

The ‘cinema of attractions’ in games and game culture

The cinema of attractions is a conception of cinema which was prevalent in films until 1906-7. It bases itself on its ability to display, thus making it fundamentally exhibitionistic in nature (Gunning 1990: 57). It is deliberately ostentatious; seeming to have the sole aim of soliciting the gaze of the spectator. According to Gunning, it is primarily “a way of presenting a series of views to an audience” with a de-emphasis on narrative (57). With these definitions as a starting point, I will attempt to show how the cinema of attractions is relevant to an analysis of game culture, and how it is significant in the analysis.

A common reason many individuals have for playing games is to obtain enjoyment, to be entertained. Enjoyment may be derived from aggressive and intense in-game activity or destruction, or from the simple admiration of an ‘impressive’ image (King 2006: 153). The presence of the cinema of attractions is clearly evident in both examples. Visual curiosity is incited, with pleasure being supplied by exciting events which may be points of interests in themselves (Gunning 1990: 58). With the following example, I seek to show how the cinema of attractions is prevalent and yet may not necessarily be central to games, appearing as merely a component or even a tool which is used to propel the player into acceptance of and engagement with the narrative and interactive elements. In the third-person PC game *American McGee's Alice* (2000), the cut-scene preceding the playable portion in [one of the stages](#) is an unfolding visual spectacle; the introduction of a new environment and the implication of an upcoming predicament. The cut-scene has the dual purpose of causing psychological impact in the form of fear and anticipation, and providing clues about the degree of intensity to be expected and the course of action which should be taken when control of the player-character is once again relinquished to the player.

The above demonstrates that the cinema of attractions is indeed concerned with the extent to which spectacular and sensational qualities offered can be actively created by the actions of the player/player-character (King 2006: 165), and is therefore worth an inclusion in the analysis of games. Consider the “ultimate tourist spectacle” of 1901: ‘Trip to the Moon’, a fairground attraction in which visitors entered an airship and were transformed into actors, having their parts to play in the spectacle in order to heighten their sensations of the dramatic illusion of space travel (Nasaw 1993: 69). Nasaw depicts the visitors as becoming “part of the sight, part of the show, simultaneously insider and spectator” (69), a description that is also

suitably applicable to the players of games. By drawing such a parallel, it can be seen how a desire for participation in spectacle has long been existent in forms of entertainment preceding the modern video game. Narrative in the classical sense is not a dominant feature of games, although there are strong traces of narrative conventionality. (Darley 2000: 155) According to Darley, the expectations which people have towards games are not centred on the idea of telling a story, but rather on *interaction* (155). Pleasure is derived from proactively and reactively engaging with the game in order to drive the flow of continuity, maintaining the “pronounced illusion of dynamic presence within an alternative world” (158).

Interestingly, interaction with and within games can be compared to the “look at the camera by actors” in early films (Gunning 1990: 57). The relationship established between the cinema of attractions and its spectators through such an act was seen as being willing to fracture the illusion of a self-contained world in order to solicit the attention of the viewer (57). However, the “look” could instead be seen as a prelude to interactivity as it seems to contain an invitation to the viewer to enter the world of the character. Interactivity in games generally involves the agency of the player; the ability to cause something to happen within the game-world or to exert power over elements of that world (Wood 2007: 107-8). The “look” from early films and the spectator’s reaction to it is merely a one-time affair, with any possibility of interaction impeded by the lack of technology required to produce ample constructions of a kinaesthetic nature: the on-screen characters do not appear to have the ability to process the spectator’s reaction and provide necessary feedback to sustain continuity.

It is then worth mentioning the spectacle touted as “the world’s first interactive movie”, [Kino-Automat](#). First shown in Montreal in 1967, it contained stops after each scene where a dilemma was encountered, and a live performer, supposedly the main character in the movie, would appear and ask the audience to vote for one out of two possible choices that the main character in the movie could make. “As if by magic”, the scene which received the majority of votes was played. (Naimark 1998) In reality, both possible scenes were carefully constructed such that they would end up leading to the same result. It is immediately visible that the structure of this movie shares similarities with role-playing games such as *Fallout* (1997) where the ending sequence is invariable although outcomes and events within the game are influenced by the player’s choices. Freedom of choice only occurs within built-in limits and opportunities which are provided (Darley 2000: 152). Extents to which limits are imposed are not always as restrictive, especially not in games like *The Sims 2* (2004). In such

a game, the player is actively involved in the set-up and the creation of spectacle, possibly giving gameplay a perfect balance between enjoyments derived from interaction and the viewing of spectacle. However, it can be argued that the cinema of attractions inevitably takes a back seat to the demands of gameplay. “The very notion of ‘sitting back’ and merely contemplating the aesthetic qualities is anathema to most forms of gameplay” (King 2006: 158).

Spectacle may also exist on smaller scales in games. For example, light effects are a common source of localized visual spectacle (King 2006: 157). [Dazzling flashes and streaks of light](#) often accompany offensive moves in the game *Devil May Cry 4* (2007), appearing in heightened degrees of intensity when the move actually connects with a target. Such displays are not only fascinating to see, but may also provide the function of letting the player know he has been successful in implementing an attack. In such cases, it may not be possible for the player to fully appreciate the spectacle of a combat sequence as the game requires “more or less constant levels of response from the player” (King 2006: 158). The visual qualities of spectacle are likely to be appreciated in a somewhat subliminal manner, although they still contribute to the overall impression of a game (159). This demand no longer exists when the sequence is recorded. A recording of gameplay invites the gaze of potential viewers and allows them to enjoy the spectacle of gameplay in a passive manner. Although no longer functional as a game, a [recorded video](#) is still an attraction, as the spectator is aggressively subjected to ‘sensual or psychological impact’ (Gunning 1990: 59). It is in video game arcades that the enjoyment occurs in the public sphere instead of in private, where a player may become a spectacle himself (Brodie 2002). Especially skilled players of arcade games such as the [DrumMania](#) series often cause feelings of awe from bystanders and fellow players alike. Being a spectator of such an event is somewhat similar to descriptions of visiting Broadway in 1892 to see “the lights of the city”. There is no admission price required to be paid; the viewing of the performance is free (Nasaw 1993: 8-9).

The cinema of attractions is willing to display its visibility, to rupture a self-contained world (Gunning 1990: 57). The Nintendo DS game *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (2005), contains an event in which such a display of visibility is a spectacle in itself. If the player fails to save the game before turning the DS off, something curious happens the next time the game is started up. A disgruntled mole called Mr. Resetti appears and gives the player a lengthy lecture on the importance of saving before shutdown. Interaction in games has been said to give the player “a choice between imagining the world of the game and seeing the

representation as a mere placeholder for information and the rules of the game” (Juul 2005: 2). If this is so, events such as the appearance of Mr. Resetti leave the player with no choice but to submit to the awareness that the imagined world is but a game with rules that should be adhered to (At least in Mr. Resetti’s opinion). There appears to be something rather exhibitionistic about this, almost as the use of current technology in the game is being flaunted; the detection of an act as seemingly trivial as shutting a game down before saving is shown to the player to be possible. The figurative fourth wall has been broken.

Perhaps the most unabashed use of spectacle in games is demonstrated by the use of cut-scenes in video game advertising. Cut-scenes in most games are commonly first seen in introductions, and “conventionally aim for a cinematic appeal” (Wood 2007: 128). It is no secret that the fastest way to catch the eye of potential buyers of video games is to impress them with stunning visuals (Schnitzer 2003). Yoshiyuki Tonoe, cut-scene Director of *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* (2008) readily admits: “The latest CG movies found in games are stunning and really help sell the game”.

In conclusion, the cinema of attractions is present in games and game culture in many forms. The player may be invited to simply appreciate the aesthetics of the visuals on display at times, and at others, his attention may be drawn to certain aspects of the game which are vital to the enhancement of enjoyment of the gaming experience. Games may also be seen as spectacles in themselves, when they are viewed as a form of entertainment without direct participation. Upon the examination of games and game culture, it seems difficult to separate them from the concept of the cinema of attractions, and therefore I feel that it remains significant to their analysis.

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