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Microsoft Flight Simulator, 2020, still.

From Postescapism to Metaescapism:

Videogames as a Return to Reality

Videogame media are still conceived as a form of escapism, as if their only purpose were to provide a digital haven for those who are no longer able to cope with crude reality. Although escapist games do exist, the gaming culture of the past ten years has been dominated by postescapism. The point is that instead of means by which to escape reality, videogames are offering the means for its exploration and explanation. Videogames today are denouncing the most urgent political and social issues, challenging ideologies, deconstructing cliches, advancing flexible thinking and inclusivity. And yet, postescapism is not enough. The pandemic has revealed the role of gaming platforms as our non-human friends and companions that allow us to safeguard ourselves, our environments and networks as well as our familiar ways of life. This new aspect of videogaming is captured by the term 'metaescapism'. Just like metamodernism, which takes a detached perspective on the tension between modernism and postmodernism, metaescapism goes beyond both escapism and postescapism. In other words, metaescapism is a form of escapism

that is intrinsically antiescapist.

Escapist videogames

Inertia is the only reason to keep labelling videogames as an escapist phenomenon today. However, the origins of videogaming do provide a good enough reason for such designations. Indeed, the very first, basic game narratives unfolded in fantasy or fantastic settings. These stories intentionally pave the way into other worlds, full of magic and superpowers. Such games as *Adventure* (1979), *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) or *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) were perfect examples of escapism both in form and content.

Clearly, games evolved over the course of time. But even in the 1990s, at a time of explicit demand for realism (translated not only into the very first 3D Polygon graphics for the original PlayStation but also into the Sega Genesis 1 games featuring characters with almost human body proportions), videogames were still escapist. They still endeavoured to make players forget about their real lives at least for a while. They never intended to respond to reality or interpret it. Far from changing it, they refused even to explain it.

An apology of the escape

Today we tend to condemn escapism as a necessarily bad tendency: if people attempt to escape reality, it means something is definitely wrong with them rather than with the world they want to evade. They must be weak and fainthearted, unable to take responsibility and stand strong in the face of difficulties. So they end up seeking refuge in dreams and fantasies, plunging into a virtual reality where everything comes easily and undeservedly, at least in the eyes of others.

In actual fact, escapism is a much more complex phenomenon. Science, art and religion can all be construed as shelters from the hardships and shortcomings of life. Moreover, culture in general can easily be interpreted as a form of escapism, a way to avoid the unfairness and unlawfulness of nature. And while dropping out of reality entirely does not bode well for anyone, escapism as a phenomenon indicates not only the weakness of those unable to embrace reality but also the shortcomings of not-exactly-perfect reality itself. With no alternatives to the real world around us, we would be left without a source of energy to deal with our lives. Only

by escaping the trappings of the real world and shaking loose of it for a while can we access the vital recharge of the energy we need in order to face our daily routine once more.

An introduction to postescapism

The censure of escapism often tends to be shallow. On the other hand, the potential of escapist videogames is rather limited. Of course, they can influence people, but having any impact on reality is somewhat beyond their means. At best, in the most realistic cases, they are able to reproduce it. Explaining the universe and even attempting to alter it is the mandate of postescapist videogames.

Essentially, postescapism means videogames can no longer stay away from the pressing issues of our times, such as social inequality, environmental pollution, sexism, racism, human exceptionalism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc. In essence, the postescapist paradigm covers a whole range of developments, including 'serious' games (those designed outside the entertainment context, in order to meet the challenges of education, defence, management, healthcare, etc); gamification, which draws on game-design elements to motivate employees, clients, students or patients, but above all regular games designed for the scope of entertainment. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015) and *Last of Us: Part II*(2020), to name but a few, are just three cases of big-budget blockbuster games addressing serious issues like torture camps, acceptance of otherness or the grey area between the human and non-human.

The postescapist movement is driven by indie games. The establishment of postescapism coincides with the indie revolution of the late 2000s which granted scope for expression through videogaming media to those who had previously had no access to it. As a result, the range of games broadened and diversified: they gave a voice to a range of different groups and communities; they became instruments of social and political critique; they expressed concerns about the capitalist global order, turning into outlets of the oppressed and perfect case studies explaining the links between seemingly innocuous local actions and their disastrous

global consequences.

Postescapist videogames

As mentioned above, postescapism ended up permeating the whole gaming culture. However, rather than discussing a series of AAA games, it would make more sense to examine several simple, low profile, efficient yet controversial indie projects. There is a good reason to do so, as large-scale releases tend to become all-embracing, and any profound, socially relevant message is eclipsed by eclectic and engaging gameplay and fancy design. The proposed case studies aim to show that videogames possess a distinct language that differs from the expressive means of literature or film, enabling narratives of a unique kind.

In 2003, Gonzalo Frasca created *September 12th: A Toy World*. The name is a clear reference to the post-9/11 events. The player is invited to take part in the War on Terror. The premise is quite simple and intuitive: the player controls what seems to be a sniper rifle target (and thus is expected to shoot); the setting is a Middle-Eastern-style village populated by characters dressed in black (terrorists) and in blue (civilians). The former must be destroyed, the latter obviously spared. But there is an eye-opener moment: instead of bullets, the player is provided with exploding missiles that inevitably hit innocent residents and damage the city's infrastructure. While reloading, the player is forced to listen to the unnerving cries of mourners. The idea that collateral damage is inevitable in the global war on terror does not offer great consolation, since the surviving mourners are converted into terrorists. The very people that had to be saved just a while ago must now be killed. The conclusion is that the player is the worst killer of them all, and that violence only begets violence. The whole anti-terrorist strategy is dramatically wrong, claims Frasca. The only solution he offers the player is to stop playing, thereby disrupting the vicious circle of violence.

A similar strategy, albeit in a different area, is applied by Lucas Pope, the developer of *Papers, Please* (2013), in his earlier game *The Republia Times* (2012). The player takes on the role of a newspaper editor-in-chief in an authoritarian nation. As is the custom, the paper is used to win over public opinion. The

player/editor has to convince the people that everything in the country is fine by running convincing stories. The news bits can be selected from a scrolling display. Some stories must be given more prominence while other articles provide the background. Along with worthless celebrations of the new regime, there are horrifying accounts of torture, murder and abduction. But publishing these materials means losing the game as well as the lives of the editor's relatives, who are held hostage. The only winning strategy here is to hush up the truth about what is going on in the country. Essentially, the game exposes the mechanisms of censorship.

Yet another remarkable case is offered by *The Migrant Trail (2014)* developed by Gigantic Mechanic. It is a social and even documentary project that follows migrants as they cross the Sonoran Desert into Arizona in search of a better life. There are two modes in the game. In the first one, the player chooses a migrant character. With the little money available to him (scraped together by his relatives), the avatar must purchase supplies for the journey. The migrants set out in a group; the aim is not to perish from dehydration, hunger or unexpected medical conditions (sadly enough, these things still happen in the Sonoran Desert to this day) and to escape capture by border patrol. The gameplay is about crude survival: every now and then someone gets in trouble and the rest of the group have to decide what to do: leave their companion to die in the desert or share medical supplies and increased risks. In this mode, the player is in for some unexpected and often unpleasant discoveries. But the second mode is even more paradoxical because this time the characters are patrol agents. The situation is turned on its head: instead of the prey, you play the hunter. No more food or water shortages, the aim is to police the desert by driving a patrol car and tracking down illegal migrants. The incompatibility of the two perspectives is mind-blowing. Being a good policeman means catching border violators. But these people break the law for a reason, not just for fun. On the other hand, no reasoning is good enough on the Arizonian or Californian side of the border.

The key element of all these games is the very personal, intimate experience gained by the player. This goes to show how

postescapist games aim to immerse the audience into the crudeness of reality instead of shutting it out. After all, such an immediately accessible kind of reality is always limited. Videogames, on the other hand, push the boundaries of experiences available. Unlike TV programmes and news reporting, they transport players to places they otherwise would not have visited, and they afford unprecedentedly deep insights revealing the causal relationships of complex phenomena from a first-person perspective.

Metaescapism

The pandemic has exposed various critical issues in today's digital realm. Computer screens indeed rescued us by offering communication tools in the absence of physical communication. But we soon realised that they were not enough to compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact. One would think that they had been largely up to the task in previous years. But at that time, they merely supplemented the bodily interaction of people sharing the same places or spaces. Alas, we cannot be reduced to minds and mental powers. People are not ethereal spirits basking in the exchange of intelligible signals. We also have bodies. Besides seeing each other and hearing each other, we must come together and breathe the same air.

Paradoxically, this is exactly where videogames come in. It would be misleading to suppose that videogames rescued us from ourselves during the pandemic. Not everyone is a gamer after all. On the other hand, it would be odd to ignore the fact that videogames were there for us while outside reality was cancelled and betrayed itself. The long weeks of isolation in deserted cities had something surreal and artificial about them. Virtually the only way to get back to reality was to escape it (in the sense of avoiding the unfamiliar world with an unknown status in order to get back to what had long been a part of each and every human being).

This is precisely what metaescapism is all about. While escapist videogames were a way to forget about reality by delving into digital worlds, and postescapist videogames were a way to get back to reality by interpreting and exposing it, metaescapist videogames take us away from reality in order to lead us back to it.

That is to say, metaescapism is the point where escapism meets postescapism. In this sense, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) is as metaescapist as *Death Stranding* (2019). Arguably, even escapist videogames have taken on metaescapist overtones in the wake of current circumstances.

The distinct realism of videogames is concerned with the reality of experiences and emotions as much as with the audiovisual information. This is why a whole range of aesthetically not-quite-realistic games turn out to be realistic enough in terms of their depiction of the actions portrayed in the gameplay. And even if the world we are supposed to interact with is fictional, a product of our imagination, the experience of saving it or interacting with it is real enough. And this is the experience that stays when the game is over. Hence the paramount importance of games for the world we live in. They allow us to go on visiting places, admiring landscapes, watching sunsets, navigating planes and using the latest technology to dive deep into the sea. Remarkably, extensive travel and communication within the gameplay arena produce a tangible sense of physical movement and contact. And even though no travel actually takes place, the experience gained is instrumental to accepting the real world around us while supporting our mental and emotional health.

The main difference between videogames and other media that strive to make up for the lack of travel and live interaction is the completeness of experience. It is not about flashing images that damage our sight or sounds that have an impact on our hearing. It is a physical, bodily interiorisation of new territories and realms that grants access to something bigger than just one individual. All in all, it seems closer to reality than many of our recent 'real-world' experiences.