

Making TV and Video Games Play Nicely

“Liveness as “Aliveness” in the MMORPG”

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Questions of “liveness” once reserved for discussions of television’s ontology (or perhaps more accurately, mythology) are increasingly made relevant by the proliferation of internet-based media. In this paper, I want to locate liveness in the phenomenological experience of shared temporality in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Studying the unique experiences of liveness in television and in MMORPGs is useful not only in tracing the phenomenological boundaries of each medium, but also in investigating how the experience of shared temporality is increasingly activated in more and varied contexts as media converge in the 21st century.

In discussing liveness and its slipping, slippery definitions, liveness in television is often considered both as *live broadcast*, wherein material is shot and broadcast in real time, and also as *shared temporality*, as seen in practices like appointment viewing as opposed to time shifting (e.g. watching a new episode of *Scandal* when it first airs, as opposed to watching it on-demand a week later). In both instances, television’s mythic potential as a metaphorical “window to the world” is foregrounded, as viewers share time and projected space, real or fictional, with the larger viewing community. Offline console games may offer a window into a world (whether it be the Mushroom Kingdom, war-torn Iraq, or a two-dimensional ping-pong table), but it is one distinct from the world outside my home. In this way, offline console games seem to offer an experience that is antithetical to that of live television; the coaxial cable that allows for shared televisual experience is hijacked by the game console, and the image flow is rerouted to originate from within my living room. The rhetoric surrounding console games (much like that of the VCR and on-demand viewing) is marked not just by viewer/gamer choice and agency, but also privacy and personalization.

The MMORPG, as an internet-based gaming experience, presents sensations of liveness similar to those of broadcast television, though the global community with which I share time and projected space is manifested graphically in the MMORPG – I can actually see the global village. Further, the liveness of the MMORPG is one with an added sense of causality, choice, mobility, and impact on the part of the user. These games offer a virtual world that exists in real time, allowing players to explore, build, collect, interact, socialize, fantasize, kill, die, and live again with hundreds of other players also logged into the game. As players interact with a digital world and its human-controlled inhabitants, the MMORPG presents an experience of liveness that players actively navigate – an “aliveness.” Even when a player logs off, the fictional world often still exists; others are experiencing the virtual space that the player has just left. It’s an offscreen space of a different sort, in which the virtual world is always there, and logging into the game allows players to tap into its aliveness like a television flow.

The MMORPG infuses the virtual worlds of the console game with a sense of vitality through their ever-present digital existence. While these worlds are generally entirely fictional, entirely unreal, the visibility and knowledge of their human avatars and the potential for real-time

interaction within them support these worlds' mythical existence. That is to say, our faith in the present-ness of the MMORPG's virtual worlds is supported by the same technical and social machinations that give us faith in the integrity and presence of live broadcast and the corresponding imagined community of viewers. The pleasures of liveness come not just from the real-time interaction enabled by the technology, but from the belief that the spaces exist concurrently (albeit digitally) and that we have the potential to connect with them.

One particularly relevant example of the intersection of TV/video game liveness is *Defiance*, a transmedia object manifested as both a TV science fiction drama (on the Syfy channel) and an MMORPG (playable on consoles and PC). Like other transmedia objects, *Defiance* existed as a fictional world that viewers/players could tap into through one of its two entry points (or both simultaneously, if they were second-screening). Unlike other TV/game tie-ins, *Defiance* aimed to exploit the liveness/aliveness of its respective media; the game and the show would not simply complement each other, but they would affect each other: events that occurred on the show would impact the game world once an episode had aired, characters would cross over between media, gamers' collective decisions in the game could conceivably alter the show's narrative in the long run. The opportunity to engage with the world of *Defiance* through two different but complementary real-time interactions allowed the sensation and pleasures of liveness to exist beyond the phenomenological boundaries of each medium and live in the liminal, conceptual space in between.