

Videogames and IR: Playing at Method

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NICK ROBINSON, MAY 28 2015

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It has become evident that the way we experience war history is inextricably linked to the forms it has taken on in media representation (Shapiro 2009, p. 16).

Michael J. Shapiro's pertinent insight, made in relation to the study of films about war, has resonance far beyond its original intent, applying not only to non-war films, but also to other forms of popular culture and experiential experience. This article reflects on the importance of videogames for IR, so filling an important gap in the existing literature. It offers a specific focus on questions of method, proceeding in three key steps. First, it sets out the specific challenges for IR scholars in confronting games, containing as they do moving images, sound, narrative and gameplay. Second, this article explores how IR scholars can begin to work with videogames as a medium. In doing so, it engages with specific debates from within games studies centred on the relative importance of narrative (narratology), visual and aural signifiers, and gameplay (ludology). In setting out the implications of these methodological debates for researching video games in IR, it suggests that a holistic perspective that accounts for narratology, visual and aural signifiers, and ludology (see, for example, Shim 2014, p. 9) is the most helpful for IR. Finally, this article concludes by commenting on the ways in which the study of videogames can function alongside Shapiro's recent work on the aesthetic subject, enriching both bodies of work and opening up important insights for IR, most specifically in terms of how games can be used to offer reflection in terms of the 'the world to which they [the aesthetic subject] belong' (Shapiro 2013, p. 11). Overall, this article demonstrates the importance of videogames for contemporary IR, outlines some of the challenges of engaging with videogames, and offers some suggestions as to how to address those challenges.

The Challenge of Videogames: Methods

Instead of focusing on how games work, I suggest that we turn to what they do – how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity... Such a comparative video game criticism would focus principally on the expressive capacity of games and true to its grounding in the humanities, would seek to understand how videogames reveal what it means to be human (Bogost, 2006, p. 45).

Videogames pose significant challenges for IR scholars. A key question is, of course, 'What is the purpose of the interaction with the game?' Here I assume that the researcher is actively seeking to engage with/play the game. The reflections on methods offered here are not concerned with 'macro-level analysis' of how, for example, politicians debate games, which requires more 'conventional' methods, such as documentary analysis, interviews, etc. (see, for example, Robinson 2012b). Like films, videogames contain moving images, sound and music, alongside narratives and stories. Yet videogames are also meant to be played, and players have the capacity to make choices within the parameters of the game's ruleset.

Videogames also place very particular requirements on players, who have to be sufficiently skilled to complete the game. Thus, to engage with videogames, the researcher requires not only training, as Ian Bogost (2006) puts it, in 'comparative videogame criticism literacy', so reflecting the present critical capacities of popular culture and world

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politics, but also the ability to actually finish the game. Unlike films or books, which can be intellectually demanding but, in procedural terms, simply require inserting a DVD and pressing play or turning the pages, respectively, if the player/researcher is not sufficiently skilled they will not be able to reach the game's end, posing significant research challenges.

Here I draw on several interrelated themes – most particularly, visual and narrative studies from IR and insights from game studies based on gameplay, visuals and narrative – to begin articulating some insights to enable methodological thinking in relation to videogames and IR.

Encountering the Game in IR

In order to use videogames in IR, the first step is to consider how to engage with games alongside reflection of what to look for when playing. The focus of analysis is contingent on whether the primary focus is on the single-player or online multiplayer element of the game. For this article, comments offered here assume a principal focus on the former.

Best practice involves playing the respective game several times while taking notes and screenshots in order to capture relevant visual signifiers, record the story and narrative, and analyse the structure of the gameplay. The first playthrough is designed to capture the broad meaning and feel of the game, with subsequent playthroughs focused on specific levels/incidents in order to consider the alternative narratives, examine the visual and aural signifiers, and explore the scope of the gameplay options available to the player. Such an approach enables reflection on key questions: What are the choices open to me? How can I complete this objective? Does the game allow alternative patterns of play? In asking such questions, the aim is to reflect on the meaning that comes from the gameplay options encoded into and coded out of the game – ‘the possibility space’, in Bogost’s terms (2007, 2008. For a discussion, see below).

A further challenge posed by games for IR scholars centres on the scale of ‘freedom’ afforded to the player. The game *Far Cry 4* (2014), while ostensibly a story-based single-player game, demonstrates the issue: the ‘freedom’ of the game’s open world is integral to the player’s experience and thus to the game’s meaning, prompting players to ‘tell their own stories’ about their in-game experiences. Such a game poses significant research challenges compared to a relatively linear game such as those in the *Call of Duty* (CoD) series, where the single-player campaign is similar for all players. In CoD, for example, while you can deviate briefly to find collectibles, the game forces a restart if you leave the mission area. The player’s primary role throughout the games is to navigate relatively linear ‘corridors’ and to literally ‘follow their (squad) leader’, so narrowing the variety of gameplay-based experiences which players can have within the game. Of course, this does not preclude players from being affected in different ways by ‘linear games’ such as CoD, nor does it mean they will read the same meanings into their experiences. However, it does mean that in a relatively linear game, the researcher can be reasonably certain that what they experience will be similar to that of other players.

Narrative vs. Visuals/Sound vs. Gameplay: Privileging One Over the Others?

The various disciplines that engage with video games – including literary studies, film studies and game studies – raise important questions as to whether or not the analysis should privilege the game’s narrative, visual and aural elements, or gameplay, or try to capture them all. This is an issue shared by the IR scholar. Frequently termed the ‘narratology vs. ludology debate’, it explicitly engages with asking: should we privilege a theory of narrative to explain games or a theory of gameplay? (See Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 2013, pp. 213-19, for a review). The central question is what the researcher prioritises in their encounter and engagement with the game. For example, in line with literary theory, is the story/narrative most important? Or, in line with film studies, is what we ‘see’ and ‘hear’ most important, and how important is the game’s *mise-en-scène*? (King and Krzywinska 2006, pp. 119-21). Or finally, in line with game studies, is gameplay primary? Here, I contend – reflective of the position within most recent games studies scholarship – that for IR scholars to privilege one over the other is counterproductive, because this selective analysis eludes the multi-sensorial and composite experience that video games offer (see, for example, Frasca 2003 on combining literary approaches and gameplay; Murray 1997 and Aarseth 1997 on the

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interrelationship between narrative and the interpretative requirements posed for the 'reader' [player] by the rules within games). That said, it can be helpful to separate these themes – narrative, visuals and gameplay – to facilitate analysis, and I will offer a brief commentary on each of them in turn to show how scholars have considered these different aspects.

Narrative

Reflective of the growing narrative turn in IR (see, for example, Dauphinée 2013; Edkins 2013; Jackson 2014; Park-Kang 2015), a number of games-studies scholars emphasise the primary importance of narrative. In particular, they argue that narratives are made up of several interrelated elements: 'the chronological order of the events themselves (story), their verbal or visual representation (text), and the act of telling or writing (narration)' (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 2013, p. 196). Furthermore, narrative scholars emphasise the value of literary theory in its emphasis on literary conventions and rules (poetics), meaning (hermeneutics), and its effects (aesthetics) (see Kücklich 2006, pp. 99-109, for a review).

At one level, a focus on narrative and story makes sense as in purely practical terms: they are both easier than gameplay or visuals to capture and replicate, as they can be repeated and reduced to words. At another level, a focus on videogame narrative also allows IR scholars to draw on the existing work from within IR that emphasises narrative, so positioning this approach on firm methodological and theoretical foundations.

Visual

Similarly to the case of narrative, there is also a growing 'visual turn in IR' (e.g. Campbell 2007; Dauphinée 2007; Möller 2007) that differentiates between static and moving images in its focus. As perhaps one of the pre-eminent scholars in terms of visual analysis in IR puts it, in interrogating visual images, the question is not one of understanding the truthfulness of their representations, but instead centres on the 'question of what they do, how they function, and the impact of this operation' (Campbell 2007, p. 379).

The focus within game studies on visual and aural analysis argues that much can be gained from this approach, as games and film (in particular) share many similarities. For example, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006, p. 113) argue that games can benefit from the focus offered within film studies on formal analysis (i.e. the organisation of sounds and images on the screen), and that game studies can take advantage of the terms and concepts developed to study visual media, such as 'point-of-view structures, the framing of onscreen action, visual motifs and styles and the use of sound effects and music'.

At one level, as a highly visual and aural media, it makes sense to focus on what is seen and experienced, albeit with the caveat that this can be more difficult to replicate in words than the narrative/story of a game. At another level, a focus on videogame visuals could also draw on the existing work from within IR. For example, in terms of static images, David Shim (2014) offers an extremely perceptive analysis of photographic representations of North Korea and articulates clearly how he engaged with the photographs:

In considering images as parts of a broader set of representations, methodological attention will be paid to the actual content of images, the context and conditions of their production and their relationships with and to accompanying texts and narrations (2014, p. 39. See also Rose 2012 and Hansen 2011).

Gameplay

Video games have the power to make arguments, to persuade, to express ideas. But they do not do so inevitably. As we evolve our relationship with video games, one of the most important steps we can take is to learn to play them critically, to suss out the meaning they carry, both on and under the surface We need to play video games in order to understand the possibility spaces their rules create, and then to explore those possibility spaces and accept, challenge, or reject them in our daily lives (Bogost 2008, p. 137).

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As Bogost (2007, 2008) argues, games allow spaces for the exploration of rules through a process of experimentation ('the possibility space') and can be used as metaphors to explore the rules that underpin society as a whole ('procedurality'), often in ways that are highly critical, yet expressive ('procedural rhetoric'). It is through this combination of possibility and process – reflected in the actual experience of the player – that games attain their persuasive power and become instrumental to social critique and reflective learning. As Mary Flanagan (2009, p. 249) argues:

Games are frameworks that designers can use to model the complexity of the problems that face the world and to make them easier for the players to comprehend. By creating a simulated environment, the player is able to step away and think critically about those problems.

The implications of such insight for IR can be clearly shown through a brief example taken from mainstream contemporary military shooter games (see Robinson 2012a for a full discussion). As Steven Poole argues, many of these games, relying on a shoot-and-destroy mechanic, promote a highly problematic assumption that complex social and political problems such as the 'war on drugs' can be solved militarily:

The more naturalistic videogames become in their modes of representation and modelling of real-life phenomena, the more they will find themselves implicated in political questions, and will need to have their ideology interrogated (Poole, 2004).

Conclusion: Videogames and the Aesthetic Subject

Overall, this article argues that a constructive encounter with videogames relies on reflection on narrative, visual and aural elements, and gameplay. It is thus reflective of the framework offered by scholars such as Laura J. Shepherd in her 2013 book *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture*. Here she offers a narrative focus encompassing spoken language (i.e. textual engagement with the script, song lyrics, captions and graphics, etc.), body language (i.e. the physical performance of each character and the framing of the on-screen images and characters), and non-linguistic signifiers (i.e. visual tropes, the built environment, lighting, music, etc.) (Shepherd 2013, pp. 7-11). Her book thus sets out to offer a comprehensive framework and precision in what she is looking at and how she is seeing and hearing when she watches a collection of TV series to demonstrate that 'gender and violence are mutually constitutive of identities, relationships, (world) politics, and each other' (Shepherd 2013, p. x. See also Rowley 2010, pp. 314-18).

Shapiro's work (see, in particular, 2013) argues that using popular culture to explore the scope of the actions undertaken by and denied to actors within those popular cultural settings can allow us to glean important insights into the nature of political reality. Reflecting on the nexus between games and IR, the meaning and insight offered by the player's actions as they traverse the game's narrative and visual arc is given additional importance through his recent work on what he has termed an 'aesthetic subject': 'characters in texts [here games] whose movements and actions (both purposive and non-purposive) map and often alter experiential, politically relevant terrains' (Shapiro 2013, p. xiv). As Shapiro argues, 'their movements and dispositions are less significant in terms of what is revealed about their inner lives *than what they tell us about the world to which they belong*'; such insights have clear implications for the scope of games to inform IR (Shapiro 2013, p. 11, emphasis added).

In reflecting on the value of videogames for IR scholars, many games have rich visuals, stories and narratives that the player experiences through gameplay. Games frequently take 20 or so hours to complete (equivalent to a boxed-set TV series, rather than a film) and hence allow for equivalent levels of engagement and character development. The player has control over the videogame avatar, albeit contingent on the game's 'possibility space' and – as discussed above – their individual ability to play the game. Players can thus tell stories about their in-game experiences. But the encounters of both players and their avatars within the game also allow them to directly experience the in-game rules. The rules which are 'in the game' are crucial to the way in which the aesthetic subject can move through the representational, political and social landscape – there are thus extremely valuable methodological and theoretical insights from this interconnection between story, visuals/sound and rules for IR scholarship.

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