

‘To Those Who Loved This World’ Using Gilles Deleuze to explore the ‘expanded reality’ of video game fan communities

Conor Mckeown

Introduction

This project is focusing on those video games that exist as a single media object, stretched across a multitude of mediums. An example which comes quickly to mind is children’s television/cinema/video game sensation *Pokémon* (Satoshi Tajiri, Nintendo, 1996) but the number of possible examples is increasing. In recent scholarship, there is an emerging trend of treating this multimedia experience with a level of scepticism. Anne Allison has repeatedly examined this medium spanning quality of multimedia video game experiences (Allison 2006: 11-22) (Allison 2006 188-200).¹² For her, it is not only various types of screen media that amount to an overall product but also the merchandise related to that product. The conflation of screen media and physical objects leads her to assert that these multimedia products create a ‘techno-intimacy’.³ In turn, Allison maintains, this leads to a ‘stretching of desire across ever new zones/bodies/products...’ leading to the ‘expanding [of] play frontiers.’⁴ While Allison draws many conclusions from this interplay between reality and fantasy, above all, she denounces this expanded reality as creating a ‘capitalism of endless innovation, information and acquisition’⁵.

However, I believe that there is something much more interesting at work in these networks of video game media. In this presentation, I hope to trouble the correlation of multimedia video games to Anne Allison’s ‘capitalism of endless acquisition’ by presenting a different function of their medium spanning existence. By taking into account the varying types of video game user groups delineated by much of *ludological* scholarship (Aarseth 2001, Juul 2006, 2010) I will argue that when a video game becomes a multimedia object, the various parts which create the whole begin to function as communicative devices. Using *Final Fantasy VII* (Tetsuya Nomura, Square, 1997) and its related multimedia as the basis of my discussion, I will argue that when the expanded reality of a multimedia experience is taken to include fan made media, this expansion begins to take on a dialogic function. This, in turn, leads to the creation and maintenance of exclusive fan communities.

Although this presentation is related to the study of video games, the analysis I am intending to employ is purely visual. Although video game theorists often shun the methods of purely visual analysis preferring to dissect the act of play in itself it is necessary in order to draw the

¹ Anne Allison, ‘The Japan Fad in Global Youth Culture and Millennial Capitalism’, in *Mechademia: 1*, ed. Frenchy Lunning (University of Minnesota Press, 2006) pp. 11 - 22

² Anne Allison, *Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (University of California Press, 2006) pp. 188 - 200

³ *Ibid*, p. 188

⁴ Allison, ‘The Japan Fad...’ as before, p. 19

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 19

conclusions I desire. It is my intention to bring to light a form of communication that has been made possible through new technology and media. This communication is only visible when one takes many forms of seemingly passive media together, to see the very active links between them. To this end, I intend to use the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, and in particular, his 'small form action-image'. This idea of a media object, constructed from the interconnection of many various actions will be used as a framework. Through this, video games and their related media can be seen as a single media object.

To proceed, I will first outline work that has been conducted on video games as multi-media experiences. I will contrast those who write about multi-media video games as encouraging the 'techno-intimate', boundary crossing, qualities theorized by Anne Allison against those who have found different conclusions in their analysis of online fandom. It will then be made clear that while Allison's 'expanded reality' plays an essential role in my consideration of interaction with multimedia experiences, I can present alternatives to the 'endless capitalism' she predicts. From this point, I will outline my proposed, Deleuzian methodology in greater detail, taking into account the current uses of Deleuze for analysing videogames and its usefulness for analysing multimedia experiences.

Fandom, Capitalism, Community

Anne Allison has produced a considerable body of work focusing on the social, cultural and economic impact of media franchises. Allison considered the effects of comic books for creating and satisfying desire in Japanese youth society⁶ before developing the aforementioned analyses of Japanese toys and television series' in a global context. It was in this more recent endeavour that she began to include references to video game culture. For Allison, *Pokémon* represented an example of what I have dubbed 'expanded reality'. She notes the 'profusion of polymorphous attachments... [the] countless gameboy games' and 'iconised *Pokémon* or monsterish trading cards' which children carried on their person, pushed the boundaries delimiting game space and reality.⁷ It is this unique, reality bending effect of multimedia experiences that I wish to focus on in this presentation: the idea that a profusion of different forms can allow a single media object to begin to blur the lines of a play space and, as such, fantasy and reality.

Patrick W. Galbraith has also produced work inspired by this fascinating observation. For him, again placing a focus on the culture of Japan, the *bishojo* (female fantasy) games, linked with the *Otaku* (geek culture) community has produced a 'feminisation' of male youth. However, Galbraith also noted that the 'techno-intimacy' produced from an expanded reality. For Galbraith, the expansion of *bishojo* games from grounded personal computers to personal and portable Nintendo DS consoles, allowed for the endless expansion of play space, allowing a video game to infiltrate the inter-personal and even sexual aspects of humanity.

⁶ Allison, *Permitted and Prohibited Desires: Mothers, Comics and Censorship in Japan* (University of California Press, 2000) p. xvii

⁷ Anne Allison 'The Japan Fad', as before, p. 20

He noted the marriage between a *LovePlus* (Konami, 2009) player and his in-game character as the key example of this.⁸

The conclusion Allison draws, however, from most her studies, is a direct link to encouraging a capitalist desire. She notes how the profusion of attachments which cumulatively create immersive experiences, encourages consumerism: ‘expanding their play frontiers through a capitalism of endless innovation, information and acquisition’. It is difficult to challenge this idea, particularly in reference to *Pokémon*. The slogan of the franchise ‘gotta catch ‘em all’ dominates the narrative arc and predominant mode interaction with both the video games and other media. The ultimate ambition of a ‘Pokémon master’ is – we are told in the video games and other media – to collect all of the Pokémon (of which, there are now over 600). In game, this requires users to accrue newer, more sophisticated equipment to catch higher level Pokémon. In reality, as new video games are released, so too are children persuaded to continue their experience of play by acquiring goods.

This observation carries a lot of clout. It essentially undermines any pretensions to importance *Pokémon* may have had as a media object. Drawing attention to its masterfully constructed financial aspects, the narrative and aesthetic value are reduced to hooks, purpose built to inspire purchasing. The same can be said of many phenomena which present the possibility on an expanded reality and indeed, has been said. *Harry Potter* for instance, provided publishers and eventually film makers with a great incentive as it attempted to chronicle the life of a growing school boy, ensuring 7 books and 7 (although 8 were made) films.⁹ Fandom, in this view, is almost directly equated to profit.

However, there are several scholars who have taken a less cynical approach to multimedia experiences. Noted *anime* scholar Susan Napier, conducted a study on the *MML* (Miyazaki Mailing List: the now on-line, international fan club of Miyazaki Hayao). In this instance, the expansion of reality is provided through the extension of a director’s cinema to the conduct of a community. Watching becomes an active process of writing, sharing opinions and teaching lessons based on the philosophy espoused in the films of Miyazaki. Napier notes how the *MML* is an ‘A-typical’ fan group,¹⁰ insisting that the *MML* not be branded “‘consumers”, a term often used in the literature of fandom. [She] would instead prefer to call them “‘appreciators and interpreters””.¹¹ Napier believes that in this kind of fandom, a strong community is formed around the creation of a single, tangible philosophy of self improvement. As such, it seems that Allison’s idea that techno-intimacy and reality expansion is in some way linked to consumerism is not wholly apparent here.

A similar view of Fandom was presented by Karen Hellekson in a study of fan-fiction writers who sought to support literary development among members of the fan-fiction writing community. Again, the expansion of reality, the traversing of boundaries associated with a

⁸ Patrick Galbraith, ‘Bishojo Games: ‘Techno-Intimacy’ and the Virtually Human in Japan’, in *Gamestudies 2011 02*, <<http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/galbraith>> [Last accessed 08/01/2011] p. 1

⁹ Stephen Brown, ‘Harry Potter and the Fandom Menace’ in *Consumer Tribes*, eds. Bernard Cova, Robert Kozinets, Avi Shankar (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007) p. 50

¹⁰ Susan J. Napier, ‘The World of Anime Fandom in America’, *Mechademia 1*, as before, p. 50

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 52

media experience is provided through the completion of acts, associated with but not necessary to experience a product. What has been created, however, is a strong, dedicated community. Hellekson noted a trend in 'gift-giving' similar to that noted in the studies of Marcel Mauss among fan-fiction writers. Hellekson stated, '...gifts have value within the fannish economy in that they are designed to create and cement a social structure, but they themselves are not meaningful outside this context.'¹² This view of fan groups presents them as uninterested in acquiring capital, but instead, interested in the sustaining of their own community.

To summate in the interest of clarity, it is possible to see 'techno intimacy' as caused by the constant interaction with machines. However, an important aspect of this condition is the spreading of an experience across several different zones and spaces. For Allison, *Pokémon* could be seen as stretching from the screen of a gameboy to the television to the everyday lives of the users involved. For Galbraith, *bishojo* games provided a life shaping effect for the *otaku* players. This was heightened when the game became hand-held. However, other expansions of reality are visible, such as the *MML* or fan-fiction writers who expand the space of their experience into the building and maintaining of an active community. Allison's main concern about these expanded realities of 'techno-intimacy' is a sense that the desire for new experiences inspires a lust for endless acquisition. This may, indeed be the case as even in the instances of the *MML* and fan-fiction there is a desire for new objects. Yet, these objects do not necessarily possess any intrinsic value. As such, the 'ceaseless capitalism' may, act as a necessary tool for the further construction of communities built around expanded realities.

The expanded reality/realities of Final Fantasy VII

Today, *Final Fantasy VII* encompasses an almost incalculable wealth of media. If limited to 'official' screen media, *Final Fantasy VII* is still vast. Along with original, there are four additional games: *Before Crisis* (2004), *Dirge of Cerberus* (2006), *Lost Episode* (2006) and *Crisis Core* (2007). Beyond this, there is one feature length film *Advent Children* (2005) and two short films *Last Order* (2005) and *On the Way to a Smile* (2006) (All Tetsuya Nomura, Square Enix). Emerging from this body of work, there are countless fan videos (either originally created or made by editing together scenes from the films or cut-scenes from the video games) websites containing fan-fiction and detailed investigations of the games narrative, formal construction and even code imperfections.¹³ As such, *Final Fantasy VII* today, is not just a game. It is a hive of activity: a site of global interaction by various groups through various means.

In many ways then, the techno-intimate expanded reality suggested by Allison and Galbraith is apparent here. While users of *Final Fantasy VII* are able to play the original video game, the boundary of this experience is weakened and stretched by the dearth of associated games and media. In addition to this, users can contribute to the body of work available by creating

¹² Karen Hellekson, 'A Fannish Field of Value: Online Fan Gift Culture' in *Fandom and Feminism: Cinema Journal*, 48, no. 4, Summer 2009, p. 115

¹³ Links to these various websites can be found on the community hub <http://thelifestream.net/> - a website dedicated to all things *Final Fantasy VII*.

fan-media of their own. More specifically, the techno-intimate urge for endless acquisition is fuelled by this experience of a multitude of media. However, not every user of *Final Fantasy VII* is interested in the *same* progression of capital. This is apparent from the types of fan-media created and posted on the internet. For instance, one fan-video will merge together a variety of shots from *Advent Children* and the cut-scenes of *Crisis Core*, set these to music and, on occasion, post a short blurb underneath the video expressing their intention in terms of continuing the meta-gamic narrative. By contrast, other fan-videos will simply show a difficult challenge of the game completed in break neck speed, or under some unprecedented handicap, set by other fan-vidders.

Using Gilles Deleuze to better understand expanded realities

I will begin with *Advent Children* as it is began my belief that there was a relationship beyond producer and consumer at work in *Final Fantasy VII*. The important introductory inter-title at the beginning of *Advent Children* reads ‘To those who loved this world and found friendly company therein; this reunion is for you.’



This is, I believe, is a clearly identifiable ‘vector point’ that changes *Advent Children* from being an action film to being a part of an overarching, small form action-image. We are told that the vector ‘styles the transforming of a scene’s action’ (Colman, 2011: 121). At the same time, it provides the ‘imaginary of theoretical nuances of a script, and the physical and intellectual situation of the *mise-en-scene*’ (Colman 2011: 121). Just as the extended fingers of *Nosferatu* confirmed to Deleuze, its place as a vampire film in the hegemony of vampire films (Deleuze, 1986: 178-9), so too do these words confirm *Advent Children*’s place as media made for fans and, to an extent, by fans.

Although it is clear that ‘To those who loved this world and found friendly company therein...’ is meant for players, there is much which is unclear to those unfamiliar with *Final Fantasy VII*. The term ‘reunion’ has a special weight in the context of *Final Fantasy VII*. The reunion is the term used by Sephiroth in the original game to represent the coming together of

his unknowing minions (of which, Cloud is one) with him and the source of his power, Jenova. *Advent Children* depicts the coming together of more minions of Sephiroth (new characters in the series designed by lead designer Tetsuya Nomura exclusively for the film) along with Jenova in an attempt to resurrect Sephiroth from the dead. At the same time, the 'reunion' is a reunion of *Final Fantasy VII* fans with the subject matter that has engaged their interest for eight years. This use of jargon is, in and of itself, exclusive in the simplest form of the word. Those who are not fans of the series are not being given much help in understanding the world they are about to engage with. This stance is upheld throughout the film as moments from the initial game are rehashed with little exposition. Objects, weapons, abilities and the logic of the *Final Fantasy VII* virtual world are all imported into the film with little or no explanation.

The same explanation can be given for the rehashing of moments which were already depicted in the original game with either updated graphics or small details. The opening moments of the film, for example, are the closing moments of the game – set outside the city of Midgar, the wolf-like character Red XIII runs toward the ruined city. Beyond attempting to provide important exposition for newcomers to the series, the film continues directly from where the game left off. Although there has been a gap of nine years, for players of the game who are as dedicated as Square Enix hope – those who did find 'company therein' – *Advent Children* functions as the ending sequence of the initial game function: as a reward for playing the game. Once again, this image is a moment of change for the film. *Advent Children* is not just a film; it is directly linked to the game that preceded it.

Beyond this, however, there are further vector points which are more clearly discernible. For example, the previously discussed DoCoMo mobile phone on which the first expansion of *Final Fantasy VII* was released features heavily in the film. This resonates with Anne Allison's identification of the 'profusion of polymorphous attachments'¹⁴ in an expanded reality. Allison noted that hand held electronic devices, could allow a product to begin crossing the boundaries between a fixed play space, ultimately, impinging upon a user's everyday life. Square Enix provided Japanese fans of *Final Fantasy VII* with mobile phone games on the DoCoMo mobile phone from as early as 2005. However, this moment of interplay between fans and fantasy implies something different than the 'endless innovation, information and acquisition' Allison speaks of. Square Enix, through the previously mentioned preface to the film, have admitted to creating a fan inspired product and here, they are once again attempting to show a bond between Cloud and dedicated fans of the series. The idea that Cloud has a DoCoMo implies that he may engage in some of the activities as the fans of the series. Indeed, a fan of the series could revel in the playful suggestion that Cloud may be a player of the *Before Crisis* mobile phone game – he may interact or have interacted with other players in the past.

Square Enix then, present an awareness of their fan base through *Advent Children*. However, the reaction of the fans to these references cannot be taken for granted. As I am attempting to suggest that the *Final Fantasy VII* franchise is not a number or disconnected images but

¹⁴ Anne Allison, as before, p.20

instead a unified small form action-image comprised of vector linked actions, it is essential to look at the response of the player fan base. Bernard Perron says of the player, 'Their role is to react to the story sequences, not to enact them.'¹⁵ What follows then, should be taken as a direct reaction to the release of *Advent Children* and the developments made with story events.

In the fan video 'Final Fantasy Amazing Video [Bahemutking12]¹⁶', uploaded by the player Bahemutking12. It depicts the events of *Advent Children*, selectively edited together to play in time with a strong hip-hop beat. The panning, zooming and other simulated camera movements of *Advent Children* are manipulated so as to emulate the beat of the song. This, in turn, emphasises the emotional tone of both the music and the source material. In the vein of my chosen Deleuzian approach, the vector point of this video may be less of an image and more of the surrounding context to the video. For example, Bahemutking12 says of his video, 'My third video – lots of work. From the legendary Advent Children Movie.'

The confirmation that this is the player's third video shows the ongoing devotion to the *Final Fantasy VII* universe and, in turn, Square Enix. More than this, comments posted under the video such as 'This vid is the absolute beast', 'great vid buddy!' and 'Amazing job dude', goes somewhat towards the idea of the gifting community outlined by Karen Hellekson. The video is being accepted by the community of player fan video makers and encouraged. The low number of viewers (2,974 – a very low number for a Youtube video) but unanimously positive feedback (0 dislikes, again, rare for Youtube) is an indication of the small, enthusiastic fan base that has viewed and appreciated this kind of content. The vector points of this video then, are those specific traits that elevate this from a fan video made for the enjoyment of a general audience, towards a media artefact designed with a specific purpose.

Another video 'This is War' by Andrew Meduri¹⁷, still appears as 'a reaction to the story' as Perron claimed, only in this instance, Meduri's reaction goes beyond a simple reiteration of plot. In the video, Meduri merges footage from *Advent Children* with various other products of the *Final Fantasy VII* franchise. Not only that, Meduri merges several cut-scenes from other games as well. This merging of products presents a concrete example of how playing a game and the activities of fandom blur the boundaries of player experience. One game in the *Final Fantasy* series blends into another – so too do the fan videos created in praise of the material. The most clear example of a vector point in this instance, however, is the inclusion of clips from video game, *Dissidia*.

Created by Square Enix to provide players with the experience of pitting their favourite characters from various, unrelated games against each other, the game appears almost tailor made for fans. The creation of a fan video that embraces *Dissidia* then, shows the success of Square Enix's offerings for its key fans. it is important to note again here, however, that *Dissidia* – a game that focuses on combat, not story line – takes the form of a 'beat 'em up',

¹⁵ Bernard Perron, as before, p. 246

¹⁶ Youtube user, Bahemutking12, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcm-sgHHgk&feature=related> <last accessed, 07/01/2012>

¹⁷ Youtube user DrewM1788, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XV30-5E6Png> <last accessed, 07/01/2012>

similar to *Street Fighter*. Again, as Perron noted, it is not the rules of gamic experience which are treated with preference by Square Enix but the narrative elements of characters. Their motivations, ambitions, confusions are carried over into the, albeit convoluted, story of *Dissidia*.

Conclusion

I have attempted to outline the major concerns of this presentation. I wish to challenge the cynical view that multimedia engagement with video games is developing purely capital driven consumers. Although several theorists have, in the past, stated this view such as Allison and Galbraith, it is possible to draw an analytical link between the media of *Final Fantasy VII* and the user community it stands for. I have used Gilles Deleuze to conceptualise the constituent parts of a multimedia experience as actions within a 'small form action-image'. The unifying 'vector points' of these action-images allow for concrete conclusions to be drawn. It has become clear that what unifies these otherwise unrelated media-objects into a whole, is a sense that they are functioning as part of a dialogue. In time, I hope to extend this research to include many various groups of user engagement with *Final Fantasy VII*, illustrating the various user communities formed through this media network.

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