

LIMINOID ACTS

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This paper applies Victor Turner's notions of liminality to game culture in the context of a particular indie game. This is done via an analysis of both the internal tropes of design exhibited by that game and the broader climate of cultural expansion as typified by the rise of indie gaming.

"Our current experience of life "betwixt and between" recalls what the anthropologist Victor Turner termed a "liminal moment," a moment of passage. It is a moment of anxiety, but it is also a moment of invention and creativity. When Turner spoke of liminality, he understood it as a transitional experience, but for us, living the tension between physical and virtual and between analysis and simulation, seems a permanent state of affairs, our permanent existence on the edge of things." [6]

"Liminality is a temporal interface whose properties partially invert those of the already consolidated order which constitutes any specific cultural "cosmos"." [7]

"One *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid." [7].

Introduction

Turner's notion of liminality as a core aspect of society offers a productive model from which to consider the movement of digital games into a creative centre ground as a major art form for the 21st century. Limen [the Latin for "threshold"] in this usage is interested in movements in society whether collective, functional and integrated ["liminal"] as part of rites of passage or individual, critical, idiosyncratic and along the margins of society ["liminoid"]. Turner's interest in broad wide-ranging sweeping change in social structures points to ways in which belief systems have largely been replaced by entertainment in our post-industrial and post-modern society. Modernity has replaced the liminal function in society with multiple liminoid acts that offer a balancing mechanism, a way in the contemporary setting to work through our understanding of core aspects of digital life. It is possible to see game culture crossing a tipping point, or threshold, of cultural acceptance that makes gamers of us all.

Turner's work has proved attractive to game studies scholars interested in the social and cultural impact of digital game form. Dovey and Kennedy [1] use his framing of liminality to point to the generative potential of digital play as "...not just a source of creativity but also a site for the generation of alternative social orders, for political interventions, for utopian imaginings." (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 35). This paper is interested in extending this view in the context of a particular indie game through an analysis of both the internal tropes of design of that game and the broader climate of cultural expansion as typified by the rise of indie gaming.

Game Culture

Game form is rapidly expanding; its cultural impact grows in significance as turn of the century gamers mature into the mainstream; as knowledge workers, artists, playful parents and creative practitioners. The ongoing movement of digital gaming from a culturally peripheral activity, once the province of a technologically literate subculture, to a mainstream leisure activity and beyond is significant. Games have always been the killer app for technology yet the metaphor of game now reaches beyond any particular technological specificity as material for the current creative generation to identify with – homo ludens indeed.

The inherently active nature of gameplay blurs the boundaries between game player and game maker and many digital games re-frame gameplay to provide spaces to play with rather than games to play through. Sandbox games like Minecraft [2009] successfully illustrate collaborative relationships between gamer and developer in both the openness of the play experience as well as the ongoing technological development of the game itself. The playable art of Minecraft lives on private servers whilst the public display of prowess populates fan video channels across the net refiguring the art gallery space forever. Running alongside the rise of the status of digital games as a contemporary art form are the complex interconnections between game art [in all it's multifarious form] and indie games; do indie games count as part of this art movement? Are we re-playing the false high/low culture divide if we exclude certain types of indie game from the art game canon? How do we ascribe aesthetic value to the sprawl of indie games springing forth like wildfire across the network? Who gets to say which game is art in what way?

Game Design Abstraction

There has long been an amateur game-making community from bedroom coders playing with home computer technology onwards. Digital distribution has enabled these independent game-makers to release their games direct to players in a range of ways: from free-to-play to revenue generating this has grown amateur practice into independent development. At the same time game-making tools continue to become more accessible to aspiring game-makers removing the requirement for programming skills to develop and deliver novel gameplay experience. The aesthetic impact of small development teams is significant, a wash of retro-imagery and lo-fi values break down expectations for the gloss of pro-productions. It may be too early to complete an art history of indie games but it is possible to trace strands of abstraction in many of these experiences. These abstractions are multiple and range from visual style through to game mechanic, although there is often a tendency to prioritize visual production above experimentation with gameplay experience. From pixel art, to minimalism to psychedelia as identified by Magnuson [2] and beyond to the 'bad art' of Cactus et al., the monochromatic silhouetting of Limbo and others, to the hand-drawn line art that dominates many iOS games. This broad stylistic experimentation is both playful and necessary, there is good practical reason for the rise of abstraction in indie games. This aesthetic is often 'cheaper'^[1] in terms of production time and allows for designers to focus on the gameplay experience, play with different types of collaboration and to rapidly develop game concepts.

In this context it is interesting to dig in a little deeper to pixel art; as one of the first natively digital art forms pixel art exposes both the history and the apparatus of the screen. Videogames are a digital form and early titles were extremely technically constrained, literally limited in visual display to a specific number of pixels in a set range of colours. Kopstein's [3] Motherboard article "Lo-Fi and The Lost Art of The Pixel" points to the connections between pixel art and past art movements including pointillism,

mosaic and tapestry work. The article also features Cottee's 2010 mini-doc "Pixel – A pixel art documentary" in which game artist Jason Rohrer discusses his attraction to pixel art. Rohrer feels that this type of inherently digital abstraction gives room for player interpretation, allowing a type of space in which meaning-making processes can productively take place. At the same time, in this view, the pixel shows us the hand of the artist literally showing us the rough edges of digital imagery magnified on modern high-resolution screens.

Superbrothers: Sword and Sworcery

Abstraction allows small teams to experiment with different types of collaboration and approaches to development. One such approach is exemplified in the 2011 release *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery* for iOS devices [<http://www.swordandsworcery.com/project/>]. This much lauded indie release is the result of collaboration between a pixel artist and animator, a rock musician and an indie game developer. Framed^[2] as a '21st century re-interpretation of an old school' adventure game S: S&S has been built around an original prog rock musical score that creates an atmospheric and multi-layered responsive aural landscape.



Fig 1. Title, 2011, Superbrothers, Digital image, Copyright Superbrothers Inc.

The title of the game itself pays homage to a specific sub-genre of fantasy storytelling originating in the late 20's through the work of Texan Robert E. Howard. Sword and sorcery tales typically deal with lands and protagonists in transition and out-of-balance leading to an increase in conflict and also in freedom, in the midst of the liminal moments that accompany key stages of life, specifically in this instance those typical of adolescence. Closely connected with Jungian theories of archetypes, apparent in the multitude of phallic snakes, swords and powerful women, this pulp fiction spawned a rich vein of American literature. This sub-genre is deeply bound to the pre- and early- history of videogames as one source for many role-playing games. S: S&S is full of this mythology, as typified by the naming of the Amazonian

player character Scythian after a lost Eastern European nomadic tribe to offer a protagonist who is an all-powerful and eternal heroine. The interest in Jungian mythology is reflected in the game in its central dreamscape, lunar cycle and magic casting. The developers have blended multiple sub-cultural tropes to build a rich mythic world.



Fig 2. Hiking, 2011, Superbrothers, Digital image, Copyright Superbrothers Inc.

Superbrothers game work is clearly identifiable and speaks of a purposeful strategy for minimalism that has then been layered back up to create a distinct visual style. S: S&S is more interested in exploration of a lush landscape as central mechanic, coining the term "scenic gameplay", than in tightly timed or fast paced challenges. Mindfully designed for touchscreens the title is all about exploration. The game is tactile and mode-oriented [with explore and combat modes accessed through rotation of the iPad or iPhone]. Zoomable screens allow the player to move through sparse game and dream worlds connected to a lunar cycle. Conveniently, for my interest in exploring liminality in and around digital game form, S: S&S is generous enough to use the exact word in the course of dialogue with the player. There is an interesting design decision here as the game's player character refers to her experience using a first-person plural voice, e.g. "We", "Our", etc. during the progression of play. This is a design trope of much interactive fiction and directly acknowledges the presence of the player in the gameplay experience. S: S&S features three non-player characters; Logfella, Girl and Dogfella, another character, The Archetype, appears within the Megatome, or in-game guidebook, to provide ongoing clues along with the rest of the supporting cast. Most of the laconic game text segments can be tweeted enabling players to both share progress and promote the game. The game text has a uniquely Canadian voice, dry and understated that works both with and against the fictional mythos of the game world. This contrast creates a game that both looks back and forward to show one way in which modern game design can reflect the culture of its production.



Fig 3. Jim Jam, 2011, Superbrothers, Digital image, Copyright Superbrothers Inc.

The soundtrack and sound effects of the game are both immaculately layered and respondent to game progress and interaction patterns. This genre of music is particularly well suited for mythic world creation and together with a sparse, yet beautifully animated, pixel art style of muted natural colours [described by the artist as 'rustic 21st century minimalism'] S: S&S builds a unique and evocative game world. It is relatively rare to find a game whose initial design has been primarily driven by music and even rarer to find one that succeeds in blending distinct art practices to create a holistic aesthetic experience. In these, and other ways, S: S&S reveals its ambitions for a loosening of the definition of game; clearly steeped in authentic admiration for game culture this indie title challenges the expectations of the old-school gamer as to what a game should and could be.

Turner's [7] essay refers to the first two of Csikszentmihalyi's distinctive features of "flow experience", which, not coincidentally, are much referenced in contemporary game design, as:

1. The experience of merging action and awareness
2. Made possible by a narrowing of consciousness to a limited focus of attention

This would seem to point to the possibility for minimalism in games to be a more successful strategy for engaging a player in a focused "flow experience". The tendency for tight constraints to be more productive than spectacular excess in creating opportunities for flow is significant. Technological evolution is relentlessly forward facing, chasing realism in an endless loop of repetition on display in much commercial game design. It is not a radical statement to say that much mainstream game design is broken, being too expensive to make to allow experimentation and innovation in form. Yet one of the things that is possible to see on display in games like S: S&S is a looking back - a working through of ideas spawned in early game worlds. This reflection functions as both homage to the early pleasures of game form and as a way of understanding, remembering and recreating the magic of early period games. Through this practice we can see game artists re-visit inherently digital practices like generative art and pixel art not purely as a nostalgic act but constructed as one way forward for innovative game design practice. Games like S: S&S self-evidently represent a next-generation design approach via an original blend of development collaboration and a layering of highly crafted media production onto game mechanics.

Conclusions

Returning to Dovey and Kennedy's [1] work on game culture, the authors point to a collapse of the integrity of play due to its co-option by consumer society. This leads to the type of digital play that we are interested in becoming a form of commodity, a form of productivity in itself. "Play therefore has an ambiguous status - it cannot be said to lie completely outside of dominant systems of power since it is now productive of enormous wealth." (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 101). This makes the liminoid acts of the independent game industry ever more essential as a critical force for an equitable human future as expressed in and through digital game form. The importance of culturally liminoid acts as a driver for a broadly expressive digital ecosystem in the wider setting cannot be overstated.

Digital technology can be remarkably myopic, in commercial terms this makes absolute sense driving the consumer to always desire the new thus keeping the cogs of capitalist society ever-turning. Yet there has been well over a generation of quotidian living and working with digital technology now surely normalizing our ecstatic dread of the implications of the digital. As the game sector fragments from a multi-national mainstream publishing industry to a diverse phenomena supporting multiple development and play practices it seems especially important that we nurture these liminoid acts.

References and Notes:

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4. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow*. (New York: Basic Books, 1997)
5. *Pixel – a pixel art documentary*, dir. Simon Cottee (2010).
6. Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. 2nd Ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005).
7. Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982).

[1] Meaning easier for small teams to produce

[2] By the project team on <http://www.swordandsworcery.com/project/>