

Representation by Regulated Interaction

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Introduction

Probably the most obvious question concerning videogames of interest to philosophers generally, and aestheticians in particular, is whether videogames properly belong to the category of ‘artworks’. The most readily apparent way to address this question is simply to pick one, or several, promising theories of art and show how certain exemplary videogames can be comfortably accommodated by them. Three philosophers, Dominic McIver Lopes (Lopes 2010: 109-17), Grant Tavinor (Tavinor 2009: 191-5) and Aaron Smuts (Smuts 2005), have so far offered arguments along these lines in favour of videogames being considered artworks, but however successful they are in showing that certain videogames possess the qualities sufficient to be admitted as artworks under any given theory of art that does not quite show that the videogame *as a medium* is an aesthetically interesting one. Suppose that we claim (following Smuts’ lead) that the *Uncharted* series must be considered artworks on the grounds that all three games are at least as visually splendid as much uncontested visual art. In making this claim we have not established that the *Uncharted* games are artworks by virtue of any of their qualities as videogames, merely that they are artworks that happen to be videogames; by this measure of visual splendour they are works of *graphic art* and not *game art* (whatever we decide that might be). When we speak of videogames as being an artistically valuable medium I suggest that we usually do not mean that it is merely a medium from which works of art can be produced, but rather that works made in that medium are artworks precisely because of some of their qualities as videogames. We want to establish, to use the appropriate jargon, that videogames are an *appreciative art-kind* – that is, a class of works that share a common feature and are appreciated (as artworks) in part by virtue of possessing that feature. In this paper I will offer a suggestion of an artistically interesting representational capacity that videogames currently make use of that is also distinctive of them (and maybe even unique to them). It is my hope that drawing attention to this feature, which I name *Representation by Regulated Interaction*, will offer both philosophers and videoludologists a reason to claim not just that some videogames are artworks, but also that the videogame as a medium has something new and interesting to offer the world of art.

Representation in Videogames

In nearly all of the videogames most frequently offered as exemplars of videogame artworks, the players' interactions with the world of the videogame are mediated by an avatar – a fictional, virtual agent through whom we act in the fictional world of the game. These avatars, when they are used, are central to the players' experience of the game; if the player wants to explore they must direct their avatar to move into different areas, if the player wants to solve a physics puzzle they must instruct their avatar to manipulate the puzzle's various elements, if the player wants to engage in some mindless violence they must command the avatar to fight as their proxy and so on. Avatars are also the means by which much, and sometimes all, of our epistemic access to those world is granted. To find out how Liberty City or Rapture is laid out, what kinds of people populate them, our character's tasks and the options available to us to complete them, we must direct our avatars so that they see, hear, converse and otherwise garner such information about the world as we require. Perhaps most significantly, while our avatars may be our epistemic proxies in the world of the videogame, they can also provide us with useful information about themselves. Certain facts about our characters are represented to us visually, such as the colour of their skin or eyes, the way they move, or in which hand they wield a weapon. Some might be presented to us audibly, such as details of their back-story, the way they talk, or how tunefully they sing. Many modern videogames also make use of 'haptic', or physical feedback mechanisms, so that my avatar taking a hit from an enemy might be represented to me as a vibration in my controller, as well as, or instead of visually; there are many different ways in which the videogame represents information about our player-characters. There is one type of representation in videogames however, which is not only revealed to the audience through interacting with the videogame, but in fact consists in the *way* such interaction occurs. Videogames can represent facts about their fictional subjects by manipulating the way the player interacts with those subjects via what I have called *Representation by Regulated Interaction*. Consider the following example from a recent critically acclaimed videogame.

In *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, an action/adventure game based in the Batman mythos, there are several instances throughout the game when Batman, the player's avatar, is unknowingly poisoned by a hallucinogenic gas. The sequences that follow are genuinely unnerving representations of Batman's psychoses resulting from the poisoning, and in one such episode he is forced to relive the shooting of his parents (which, for those not familiar with the Batman stories, was the childhood tragedy that caused Bruce Wayne to adopt the

eponymous alter ego). After Batman has witnessed (or rather, hallucinated) the murder of his parents, the avatar on screen changes from Batman to Bruce Wayne as an eight-year-old boy, as he was on the night of his parents' death. The change in avatar, as the 'world's greatest detective' is rendered as completely powerless as a grieving child, is deeply affecting but it is not just the change in the CGI model that represents this powerlessness to the player.

Throughout most of the game Batman, in the words of one reviewer, "marches around like a pompous Sergeant Major" (Croschaw 2009). The way the avatar responds to the player's input represents something about the character although in this case it is not just his physical qualities, but also his confidence and assuredness in the hellish situations in which he finds himself, reflected by the powerful, deliberate strides that constitute Batman's usual gait. When Batman is transformed into the young Bruce Wayne, however, the avatar's only response to movement commands from the player is a resigned shuffling, no longer the confident strides of his older self, and he will not respond at all to any commands from the player to do anything other than slowly walk through the nightmarish scene. It is important to emphasise that this representation is not made by the visual presentation of the young Bruce Wayne shuffling slowly around the corpses of his dead parents. An audience simply viewing, rather than playing, that particular scene will not know whether the slow movement of the avatar, or the lack of any activity other than movement, is the choice of the player or a simple feature of the videogame. As a player, however, having your control over the character, and by extension the fictional world of the game, restricted in this way brilliantly represents firstly the change in the capabilities of the child avatar when compared to the Batman avatar, and also the helplessness of the child compared to the powerful hero he becomes.

Representation by Regulated Interaction

In the above case the videogame has represented something to the player about her player-character - something about Batman's psychological state. While this feature of *Arkham Asylum* that I have described is by no means unique to that game – it is extremely common, for instance, to for the relative mass of a character to be represented to the player by having the avatar move more slowly or quickly in response to movement commands – to my knowledge they have never been described as representational capacities of the medium, rather they appear to have been designed as straightforward features of the gameplay. It is my hope that characterising them as representational capacities will enable the artistic potential of those techniques, what I have called *Representation by Regulated Interaction*, to be better understood.

Not all the ways it is possible to interact with an interactive artwork are capable of producing representations by regulated interaction. Firstly, some interactive artworks will be abstract, rather than representational, and no prescribed user actions will generate a representational display¹. Call this type of interaction:

(A) Non-representational Interaction

Another type of interaction, extremely common in videogames, does facilitate representation. Such interaction consists in moving around the world of the videogame, in instructing my avatar to explore the ruins of Rapture or the dark, gothic halls of Arkham Asylum. By being able to ‘move through’ the world of the videogame in this way my viewing of the CGI models that make up the representation of Rapture is facilitated, but it could not be said that this type of interaction is actually doing any representing in the same way as Representation by Regulated Interaction. If I wander around a large installation or work of architecture, or rotate a digital artwork on a screen so as to be able to examine it from every side, that does not add any aesthetic value to the object I am examining, though it will alter my experience of it. Being able to interact with CGI representations in the very limited way that videogames appear to permit does not add any aesthetic value to the representations of characters and scenery we encounter as we play, although it may allow us to appreciate those representations more than if they were photographed in a static picture. Call this type of interactivity:

(B) Minimally representational interaction

While (A) and (B) types of interactivity are distinguished from one another by the capacity of the object interacted with to generate representational displays, they are structurally similar in that in both cases the relation between the users’ prescribed actions and the display generated by those actions is mediated by only one interactive object; the interactive work. The representation of Batman’s powerlessness that I described, however, could not have been made if the player was interacting directly with the various objects that make up the worlds of each videogame discussed. In videogames such as *Arkham Asylum* we interact with the work by interacting with a further object embedded within the work; namely, the avatar. Call interaction of this type:

(C) Multiply mediated interaction

¹ The usage of the term ‘display’ here is borrowed from Dominic McIver Lopes and simply refers to that part of any artwork that we directly apprehend. Displays in this sense need not be visual. (Lopes 2010: 4-5)

In (B) type cases of interaction the work's representations are all made by the work's display the details of which are determined by user input. The interaction generates the display, and the display contains any representational elements that might be present in the work.

However, sometimes in cases of (C) type interaction it is not the *result* of the interaction, the features of the display, that represents the subject, but properties of the interaction itself. This is possible because some of the properties of our interaction with the work are determined by the way the embedded interactive object mediates our interaction with the work of which the embedded object is a part. In (A) and (B) type interaction, by comparison, all the properties of our interaction with the work are determined by how we are prescribed to interact with the work in the first place. Only when our interaction with a work is multiply mediated, by prescribing that we interact with the work by interacting with an object embedded in it, can properties of the interaction be intentionally regulated by the artist as the work is being interacted with. If, for instance, in *Arkham Asylum*, the player was prescribed to surrender control of her avatar by a piece of text flashing up on the screen, this would not have the same representational value as that which occurs in the actual game; the regulation of our interaction with *Arkham Asylum* such that Bruce Wayne's actions are suddenly placed beyond our complete control is so affecting precisely because it does not come in the form of an explicit prescription, but in an unexpected frustration of our instructions.

To recap: there are three different types of interaction with interactive artworks that can be distinguished by their potential to facilitate representations. Only in cases of multiply mediated interaction, as described above, can the interaction itself be a representation. This is not to say that it always must be, there will doubtless be many instances of multiply mediated interaction which are not themselves representations. Representation by regulated interaction may be dependent on multiply mediated interaction, as well as other features of videogames for its existence, but it is not a necessary property of such interaction that it be a representation.

Representational Interaction in Videogames

It might be thought that the use of avatars need not be distinctive of videogames, and that other works might be able to make use of them, or similar devices, in order to represent by regulating the interaction between a work's users and the work itself. This would mean that those other media could make use of representation by regulated interaction, thereby threatening my claim that Representation by Regulated Interaction is something of which

videogames are uniquely capable. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that any work that could make use of an avatar would count as a videogame under any reasonable definition. Any such work, by putting the audience in the role of another character would involve some form of gameplay on the part of the audience. In ‘acting’ the role of a protagonist in any sort of narrative fiction, for example, any audience of any robustly interactive work in which that was possible would probably find themselves overcoming challenges, achieving goals, and learning more about their environment in very similar ways to how we engage with videogames by virtue of our avatars. Indeed, there already exist videogame titles, such as the recent *Heavy Rain*, which just consist in placing the player in the role of the protagonist of a crime thriller. The role of the audience in that game, despite the fact that the game almost entirely consists of ‘acting the part’ by walking your avatar through his scenes, is still far more closely related to that of the player of videogames rather than the stage or screen actor. It seems, then, that not only is representation by regulated interaction distinctive of videogames at present, but that any work that could feasibly use such representation, by prescribing that the user interact with the work by interacting with an object embedded in that work, will be a videogame.

One important consequence of the structural features of (C) type interaction is that the only objects that can be represented about by regulating that interaction are those that mediate the user’s interaction with the work as a whole; in terms of videogames only avatars can be the subject of representation by regulated interaction. To forestall objections that this is a crippling limitation on the distinctive representational capacities of videogames my final section will demonstrate how, even allowing for its relatively modest representational scope, representation by regulated interaction is an exceptionally potent potential source of artistic value.

The key difference we need to highlight between the broader class of interactive artworks and works of what we might call game-art, as regards their use of interactivity, is that *all* interactive artworks use interactivity to *engage* their audiences, but only videogames are capable of using interactivity to *represent* things about their subjects. This is because of the unique ability that videogames have to place the player in direct control of a subject of the work, namely the avatar. Because, in videogames of the type I have described, we take on a character role, we can be represented to about that character through the way she acts on our instructions in the world of the videogame.

The artistic significance of this is more profound than might first be realised. If it is true, as I have suggested, that representation by regulated interaction is only possible in videogames, then videogames are the only medium that will open up the possibility for us, as the audience, to be represented to about characters in a ‘true’ first-person perspective. What I mean by true first-person perspective is not to suggest that media such as film and literature are not capable of making artistically valuable representations from a particular character’s point of view; that is plainly not the case. Rather what I mean is that only in videogames will the audience be able to be represented to about their character *as* that character, and not as an external viewpoint with supernatural access to that character’s mental states, as in first-person literature, or viewing a scene as if through their eyes, as in film and other visual arts. There is much work to be done to establish the exact nature of the relationship between the player and her avatar. I have not even scratched the surface of the problem in this paper, and a good theoretical explanation of that relationship will greatly aid our understanding of the representational capacities of videogames. What is clear, however, is that that relationship is unlike anything that exists between work and audience in any other artistic medium. The relationship between player and avatar can, I believe, be most profitably compared to that of an actor and their character, although there are obviously huge differences between them. We have seen that a player can be usefully informed about aspects of their player-avatar’s character as they are playing (sometimes through representation by regulated interaction) and this cannot happen with an actor-character relationship (the knowledge of such character traits being a precondition for having the requisite intention to perform the role).² Even without a clear understanding of that relationship, however, the fact that the player can certainly, in a very loose sense, be identified with the character on screen means that the character can be represented to the player-as-audience in a way that is not possible with any other way of presenting that character. As a brief example of the kind of artistic value that could be gained from exploiting this relationship picture the way difficult moral choices are represented in first-person literature. Now imagine that instead of reading a vivid description of a character’s making that choice, you had to choose right along with them. I do not claim that such a representation would be necessarily more valuable than those found in literature, but there is no denying that, if well executed, such an experience has the potential to be profoundly moving. Representation by regulated interaction could feasibly have a strong role to play in making those moments as affecting as they doubtless could be. There is a moment

² An actor may claim to have ‘learnt’ about their character through playing the role, but the phenomenon is nowhere near as robust as in the case of players and avatars.

in *Mass Effect 2*, one of a critically acclaimed sci-fi role playing game trilogy, in which the player-character (Commander Sheppard) must make such a choice. Faced with two warring factions of an alien race, one of which wishes to aid Sheppard in her quest to save the galaxy, and the other wanting to kill Sheppard and her crew, she must make a terrible decision. Sheppard can either trigger an explosion that will wipe out the entire hostile faction, or she can make use of a mind-control device to bend the hostile aliens to her will. The making of such a choice, between genocide and robbing a people of their freedom, could be represented by regulated interaction to great effect. Imagine making such a choice while controlling Commander Sheppard, only to find that your avatar, no matter which option you choose, is desperate not to make it; that the player-character's disgust at herself for having to make one of those two terrible decision is represented to the player by making the player *force* the character, against great resistance, to go through with whichever action they believe is least heinous.

It must also be noted that videogame avatars, and therefore potential subjects of representation by regulated interaction, are by no means always anthropomorphic characters – meaning of course that the ‘true first-person’ perspective described above is a creative option available to game designers, and not an entailment of regulated interaction. The recent *From Dust* places the player in the role of the breath of a god sculpting a world to satisfy, or frustrate, the needs of its occupants. *Flower*, similarly, finds the player acting on the world of the videogame through the fictional proxy of a breeze. Anything that can play the role of avatar in a videogame has the potential to be represented about through regulated interaction, and this significantly broadens the distinctive artistic scope of game-art. In no other medium would it be possible to enable the audience to feel some of what it is like to act on the world as a breeze, a deity, or any of the other myriad potential avatars that videogames might use. Imagine interacting with a fictional world in the guise of a gravitational force, of an electron, as a great general, a lowly peasant in a Maoist rebellion, or any other object that could conceivably mediate the interaction between a player and the fictional world of a videogame. These are just a few examples of how representation by regulated interaction could be used to great artistic effect, and there are countless others; the artistic capabilities of representation by regulated interaction are limited only by the objects that can be represented as avatars, and the relationships that can be developed between them and their players.

Games

Batman: Arkham Asylum (2009), PS3, Eidos Interactive

Heavy Rain (2010), PS3, Sony Computer Entertainment

Flower (2009), PS3, Sony Computer Entertainment

From Dust (2011), PS3, Ubisoft

Mass Effect 2 (2010), PC, Electronic Arts

Uncharted [Series] (2007-11), PS3, Naughty Dog

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