

The Bad Games Panel

PANEL OVERVIEW (ABSTRACT)

A video game can be such an utter failure, in terms of basic craft and artistic value, that it is not possible to gain any enjoyment from playing it. Or is it?

This panel discusses the possibility of appreciating video games that are otherwise considered "flawed" or "bad". The concepts of paracinema (Sconce) and camp (Sontag) describe ways of appreciating cinema and culture that is otherwise derided as low quality by dominant standard of taste. Using these as starting points, we can begin to understand how also games can be enjoyed or valued precisely *because* they fail to meet established quality criteria. *Paragaming* can be seen as the practice of valuing games because they fail to meet game-specific quality criteria like usability, stability, flow, etc.

This panel will explore three different aspects of paragaming, touching on the relationship between difficulty and user experience, the way paracinematic language and culture is often appropriated into not only the practice of paragaming, but into game development, and the role of group dynamics in enjoying "bad games".

The question of bad games is important to the mission of game studies. By better understanding counter-readings and/or counter-playings of games - the deliberate appropriation of games in ways that are presumed to go against the intentions of the developers - we can better understand the taste cultures that we are already (and perhaps not consciously) immersed in.

Author Keywords

GAME DESIGN, PARACINEMA, PARAGAMING, AUDIENCES, GAME APPRECIATION.

FIRST PANELIST: UNPLAYABLE MEANS MORE PLAYABLE

Cinema has well understood ways of appreciating and elevating "bad" film. The appreciation of "bad" games is less developed and less well understood. I will point to two barriers to the appreciation of bad games, and show how these barriers *by themselves* open for ways to appreciate bad games, or *paragaming*.

The first barrier to paragaming is that video games ask players for a level of concrete, even physical effort that exceeds that of cinema. Not that watching cinema is passive, but a game with a broken interface or excessive

difficulty will concretely prevent the player from progressing in the game.

However, it is in practice straightforward to appreciate games that are excessively difficult due to interface problems or design flaws. The strategy is simply to acknowledge these flaws of the game, and then knowingly accept these flaws as an extra level of enjoyable challenge.

The second barrier to paragaming is that video games retain a contested status as medium, as witnessed by countless discussion of video games as "art" or video games as possible purveyors of emotional depth. Since paracinema is built on the rejection of established taste canons, the potential paragamer lacks an authority to define their taste against.

On the other hand, minor canons of "good" games do exist: The gaming press and the field of game studies do promote a canon of games such as, *BioShock* (2K Games 2007), *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico 2005), or *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004). Paragaming, then, requires selecting a specific canon against which other, "bad" games can be enjoyed.

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SECOND PANELIST: BAD STORIES MAKE GOOD GAMES BETTER

Although finding enjoyment in bad game design or broken interfaces is certainly one form of what one might call paragaming, another (probably more common) form could be called "paracinema by proxy": the enjoyment of well-designed, fun games that also offer the pleasures of bad cinema.

In games that function as paracinematic proxies the “awful” writing, acting, or production value are themselves sources of pleasure that coexist easily alongside the pleasures of “excellent” game design. An early historical example of this is *Resident Evil* (Capcom Entertainment 1996), a game that was equally lauded for its terrific gameplay and hilariously bad dialogue. More recently games like *House of the Dead: Overkill* (Headstrong Games 2009) have orchestrated entire marketing campaigns around paracinematic aesthetics while simultaneously promising great gameplay.

Intentionality is an important issue. Awkward translations can spurn paracinematic interpretations of seriously-meant game stories, with players appropriating the language of paracinema to make sense of confusing foreign games. Likewise the difference between *real* bad game production value (bad or buggy graphics) and *simulated* bad cinematic production value (film grain effects) is important to consider. Games can function as paracinematic proxies even without any explicit film references, as long as the game’s “badness” never interferes with the “goodness” of the play experience.

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THIRD PANELIST: WE'LL GET THROUGH THIS TOGETHER

One strategy for appreciating bad games is to play them in a social setting. Using case studies of groups of players

intentionally engaged with "bad" single-player games, I will argue that the group setting fundamentally alters the player-avatar relationship, which then enables a specific mode of enjoyment.

When playing a single-player game the player usually identifies with his or her avatar to some extent, as evidenced by common sayings such as “I died” not “Mario died.” If the game is poor this identification becomes a source of frustration: if “I” am in the game then “I” am part of the problem.

If a single-player game is experienced in a group where control is shared, this identification breaks down because the player in control will often simply do what the others suggest, and because direct control of the avatar frequently changes. As a result, the experience of the bad game transforms into an interactive performance where the audience is invited to revel in the performer’s shortcomings.

Unlike the appreciation of camp, this mode of enjoyment is distinctly negative: the audience is making fun of the game. Here the lack of identification between player and avatar is necessary; otherwise the player would become a source of derision as well.

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