Extreme simulation: the status of the stunt.

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Introduction

This is an enquiry into the nature of reference and imitation when a game activity is reproduced by bodies in physical space. This is a question both of aesthetics – of mimesis and the relationship to the work of art—as well as of meaning and reference. The imitation of a character (e.g. cosplay) or a story (re-enactment) or a setting (e.g. theme parks) intuitively strike us as very different from the recreation of a stunt or action from a game. In one case, the status of the referent remains fictional: the cosplayer is a fake or derivative instantiation of the original character. In the latter case, the re-creation does not provoke an intuition that it is derivative, less authentic, or fake. Instead, it confirms the viability of the simulation.

Authentic and dependent performances.

We begin by exploring an intuition about the status of different imitations of elements of fictional forms: that there is a variety of derivative performance which is more authentic than the fictional original and that this authenticity reveals something about the operation and limits of the fictive in digital games and simulation. This enquiry will touch upon a number of topics: fiction theory, theory of reference, simulation, speculative design, and digital, screen-mediated play as a signifying practice.

We start with some film clips, with the apology that this intuition need only a hypothetical possibility to work as an exercise in thinking about language, fiction and reference: it just happens to be the case that an interesting genre of film has emerged which relies on the ambiguity that we explore here. (A media-theoretical or screen-studies take on this would be a possible line of thought for later.)

The first of these clips is from the developer's notes for the 2001 PlayStation 2 game *SSX Tricky,* an arcade-style snowboarding game featuring racing and tricks. The exexutive producer, Steven Rechtschaffner (also a successful freestyle skier), describes many of the tricks in the game as highly improbable, affirming the fantastic, rather than simulationist, aspirations of the designers: they wanted to produce an over-the-top experience, not a close simulation of snowboarding. At the same time, they balked at declaring the tricks completely impossible: they were "theoretically" possible to the extent that they relied on a physics model which made some reference to real-world physics and character models which were articulated and rigged in ways which correspond to the conditions of real-world human bodies.

The second clip is from a film maker and stunt skier, Candide Thovex. His videos have been described as being "like a video game[1]," and it is apparent that he treats terrain like it was a designed level. He jumps through cars, spins through tunnels, glides over melting ice. His videos have some explicitly fictive aspects to them: actors who are chasing him, or are disgruntled by his activities. However, the stunts themselves, as in many YouTube videos, are the central feature for the video.

The argument follows does not require the existence of the film clips; however, watching them—in particular, the Thovex video—does make the intuition more accessible. At a minimum, all that is needed is that a simulated activity designated as impossible become instantiated as possible after all.

Diagesis and referentiality

The status of the elements of the game which contribute to game's production of its diagesis – those fictions which trace back to the invention of characters, places and events – produce a different mental space than those which trace book to the invention of an uninstantiated activity, to a possible execution of a trick which alludes, not to the body specifically of this character or another, but to a simulation of human bodies within a simulation of physics.

A distinction between fictional event and a hypothetical activity (what Flusser[2] calls a "happening") is an important one. A trick performed in a game is not an event in this sense: it is not dependent on an invented history, a chain of imagined cause and effect which culminates in the fictional event. It is not important for this argument that, in an ergodic work, there are a variety of strings of fictive causes to produce an event. An event as a historical event can be reproduced and recreated, but not reinstantiated, and a fictional event (a coronation of a fictional queen, a war) can only be imitated. A "happening", on the other hand, is not specifically located in time and space (and thus not restricted to the diagetic.) The trick in a snowboarding game is fungible: it does not refer to a specific fictional event in the world of SSX. (There is, indeed, a fictional world of SSX: there are characters and settings invented by the designers.)

There is a controller combination which produces an Uber-trick in SSX: in the right circumstance, this combination will trigger an animation in a model of a snowboarder. One snowboarder has been designated "JP", and is an authored, fictional character. The player is not JP, though he can role-play as JP or cosplay as JP or write JP fan-fiction: none of these activities turn him into JP. The trick is described as unique to JP in the game: if the player has selected another character, the same combination of controls in the same game context (the right resources, the right terrain) will generate a different trick.

What distinguishes the event from the activity is indexicality: in the first case, the reference to the fictive character indexes the character which has a possible history that would not be indexed by a reproduction or derivative performance of that character. If JP's parents are wealthy French diplomats, and I am cosplaying as JP, my parents do not become wealthy French diplomats, nor do my parents become his parents or his parents mine. Even if my parents happened to be wealthy French diplomats, they would not be the French diplomats

[1] Dicker, "This Real-Life Skiing Video Is Not a Video Game."
[2] Flusser, "Television Image and Political Space."

which named a child JP who looked a certain way and competed in (fictional) snowboard races at fictional places.

What the activity of each trick refers to – the minimum conditions for successful reference – are to any possible performance of it, not a specific fictive performance of it. Facilitating this schema are the other tricks which the player's characters and avatar can perform in the game which are recognized as simulations of actually-existing tricks (grabs, spins, flips.)

Documentary and fiction

A contrast can be made with the indexicality at work in the 2004 game *JFK Reloaded*[3]. The game asks the player to attempt to reconstruct the assassination of President John Kennedy: it provides a sophisticated ballistics simulation and a 3D reconstruction of the conditions leading up to the assassination. Kirk Ewing, the game's designer, indicated in interviews and in the accompanying website that the account of the assassination of JFK reported by the Warren Commission could, indeed, by reproduced by the simulation, and players were challenged to do so, with a cash bounty: the competition ended on February 22, 2005 with a near approximation, but not a full reconstruction of the official account's events.

In SSX, a performance designated as impossible is shown to be possible: in JFK, a perhaps-possible performance which is never actually performed indexes (according to Poremba) an account of a historical action: Lee Harvey Oswald's actual shooting.

Conclusion: possible and impossible rules

Juul[4] distinguished between games as rules and games as fiction, identifying the first as "real" and thus outside of the fictive function of the game. This thought experiment complicates this distinction: a rule produces an activity which refers to a possible world; the very "reality" of that activity then indexes the activity as a possibility. Rules refer to entities, and those entities have different ontic statuses. When the activity is impossible in the real world—e.g., a rule which enables a magical fireball—the rule alludes to elements which correspond only to elements in the fictional world, not to the world of lived experience. In a digital game, the rule refers to the representation of the entity (the virtual object), which in turn refers to entities outside the game. The sense of authenticity or inauthenticity inherits from the ontic status of the entity denoted by the virtual object: its simple existence as a rule does not determine its status.

Games

JFK RELOADED. Traffic Software, Windows, 2004
SSX TRICKY. Electronic Arts, PlayStation 2, 2001.

References

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[3] For an extended discussion on JFK Reloaded, see Galloway et al, "From Michael Moore to JFK Reloaded." Abd Poremba, "Frames and Simulated Documents". Poremba works through the question of indexicality as it usually applies to documentary and the relationship between simulation and reference. In a sense, her project is a counterpoint to this one.
[4] Juul, *Half-Real*, 161.

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