Gaming, AI and the Aesthetics of Stuplimity

ECHO (Ultra Ultra 2017) and *Invisibe Inc.* (Klei 2015) are videogames that tell stories about artificial intelligence, stories steeped in the canons of cyberpunk and science-fiction. Derivative enough in their own right, these human-authored plots become more interesting once we consider the games' use of AI to elicit emergent experiences of shock, suspense and 'stuplimity' (Ngai 2000). Thematising AI's role in digital creativity and digital play, they ask us to consider not just how games portray AI, but also how they function as sites of posthuman encounter (Fizek 2018).

ECHO sits within a tradition of posthuman horror games that explore the nature and status of humanity in an era of "smart" technologies (Gallagher 2017, 114-140). Pitting players against uncannily intelligent monsters, aliens or automata, such games repurpose gothic tropes to challenge the '(mis)perception that humans are the only important or relevant cognizers on the planet' (Hayles 2017, 11). *ECHO's* headline contribution to this tradition is its so-called 'adaptive artificial intelligence' system. Protagonist En faces off against an army of doppelgangers who learn to copy her, gradually integrating abilities she uses into their own repertoires of possible actions. In some ways, then, *ECHO* demystifies videogame AI, showing how simple rules and scripts concatenate to give the impression of intelligent behaviour. If anything, though, this gesture only renders En's doppelgangers eerier. Crude as their programming may be, they remain capable of both thwarting and unsettling players – suggesting (in line with posthumanist reconceptualisations of the Freudian uncanny (see Liu 2011, 208-220; Botting 2013, 128-137)) that if humans fear lively machines, it may be because they remind us of our own machinic tendencies.

ECHO also foregrounds questions of emergence through its environmental design, creating a sense of awe-inspiring scale and complexity by repeating, rescaling and recombining a relatively small number of geometrical forms. In a similar vein, *Invisible Inc.* deploys procedural generation techniques to create an endless succession of environments and challenges out of the same basic building blocks, resulting in an experience that is always the same, but always different. If all digital media comprise discrete 'elements assembled into larger-scale objects' that can 'themselves… be combined into even larger objects', these games dramatize and draw attention to the "'fractal structure of new media"' (Manovich 2001, 30), exemplifying in so doing the 'stuplime' duality of the videogame: a form that simultaneously confronts us with 'the banality of the artifact as a mass-produced consumer object, and the sublimity of its distance and difference from the human' (Shinkle 2012, 105).

Bio

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