

Critically discuss the claim that people play videogames to escape from reality

For the purposes of this assignment, a videogame will be defined as '*a game played by electronically manipulating images produced by a computer programme, on audio-visual apparatus, that is based on a narrative*' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016a; Esposito, 2005). 'Reality' will be expressive of physically tangible structures that encompass an individual's general everyday life, and 'escape'/'escapism' will essentially be descriptive of distractive activity from this reality. Utilising these definitions, this assignment aims to deliberate the intended meaning behind 'escapism' in relation to videogaming, as well as exploring alternative explanations as to why people may play videogames outside notions of escape. Ultimately, the analytical critique of the claim hopes to justify why it is inherently problematic.

Calleja (2010: 337-8) argues that the 'real' and the virtual are often seen as a binary division, the crossing of which is suggested to imply escapism. He contends that this logic misrepresents our engagement with virtual environments, insofar it implies that by accessing virtual environments we are automatically entertaining escapism, which he rightly explains is far removed from the truth (Calleja, 2010: 340). As such, he advocates Castronova's (2005) move towards adopting 'synthetic' as a suitable replacement to what was failing to be articulated by 'virtual' in this context. According to Castronova (2005: 294) 'synthetic' is expressive of what is just '*rendered by a computer*' as well as emphasising the designed nature of virtual environments. Thus, because this assignment supports that the virtual is a constituent of reality and not it's binary, it will also adopt 'synthetic' to avoid misrepresentations (Calleja, (2010: 339).

Guest (2007) claims that videogames can be a welcome distraction, especially in the procrastination from some form of pressure, which would suggest that videogames are played to escape from reality. He adds that videogames transport the player to another world which has some degree of synthetic realism, but unlike reality, has a high degree of safety as varying levels of havoc can be created without the player physically getting hurt, thus enabling an imaginative escape. This ideology of transferring to another realm is also characterised by Huizinga's (1955) concept of a 'magic circle' in which the player becomes enclosed in a self-contained, spatiotemporal sphere that isolates them, and their actions within it, from their

everyday life, i.e. reality (Rodriguez, 2006). However, a key distinction between the two positions is that Huizinga's is not based upon escaping from reality, but on the player becoming immersed in the gameplay experience away from reality. Thus, it can reasonably be debated that whilst videogames act as a mechanism by which the player can safely explore imaginative escapes, in which they can withdraw from mundane reality for periods of time (Molesworth, 2009), it does not necessarily mean that this is the primary reasoning to why people play videogames.

Rodriguez (2006) presents that people play games to develop and/or test their various cognitive, interpersonal and moral skills, such as intelligence, communication and moral reasoning. In this respect, people are playing videogames as an educational tool to assist their everyday realities, as opposed to escaping them (Evans, 2001). In relation to using games as an assistive tool, Rodriguez (2006) contends that people cite gaming as mechanism to maintain/develop their social relations and/or health, insofar that various games allow for play and/or competition against themselves and/or others. For example, when asked why he plays FIFA, a colleague replied that he does so to maintain his friendship and socialise with his best friend who is geographically distanced from him. Likewise, another colleague experiments with Wii Fit using his balance board to assist recovery from nerve damage to his left leg. In both scenarios it is evident neither are using videogames as a form of escape from reality.

Whilst there are likely to be many other motives to playing videogames, the final one that will be discussed in this assignment is that of the experience. Ermi and Mäyrä (2005: 91) claim that '*the gameplay experience can be defined as an ensemble made up of the player's sensations, thoughts, feelings, actions and meaning-making in a gameplay setting*', thus is something that emerges in a unique interaction between the player and their game. Often the player anticipates that by engaging with gameplay they will experience a certain emotive state as a result (Bartle, 2004), whether they envisage it as fun, in the search of happiness, to relax or to purposefully escape from their reality (Evans, 2001: 55). This active participation assists the construction of their gameplay experience and is what could potentially lead to an escapist experience (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005: 91-94), however, it does not mean that playing a videogame to escape from reality was intended. According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), escapist experiences emerge from active participation in

addition to immersion. They describe immersion as a psychological process in which the player becomes part of the experience itself, which is distinct from simply engaging with the videogame as it extends beyond just directing attention towards the gameplay (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005: 94). This may also be a by-product of the gameplay experience and not at all anticipated, therefore debates surrounding gameplay experience can both support and negate that people play videogames to escape from reality.

Despite entertaining the claim in the discussion posed above, it is believed that the notion 'people play videogames to escape from reality' is fundamentally flawed, and as such cannot be accepted to hold a valid argument. If ludologists and related academics critically concerned themselves with the terminology they choose to use and replicate, they would recognise that the logical semantics of 'escape' lies in breaking free (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016b). It is acknowledged that the dictionary itself supports using 'escape' to define '*a form of temporary distraction from reality*' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016b), however this is imagined to be a side-effect of seemingly popular irrational usage. Taking Calleja's (2010: 348) invalid point to illustrate this wrongful disposition, escapism cannot imply an eventual return to the point of departure, insofar once the gameplay experience is over the player expects that they will essentially be transported back to reality. Thus using 'escape' as a means of explanation in this context has to be contested as 'escape' inherently suggests a more permanent condition and not a temporary state. Therefore, under analytical scrutiny, a more robust replacement would perhaps be a 'retreat', i.e. 'people play videogames to retreat from reality'. Using 'retreat' provides a coherent representation of what players experience or seek when they knowingly psychologically suspend themselves from reality to engage with videogames and is plausibly more representative of what is aiming to be ludologically expressed.

In continuation from understanding escapism in academic use to be more suggestive of retreating from reality for a period of time, Molesworth's (2009: 378-381) analysis of using videogames as imaginative escape from routine (reality), finally makes sense. He identified several prominent themes which he believed could be contextualised to escapism, namely nostalgia, fantasising/partial actualisation of an alternate self or of being someone else, wanting to be somewhere different and novelty. What he actually helpfully provides are explanations/motives to why people

want to retreat from their realities, and what they hope to achieve by doing so. Further to this, Calleja (2010: 347) and Evans (2001: 57) effectively write that using videogames as a synthetic retreat can be a coping mechanism in which players regulate their emotional states and recuperate to enable them to sustain otherwise unbearable realities. Additionally, he claims that videogames can act as a means to turn tedious lengths of time into cognitively and emotionally stimulating activity. These arguments support that retreating can be intentionally desired and may sought to be achieved by playing videogames because they offer the potential for profound redefinition of body, mind and spirit for a limited time, that are not subject to reality (Rehak, 2003: 21). However, it has to be noted that whilst positive psychological retreats are anticipated, they were not always obtained, for example, nostalgic 'escapes' may not live up to the player's expectations (Molesworth, 2009: 379-380), thus cannot be guaranteed to be an effective retreat/coping mechanism.

In conclusion, the very fact that videogaming can be principally pursued as a desired mechanism for retreating indicates that there is something unsatisfactory about reality (Evans, 2001; Molesworth, 2009), thus, the underlying matters that people truly want to escape from, but perceivably cannot, perhaps need to be addressed. Nonetheless, if the discussed claim is entertained as being true, then it has to be remembered that humans themselves create these imaginative escapes. As such, it should be questioned why an 'escape' from reality was originally conceived and deemed desirable, let alone why videogames are contemporarily accepted and utilised in an increasing capacity for this alleged purpose (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). However, as discussed, 'escapism' is not the only reason people play videogames and there are a number of other explanations as to why people do so.

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