

The Emotional Impact of Videogames and Poetry

I'm in the second year of my PhD project and I'm looking into the emotional impact of videogames and poetry. I'm comparing them to try to understand what techniques are used and whether there are any common grounds between these very different forms of media.

The kind of videogame selected for my project belongs to the genre of walking simulators. These games appeared in the 2010s and they were derisively called walking simulators by the gaming community at the time, because there was a lot of walking involved. The mechanics are usually very very simple to make the story development the player's main concern. Our avatar typically has to walk around a space and interact with objects to uncover a story. So whereas the story in Super Mario is that we want to reach the castle where Princess Peach is imprisoned and save her, we all know that's really not important to the game at all. The real enjoyment doesn't come from learning the story of the game but from overcoming the challenges of each platform. Jumping, shooting, getting the power ups, beating the boss in each castle. Peach and any other bit of storytelling really is the last of our concerns. In walking simulators, on the other hand, the goal really is experiencing the story and all game mechanics are dedicated to this goal. The result is that they get to explore much more complex situations and feelings than the average game.

The three video games I'm choosing are *What Remains of Edith Finch*, *Gone Home* and *The Suicide of Rachel Foster*. They follow the story of three female protagonists that come back to their childhood home after a period of absence. They're all in the first person, so we see straight through the eyes of the protagonist as we play and we walk through the house looking for clues to understand what has happened to their respective families. The story in each game and the kind of conflict they explore are very different, namely the suspiciously high mortality rate throughout 5 generations of the family in *What Remains*, homophobia in the late 90s in *Gone Home*, and paedophilia and murder in *The Suicide*. Still, these all revolve one way or

another around family, memory, past, loss and intergenerational trauma; and the setting, the house, is very significant as a vessel to all of this.

Now, the most significant development since March, when I submitted my abstract, is that I've finally narrowed down from literature to poetry. Which is very exciting. To begin with, it's a relationship that hasn't been too studied but I don't think it's unrelated at all. I'd say that both lyric poetry and walking simulator videogames are granular, for lack of a better word yet. They may present a straight line, either by game design or book structure but one could still skip parts, experience poems or game sections in an order other than the one arranged by the author, mix and match.

Although that might be true of short stories too, I find poetry collections lend themselves better to be read as an organic whole, just like videogames. A poetry collection typically includes more pieces than a short story collection, and, although its not necessarily the case, poems may be purposefully arranged in the book to work together. That's the case Rupi Kaur's work. I find her poetry moving, especially because she structures her poetry books emotionally. For example, her first collection, *Milk and Honey*, has four chapters called: The hurting, the loving, the breaking and the healing. This way she takes us through an emotional journey. She focuses on each feeling, so that the reader goes through them with her. She intends her poetry collections as an organic whole.

Another reason why I read Kaur alongside the games in my corpus is because she deals with similar topics. Again, family relations, the past, memory, intergenerational trauma, and the body, instead of a house, as a vessel that keeps all these traces.

However, I should say I am not yet decided on what other poets I'd like to analyse alongside her, so here comes a call to action, because I have a list of authors waiting for me but I'm happy to hear suggestions and recommendations. Initially, my main constrain is that it is published since 2000s, after 2010 even better. Also, that it deals with issues around family,

memory, past, and intergenerational trauma for thematic unity in this corpus that comes across as very heterogenous already. However, I don't necessarily look for a simple style similar to hers, a similar way of structuring their poetry collections or even for a female author, for the creators of the games are not all women themselves, even though their main character is a woman.

But back to my main research question, how are they emotionally impactful?

So far, the theoretical concepts that are helping me understand this are the modes of identification described by Rita Felski, and resonance as explained by Brian Massumi. At this point, I have a clear idea of the comparison between the games, and the games with Rupi Kaur, but my analysis can't be complete without at least another poet, so once I add it, I will probably find more ways in which they all interact.

Rita Felski (2020) theorises the concept of emotional attachment to a work of art. She suggests that attachment happens when one is attuned to the artwork, when one feels affinity with it (41–42). To analyse why one becomes attuned this way, Felski uses the concept of identification, not which can happen not only with a character but with a much broader range of elements such as a style, a composite of author-novel, etc. (81). According to Felski (91-110), there are four modes of identification:

- Alignment: when the work itself encourages us to become attuned to a given element. It often manifests as a narrator encouraging a certain reading of the events.
- Recognition: when the reader feels mirrored by a character or some other aspect of the work.
- Allegiance: when the political and moral stance of the work agrees with our own convictions.
- Empathy: a co-feeling, a sharing of the feelings of the character, situation or voice, without recognising oneself in them.

This helps me explain why *What Remains* is more emotionally impactful than the other two games. While most walking simulators develop from one only point of view and might retell the story of more characters, *What Remains* very particular mechanics make us play as each of the family members, 13 in total. The point of view, while still in the first person, actually changes from one character to another. This way, it renders their inner world in a very personal way, revealing each of their personalities, dreams and background. In doing this, different narrative styles are used with each character. So, *What Remains* can also foster attunement on aesthetic as well as story-content grounds. In fact, players have reported feeling attached to some characters and episodes rather than others, establishing personal attachments to the same game through a variety of identifications. On the contrary, *Gone Home* and *The Suicide* are more traditional in this respect, with just about four significant characters in each game.

When it comes to Kaur's work, her point of view is also quite personal and autobiographic. However, she touches on a variety of issues, both personal and political, rather than the single conflict for each of the fictional characters in these games. She's a real person, and her poetry is more well-rounded.

Brian Massumi's 'The Autonomy of Affect' (86–87) helped me understand how textual narrative, audiovisual input like setting and atmosphere in games or illustrations in books, and, again in the case of games, game mechanics, all interact with each other to heighten or dampen the emotional impact of these stories. Massumi explains that the way audio-visuals and the narration interact, impact affectivity differently. When narration does not just verbalize what we can see but rather adds complementary information, language and image resonate with each other and amplify the emotional intensity of the scene. There is affective resonance when the linguistic aspect of the story "doubles the flow of images, on another level, on a different track" (87). On the other hand, when narration just explains the scene factually, there is a "redundancy of signification". The result would be a "dampening" or lessening of this intensity (86). Language

does not usually purely resonate or interfere with images, but depending on which role it predominantly enacts, the affective impact is altered.

I observe a similar phenomenon in my corpus. For example, all games include some element of gothic horror in the setting. They all happen in big old mysterious houses. *Gone home* and *the suicide* include significantly more supernatural elements, tension music and horror atmosphere, while what remains continually mixes it with magic realism features and uses warm comforting light and melancholic but pleasant music to counteract the gothic horror elements. However, in *gone home* and *the suicide*, the horror seems disjointed. It succeeds at catching the player's attention and building tension to make the game more interesting, but ultimately none of the stories have anything to do with actual paranormal horror of any kind. Content and form play different scores and the overall impact of the story is diminished. On the other hand, what remains tries to convey awe in all fronts. The main point of the game is to reflect on the tragedy of death and the beauty and mystery of life, and this mix is represented through setting, game mechanics and narrative text amplifying resonance.

Resonance in Rupi Kaur's poetry looks differently, but also plays a role. She uses simple line drawings that re-elaborate her point in the poem through image, again same message conveyed in two different tracks. More particularly, an aspect of resonance that especially applies to Rupi Kaur's poetry books are cumulation and re-elaboration of ideas in different poems. According to Massumi, each affective stimulus reverberates in the body and brain, resonating with past experiences and informing following ones. While any poetry book would benefit from the effect of cumulation by reading a number of poems in the same sitting, Kaur's style potentiates this aspect significantly. Her emotion-based structure, the revisiting of the same topic in different poems, and her short, punchy, simple style that allows reading the whole book in one sitting, allows for accumulation to resonate one poem with the previous and the next, and heighten the emotional impact.