

Making Video Games and Television Play Nicely

“How do games think about television?”

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1. Making motion

The earliest home gaming devices, such as Ralph Baer’s series of “TV Game Unit” prototypes from 1967 and 1968 and subsequent commercial releases like the Magnavox Odyssey and Home Pong were part game, part novelty item. In early film exhibitions, presenters often projected a slide of the film’s first frame prior to starting the film, drawing attention to the “magic” moment where the image went from static to moving. If part of the attraction of early film was the wonder of motion, coupled with the thrill of technological innovation, the early development and marketing of home videogames drew on a corresponding appeal: what if you could make things appear and move on your TV? Electromechanical tinkering, rather than interest in gameplay, seems to have been Baer’s principal interest in developing the TV units.

Early consoles were, at heart, tools for producing images on a TV screen. The TV Game Unit was essentially a modification of a device called an “alignment generator” that was used to test and adjust television sets. The consoles, in other words, broke televisions down to their functioning as electronic devices capable of producing images. The lines and dots drawn by the TV Game Unit and its successors represent a close coupling of one device to another.

2. Liveness

If video game consoles were capable of harnessing the technological form-creating abilities of televisions, they were unable to approach the visual verisimilitude of even the simplest televisions. This is partly due to technological limitations, of course, but beyond questions of visual “realism,” games have also historically been closed systems in ways that television has not. As consoles were appearing, much television, even dramatic television, was still broadcast live, bringing new information from and about the world semi-instantaneously into the home. Of course, many shows—notably news programs and sports—are still broadcast live today. Videogames, by comparison, are relatively self-contained: models of worlds, guidelines for stories, and sets of parameters that lay dormant until engaged by their players.

In one sense, games are always “live,” as game sessions only happen when we play the games, and what happens in a game only happens as it is brought into being by the closely coupled activities of players, consoles, and software. The loop, until recently, stopped there. This is complicated by the (relatively) recent rise of online games and persistent virtual worlds, in which time passes and things happen whether any particular player is logged in or not. With the increased network capacities of home consoles we also see attempts to capture a sense of liveness “from the world,” especially in the case of sports games such as *NBA 2k16*, a basketball game in which the announcers make reference to events that have occurred over the last few days in the *real* NBA, and in which score updates keep players up to date on what is happening in live basketball games as they play the simulation.

3. Is television information to games?

The presence of mock-television aesthetics in games is nothing new. Voiceover announcers have featured in sports games since they became technologically feasible, and earlier sports games were routinely modeled after television presentations of the sports. 1980s-era games like *Double Dribble*, *Hardball*, and

Blades of Steel mimicked the camera angles and the of television sports as well as TV's visual methods for providing information about the status of the game.

Beyond sports games, the trope of television as a framing device appears in numerous games like the survival action game *Smash TV*. Games like *Grand Theft Auto V* invert this relationship, creating fictional TV networks and hours of programming that players watch in-game—much of it broad parodies of television cliches. Perhaps the most bizarre incorporation of TV by games is in the opening of *Metal Gear Solid 4* (2008), in which the game's primary voice actor appears as himself on a surreal talk-show.

Early console technology was constructed to augment and manipulate television technology. As games have come more properly to be computers rather than analog video devices, game consoles have been no less preoccupied with television—as a technology, as a cultural presence, and as a set of aesthetic conventions and innovations. Perhaps most of all, videogames have been preoccupied with television's relationship to information—whether the indexical display of moving images on a screen, the liveness of a video feed, or the reassuring and often redundant aesthetics of televisual style. If film spent its early years worried about its status relative to theater and other “legitimate” arts, games have spent their first decades concerned with their relationship to television—as an art form, to be sure, but perhaps more so as a bearer of information.