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Chris Chesher's Paper was delivered at *Plaything*;
Theorising the Zone: Chaired by Eric Zimmerman.

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Should we analyse digital games using the same methods as other media, or do we need a new language? The speakers exlpore the structure of games and the subjective experience of the the gamer immersed in the Zone.

Eugenie Shinkle (UK)

Corporealis ergo sum: Rez, affect, and the end of the Cartesian subject

Anne Mette Thorhauge (DK)

Playing while making sense - How to understand the position of the videogame player

Chris Chesher (Aus)

Game Screens: Not the Gaze, nor the Glance, but the Glaze

Console games and the glaze

Chris Chesher

A man stands in the middle of a downtown city street, outside a gun shop. Even though he is bringing the traffic to a standstill, he seems oblivious to the disruption. He sways side-to-side as if in a trance. But the city is indifferent: other pedestrians wander past, ignoring his plight.

A car is parked on a hill by the side of a river. It is blowing steam or smoke, and seems to have been damaged recently. The radio is playing loudly. The driver sits motionless at the wheel. Nestled in his hands there's a submachinegun.

A man in a suit stands on a footpath possibly in London, watching traffic speeding past. He seems agitated and uncomfortable.

These scenes are taken from video games, which many say are defined by interactivity. But even before anyone picked up the games controller — before any user interaction took place — the images on this console game screen were distinctively different from the images on those other familiar screens: cinema and television.

It's not just that the images and sounds are different. We are too. The way we usually approach a game is very different from flicking on the telly or going out to the movies. My commentary read the game as though it was cinema. And while it made some sense to look for deeper meaning in these scenes, that's not the conventional way of reading these images.

People learn to look at games images (and listen to their sounds) in specific and different ways: where am I? Who am I? What can I do? What is threatening me? How can I enhance my powers? How can I move? How can I act? What's that pipe for? These are not the same questions that I ask as a TV viewer, or as a cinema spectator.

All visual media operate according to culturally established and technologically mediated conventions about how they should be looked at. Computer games ask you to look at them in ways that are very different from TV or film (or Shakespearean theatre, Classicist oil paintings, religious frescos, or modernist architecture for that matter). In this talk I'm going to show some more clips from the *Grand Theft Auto* games, and from cinema, to offer some ideas about how TV, movies and games constitute their consumers in different ways.

In the essay for the *Plaything* exhibition catalogue (don't forget to visit the exhibition, and buy the beautiful full colour catalogue), I return to a classic media studies book by John Ellis called *Visible Fictions.* [new slide]

This book compares and contrasts cinema and television as cultural practices; as image and sound; as narration; and according to how they constitute spectators or viewers. Ellis shows how TV and cinema, sometimes reduced to the category of audiovisual media, are quite distinctive and interdependent. He draws heavily on psychoanalysis, but works very much within media studies. While this work has dated, and these generalisations have many exceptions, they're a useful starting point. They give us something to play with.

[new slide]

The regime of vision typical of Hollywood cinema has been familiar for a century. [New cell] You are cast as one of many spectators, sitting in rows in a darkened public space [new cell], with a huge screen presenting high resolution, photographic images [new cell]. This dark, sedentary condition encourages a dream-like state of phantasy, in which your sense of reality, agency and identity become more malleable. [new cell] It also positions you as a voyeur, looking in on the lives of characters that apparently know nothing about the fact that they are being observed. You identify with the projected image, and with the characters on the screen (but not just one of them – in a strange way you identify with all of the humans (and sometimes non-humans) involved.

Feature films are typically single fictional works that establish some enigma that you have to resolve by the end of the two hours or so that you expect to spend in the theatre. You've already had your expectations set by posters, trailers and reviews, or what Ellis calls the film's 'narrative image'.

[new cell] Cinema tends towards nostalgia. Unlike the electronic images on television, cinema presents high quality photographic images, which require significant postproduction before being released. As Barthes argued, photos tend to be read as evidence of something having once been present.

The cinema spectator tries to understand the psychological states of the characters involved, attempting to penetrate the ambiguous depths of their motivations. In close-up, the face of the actor becomes an expansive and mysterious surface. His or her eyes (which rarely connect with the spectator's) are dark pools that seem to hold a mysterious unknowable truth. Spectators watch in their dream-like voyeuristic, nostalgic state. [new cell] In a word, this mode of visuality is the gaze. Cinematic images cut between shots, and move the camera, creating its effects by manipulating the gaze of spectators and characters. [new column]

Broadcast television

Broadcast television viewers are cast in quite a different role. [new cell x 2] The screen sits in your own home, all the time. TV is distinctively domestic. [new cell] It assumes that its viewers are families in their own homes (even when this demographic represents only a fraction of actual viewers).

The screen is smaller than you are, and the lower quality images are electronic and luminous [new cell] rather than filmed and projected. You don't have to pay to go and see it. But the household has other distractions, and television has to compete for attention. It often does so through sound: jingles, station IDs and other music or sound effects draw viewers back to the screen.

[new cell] TV viewers experience a distracted complicity with televisual reality. Broadcast television is geographically specific, so programs address the viewers of a particular region or city. Stations try to establish ongoing relationships of trust with their viewers. Television scans what is going on in the world, and asks the viewers to share that experience. Both fiction and non-fiction content, soapies and news, offer viewers an image of the world framed according to familiar and familial standards. It shows fragments of ongoing life, rather than complete narratives with resolution. [new cell] It tends to concentrate on the extraordinary and the bizarre, but only to assure viewers of their own normality in relation to this outside that is not us.

Programming is continuous, but highly fragmented. Segments are self-contained, constantly drawing back viewers any time their attention drifts. Each program is only one segment

within a carefully programmed flow. Many are serials that return daily or weekly. Whereas a film usually resolves the problems it establishes, serials tend to return to the same dilemmas and anxieties over and over.

TV also relates to time differently. [new slide] Where cinema requires a long period of post-production between filming and screening, television is often broadcast live. Even pre-recorded programs have a sense of liveness, because broadcasts appear simultaneously on any set that is tuned in.

[new slide] Television's typical regime of vision, then, is a distracted looking through the medium at a strange world passing by — a glance.

[new cell]

Console games

Ellis's contrast between television and cinema is a useful starting point for reading the new popular culture medium of 3D immersive console games like *Grand Theft Auto III* and *GTA Vice City*.

Users of console games are called individually to become players. [new cell] While games are consumed domestically, they are not for the whole family. They are most often used with one person, or sometimes two, on a console. [new cell] The person with the controller is directly addressed by menus to set up the game and start play. This process of personalisation often extends to competitive records that identify players by name or initials, and document their level of performance, again encouraging atomic individualism. Unlike television content, which is homogenised to suit family viewing, games are often addressed to include and exclude groups according to taste. Part of the pleasure of playing games that horrify your parents is that it asserts your own identity. The popular demonisation of games, characteristically on television, plays into this pleasure in non-conformity.

Whereas cinema spectators vicariously identify with several characters on the screen, game players' typically actively identify with only one avatar. One variation to this rule is in ball sport simulation games where a single player can control a whole team, as the computer switches user control to the player closest to the ball. Games can create quite a range of different forms of identification or modes of attachment between players and avatars, and mobilise quite different subjectivities.

[new cell] Unlike cinema's photo effect, and video's sense of liveness, computer game images are simulations that never actually existed. Game designers compile databases of elements that are called up in real time during gameplay and composed according to algorithms in the games engine. In 3D console games like the ones I showed earlier, these elements include animated wireframe models, bitmapped image skins wrapped around these models, sound effects, and lighting. The scene is calculated in real time from appropriate virtual camera angles, often referencing cinema as the ideal visual standard. Whereas the virtuoso technical performance in cinema involves complicated and long moving camera shots, video game designers show off with complex movements of water, fire, and naturalistic hair.

As important as visual realism, though, is a realism of affordances. The avatar has certain limited powers of movement and action that can be enhanced by prosthetic objects, typically weapons and vehicles. The avatar also has specific vulnerabilities, and the game world presents threats to avatar's health. These games features are tuned to generate affect: fear of threats, confidence with health bonuses and armour, satisfaction with destroying that

threat. The psychic state of games players, therefore, is a long way from the soporific trance of cinema spectators. [new cell] Rather than cinema's voyeuristic view from outside, games are immersive, and encourage a sadomasochistic relationship to the games world. Players take pleasure in destroying things, and even in being destroyed themselves.

Taking control of an avatar lets the player take on the role of the character directly, and experiment with 'what-if' scenarios. [new cell] Because games sequences can (and usually must) be replayed several times, there is no final take. Players experiment with several outcomes from the same set of circumstances. This makes it possible to renegotiate practical problems, and even ethical dilemmas, until the player gets it right. Play tends to be structured by virtual spaces, as much as by time pressures. Charmed spaces trigger what Alex Luscombe calls 'micro-narratives' that attach particular spaces with significant events.

The console game's simulated images are not oriented to the past like cinema, or to the present like broadcast television, but to the possible. As films like *Groundhog day* or *Run Lola Run* have mimicked cinematically, the logic of gameplay is founded on cycling time and repetition that perform a wide range of possible worlds.

Where cinema's regime of vision is the gaze, and television's is the glance, the console game's, I will now argue, is the glaze.

[new slide]

The glaze

The concept of the glaze requires some elucidation. There are three different meanings of the term that are relevant to defining the distinctiveness of the computer game. The first is the usual accusation made of game players: that their eyes seem to have glazed over. [new bullet]

Even if they look spaced out, game players are actually closely engaged with space and action. They're just not in the same sensorimotor space as the rest of us. Their perceptions have become coextensive with the simulation. Their capacities for action is channelled through the games controller, and calibrated to the glaze space.

Camera movements and edits have very different significance in 3D immersive console games from their cinematic equivalent. While they take cinematic imagery as their model, the ways that they mobilise these conventions are very different. I'll show how in a moment.

The second sense of the glaze is its stickiness. Just as the glaze on a cake is sticky, the video game glaze holds players to the game. This hold is dynamic, and heterogeneous. Some games encourage players to master particular skills, such as getting the quickest lap time in a race. Others allow players to compete against other players. The *Grand Theft Auto* games have an open playspace, but a sequence of missions can be activated if the player chooses. Each mission introduces new puzzles and requires new skills. Successful completion opens up the next mission, and sometimes unlocks new areas, weapons or vehicles. All of these function as what I call ludostatic mechanisms, sustaining the playability of a game. They don't hold the players so tight that they can't move, but they hold them enough that they don't drift off with boredom. Since a typical console game can take thirty or more hours of play to get through, this hold can be remarkably strong.

The third sense of the glaze refers to the reflections that appear in a glazed surface such as a vase. You can see yourself and the world around you, but it's distorted out of proportion. When you take on the role of the avatar, you identify with the character quite directly. When

you decide to move, the avatar moves, within the fields of action that the games engine and controls allow. Many people imagine that simulation technology is imperfect, and that when the technology matures, it will be possible to simulate anything. This underplays the importance of constraints to gameplay (as Eric Zimmerman stressed last night). Unlike the way spectators identify with characters with apparent depth in the cinema, the avatar tends to be empty, or at the most a stereotype. The player fills this identity when they take control of the character. Glaze is surface-only, with no depth or substance.

So now let's look at some examples to compare and contrast how different media handle similar material. The examples I'll show belong to the genre of crime fiction (if I had time I'd show a TV cop show as well). These scenes have many similar elements. But they're mobilised differently and invite consumers into the image in contrasting ways.

My first example is a sequence from the Scorcese film, *Goodfellas*.

[check volume]

Goodfellas

[new slide] In this sequence, Henry Hill, played by Ray Liotta, has some guns to sell, some drugs to traffic, and he has to pick up his brother from hospital. While you're watching this, I want you to look for three things:

1. How do the mise-en-scene, camera movements, editing, music and sound establish and maintain the spectator's sense of the filmic space?

2. What keeps you watching? How does the film establish expectations and mobilise memory?

3. Who do you identify with, and how? How do you come to know the internal life of the character?

Of course you want to keep watching. The sequence of images that come to the screen are the result of a highly produced combination of carefully selected and groomed locations, props, performances (from on-screen actors, trained crew, voice-overs and so on), editing, music, on-screen text and sound effects. The sequence creates a relentless sense of urgency and impending threat from the helicopters, although it is ambiguous whether the helicopters are real or flown in from Henry's cocaine-psychotic imagination. You want to keep watching to find out what happens.

Space and time are typically indistinct: there are jumps or ellipses between scenes. And the time that it takes for him to stop the car is extended much longer than real time. Cinema audiences accept that in movies time is quite malleable. The combination of fast editing and the rock soundtrack maintain a pace and rhythm to the sequence that leaves spectators no pause.

You probably didn't identify with Liotta's character as though you were he, but in that cinematic way, you felt close to him, and read his actions as evidence of deeper motivations. Several times in the sequence the camera rapidly tracks in to a close-up on his face — almost too quickly — to reflect his hypermanic state. This is quite typical of the gaze relation created by cinema.

So in contrast, the glaze works very differently.

Martha's mug shot

This mission in *Grand Theft Auto Vice City* works with many of the same props as the sequence from *Goodfellas*, and the same lead actor — Ray Liotta, alongside Dennis Hopper in this scene. Tommy Vercetti, your avatar, has recently purchased an old film studio. The director has called you to deal with an emerging threat to business.

[wait for clip to end… lower the volume]

The main cut scene establishes a narrative justification for the mission, and the game engine gives the player two appropriate affordances: a camera (that works like the sniper gun sight we know already) and a helicopter that flies something like the cars drive.

Apart from the cut scenes, virtual camera movements in the glaze space are motivated entirely by the character's movements. As your character (or the helicopter he's flying) moves, the world literally revolves around you.

It's possible (and sometime necessary) for players to switch camera angles. There are buttons assigned to switch to views from the left, right and rear; and another button cycles between several wider or tighter camera positions, as well as the 'cinematic camera' that mimics cinematic editing, but makes the game almost unplayable. There are occasional trigger points in the game when minor cut sequences move the mission narrative along. These sequences can hardly be described as great cinema. If anything, by removing control of the helicopter in mid-air, this switch makes a player even more anxious about their mission ahead. [pause for dialogue]

Otherwise, camera movements in the general egocentric viewpoint are not motivated by dramatic significance, but by a necessity to maintain the conditions for future action within the game simulation (glaze one). On-screen text directly addresses the player not as abstract information, but as instructions about how to act. Unlike *Goodfellas*, where time is compressed, the action unfolds as if in real time (although I've edited this sequence myself for this talk). As the character runs up the stairs, the player realises that within the glaze space, they'll need to come back down later (which is the real challenge of the mission — as soon as you take the pictures your 'wanted level', indicated by the stars at the top right of the screen, goes off the scale! The story — blackmailing Congressman Shrub — depends upon your own actions.

So to summarise, while *Goodfellas* and *Vice City* are crime fictions set in the 1980s, involving bad guys, vice, helicopters and urban landscapes, their most distinct differences relate to the medium they're working in.

Goodfellas establishes a gaze relation: voyeuristic, nostalgic spectators watching a single narrative on a photographic medium, unravelling an enigma (are the helicopters real?) Time and space are fudged for dramatic effect. Music and sound are closely integrated with the narrative flow.

By contrast, *Vice City* glazes players into its simulated gamespace. A virtual camera tracks the avatar to keep the fields of possible action in view, revealing threats and opportunities.

The game is sticky, holding players by offering varied, challenging and rewarding missions within a very open playspace.

In the third dimension, the game gives players a hypermasculine avatar that is open to be read literally or ironically. Exploring the world reveals corrupt cops and politicians, urban

landscapes reflecting class and ethnic variations, and other exaggerated but familiar features of a 20th century western city.

So although games seem to be approaching cinematic image quality, they remain very different media. Their use of space and time, the ways they attract and hold consumers, and the modes of identification they offer remain very different.

Perhaps as interesting as the distinctions between these media are the instances where these regimes of vision intersect or cross-pollinate. DVD menus and TV remotes inject the glaze relation into gaze and glance. Some games feature so many and elaborate cut-scenes that they almost qualify as cinema. Watching sport on television, even without any agency, might be characterised as glaze-like. I could go on, but I think my time is well up, and I'll leave you to play with these concepts yourselves.