

# Understanding the Medium of Video Game

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Throughout history, even before computers came into existence, human beings have wrestled with the notion of “real”. In the 60s, it was psychedelic drugs that inspired the question, “What is reality?” Now, it is the medium of computers armed with high-performance graphics processors that inspire the same question. Los Angeles based art cooperative C-Level seems to be keen on understanding the message of this modern medium.

Their new project “Waco Resurrection” premiered on October 16 at the Kitchen in New York City. It is a 3D role-playing game where players become Vernon Howell (aka David Koresh), the cult leader of Branch Davidian in Waco, Texas. The game is played with a “hard-plastic 3D skin” featuring a voice-activated interface. Participants run around the Branch Davidian compound with a variety of weapons shooting at FBI agents and other adversaries. They are also bombarded with the government “psy-ops” such as the blasting of Nancy Sinatra’s “These Boots Are Made for Walking.” It is a complex experience in many ways, triggering many emotions, which in turn prompt many questions.

This summer, a similar game called “9-11 Survivor” was available on the Internet, and was quickly labeled by many as exploitative. Brody Condon, a member of the team that developed “Waco Resurrection,” was the teacher of the game-design class that produced “9-11 Survivor.” My first question when I observed the installation of “Waco” at the Kitchen was: What are the criteria for something to be “exploitative”?

To exploit, according to Merriam-Webster, is “to make use of meanly or unjustly for one’s own advantage or profit.” Monetary gain is the most obvious, but neither game is a commercial venture. Why then are people so quick to label “9-11 Survivor” exploitative? The only other motive that I can think of is fame, or recognition, but this is merely an assumption, albeit an obvious one. The truth of the matter is that the critics of the game do not know what the motive of the creators was.

There is nothing inherently exploitative about trying to recreate experiences of others. The public smoothly accepts movies like “Titanic” and “Pearl Harbor” only because the actual events happened decades ago. Why should time be a factor in the notion of exploitation? Why are text descriptions of the event acceptable, but not a 3D graphical representation? Why are web-based interactive presentations by news organizations such as New York Times acceptable? It appears that what is required in order to be publicly acceptable is reduction or dulling of information either in time or in resolution. If the time is too soon, your presentation will feel too real. If the resolution of your presentation is too high, it will feel too real also.

Something that looks and feels real, yet is protected from any real consequences, has an entertainment value. We are tempted to see and feel what it was like without risking our own lives for it. This entertainment value is what is perceived to be vulgar or of bad taste. But again, this is a projection of our own questionable motive or desire. Why should we assume that the same motive applies to everyone else, as common as it may be?

The theme that runs through much of C-Level’s work appears to be the disconnect we experience in computer generated reality. Mainstream games such as Unreal Tournament and Grand Theft Auto are based mostly on fictional scenarios. Despite the fact that players continuously massacre people with powerful guns or by running them over with cars, the emotions generated tend to be those of excitement, not sorrow or guilt. When the context of the game is closer to reality, such as Waco or 9-11, it is more difficult to disconnect from natural emotions or empathies. In playing “Waco”, emotions are mixed and confused. The context prevents players from simply enjoying the excitement of blowing up people and objects.

This feeling of disconnect is explored in a different way with another work by C-Level, “Tekken Torture Tournament.” Tekken is a popular fighting game where players assume a role of a master of martial art. In the C-Level version of it, for every blow received, one is also given an electric shock, thereby matching what is seen with what is felt physically. In high-resolution video games like Tekken, there is a substantial discrepancy between what the eyes and ears experience and what other parts of the body experience. By filling in the gaps, one becomes more aware of the disconnectedness of the original game.

But to blame this feeling of disconnect to the technology itself would be a mistake. It is more a product of our alienation than it is an effect of high technology. One can create a similar feeling of disconnect without technology. For instance, pinch your nose so that you cannot smell anything, and take a sip of

expensive brandy. Your sense of smell is disconnected from the flavor of the brandy, and it creates a very different experience. Better yet, wipe the surface of raw fish with a piece of tissue paper, plug your nose with it, and take a sip. When you drive through a thunderstorm, what you are looking at is the same as what the pedestrian outside is looking at, but you are nice and dry, comfortably chatting with your company, a far cry from what the pedestrian is feeling. In a freezing cold weather, you are wearing 10 layers of clothes, and you are actually feeling too hot. This too is a feeling of disconnect.

For most people, what they know about 9-11 came through the same mechanisms they usually use to consume any other types of information. There was nothing substantially different about their experience of 9-11 from their experience of Hollywood movies, other than their awareness of the fact that 9-11 happened for real, and that Hollywood movies are fictional. Some people were troubled by the fact that 9-11 did not feel any different from watching a Hollywood movie. They felt guilty, and had a difficult time admitting the discrepancy between how they felt and what they thought they should feel. I believe there was a certain degree of honesty in their feelings of disconnect. After all, there was no substantial difference in the nature of their experience; it was only psychological. In order to reconcile these feelings of disconnect, many people flocked around Ground Zero to see the aftermath of the tragedy. We all employ different ways of reconciling our feelings with what we perceive. For some people, visiting Ground Zero was nothing more than an amusement, but for others, it was a necessary process of reconciliation. We cannot make an overarching judgment of other people's actions based on what our own motive would be. Perhaps for some people, experiencing what it was like to be trapped in the WTC towers through the means of 3D computer graphics was meaningful.

In some ways, this is similar to the effort made by C-Level to add the component of physical pain to the video game Tekken. Those who are perceptive and conscientious enough cannot help feeling a sense of disconnect in playing such a game, and they are tempted to make an effort at reconciling it. This, however, has nothing to do with the nature of technology per se.

There are people whose emotional pain is so great that they feel comforted by inflicting and feeling physical pain on themselves. This too is fundamentally the same effort of reconciliation. Whenever we feel alienated, we try to reconcile. Alienation is a feeling that what we do or feel is not part of us. The term is more often used to describe the disconnect between who we are and what we produce (as in classical Marxist critiques), but my concern here is with who we are and what we feel. Just because we feel something, does not necessarily mean that it is connected to who we are. The problem is not so much that there are discrepancies and contradictions among the pieces of our sensory information,

but that there is nothing that can tie these mismatching pieces into something coherent, something we can feel as our own. When our emotions originate from within ourselves, as disparate and contradictory as they may be, they make sense at least from our own perspectives. If they do not originate from within ourselves, that is, if they are being manipulated by external forces, we cannot make any sense out of the chaos of our own emotions, and we feel alienated from them.

It is analogous to how an electrical motor works. If you feed electricity into a motor, it turns. Reverse the process and turn it with your hand, it generates electricity. The same can happen with human beings. That is, there are passive emotions and active emotions. Just because you feel something does not necessarily mean that it originated in you. It might be a result of external triggers. You feel alienated when most of your emotions are triggered externally, when your life is filled with apathy, and when you are a slave to your own feelings. It is not because of the fact that you work on a computer everyday that necessarily causes the feeling of disconnect. It is not the impressive realism of video games that causes it either. You could be a chef who has never had any need to touch a computer, and still feel the general feeling of disconnect in everything you do.

Shown on giant screens, in vivid color, and with surround audio, movies are capable of impressive realism. Often they make viewers identify with their characters. Literature too can feel so real that one starts crying. Some of those feelings too are passive and active. The reason why we hardly hear anyone complain about the disconnect between what they see and what they feel in movies or novels, is because many of them engender active emotions in us. This is the difference between art and entertainment; the former is an opportunity to find our genuine, active emotions, whereas the latter manipulates our sensory perceptions to artificially induce emotions in us. This is why true art makes consumers work hard, whereas a piece of entertainment is served on a silver platter for easy consumption, essentially telling consumers how to feel. The reason why video games tend to invite criticism of disconnect is because most of them provide no opportunity for our active emotions to manifest themselves. "Waco Resurrection" is one such attempt at creating this opportunity.

C-Level may face some difficulties in changing the perception that video games are devoid of true emotions, but once the public understands and sees the potential of the medium, we may soon see a wave of new art using the medium. In other words, the name "video game" has a bad rap that it needs to get over first. It is a form of prejudice; the common associations with the label "video game" are getting in the way of seeing the full potential of the medium. It is similar to the way cartoon is perceived in this country. It may face a real uphill battle, but I have a faith in the determinations of video gamers.