilst a game offers a form of engagement where the player experiences '<u>vicarious kinaesthesia</u> … the impression of controlling events that are taking place in the present.' (Darley, 2000, 157 original emphasis), an audio-visual form such as television offers a greater level of 'semiotic resonance and semantic depth' (Darley, 2000, 164). In the latter the audience's active role comes from the act of interpretation, an argument first put forward in Stuart Halls 'Encoding/Decoding' model (Hall, 1980). Although the audience has less direct input on content when watching television, that does not mean they play no role in determining their engagement. Darley in fact goes on to argue that:

> the space for reading or meaning-making in the traditional sense is radically
>
> reduced in computer games and simulation rides. In this sense the much
>
> maligned "passive" spectators of conventional cinema might be said to be
>
> far more active that their counterparts in the newer forms. (Darley, 2000,
>
> 164)

'Interactivity' is therefore not a monolithic concept but one that covers subtle distinctions between different activities based on both interpretation and physical action. Whilst television relies more on interpretive interactivity and games require physical action, the question of which is more valued by the audience is, as I will go onto discuss, up for debate.

However, whilst the kinds of activity the audience is engaged with, be that interpretation or controlling figures on the screen, is central to any theorisation of 'interactivity', there

is another dimension that must be considered: the audience's <u>awareness</u> of their role and how interactive a medium is. As Darley writes in the quote above, vicarious kinaesthesia is the '<u>perception</u> of controlling events' (Darley, 200, 157, my emphasis). A similar argument is made by Sprio Kiousis in his discussion of interactivity as two-way communication between either two people or one person and a machine. He describes the user's 'ability to <u>perceive</u> the experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication' (Kiousis, 2003, 372). The audience, and their perception of their engagement with any given form of media, is therefore central to determining how interactivity works. The audience must believe they are having some kind of input on their experience for the notion of interactivity to hold, even if it is ultimately, as Moody argues, a 'myth' (Moody, 1996, 60).

To take the role of audience perception a step further then, the notion of interactivity is connected to ideas of agency and control, with these linked concepts providing the key pleasures for audiences in engaging with 'interactive' texts. Beryl Graham for example writes that, '[p]erhaps a primary pleasure of interactivity is that of <u>control</u>, which is why the thwarting of audience control, or the realisation of "token" control, is a site of such <u>dis</u>pleasure' (Graham, 1996, 171). It is therefore possible to construct an model of interactivity as not only a system in which the user's input affects what happens onscreen (the player presses and arrow button and the icon on screen moves) but also that the player perceives themselves as having control over what they are seeing (the player knows and takes pleasure in the fact that they are making the icon move).

What each of these examinations of the term 'interactivity' demonstrates is how it is intricately bound up with perceptions of the active/passive binary that informed earlier work on television audiences. From Roland Barthes's assertion that it is the reader and not the author that creates focused meaning from a text (Barthes, 1982, 148) television audience studies researchers have explored the implications and nuances of audience agency. Many of these explorations have been with the purpose of giving the audience power over their engagement with television, asserting that audience agency appears in their ability to interpret texts in any one of many different ways. Arguments such as David Buckingham's that 'viewers themselves also have a considerable degree of power to define their relationship with television, and may often do so in quite different ways from those envisaged by its producers' (Buckingham, 1987, 4) or Justin Lewis's more reserved point that 'the power to produce meaning lies neither within the TV message nor within the viewer, but in the active engagement between the two' (Lewis, 1991, 58) work through issues concerning the level of control the television audience has over their own experience with the medium. Although limitations to the audience's ability to create meaning independently are acknowledged, these theories maintain a certain level of control and agency for the audience.

These arguments however become complicated in comparing television with more 'interactive' media. As in the quote by Graham above, the computer, internet and game are seen as providing the audience with a more tangible sense of control. Whereas the television audience's sense of control over the images presented to them is limited to changing channels or switching the set off, the computer game player (or indeed the

general computer user) sees their actions have a literal reaction on the screen. They move

their mouse and an onscreen object moves. They press the correct combination of keys in

a game and they 'win'. In turn this raises ideas concerning the value of each media. As

Ellen Seiter writes:

> In advertising, in news broadcasts, in education journals, the computer is
>
> often defined against, and pitched as an improvement on the television set:
>
> where television viewing is passive, computer use is interactive, where
>
> television programmes are entertaining in a stale, commercialized, violent
>
> way, computer software and the Internet are educational, virtuous and new.
>
> (Seiter, 1999, 120)

Part of the value of the internet is therefore tied up with its perceived level of interactivity

and the subsequent connotations of increased audience agency. The internet is somehow

'better' than television, which is simply seen as something to fill void time (Kubey,

1996).

As I will go onto discuss in more detail, those taking part in my audience study for

Spooks did often discuss the interactivity on offer in the games alongside their desire for

control over their engagement with a fictional world. However their discussions also

began to challenge the notion of a simple active/passive binary and especially call into

question the assignment of values to each side of that binary. As I will now explore, in

discussing their engagement with interactive elements of the trans-media texts of Spooks,

those involved in the focus groups applied qualities and values from their engagement

with the television episodes. These audience members desired both passive and active

elements simultaneously, complicating the idea that a medium can be one or the other or that the audience values one over the other.

Character, Identity and Agency

Characters are a central, if not the central, point of engagement for the audience of a television fiction. Michael J Porter, Derboah L Larson, Allison Harthcock and Kelly Berg Nellis argue that the two central characteristics of the television series narrative are 'a heavy emphasis on character development and continuous storylines that flow between episodes of a series' (2002, 102). Characters remain consistent over the course of the series whilst individual episode narratives change and will be less easy to recollect. Whereas, in terms of prolonged engagement with a drama, narratives can begin to merge and become indistinguishable from each other, characters are easier to identify and recall. This very fact indicates the importance of character in establishing audience engagement with a television drama series and a possible point of engagement when that television drama is extended away from the television set and onto the internet. It is the characters that remain a constant point of contact for the audience. Regardless of what is happening in the episode, the characters are recognisable and familiar and therefore help orient the audience within the narrative.

As I have already discussed, despite the moving together of televisual and gaming texts, the two formats still offer different forms of engagement and this argument is also applicable to a player's engagement with character. In many console based video games, the player takes control of a character in the form of an avatar. The player then watches

the avatar move from a detached point of view. As Barry Atkins writes when examining the <u>Tomb Raider</u> games, '[w]e may become deeply involved in the experience of watching or playing "as" Lara Croft, but we never undertake a magical transformation to "become" her…(we "look" not so much over her shoulder, but from above and behind)' (Atkins, 2003, 28). In many ways games such as the <u>Tomb Raider</u> series offer the same kind of third person engagement with character offered in other forms of fictional texts. At the same time however, there are also a number of games, <u>Quake</u> and <u>Halo</u> being two examples, where the point of view of the player is shifted to a first person perspective. As Atkins again describes, '[w]hat the player sees is what the protagonist sees' (Atkins, 2003, 55). Character can therefore be constructed in two primary ways by gaming texts. There can be a 'body', albeit a virtual one, that the player can see and move, or the player can be positioned behind the eyes of the game protagonist, who they embody, seeing the action from their point of view.

A useful way forward in developing an understanding of the differences between engaging with characters in a television drama episode and in a game is to consider the theories of Murray Smith (1995). Smith makes clear that he is writing specifically about engagement with cinema, arguing that:

> [w]atching a film in a cinema is not exactly like watching TV or reading a novel for technological, institutional, and "spectatorial" reasons: cinemas are public spaces eliciting expectations, norms of behaviour and types of experience different from those prompted by the domestic location of TV viewing. (Smith, 1995 12)

Despite the differences between the public space of the cinema and the domestic space of television described by Smith, his theories on the relationship between the audience and fictional characters prove useful in considering other viewing contexts. In particular his construction of three versions of engagement with fictional characters (Smith, 1995, 76) provides a clear way towards understanding the different viewing positions offered in a television series and a game.

Smith rejects many psychoanalytic approaches that argue that viewers 'experience vicariously the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist' (Smith, 1995, 77), preferring Noël Carroll's theories based on Richard Wollheim's concept of 'acentral imagining'. In describing Carroll's work on engaging with horror films, Smith writes:

> When the spectator Charles sees a fictional character faced by the Green
> Slime - to use the dramatis personae of Carroll's analysis - he does not
> experience an emotion identical to that of the character. Rather than
> experiencing <u>fear of the Slime</u>, Charles experiences <u>anxiety for the character</u>
> <u>as she faces the slime</u>. (Smith, 1995, 78, original emphasis)[v]

Smith uses the distinction between a psychoanalytic approach and the idea of the more detached 'acentral imagining' to construct the following three versions of engagement with character, each offering a weaker form than the last:

1. 'not only do we mistake the representation for its referents, but we mistake ourselves for (or "lose ourselves in") the protagonist.'
2. we, as the audience, 'imagine what another person must feel like in their situation, without for a moment confusing ourselves with that other person.'

3. 'We might be said to imagine <u>ourselves in the situation</u> (as distinct from imagining <u>being the character in the situation</u>).'

(all Smith, 1995, 80, original emphasis).

Smith then goes onto dismiss the first version since it relies on 'central imagining' and is therefore close to the psychoanalytic approach in which viewers lose any separation between themselves and the characters on screen, something Smith views as untenable. Instead he further clarifies the difference between the empathetic second version and third version in which the viewer replaces the character with their own persona. What is particularly important in making this distinction is that, Smith writes, 'identification depends on the idea that the spectator's traits and mental states are modelled on those of the character, not that the character functions as a "holding bay" into which the spectator projects her own attributes [as in version three]' (Smith, 1995, 80). In version two, the spectator never imagines themselves inside the fictional text, with fictional characters providing both a barrier to such forms of engagement and acting as a way into alternative forms of engagement. I will now go onto explore initially how Smith's model is apparent in the trans-media texts of <u>Spooks</u> and then how it inflects the focus group discussions that dealt with character.

In the television episodes of <u>Spooks</u>, the audience is clearly aligned with the central group of intelligence officers, Tom Quinn (Matthew MacFadyen), Zoe Reynolds (Keely Hawes) and Danny Hunter (David Oyelowo) in the first three seasons and Ruth Evershed (Nicola Walker), Adam Carter (Rupert Penry-Jones), Fiona Carter (Olga Sosnovska),

Zafar Younis (Raza Jaffrey), Jo Portman (Miranda Raison) and Ros Myers (Hermione Norris) in the later seasons. On a most basic level identification with these characters is established as described by Robin Nelson when he writes that '[p]oint of view is established televisually by the simple means in the first instance of allotting more narrative time, and thus more screen time, to a particular character' (Nelson, 1997, 41). The audience becomes engaged with this particular set of characters because they are the focus and agents in the narrative of each episode. They are the ones we actually see and it is their actions that we follow through each episode and over the development of the series.

The importance of character to audience engagement was summed up by one focus group participant in my research who, when asked why she continued to watch the series so adamantly, said, 'I can only imagine it must have been the characters because actually quite a lot of the time I can forgive a lot of problems with the plot if I like the characters and if I enjoy them' (participant one: 23 year-old female admin. worker, focus group two). For this particular member of the audience, it is the characters that provide her reason for returning every week to the point where she will happily ignore other aspects of the series that she does not like because of them. They are the source of enjoyment rather than the narrative development of each episode. In fact the same respondent also discussed how the viewing in which she is most engaged is the second time she watches an episode, when she knows the plot and can instead focus on moments of character development. In many ways the engagement that this participant gets from *Spooks* is similar to Ien Ang's concept of 'emotional realism' in her discussion of the pleasures of

watching Dallas. Ang argues that the pleasure experienced by audiences for Dallas comes from a realism that 'is situated at the emotional level: what is recognised as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a "structure of feeling"' (Ang, 1985, 45). The characters become important for this viewer because she can relate to and understand the emotions they are going through. Although the world in which they live and work may be alien to her, not many people actually have to deal with espionage and regular threats to their personal safety, she responds affectively to that world. She may not personally know what it is like to be threatened but she understands the fear or apprehension it would elicit, a position that echoes both the idea of 'acentral imagining' and Smith's second version of engagement with characters.

Another point that was demonstrated in the focus groups is that this emotional engagement with the characters will often be twinned with a sense of identification or admiration. For example in these two quotes:

> 'My favourite character is Ruth because I kind of want to be her because
> she doesn't get shot at and sits at a desk'
> (participant two: 25 year old female Government worker, focus group one)

> 'My favourite characters are the two geeky guys [Colin and Malcolm]
> because I think they're cool and I want to be like them.'
> (participant three: 28 year old female Government worker, focus group
> one)

These two participants are particularly engaged with characters they aspire to be like, those that have personality traits that they themselves would like to have. Alongside this identification, almost everyone in the focus groups described their favourite character in terms that suggested an admiration for them, without the direct desire to emulate them. The description 'because they're cool' was particularly common, or to take these two quotes:

> 'my favourite character is Ruth…because she's just so intelligent, partly because of the things she says…and she doesn't let herself you know go mad or breakdown or go out and do things for … personal reasons which I think most of the other characters do at some point. She's got integrity and I like that.'
> (participant one: 23 year old female admin. worker, focus group two)

> 'My favourite character in *Spooks* I think is Ruth because she's always calm and in control and comes out with these clever witticisms'
> (participant four: 17 year old male student, focus group three)

For all of these viewers, it is the characters with positive traits, that they admire or may aspire to be like, that they find appealing about the programme. However as I will discuss later, when they are given the option to take the place of these characters in the games, of merging their own identity with that of the character they admire, they do not want to and in doing so demonstrate how audiences engage with character on different media platforms.

Characters also provide key moments that challenge or threaten audience members' engagement with the series. Those involved in the focus groups often articulated a sense of disappointment when they perceived character development as failing. One of the main complaints they had about the programme was when they saw the development of a character veer away from the established trajectory. For example this quote,

> 'I didn't like the way Tom went towards the end…sort of ran off. I didn't
> like the way they did it and I find Adam - I do like him, he's a very good
> character but I…think he goes off the general line that his character should
> be going in quite a lot. I don't think he's going in the right direction.'
> (participant five: 19 year old female admin worker, focus group two)

Characters therefore also provide a way for audiences to disengage with the series, to be put off it. Quotes such as this suggest that it is moments when the audience recognises their lack of control over the diegesis of the series, when there is a development that clashes with their own perceptions of what the series is and who its characters are, that are moments when the audience begins to become detached from the programme.

These kind of comments relate to Smith's second form of identification, where viewers 'imagine what another person must feel like in their situation, without for a moment confusing ourselves with that other person' (Smith, 1995, 80). They sympathise with and admire the characters in the programme but never see them as a 'holding bay' (Smith, 1995, 80) to project their own personality onto, as outlined in Smith's third version. However the games take this third version and extends it even further to remove the need for a defined character to act as a holding bay, completely. The player plays as

themselves, not as Tom, Ruth or any of the other characters from the series. Therefore the games offer a position that combines aspects of the characters from the television series (their roles and actions) with aspects of he player's own personality (their skills and attributes).

In the internet games this is primarily done through the use of point of view, which is established through the design of the games, which in turn replicates the design of the series. As I have already described, the player is positioned at a desk in the office space from the programme, literally taking the place of a character from the television series. The space around them explicitly calls on visual elements from the series, most noticeably in the appearance of a meeting room in the background of the games' homepage that recreates the fictional MI-5 crest visible in many episodes of the series. They are then told to perform tasks that they will have seen the characters perform. The games also recreate the characters' relationship with their superior when the character of Harry appears using direct address to guide and chastise the player, the same role he takes in the episodes, again drawing the player into the fictional world in a similar way to the use of a first person point of view within a recognisable space discussed earlier. However, Harry is the only character that appears and it is therefore the player's own identity that becomes the central character in the games. Instead of taking control of a fictional character, a 'body' other than their own that serves as Smith's idea of a 'holding bay' (1995, 80), they must use their own identity, their own skills and abilities to perform the task required of them. In the BBCi games, that same positioning is established when

characters speak directly through the camera, to the player sitting at home. The player is never referred to by a fictional name, they remain themselves.

Therefore, despite the similarity in style and content to the television episodes, the games offer the player a different kind of engagement with the world of <u>Spooks</u> compared to the television episodes in terms of their relationship to character. In the television episode, the audience is positioned to engage in the kind of 'identification' outlined in Smith's second version, where they are invited to imagine the situation from the fictional characters' points of view. The bodies and personalities of other characters are always present and the viewer takes pleasure from observing and empathising with them. In contrast, engagement in the games is closer to Smith's third version of identification. The player places themselves in the situations they have seen the character in and they must respond to the circumstances created in the games themselves. Instead of a third-person perspective on the action as the viewer watches other bodies act out, the games present a first-person perspective. It is the player themselves that is the 'protagonist' of the game, not a separate, fictional character.

What emerged from the focus groups regarding this shift however is that those who particularly engage with the characters do not want to replace them and the kinds of engagement with characters available through the television episodes would be preferred in the games. The following is a quote from a conversation between two members of a focus group, who discussed not only their experience of playing the games currently available, but also discussed the kind of game they would like to be available:

A: Harry is the only one in it and we're spies. No, I would've liked to

have seen something probably more like-

B: Properly interacting with the characters would've been great…you

could stop Tom from going mad because you wouldn't let him go out

with Christine Dale or Dr Vicky[vi].

(A: participant five: 19 year old female office worker)

(B: participant one: 23 year old female office worker, focus group two)

These participants do not want to step inside the fictional world of Spooks and experience

the kind of engagement Smith describes when he writes that we 'imagine ourselves in the

situation' (Smith, 1995, 80, original emphasis). They want the fictional characters from

the series to remain and therefore they reject the kind of viewing position offered by the

games in favour of one more familiar to them from the series. They do not want to

position themselves within the diegesis of Spooks, they want to experience it through the

actions of a third party. They still want the pleasure that they find in a television series by

engaging with a character other than themselves.

What is also interesting about this quote is how issues of character and issues of agency

and control merge together. Discussions of unpopular character developments highlighted

the audience's lack of control over the series whilst here the games are discussed in terms

of potentially granting them that lost control, but in reality failing to. Instead of wanting

to emulate the characters and experience what they experience, to test herself against

them, the second respondent in the quote above wants to play an active part in correcting

the elements of story and character development that she was unhappy about in the

television series. In a later discussion about what kind of game they would like to see emerge in connection to Spooks, she furthered this opinion, talking about her desire to play a game whereby she could pick her own team of officers from the characters and control how they developed over a series of missions. She particularly got excited when presented with the idea that she could kill off the one character she strongly disliked.

This conversation therefore demonstrates two points about how audiences engage with the same text on multiple formats. On the one hand there is a desire for forms of engagement that are available through drama on television to be transferred when that drama is expanded onto the potentially interactive medium of the internet. Although the games allow players to become the characters, to place themselves inside the fictional world of the series, participants in the focus groups do not want this. They do not want their own identity to become part of the Spooks text and instead want to maintain a distinction between themselves and the characters within the game play. In terms of Smith's theory, they desire the second form of engagement in which they can 'imagine what another person must feel like [or would do] in their situation without for a moment confusing ourselves with that other person' (Smith, 1995, 80). This kind of engagement fits then with Janet Murray's statement that, '[w]hen we enter the enchanted world [of a fictional narrative] as our actual selves, we risk draining it of its delicious otherness' (Murray, 2000, 101). The appeal of Spooks is the ability for it to bring the audience into a world that is different to their own, populated by people who are not themselves. The characters provide a boundary between the viewers' identity and the world of Spooks, they are the portal through which the audience accesses the 'delicious otherness.' When

the games break this boundary the audience potentially becomes uncomfortable and whilst revelling in the opportunity to exert control over the fictional world, also shrink away from the prospect of inserting themselves into it.

On the other hand, the games are discussed as a potential way for audiences to gain more control over the text as an omniscient observer-manipulator. They want the moments in which they feel a lack in their engagement with the television episodes, the moments when what they see on screen becomes a radical break from what they want to see, to be transformed by the control they perceive a game as potentially giving them. However the construction of the <u>Spooks</u> internet games, as discrete activity based puzzles, doesn't allow them this, instead only offering the chance to place themselves in the spies' position and compare their achievements. By looking at audiences' responses to issues of character in terms of both the episodes and the games it becomes clear that whilst they prefer engagement with established fictional characters throughout the different elements of the <u>Spooks</u> text, they also desire a stronger sense of control over those characters. It is through interactive technologies such as the internet that they see the possibility of gaining this control even if it is not currently available.

The binary between activity and passivity that seems to influence much of the debate surrounding the development of 'interactive media' therefore begins to unravel in these discussions. Whilst these audience members do desire a more 'active' role, to see their actions have direct influence on what occurs on screen, it is twinned with a desire to retain what might be seen as the more 'passive' qualities associated with television

viewing, to be positioned as a spectator outside a fictional world and not as an active agent in the narrative. Instead of wanting to gain complete control over the fictional world and insert their own identity as the active agent, they want to maintain a detached viewing position and enjoy the trans-media text as a separate, fictional world to explore. Control over fictional characters is welcomed, but only so long as those fictional characters remain to serve as figures for the viewer to manipulate.

Conclusion

With the development of new media technologies, television drama is increasingly being produced to involve multiple forms of audio-visual fictional entertainment, offering different forms of interactivity, across these various technologies. However, the development of trans-media drama is also leading to a complication of the values assigned to these different technologies and the forms available on them. In particular the values assigned to different kinds of interactivity are complicated in the examination of audiences for the gaming texts of Spooks. Seemingly 'passive' spectator positions, which are in fact positions of cerebral rather than physical interactivity, are desired by participants in my focus groups. The absence of the distance from the text that fictional characters provide becomes an important point of disengagement with forms in which they are replaced as the active agent in the narrative by the player.

Although the physical interactivity and control the games offer is not rejected completely, it is desired alongside a positioning outside of the fictional text. The perceived value of computer forms such as gaming, their need for an audience to physically interact with

them, is only valued by these audience members when it is twinned with the more passive relationship with fictional texts available through television drama. As such the further development of forms and technologies with differing levels of interactivity into coherent, trans-media texts, will require a greater understanding of the desire of audiences to transfer forms of engagement available through television texts into those platforms that seem to offer new ones.

Notes

[i] For a discussion on the merits of diaries and focus groups see Petrie and Willis (1995), Buckingham (1987), Morley (1992) and Thomas (2002)

[ii] Shortly before the first series aired on BBC One in May 2002, an interactive episode was launched on a website created for the series. Players acted as 'new recruits' and helped Danny Hunter (David Oyelowo) investigate a radical group that his brother, who never appears in the series, had become involved in. Timed to coincide with the episodes aired during the first series, the game closed in June 2002 and has not been made available since. Subsequently it was not discussed in the focus groups and will not be a focus of the following analysis.

[iii] In late 2005 the second 'mission' game also became available on the BBC website as a test for transmitting high bandwidth content over a broadband connection and could therefore be accessed by anyone with high speed internet access.

[iv] Reality television is of course an exception to this in which the audience is invited to have input on the content of the programme. In drama however it is extremely rare, the only examples in recent years being a cross-over episode of Casualty and Holby City (both BBC, 26/08/06) where the audience could choose the recipient of a donor heart and an episode of Family Affairs (24/05/04) where the audience chose the outcome of a love triangle.

[v] See also Carroll, Noël (1990) The Philosophy of Horror (New York and London, Routledge) pp80-81

[vi] She is referring here to two romantic relationships that Tom Quinn has during the programme's second series, which contribute to his breakdown and exit at the beginning of series three, a narrative development she disliked.

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