Submission on the Zine of: Technology: The Evolution of Play

The evolution of videogames

Videogames have been present for many years where computer scientists started designing simple games and simulations on mainframe computers with one dimensional graphics and designs. One of the very first videogame was “Spacewar!” which simply included a needle and a wedge where the player would simply engage in a dodge fight. Old games such as Tetris or Blix contained easy and plain graphics and not many rules. As time passes, technology developpes into something more sophisticated, and has affected the way we play videogames. Play is a free activity with bounded rules while entering the realm of make- believe, which contains Mimicry, Agon, Alea and Ilinx (Cailliois, 2001). The intensification of Play comes from the development of technology as it highly affects the emergence of better game engines and graphics processors which play a big role on the engagement of the player, as well as the evolution of narrative based games into what they are today.

Videogames have come a long way, and thanks to technology, some sophisticated technological advances molded the ways games are played today. Before diving into the topic on the progression of engagement of the player and the breakthrough of storytelling and narrative gaming, it is crucial to know and name some of the advances that gaming technology created which affected these progressions. I) Videogames now provide staggering graphics and high-definition displays which increased playability and makes the player seem like he or she is inside the game. Videogames went from having 8-bit graphics to televisions and laptops with 4K pixels capabilities and well contrasted and high-definition colors. II) Virtual and Augmented Reality has taken over videogames where VR headsets give the players a fully immersive experience and step into this ‘magic circle’ (Caillois, 2001) where you lose yourself before coming back to the real world. AR games operates real life spaces which allows the game’s goal to be applied to real- life scenarios. How cool is it to play bowling or the mole game on your own floor or on your dining table? III) Facial and Voice recognition are also present in videogames. Face recognition helps build the player’s traits and similarities in a video game in order to make a personalized character or even gestures that resembles the gamer. With the example of Bitmoji, technology is now able to adapt the person’s facial expressions. Voice recognition unlocks the player’s commands orally. With that feature in hand the gamer can switch his console off and on, surf through the web by just talking to his gaming device. IV) Movement and gesture recognition unlocks the ability to take part in first person shooter games and creates interplay with the gadget. By using a three-dimensional camera, the gamer can play the game by simply using his body such as waving his hand, jumping, running and many more. EyeToy for example is a PlayStation webcam which contains game that simply allows to players interact with the game by using sound and motion. V) Wearable and Mobile gaming become prominent in the gaming world. Wearable gaming includes sensor devices that can be worn on your head, wrist, body and have different purposes. VR goggles is an example of Wearable gaming. Mobile gaming has been present for many years now where we play games on our phones, laptops and iPad. What is better than playing games that are now transferred to our hands? There are no limits in terms of location where you can’t play video games, whether in a restaurant, at home, walking down the street and many more. Videogames went from being available in these large, squared computers to being present everywhere at any time and place. These new features have unlocked better ways to pay and engage with games, as well as imitating the story of a movie and put into a game.

Imagine a version of the game Bioshock without cut scenes and without audio diaries, do you think players would still understand what the game was all about? With the presence of high graphics and displays, the space and environment of the game can give out better and high-quality narratives that are built by designers, or as Jenkins (2004) says, ‘narrative architects’ which help the players engage and better understand the purpose of the game: "interactive drama/storytelling/narrative" paradigm has been the leading design guide in most current videogame design.” (Frasca, 2004). To make narrative games stronger and more appealing there needs to be a presence of “interface design and expressive movements” (Jenkins 2004). With the game technologies provided for us today, games have been able to give out compelling game spaces that helps create the story through the environment of the game. A game’s environment can be an effective method of storytelling and how embedding narrative elements into the very space and places that we visit throughout the game can speak just as loudly as more traditional forms of storytelling. Level design can drive our understanding, feeling and identity. Environmental storytelling requires a level of deductive reasoning to create details in the story and to determine relationships and cause and effect. It makes the player an active participant in the story and not just a passive viewer. With the evolution of technology and graphics, the animations become more interactive. Maps and signs can help the player navigate through the complex game. Things like architecture, layout and scale can make the place a believable location. Sophisticated and high-quality graphics unlocked new types of environmental storytelling such as ‘evocative spaces’, ‘enacting stories’, ‘embedded narratives’, and ‘emergent narrative’ (Jenkins 2004). When talking about evocative spaces it is the idea of knowing the narrative and story prior entering the environment of the game. However, the strength of the story depends on how the graphics and designs set in the game. The stronger and more detailed the graphics are, the more engaged the player will be as he or she steps into the environment of the story with higher quality. Embedded narrative is the idea of a story withing a story, where the story and information are given to the player and has to find his or her way “The author of a film has a high degree control over when and if we receive bits of information, but a game designer can control the narrational process by distributing the information across the game space” (Jenkins, 2004). Emergent narrative are unscripted stories, but aren’t ‘chaotic’ as well. The stories aren’t controlled by anyone but on how you play the game and interact with it. The Sims and Minecraft are two emergent narrative games where one creates his proper story by having a house and family in Sims, or by building forts and managing the wildlife in Minecraft. These types of games let the player stay in an ‘authoring environment’ (Jenkins, 2004). However, some might say that Sims negative aspects on the game such as that the characters don’t communicate in a verbal language (Frasca, 2004). However, I believe that thanks to the new features that technology has provided for narrative gaming, we can create our own meaning with their nonsense language and create our own story. With the rise of technology, videogame environments can be a huge medium for storytelling. Whether they are telling stories about what happened before your arrival of the game, giving clues about the characters who live in the game, evoking emotions trough architecture, or providing contexts for player identity, these spaces and graphics can speak volumes.

The advancement of technology in game engines and the gaming industry not only enhances and creates new ways of storytelling, but the way players engage with the game. The new features provided for the videogame are catalysts of the way gameplay is now defined. As game technology evolves, the engagement of the player changes as well. Playing games with VR goggles or with AR devices, lets the player step into the world of the game by not just being mentally present in the game, but by physically being there. It plays on one of the effects of Paidia (Caillois, 2001) where the player experiences free flowing when entering the virtual realm of the game. The player is in the zone and is absorbed by the game where he’s involved. When experiencing flow, you lose self-consciousness and track of time. You feel a sense of enjoyment when playing, especially with VR goggles where you are physically surrounded by graphics. As you dive in the game, the challenges and goals seem clearer and therefore encourages the player to engage even more. Furthermore, with high graphics, it enhances one of the categories of play which is mimicry (Caillois, 2001) where simulation and role-playing become more real, as the limit between reality and virtuality is getting thinner. It affects Ludus (Caillous 2001) as well, as the player can gain mastery faster in that newfound skill. With these new technological advancements, the player’s motivation to participate in these games is boosted.

With the emersion of new technologies, gaming and the world of play have progressed and intensified the player’s engagement. Gaming technology has developed astonishing gadgets such as wearable gaming, VR and AR gaming, high graphics, gesture recognition and many more. Thanks to these technological advancements, it has changed that way games are played, as it has highly affected narrative game stories which encouraged the engagement of the gamer.

Citations:

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