Realism and the everyday in digital games

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ABSTRACT
This paper develops Alexander Galloway’s (2006) theory of social realism in games, arguing that a focus on the relationship between mode of representation, the everyday and the social totality (Lukács, 2001/1938) unpack the critical potential of realism in digital games.

Keywords
realism, the everyday, Lukács, Lotman, Galloway

INTRODUCTION
When realism is discussed in relation to games it most often refers to the level of correspondence between how a game world looks, sounds or behaves and how the world is experienced in normal perception (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008, p. 142; King & Krzywinska, 2006, pp.125-152). When a game draws on some specific real-world events, realism can also mean the game’s faithfulness to these events. This is often a point of contention in the context of wargames and other games that treat historical themes (Payne, 2012).

Alexander Galloway (2006) sees this approach to realism as related to representation—an interest in the “realisticness” of a game. He contrasts this with “social realism,” by which he means the extent to which a game’s story or theme corresponds to the everyday lived experience of its players. Galloway defines social realist games as “those games that reflect critically on the minuitiae of everyday life, replete as it is with struggle, personal drama, and injustice” (p.75). Galloway identifies some “proto-realist” games, but fails to find any games that fully accord with his definition.

There are three aspects of Galloway’s argument that I wish to re-examine in this paper. First, in attempting to emphasise social realism Galloway almost entirely neglects the role of representation. His discussion therefore fails to account for the importance of the mode of description through which games might engage in critical reflection. Second, while Galloway’s definition of realism does mention the representation of everyday life he loses sight of this at certain points, focusing exclusively at times on the critical capacity of realism rather than its location in everyday life. This identifies realism with critique as such, rather than differentiating it as a particular form of critique that operates along
particular lines. Third, when Galloway does discuss everyday life he makes an untenable claim that a game is only realist if the form of everyday life represented corresponds to the everyday experience of the player. He calls this the “congruence requirement” and claims it is a unique feature of games due to the fact that they are “active media” (p.83). I argue that this claim involves an oversimplification of the relationship between images and actions in games.

This paper develops Galloway’s discussion by emphasising the importance of mode of representation and the everyday in games. I retain Galloway’s conviction that realism is a potentially critical genre, and use the Marxist critic György Lukács’ (2001/1938) defence of realism as a literary practice to this end. Lukács claimed that realism used description to show the possibility of connecting the life of individuals to the social totality of which they are a part. This totality had been, for Lukács, fragmented under capitalism, but realism demonstrated the possibility of a restoration of this totality. I connect Lukács’ approach to literary realism with Yuri Lotman’s theorisation of everyday life which he sees as “a ‘boundary’ zone in which our own practices and habits come into conflict with the codes and systems that a dominant discourse of the ‘center’ seeks to impose on us” (Bolton, 2006, 321). Lotman claims that everyday life is not “semiotised”—it goes unnoticed. I argue that realism in games would bring everyday life into focus not only by putting everyday practices into play, but also by connecting these everyday practices to the social totality.

Like Galloway, I do not identify the realist game as an existing genre, nor do I identify specific instances of realist games. Rather, I use the concept of realism as developed in literary theory to elaborate on the relationship between mode of representation and the everyday in digital games. In selecting examples I am informed by Rosa Mucignat (2013), who has pointed out that a key characteristic of the realist novel is in its intersection of the everyday with the adventure. We see this intersection in Shenmue (SEGA, 1999), Mother (Nintendo, 1989), and The Sims (Maxis, 2000). While each of these games semiotises the everyday through this intersection of the everyday and the adventure, they each fall short of the critical potential Lukács argues for the realist novel.

BIBLIOGRAPHY