

Deviant play

Description

I just watched a team of gamers play *Fortnite Battle Royal*. You don't need to play a video game to get the gist. You can watch others play it on Youtube. *Fortnite* is a war game where you form teams and hide out in photo-real buildings while you shoot enemies. One of the gamers remarked how much he was looking forward to being killed so he could start the game again.

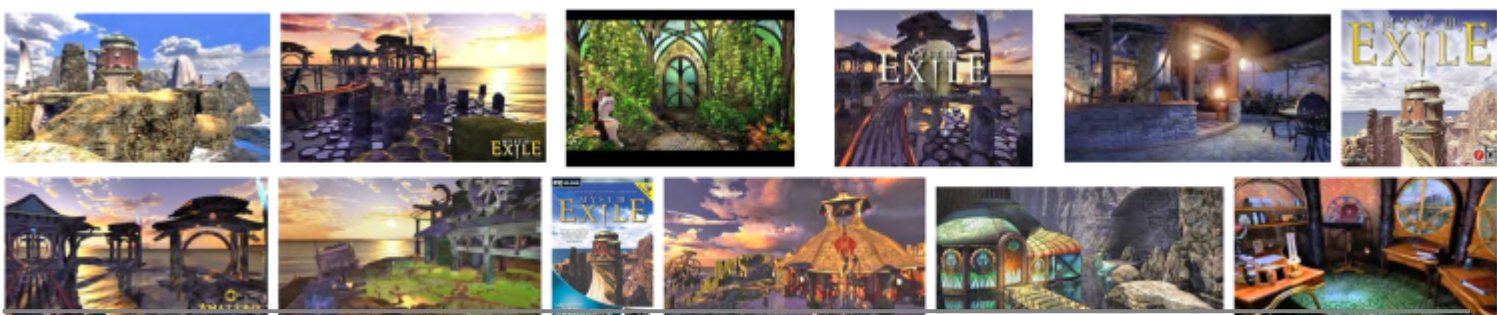
Reset

The repetitive motions of play present a certain absurdity, as the player's avatar participates in rapid cycles of life and death. In most games it's possible to save game states, so the death of the champion does not mean the end of the game, but an opportunity to revert to an earlier saved state.

The game is then not just a matter of solving puzzles or maximising your score, but also managing the moments of entry and exit from the game. I think of this as a meta-game that enables the player to explore paths and possibilities to their fatal conclusion without jeopardising the ultimate success of the mission.

As I explored in an earlier post ([The magic circle](#)), many games have this strategic dimension that is outside the rules of the game proper: the strategic termination of an innings in a game of cricket, the prolongation of time out for injuries in a soccer match, the use and abuse of signals to one's partner in a game of bridge.

The replayability of video games brings the meta-game to light by virtue of the game's duration, the ritual of repeated entry into the game world, and the game of manipulating files that record states of the game play.



Game within a game

If computer games participate in a meta-game of entry and exit, game designers are capable of exploiting the capacity for simulation in self referential games within games. Computer games readily present simulated computers, communications devices and screens.

The precincts of Liberty Island in the video game *Deus-Ex* (2000) are under the surveillance of synthetic cameras. You can enter a control room where different parts of the game world are under view from a battery of screens. It's as though the game player is controlling another game world of surveillance.

In the course of another game from my past, *The Last Revelation* (1999), Lara Croft encountered a giant game board on which she must position chess-like pieces against the countermoves of a synthetic opponent. In the process she must also guess the rules of the game.

In a similar vein, the player of *Myst III: Exile* (2001) encountered an island replete with a number of elaborate oversized puzzles in various states of repair. The player had to work out what a puzzle does, repair it and solve the puzzle at the same time. The puzzles are also of a scale that invites the player to move around its rails, ramps, levers and counterweights to explore and repair its workings.

At the end of this phase of the game the player discovered that the various puzzles work together to produce a larger puzzle, the solution to which rewards us with a spectacular exit from the island, and another piece in the larger puzzle.

This play of simulations presents the video game at its most deliberately surreal. In the same way that Magritte, Delvaux or Dal  brought the frame into relief as an issue, introduced a representation of the artist or observer into the picture, populated a painting with the tools of painting, or presented a parody of painterly technique, a video game is capable of invoking reflections on the game itself, a capacity for simulation beyond the capability of non-computer games.

Corrupted play

Our fascination with the meta-game may exceed our interest in the game itself. There is arguably not only more opportunity, but more pleasure in contemplating an intricate maze, admiring its structure and possible significance, than in playing it. Games have the capacity to be even more enticing in their concept than in their playing, in partial than in completed form, and the game more exciting in prospect than in its execution.

It transpires that the puzzles in *Myst III*, once repaired, are hardly puzzles at all. The game is to repair them, the restoration of games being a game in itself. For a habitual chess player a game of chess with pieces missing will hardly warrant attention, but for the unknown game, the game for which we have lost the rules, the unfolding wooden box with a scarred playing surface and weird tokens will excite as much curiosity as any mystery.



This post is adapted from the chapter on Play in Coyne, Richard. 2005. *Cornucopia Limited: Design and Dissent on the Internet*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Reference

- Caillois, Roger. 1961. *Man, Play, and Games*. New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe

Note

- Second image above is Hampton Court Maze. Pictures taken by the author in 2014.
- At the time of writing the grand mystery is which “senior administration official” in the US wrote the anonymous op-ed about the “resistance” in the White House. It’s become an international guessing game ([Guardian article](#)).

Category

1. Play

Tags

1. game
2. maze
3. play
4. reset
5. Surrealism

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