Gaming and the Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games

Matthew Spokes

Emily Jessica Turner, Independent Scholar

In *Gaming and the Virtual Sublime*, author Matthew Spokes asks readers to consider what video games do, what the notion of 'play' means, and how game processes make audiences think, feel, and respond. To this end, his book uses philosophical and theoretical frameworks alongside close analysis of material to explore video games' potential for producing 'affective experiences' (8), such as that of the sublime. In this thoroughly researched and well-structured book, Spokes puts forward his central contention that as video games are 'responsive as we enter in to a relationship with the object' (39), thus they are 'a medium through which affective experiences are possible' (31).

Gaming's first three chapters comprise a philosophical, ontological, and methodological overview. Following the introduction, Spokes offers a historical overview of key philosophical thinkers and their contributions to the developing concept of the sublime. In Chapter Two, the author traces the evolution of this concept from its foundations in the study of rhetoric undertaken by first century AD Greek critic Longinus, through to eighteen century theories of John Dennis, John Baillie, and Alexander Gerard. Here, Spokes identifies a number of ideas that he explores more fully later in his book. He argues that Longinus's concept of 'the power of rhetoric to engender sublime experience' (16), in which rhetorical devices create an 'affective response' in the reader, is 'analogous to exactly what contemporary games developers seek to achieve with video games' (18). Dennis's work, which exemplifies the eighteenth century move towards the understanding of the sublime in aesthetic terms such as beauty and ugliness, allows for a connection between the sublime and terror or fear. These emotions, Spokes says, are 'routine components [video game] developers use to engender affective responses from players' (20). Dennis, Baillie and Gerard 'open several avenues for enquiry in relation to video games' including how 'representations of vast or magnificent spaces affect gamers' (21). As can be expected, Edmund Burke's writing on nature and beauty and Immanuel Kant's work on awe is also discussed, as is 'the

difference between the mathematical and dynamical sublime' (11), by which an object is experienced in either terms of its magnitude or its power.

Having set out the historical roots of the discussions informing his theoretical framework, Spokes then turns to more contemporaneous examples for Chapter Three. Introducing Jean-François Lyotard's writing on unpresentability and Gilles Deleuze's work on chaos, rhythm and sensation, the author uses his analysis of these thinkers to consider the 'techno-sublime' and the 'gamified sublime' (11). Here, Spokes examines the experiences created by the relationship between the game developer and the active participation of the gamer.

Chapter Four of *Gaming* considers some terms used throughout Spokes' book, specifically the 'ontological underpinnings' of the 'virtual', and the notion of 'affect' (11), and defines them within the author's framework for approaching his chosen primary material. This chapter also lays out his methodological design, which is considerate of the philosophical issues of affective experiences and allows for interpretive analysis of the video game case studies. Spokes also explains his use of feedback from reviews, playthroughs, and comments in his analysis to explore how 'our engagement(s) with different worlds of affective experience can be understood through the sublime' (61).

The remaining four chapters consider in turn themes of 'rhetoric', 'awe', 'fear', and 'failure/death'. On the theme of rhetoric, Spokes turns to *God of War* (2018), *The Walking Dead* series (2013), *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* (2003), *That Dragon, Cancer* (2016), and *Silent Hill 2* (2001), considering 'temporality and identity as disruptive elements' as well as the limits of 'rhetorical notion[s] of the sublime' (12) in creating affective experiences.

Chapter Six returns to awe and beauty in eighteenth century theories of the sublime, using as case studies *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018) and *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015), two games which borrow heavily from myth and legend. Here, Spokes considers 'the relationship between representation and realism' (12) and explores how realistic settings impact gamers' experiences. Particularly interesting in this discussion is the author's exploration of the game space on the continent within *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2014), which draws inspiration from the Hudson River School art movement, as 'a space for exploration and the development of ideological apparatus' (12). Spokes develops further his exploration of 'the agentic role of the gamer' (12), a theme repeatedly brought up throughout this book, by using *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007) to consider player agency and the opportunities gamers create for themselves while interacting with the medium. The author also demonstrates how 'the sublime can be glimpsed at the edges of virtual worlds' (12) in *Elite: Dangerous* (2018)

and *Red Dead Online* (2018) wherein gamers' action can destabilize the game, collapsing rules and creating new experiential opportunities.

A particularly fascinating section of the book, Chapter Seven explores the theme of fear, considering gamers' motivations for choosing to engage with a game that causes them to feel horrified or scared. In this section of *Gaming*, Spokes suggests that *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2014) can be understood as 'an extended metaphor for reincorporating aspects of narrative into our understanding of the sublime' (12). He also examines other 'survival horror' games (such as *Alien Isolation* (2014) and *P.T.* (2014)) as producing this sublime experience of fear, as well as applying Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny to *Bioshock* (2007), and Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject to body horror within *Outlast* (2013/4)

Spokes introduces philosophical notions of 'flow' and 'stuplimity' (126) (the affective experience of simultaneous shock and boredom) in Chapter Eight, considering themes of failure and repetition in games. Using examples such as *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017), *The Binding of Isaac* (2011), *To The Moon* (2011), and *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (2019), the author focuses in particular on death as an often repeated failure in this medium, and explores video game death in relation to agency and the sublime. He effectively argues for play to be considered as a productive method of practicing strategies, and for video games to be viewed as the safe space in which repeated failure allows for this process of improvement to happen. A really interesting, if brief, section uses *Plague Tale: Innocence* (2019) to consider how the magnitude of death in a video game can impact both avatar and player.

Chapter Nine, the conclusion, draws these threads together to forward a 'working conceptual toolbox for the virtual sublime' (12). Here, Spokes considers what the future of VR could hold, and how technological advancements could 'change our understanding of the sublime through new ideas of embodiment and affect in gaming' (153).

Strongly informed by previous writing on games and the sublime, *Gaming* has a hefty bibliography, building on an extensive scholarship of philosophers, theorists, and games studies intellectuals. Spokes is clear in explaining the reasoning behind his inclusions and exclusions, and is considerate of which scholars' work is best applicable to his various arguments. The great scope of the philosophical and games-specific conversation around the sublime means that *Gaming* is an academically concentrated read, but the book produces a wide collection of interesting and thought-provoking discussions. The complexity of the subject matter is also mitigated by Spokes' occasional use of a more conversational tone, with a topical anecdotal thread running throughout the text to link and reinforce ideas. The close analysis of the chosen texts is particularly strong, not least because they are well

selected to demonstrate Spokes' line of exploration and argument. A challenging and fascinating read.