
Trauma Representations in Videogames

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Over the last few years, the videogame community has seen an increase in the visibility of indie games, particularly ones that focus on serious subjects. Given the name “empathy games” by Minority Media’s Vander Caballero in his 2014 GDC talk, this sub-genre is known for its intense and meaningful narratives that often bring to light traumatic experiences. While the classification of these games under empathy can be problematic as highlighted by Anna Anthropy (2015) and the responses to her game *Dys4ia*, the phenomenological experience of playing these videogames offers a new perspective through which one can engage understandings of new media aesthetics and narrative design. Moreover, Caballero’s (2014) identification of the “empathy game” category as strategic for project support highlights the development of the sub-genre at a point which methodologies of analyzing these aesthetics and design choices as they relate to the representation of trauma within videogames are needed most. Building on the relevance of the issue as well as the unexplored intersections that such mediation brings to prior understandings of critical theory, this paper will propose a methodology for analyzing representations of trauma in videogames that builds on current work in the field. Moreover, it will explore the theoretical implications of such a method to the model of player experience through remediation in order to offer a broader understanding of the meaningful intersection of trauma narratives and new media.

Beginning with its most well-known applications in the 1990s with the work of Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996) in literary studies and in the 2000s with the work of Dominick LaCapra (2014) in history, the study of trauma has spread from its Freudian psychoanalytic roots to become a field of study in both the sciences and the humanities. Both of the models developed by and around these two theorists are extremely helpful

for literary representations given their foundations in disciplines that largely rely on print media and are able to be applied to different genres given their multidisciplinary foci; however, the study of trauma representations has not yet spread widely to new media applications aside from its application in testimonial media. This exclusion suggests a gap in scholarship for trauma studies as it does not account for how these models of trauma may be useful in or influenced by other media.

With the increasing cultural and economic impact of videogames, it is essential that the digital humanities develop a critical framework for understanding and analyzing the intersections of trauma studies and videogames. Tobi Smethurst’s work (2014, 2015a, 2015b) attempts to bridge this gap by identifying how both game studies and trauma studies could benefit from an interdisciplinary application. Smethurst’s doctoral thesis (2015a), explores this intersection to offer a tripartite methodology for analyzing trauma in videogames: interactivity, empathy, and complicity. This methodology is particularly useful because it examines the rhetorical feedback loop between player and game, which, she argues, creates a very specific experience for representing trauma by implicating the player as a perpetrator, and it works very well for games that are designed to elicit such feedback from players. This methodology, however, does not fully account for videogames being able to represent trauma in ways that do not end in making the player complicit in the trauma.

Expanding on this foundation, my paper will discuss the use of videogames as an interactive digital media platform for representing traumatic narratives, identify a methodology for analyzing such representations, and argue for a model that understands play in videogames containing representations of trauma as a form of witnessing. This work will begin by grounding its understanding of trauma as it is defined in literary studies through the works of Caruth (1995, 1996) and LaCapra (2014) respectively and expanding its theoretical framework to the use of digital media through digital narrative and media studies by exploring the affordances of videogames highlighted by Janet Murray (1997) in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Next, I will discuss a methodology for analyzing representations of trauma in videogames that utilizes those media aesthetics and the object’s use of procedural rhetoric as defined by Ian Bogost (2007) in *Persuasive Games* to create a remediated (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) experience of

witnessing as described by Dori Laub (1995) in "Truth as Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." In doing so, I will discuss how this methodology provides a much needed perspective concerning the intersection of videogames and trauma studies. Additionally, I will argue for a model of representing trauma in videogames that seeks to understand feedback loops with the audience in broader terms, which I will ground in the understanding of videogame ethics as discussed in *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009) by Miguel Sicart. Such a model will focus on the mediation of the trauma through the videogame experience and account for the overlapping of ethical systems that exist for the player outside of the gameworld, which, I will argue, helps the player navigate the different levels of witnessing. Together, this combination of theoretical foundations will expand on the current scholarship to offer a more holistic understanding of the potential held by videogames as a medium to represent trauma.

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