

The Nonsense of the Aura

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ABSTRACT

An examination of Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura as it appears in videogames, and the relation between the non-directional sense of smell, non-directional visual fields, and the representation or active exclusion of cultural memory.

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Aura, Benjamin, Agamben, memory, affect

1. INTRODUCTION

Videogames are, to a large extent, audio-visual media, relying on technologies of sound and vision which have been the subject of complex analysis. However, how has the olfactory sense been portrayed in games and what can be learned from these representations about the codification of sensory experience in contemporary media?

2. WHERE'S THAT SMELL?

This is a rather rarely asked question. Indeed, the common experience of hunting around a space for the source of some appealing or offensive olfactory phenomenon reveals a signal difference between this sense and the regimes of sound and vision gifted to us in various ways by contemporary communications media. The sense of smell does not serve to place objects in space and time, unlike visual media and allied audio technologies from talking pictures to quadrophonics to umpteen channel surround sound. Rather, smell and taste tend to be associated with the realm of reminiscence, contemplation and memory: famously, Proust's narrator tastes a *madeleine* cake that displaces his thoughts and invokes lost time. Cinema, video and interactive games all sell themselves on the immediacy of experience provided by such techniques, on the feeling that things are happening and the viewer or player is right in the thick of it all – small wonder then that the olfactory has no 'place' in such media.

Or does it? It can be demonstrated that the sense of smell is a subject of representation, even if this representation must be indirect (such as through descriptive language). In the famous opening to Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy VII*, the character Aeris is seen with a bouquet of flowers. Surrounding her is an aura of green light. Similarly, Aeris is later revealed to keep a hidden garden, a rarity in the industrial dystopia of Midgar. This area too is bathed with a soft aura of light. Aeris, in fact the last representative of a race called simply 'the Ancients', is thus

troped by a pastoralist motif. By comparison, the shady special agents of the mega-corporation Shinra who are sent to apprehend her, trampling her flowers in the pursuit, clearly represent the lapsarian state of urbanisation. This is reinforced when the player learns that Aeris is searching for 'The Promised Land' – in effect, the character represents both lost time and the utopian possibility of reparation – any time, that is, but the present. Several concepts are thus brought together in a close reading of Aeris' role: a diffuse visual aura, the non-directional olfactory sense, and temporalities of the past and the future that are lost by those who dwell too much in the present.

Softening focus is a well-established visual device for conveying a meditative or dream-like state of mind in which the typical spatial and temporal relations of the form in question are suspended. However in videogames there is another major context in which a diffuse visual field can perhaps be held to have some kind of olfactory connotation – the environmental hazards found in action genres. In *Doom*, for example, certain areas are marked by a greenish miasma or a red glow, representing toxin and molten lava or flame respectively. Alternatively, the impact of an attack in *Gears of War* or *Half-Life* causes the screen to flash red, attempting to convey perhaps alongside sonic shock the smell of blood. The same visual device, remediated in videogames, serves to invoke a subjective domination of the environment and, conversely, the overwhelming presence of the environment for the wellbeing of the player-subject. How may two such disparate visualisations of the aura be accounted for?

3. PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE

The concept of the aura occupies an important, if enigmatic, place in Walter Benjamin's writing on modernity. While it will be impossible to cover all its manifestations and ramifications, several contexts are useful here. Arguing in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility" that 'The way in which human perception is organised – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history' [2], Benjamin posits the decay of the aura as a vitally important correlate to technologies of reproduction. For Benjamin, aura is the unique history of a given work of art, its place in tradition. However, with the advances in methods of mechanical reproduction such as film and photography, an individual work could be experienced in many different contexts, not simply that dictated by tradition. Through reproductions, the object 'meets the observer half-way', gaining a new, mass form of reception impossible for the singular, unique artwork. It is amidst the pluralities of such modes of reception – a reorganization of perception by technical media – that the traditional mode, the auratic, seems to decay.

Indeed, there is no such thing as an ‘original’ film or photograph as such because they are designed to be reproduced.

The aura is therefore linked to a form of lost memory, one that derived its authority from ritual, cultic cycles and tradition. However, it also possesses a spatial aspect: it is ‘the unique apparition of a distance no matter how close it may be’, and through this ‘we can readily grasp the social determinants of the aura’s present decay’ [2]. Rather than stopping to contemplate before each individual artwork (as in a gallery), the mass bombarded with reproductions takes to apprehending them all in a distracted, haphazard manner – to such a degree that often the boundaries of individual works can be compromised through photomontage and film, creating entirely novel narratives.

This latter point has significance far beyond the reproduction of works of art, describing also changes in the urban environment through new techniques in architecture and design. The most important of these, for Benjamin, was iron and glass architecture (such as the Arcades), which lined the streets with magical vistas – the enchanting world of commodities, close enough to be at hand but in fact accessible only to the eye due to the auratic distance of glass. Indeed, the very air in the Crystal Palace of the first Universal Exhibition in London was held to possess an unearthly, enchanted glow [1]. Both film and buildings in iron and glass represented a new organization of ‘the human sensorium’ in service of a novel regime of extreme visibility, one in which naturalistic conceptions of proximity and distance showed themselves as in fact ineluctably mediated by the exchange of signs.

It is interesting then that the language of enchantment, aura and ritualistic reception seems to creep back in with regard to the commodity – the most exchangeable of objects and the furthest from the unique work of art. If Benjamin’s thesis concerning the decay of the aura before technical reproducibility is correct, there nevertheless seem to be cases in which a form of aura is made visible. Some of these are noted by Benjamin himself, such as in his claim that the human face itself is the last vestige of auratic experience in early bourgeois photography that still imitated portrait painting. ‘Cult value does not give way without resistance. It falls back to a last entrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait is central to early photography. In the cult of remembrance of dead or absent loved ones, the cult value of the image finds its last refuge’ [2]. Elsewhere, he writes that ‘Jugendstil is to be presented as art’s second attempt to come to terms with technology. The first attempt was realism... Jugendstil was especially fond of the aureole. Never was the sun more pleased with itself in its radiant halo; never was the human eye more lustrous than in Fidus’ [3].

The visual aura in these contexts is read as an attempt to ameliorate or thematise the fragmenting of perception and experience due to technological change, and in doing so it draws together topics of memory, mediated proximity (or control) and technology. If, as Giorgio Agamben argues, the most auratic sense is the olfactory [1], is it possible to read the auras in videogames as visual motifs that recall a lost, pre-technological unity of memory and perception?

4. THE FLOWER GIRL

Aeris is hardly a unique character in the *Final Fantasy* series. Rinoa from *Final Fantasy VIII* is a sorceress, part of an eldritch succession of witches that stretches all the way to the end of time. Terra in *Final Fantasy VI*, Garnet in *Final Fantasy IX*, Yuna in *Final Fantasy X*, Fran and Ashe from *Final Fantasy XII* fulfill similar functions within their respective communities, representing complex and often dynastic or utopian articulations of temporality in association with auratic visual motifs (crystals throughout, the fayth in *FFX*, Lifestream in *VII*, the Mist in *FFIX* and *FFXII*). These women and their allies are invariably pitted against a monolithic and highly militarized force of some kind which serves an imperial power, or a mercantile concern with imperial pretensions. In addition, the women often contradictorily embody both a threat to their communities and a chance of salvation.

I will focus here on *FFVII* due to space constraints and the particularities of the character of Aeris, but the recurrence of the motif in the series as a whole is worth taking into account. Auras are present in a wide variety of contexts throughout *FFVII*. The most common are simple interface indicators that inform the player who is acting. While they may appear straightforward, this conspicuous departure from naturalism in favour of stylization emphasizes the power of the characters. Particularly potent actions may, drawing on visual conventions common to many forms of animation, involve a considerable lightshow accompanied by a rising tone that gives the impression of building tension. In this auras blur the boundaries between character and environment, but none moreso than the impressive summoning sequences which cause the player characters to disappear in order that their enemies be overwhelmed by a powerful mythic creature. The aura of an image from the past washes over and engulfs the battle-space.

This ludic use of auras to emphasise action and power is recapitulated in the plot and wider aesthetics of the *Final Fantasy VII* game world. The power company, Shinra, has risen to governance of Midgar (and most of the Planet) through discovering a means to manipulate and control Lifestream, the subterranean reservoir of spirits which sustains all life on the surface, as ‘Mako’ energy. This new energy technology has displaced the community of Barrett Wallace, once a coal miner and now a freedom fighter leading the eco-terrorist group AVALANCHE. In their eagerness to capitalize on their industrial, socio-economic and technological pre-eminence, Shinra have experimented on human employees with Mako radiation. The test subjects who survive this process are often mutated and must be constrained – the few who remain whole and sane join the elite division SOLDIER. This includes the major antagonist Sephiroth and (although as an amnesiac his memory is untrustworthy) protagonist Cloud Strife. Both of these characters are notable for having ‘Mako eyes’ – a strange glow or sheen emanating from their irises.

The issue of proximity and distance is raised by Shinra’s attempts to control and direct Lifestream, which should be allowed to flow freely as the circulation of the Planet – for example, when an alien entity called Jenova impacted the surface to create the Northern Crater, Lifestream flowed like blood to the wound. It is intimated that Lifestream is also a form of collective

memory – when he is plunged into the flow, Cloud emerges in a vegetative state, oversaturated with memory. Where Lifestream gathers and pools naturally are found *FFVII*'s versions of the crystal motif common to the series as a whole: 'materia'. Aeris herself possesses an heirloom White materia while Sephiroth, possessed by a psychopathic nihilism after learning by chance that he is a product of Shinra's experimentation with Jenova's alien biology, quests after a fabled Black materia which can summon a Meteor which will re-create the original 'Catastrophe from the Skies' – Jenova itself. When Lifestream rushes to heal the resulting wound, Sephiroth plans to absorb the flow and elevate himself to a new level of being.

The player's own party, comprised of AVALANCHE members and a motley of taggers-on, utilizes naturally formed materia rather than Shinra's fabricated Mako energy or Jenova mutation to empower themselves. In this respect again, diffuse fields of light emphasise the capacity of the player characters to act decisively rather than fruitlessly in the world. This is a device that is common to many games of the RPG genre – particularly Japanese titles. Glows and auras have often been used by Western RPGs to delineate objects and characters of conspicuous potency. In *Diablo*, for example, a magical weapon will be designated in blue letters rather than simple white used for commonplace implements, and a unique item will be gold. The game's sequel adds 'slots' in which materia-like gems can be inserted to imbue certain weapons with additional qualities. Furthermore, in many RPGs these auras take on a moral character, such as in the concept of alignment which is a detectable aura surrounding characters that can be discerned through magic. When used as a visual convention, this may be as simple as a bad guy glowing red or black, while a good guy is blue or white. The important point is that the diffuse field represents a 'sense' which cannot be placed simply in space – like the Proustian *Madeleine*, it invokes time.

Indeed, it is this moral use of aura that highlights its tenor in RPGs in general once it is recalled that by far the most common genres which such games remediate are high fantasy and particular forms of neomedievalism. As such it is signifiers of the past that are being taken up and revived through play. This is in fact even more apparent in RPGs that are set in the future (such as *Star Ocean 3*), or utilize overt science fiction elements (such as *Final Fantasy VII*), as for the large part protagonists utilize medieval weaponry such as swords, staves and bows – in effect, representing a nostalgia for direct individual action *in spite of* what we know from centuries of imperialism as the absolute superiority of technological methods of mass slaughter. This amounts to political voluntarism – but one which is significant, not fruitless, when pitted against the prevailing forces of production. Although Barrett fights with a cybernetic machine gun, other characters Aeris, Tifa and Cloud enter combat with venerable close-combat weaponry none of which is particularly well designed for battlefield formations or contemporary 'urban warfare'.

The effectiveness of the group's weaponry is conceived relative to the rarity and quality of the item in question (that is, the time involved in their acquisition), not its relative merits in a given combat situation. In taking up the heroic signifiers of the archaic, pre-technological world now shattered and fragmented without a

coherent tradition in which to find meaning, the protagonists of *Final Fantasy VII* implicitly promise players a re-assembly of aura and a redemption of lost times – a virtual history, generally coded as the re-attainment of a pre-lapsarian state whether this be as numinous as Aeris' pastoralist Promised Land or as straightforward as the restitution of the rightful social order of Good King So-and-So. As primary historical actors, for whom the fate of their entire world is at issue, RPG protagonists and antagonists project their inner character – in terms as diverse as morality, martial puissance and even attire and equipment – onto the world around them as visible effect. In projecting character from within to without, they promise a restored narrative. This is why such characters are able to project a moral aura, because their attitude to morality is in the context of a posited world in which past, future and present are restored to some kind of auratic whole, an intelligible relation rather than a fragmented, partisan multiplicity.¹

Recalling Benjamin's descriptions of Jugendstil art, in which figures are depicted in highly graphic form of stylisation, surrounded by aureoles of light and bereft of any objective background, the resemblance to Aeris' first appearance in *Final Fantasy VII* is striking (both in the original PS version and the reworked technical demo for the PlayStation 3). Indeed, the similarity seems a good fit for much anime, and the RPG visual style that draws from it. The lack of objective background also has its contemporary correlate in the remarkable restraint of characters in such games with regards to manipulating their own environment. Certainly, they rarely utilize their prodigious abilities to overcome mere environmental obstacles – and much of the time, they refuse even to take a standing jump over minor fissures or folds in their path. In *Final Fantasy VII* of course the backgrounds were pre-rendered, and any change in that environment could thus only be a matter of predefined plot advancement or gameplay milestones (breeding various varieties of mount to cross certain impassable terrain, for example) rather than a real-time affair. However, even in the latest iteration *Final Fantasy XII*, which features beautiful environments rendered in real-time, the characters almost exclusively reserve their supernatural power for battle sequences.

This general paucity of 'objectivity' or interplay between figure and ground suggests that any effect on the surrounds must be in terms of the promised narrative, not player caprice. Anything else would be indiscreet, because the environment in these games always presented as *almost* auratic: as if it has an unique history, but one whose completion awaits very specific actions by the game's protagonists. Much like their equipment, characters tend to maintain their attire throughout the game regardless of ambient conditions – the miniskirt-clad Tifa doesn't catch cold at Icicle Inn, and Cloud strolls about Costa del Sol in long sleeves, a battered shoulder pauldron and baggy trousers. There is

¹ Anti-heroes and other such genealogies have of course been introduced to RPGs (Cloud himself, for example, is initially a callous mercenary and it shouldn't be forgotten that AVALANCHE are terrorists), but their function as regards the aura has most strenuously been challenged in titles whose story and design are influenced by Matsuno, whose *Vagrant Story* and *Final Fantasy XII* pose the question of power, despite their neomedievalist trappings, firmly in terms of the exigencies of political economy rather than individual, heroic morality.

certainly an argument to be made that RPG characters' reluctance to change their outfits (as opposed to, for example, Lara Croft's variously environmentally appropriate equipment) is due to the powerful influence and popularity of character designers or the need to conserve the labour of animators, or what have you – but these eminently sensible explanations aren't inherently exclusive of an aesthetic analysis.

It is also worth noting the role that aura plays in the creation or delineation of distance and proximity between player and character, as the player's control is willingly suspended once the character begins to enact a given command in a potentially quite lengthy animation. This is an organization of perception and action often marked by visible aura, especially when the action in question is coded as supernatural. Aeris herself exemplifies this split. Although characters are taken from and returned to player control throughout the game, Aeris' murder by Sephiroth is an iconic moment for many players, as a narrative event leads to a shocking bereavement. Players may well be as distraught due to personal affection towards Aeris as by the sight of hours upon hours of advancing and equipping the character stripped from them by cinematic *fiat*. Indeed, Aeris' further presence in the game is primarily cinematic and auratic. In the final sequence the power contained in her White materia, Holy, is unleashed and along with Lifestream stymies Sephiroth's catastrophic Meteor. Incandescent colours of white, reddish-black and green stand for the principle protagonists. A wash of white and then a fade to black leaves the outcome of the interplay of forces in doubt, until motes of green light emerge from the bottom of the screen, illuminating Aeris' face in a recapitulation of the game's opening sequence.

The emanation, like an *art nouveau* halo, of aura from the player characters (both in literal terms but also in terms of their attire) into surrounding space champions the rights of the lost past and utopian future against the aggressive demands of the present. The protagonists of *Final Fantasy VII* possess a remarkable self-cohesion: regardless of the (occasionally cosmic) bodily stresses they are subjected to by various enemies in combat, they never bleed, burn, tire or bruise until their hit points are reduced to zero. Even then, they are merely unconscious and can be revived by the magical power of a tuft of phoenix down. Attacks do not cause visible trauma, but flashes and vectors signify force applied. In the relatively rare case that the party is completely knocked out, the game over screen does not convey a message of death so much as an incompletely told tale.

5. HAZMAT

If the auras in RPGs, particularly *Final Fantasy VII*, tend to emanate from the characters, in First-Person Shooter (FPS) games such as id's *Doom 3* and *Quake 4* and Valve's *Half-Life 2* they act somewhat differently. In the oddly titled *Half-Life 2: Episode One*, the player as wordless protagonist Gordon Freeman must escape a City 17 threatened by a pending reactor meltdown. The lowered sky of this episode is bruised by alarming and virulently unnatural red and black hues. Early in the game, Gordon must slow the meltdown reaction by activating various containment devices. Because of his protective Hazardous Environment (HEV) suit, Gordon can navigate the perilous interior of the crippled reactor in the middle of which an

unidentified field of energy pulses, contact with which is instantaneously deadly.

Early *Doom* players were confronted with similar situation whenever they stood in a greenish miasma without a protective suit, or found themselves treading magma. A FPS player is likely to have quite a different response to an aura than someone playing *Final Fantasy VII*. In these games, auras are much more often meaning to the player's avatar than reassuring. They often signify hazardous materials. They represent dangerous space which must be traversed as quickly as possible or whose deleterious potentials must be carefully managed. The emphasis in such games on orientation and navigation, on pinpoint accuracy and superiority over distance makes the diffuse aura a threat.

A spatter of red also impacts the screen, along with a pained grunt, when a creature strikes the player in *Doom 3*. The visual field dissolves into red upon death. A visceral bloom, this aura signifies the unseen ripping apart of the body (of which we typically only see the doing parts – hands, arms, perhaps legs). It thus stands for pain, but also presumably the smell of blood and opened wounds emanating from the player character. It is an aura quite different from that of *Final Fantasy*-type RPGs, representing a present that will not wait patiently on the player or the character to assimilate it, an aura that threatens constantly to tear the two apart into a 'game over' rather than represent their ultimate complicity as co-creators of a narrative. From a first- rather than a third-person perspective, aura appears as 'the unique apparition of a distance', making visible the disavowed (and thereby always potential) split between eye and hand, dismembering the ludic body. If the interiority of a RPG character, as revealed by aura, is an essentially psychological-moral comportment, in FPS it is gore. Death is just death, bracketed into a lurching, juddering present by the stabbing of quicksave and quickload keys. Aeris dies once; Gordon Freeman dies many times, quickly forgets about it, and ultimately reaps quite a tactical advantage from the experience.

Significantly, Benjamin holds that realism was the first attempt of artists to come to terms with urban, industrial and technological reality, while Jugendstil and *art nouveau* was the second. In squeezing out as much as possible the time of reminiscence, in striving to pack the moment full of violence, the FPS prides itself on the realism of its 'objective' backgrounds – a homogeneous space visualized according to the laws of linear perspective. This serves to place the player's own body within the space, as subject to and of the pressures of constant attention. In a space thus predicated upon and defined by trajectories and domination, diffuse auras must appear as a threat.

It's hardly surprising that Aeris has more aura than Doomguy, who is after all an anonymous space marine and not an Ancient with a unique, vital history. The many deaths of the FPS protagonist and the intense investment in the present bespeak a different set of pleasures, ones based on the exposure to shock and the technical apparatus characteristic of contemporary urban life. But immanent to such pleasures, there is the risk of overstimulation, of dissection of the body that the player staves off to keep alive. Frags are all that remains after the decay of the aura. Signifiers from the past are much rarer in the FPS genre. Instead, dominant themes are industrial and scientific environs

ruined by cataclysm. The bloody interior of the figures is projected onto the walls like a promise: realist graphical images of tortured and distended flesh formed a veritable architecture in later levels much to the relish of early *Doom* players. In *Half-Life* the hapless Gordon must fight his way out of a research laboratory infested with the shattered – and yet animate – remains of his colleagues. The theme is made explicit in *Quake 4* in which the player watches from a first-person point of view as their virtual body, captured by the cybernetic enemy, is brutally dismembered and reassembled. Flashes of red and white accompany the dip and swoop of buzzsaws and blades.

Aura is also often present when the space itself, putatively realist and self-identical, is in fact heterogeneous due to technical limits. Level breaks and teleporters represent breaks in the continuity of the scene demanded by perspective. In both *Doom* and *Half-Life* teleportation, as a violation of spatial and temporal relations, is presented as a dangerous hubris which threatens the fragmentation and dismemberment of the body. More often than not, the threat of the aura to overwhelm the extreme presence of the FPS gameplay is directly attributable to the presence of some techno-industrial apparatus gone awry. Flick the switch, shut down the reactor or close the vents, and the radiation or poison dissipates. If the aura in the RPG represents the vanished and utopian memory of a pastoralist idyll, in the FPS it appears as the anxiety that technology's constitutive capacity to establish regimes of proximity and distance threatens the very immanence of the body to itself.

6. CONCLUSION

If Benjamin's argument that the task of film was to help people living in conditions of mass society come to terms with the place of the apparatus in their daily existence is still cogent, it is possible to extend his analyses of the aura to the way that

videogames organize perception. From this the 'social determinants' behind videogame production can be approached, rather than simply claiming that they are inherently spectacular or pleasurable in their own right.

Auras often represent non-directional sensory experience in a medium committed to placing objects in (virtual) space. Although the senses of smell and taste are often simulated in our culture, they are absent from videogames. The form of reminiscence they give rise to is instead mediated by audio-visual device of the aura. They thus help mediate players' relation to the sorts of memory set up by game systems and the manner in which they mediate play. Where *Final Fantasy VII* attempts to have recourse to a natural form of memory preceding reliance on technology in which all is auratically preserved (Aeris' flower-church and her access to Lifestream), *Doom* and *Half-Life* insist on the trauma of mnemonic inscription. The emanating figures of Jugendstil, signifying self-possession, become the assailed and fragmented figures of realism with their tendency to burst asunder. The outcomes of these playful engagements with aura are evident enough to the briefest glance at wider cultures: on the one hand, "Quake Done Quick"; on the other, cosplay.

7. REFERENCES

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