Exploring the Queer Possibilities of Rougelike Video Games
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We find video games interesting to study because, as Galloway suggests, they require the "active participation of players." Where in other traditional artforms, audiences might interpret what is being presented to them; in video games, audience actions are fundamental to the creation (or more precisely, expression) of that presentation. That is, for a video game to meaningfully operate, it requires something beyond itself: the player.

This structural requirement is intriguing when put into the context of some more recent developments in poststructural metaphysics. Queer theory, a branch of poststructuralism, generally posits using a variant of Kant's critique of totality that all representational systems—language, social identifications, and other symbologies—are incomplete (Copjec 2002; Copjec 2015; MacCormick 2008). There is always something 'that exceeds the representation.'

Our research attempted to draw a connection between this notion of excess and videogames, specifically Rougelikes (a genre of video games mostly characterized by the presence of procedurally generated levels and the permeant death of the player character). Since video games are representational systems that incomplete without 'that which is outside itself,' a careful study of them could provide insight into the nature of what precisely 'exceeds the representation' and where this 'excess' is located in our lives. (These questions are so hard to answer because excess is, by definition, something that cannot be represented in language.) Specifically, we propose that video games—unlike other artforms—structurally contain space for 'excess.' They are, in the strangest sense, a representation that must allow for what it cannot represent; a signifier that allows for the non-signifier.

An example might clarify this structural argument and show how the procedural elements of video games can provide further insight. Consider: you load up *Rouge Legacy*, a video game about discovering the secrets of a mysterious, ever-changing castle. Every time you die in the game, the castle is randomized and you must begin again at its start: enemies respawn, rooms change their shape, the location of prized chests shifts, and hidden rewards conceal themselves behind new puzzles. Although each version of the castle technically contains a finite amount of space, the randomization means there is an infinite amount to explore within that space. As you play the game, each singular representation of the castle is exposed as incomplete; the 'castle' cannot be contained within the castle. But the critique goes further. It is precisely through the players navigation of space that the impossibility of totality is exposed. That is, the 'excess' of the castle, its infinity, emerges from a confrontation of the external—the player—with the representational. In other words, the structure of video games—pre-existing code combined with player action—creates the possibility of a critique of excess. *Rouge Legacy* uses the player and the castle to create an infinite space (and in turn, room for excess). The critique here is not simply 'excess' (the player) creates 'excess' (the infinite castle); rather, since a necessary component of the castle's existence is the player, *Rouge Legacy* is signaling that excess is a structural component of representation.

This was the first conclusion of our research. Using primarily *Rouge Legacy*, we contended that the structural elements of Rougelikes make them deconstructive of totalizing representations. Through the usage of the player in these deconstructions, Rougelikes gesture towards an interesting conclusion: since all representations are imperfect, they tautologically produce excess. This critique locates Rougelikes in a rather peculiar place. Since video games are themselves representational systems, Rougelikes are representations that both acknowledge their own incompleteness (that is, the non-representational) and create a space for that which exceeds them. We then, using a second Rougelike *Hades*, attempted to show the limitations of that 'space.' Excess in a world of representation is something negotiated. It is

in some ways accessible and some ways not. We conclude that the non-assimilated can never fully be denied; it structurally persists; but there are often mechanisms that successfully make this persistence trivial.

Ultimately, our research attempted to generate a new theoretical framework for video game studies based on previous scholarly work in the field of queer theory; applying this framework to Rougelikes, we attempted to conversely gleam insight into the metaphysics of queer theory. We hope in the future to use different video game genres to answer the more allusive questions of queer theory: what happens to a subject when they are exorcised of all representation, what are 'you' when you are lost in a video game; how can the non-representational be represented, how is the player symbolized in video games. And above all else: what kind of politics—if any—do these questions imply.

References:

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