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Chopin's Dream as Reality - A Critical Reading of Eternal Sonata

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There are several books and articles, like Aarseth's *Cybertext* and Juul's *Half Real*, that talk about video games in a purely 'gaming' context. These texts look at video games as a set of abstract rules which govern simulation in open worlds, and study the relationship between the game and the player as developed by the active engagement with the game world through the rules set by the designer. Even narrative and fictional elements are analyzed through the game's system of rules. There is also a relatively large selection of literature related to the effects of video games in education, language learning, behaviour, and other aspects of real life which, according to social scientists, are affected by video games. Some of the major works within this type of game study are Gee's *What Videogames have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, Aldrich's *Simulations and the Future of Learning*, and Quinn's *Engaging Learning*. Yet one of the largest bodies of video game-related literature involves "gaming culture", "the culture of video games", and other similar terms (which often carry a negative connotation) used to define the group of people who play video games and the practice of playing video games. Scholars who engage with this type of study focus on the behavioural patterns and the interpersonal interaction of gamers in an attempt to label individuals as part of a "gaming" sub-culture. All of these distinct approaches to video game studies differ in virtually every aspect conceivable except one: even though they see the academic study of video games as acceptable, they do not see video games as a viable means for cultural expression.

It seems as if all disciplines of video game studies seem to neglect video games and their potential for cultural expression. Ludologists spend their time and effort trying to figure out how to improve virtual spaces while neglecting the narrative potential of games in the process. Meanwhile, social scientists – including educators – mostly see games as learning tools or as artefacts that brainwash individuals. Even those who advocate for the use of video games in language classrooms, like Dubbles and Ferlazzo, see video games only as tools to be used to improve on the instruction of certain tasks. Those who are closest to seeing games as cultural artefacts are video game anthropologists like Patrick Williams and Heide Smith, who look at them as artefacts which have somehow managed to create a somewhat exclusive sub-culture based on certain practices; however, even video game anthropologists seem to shun from the idea of video games being able to produce social criticism, incorporate elements from reality and analyze them, offer meaning, and, potentially, create a change in the national – or international – collective conscience. This essay argues that video games are one of the most meaningful means of cultural expression available and offers the example of *Eternal Sonata*¹ as a video game that actually incorporates, analyzes, interprets, and offers critical commentary of certain aspects of society.

Defining Terms

Before continuing it might be prudent to define certain terms as used in this article. The reason for defining these terms is that they have been explained in various ways by different academics in different fields of study, and their meaning, unless stated otherwise, is open to drastically juxtaposed interpretation.

Culture has been defined in several ways by different people. In 1952 Kroeber and Kluckhohn compiled a series of definitions for the term 'culture' which included 164 distinct definitions, and while some academics in certain fields may argue that some of the definitions used for the term 'culture' do not apply, the truth is that culture is what Arnold and Kant described as some elevated sense of human refinement just as it can be a set of values and beliefs which unite a certain group of people – how culture is defined depends entirely on the speaker and on the academic discipline. For this essay culture will be defined as a set of shared values, beliefs, behaviour, and living patterns which groups of people adopt in order to see the world in a distinct way. It is implied, then, that each group of people express their individuality (or collective) through certain activities in which their culture is exhaled and through the creation of objects which reflect culture's living patterns, behaviours, and concerns. These objects are cultural artefacts.

The definition of cultural artefact is fairly standardized even when going across disciplines – cultural artefacts are human-made objects which give information about the culture of its creators. The definition of a cultural artefact, however, entails a different definition from that of an artefact of culture – these are objects which are created by a certain culture or created by individuals belonging to a certain culture which offer no insight of the culture beyond the fact that said object was manufactured. Objects of culture might include the television set, the video game console, or the movie reel, as these are objects whose offered insight into our culture does not go beyond "it's a thing that a specific culture created". *Frasier*, *Tales of Vespera*, or *Dirty Dancing*, however, can be considered as cultural artefacts as they give information about the culture which created them. When these definitions are put into practice the resulting statement might look like "The DVD (medium) is an artefact of culture, but *Fallout 3* (content) is a cultural artefact". Through *Fallout 3*, the content, one can explore modern culture's concerns of the growing Chinese economy, the already gargantuan Chinese military force, and the impending threat of a post-nuclear world – just to name a few of the many concerns and criticism presented in the game. A DVD, the medium, however, can only offer the knowledge that the 20th century could create silver-plated discs that store data.

Alternatively, it can be stated that cultural artefacts are objects through which the practices and concerns of a specific culture can be analyzed. Examples of this are books (not the medium itself, but the content), music, movies, and video games – and while certainly not all books, music, movies, or video games can be used to gain deep insights into the concerns of a culture as a whole, all of these texts offer some sort of insight about its creators. Just as *Beowulf* exposed concerns of heroism and of Christianity versus pagan culture and Michaelangelo's work on the Sistine Chapel's roof expressed that society's religious concerns, video games express late 20th and early 21st century's concerns. Still, there is a problem of representation.

As a final note, it should be pointed out that although video games have not been accepted by the academic community (or by gamers themselves) as belonging to a 'high' culture where games like *Fallout 3* or *Lost Odyssey* are considered to be of the same cultural value as H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* or Homer's *The Odyssey*, it is widely accepted by the video game community that some video games – like Shigeru Myamoto's Mario series and Hideo Kojima's Metal Gear series – have a higher social and cultural value than other games – like *Custer's Revenge* or *Donkey Konga*. While this comparison might seem a bit extreme, it is certainly not unfair to say that games like *Persona 4*, which explores topics like sexuality and the human subconscious, or *Okami*, which explores new ways to employ art and myth into its design, are perceived by the majority of the gaming community as belonging to a drastically different category of games than, for example, *Tales of Vesperia* or *Dynasty Warriors: Gunam*, both great games in their own right but neither of which push the boundaries of game design or storytelling in the least.

Video Games as 'Cultural Artefacts'

Despite the obvious potential of video games as a means of cultural expression, this aspect of video games has been largely neglected both by the academic and the game development community. With the exception of the brief mention of the phrase "video games as cultural artefacts" in some articles regarding Henry Lowood's 'Game Canon', video game blogs of varying degrees of popularity, and one of Nina B. Huntemann's lectures, the notion of video games as serious cultural artefacts (not as objects of culture, which it has been stated quite often that they are) able to influence and morph certain individual and collective preconceived notions about society is nearly nonexistent. This is possibly because of certain popular notions of video games in which they are seen as "the most influential pop-culture force in recent memory" (Abanes, 2006, pp. 7). While there is no denying the fact that video games are some of the most popular pastimes in America – and possibly around the western world – it is exactly this kind of thought that prevents individuals (and, perhaps, society as a whole) from seeing video games as true cultural artifacts; as artifacts produced from the popular culture cater to the needs of the people and are a completely different phenomena than artifacts produced by 'high culture' (Swingewood, 1977). The public's schema of video games essentially states that since video games come from a popular culture they do not need the same kind of critical attention as, for example, William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), Salvador Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1931), or Frederic Chopin's *Grande Valse Brillante* (1833).

The common perception of video games suggests that, unlike poetry, art, or music, video games are not mentally stimulating. However, theory and research into video games and their effects on cognition has shown that video games not only enhance problem solving skills, but also transfer a wide range of information while giving the player a series of useful skills needed to engage in successful learning (Gee, 2003 – 2007). Furthermore, "gamers claim that playing games is mentally stimulating" (BBFC, 2007). Abanes even suggests that "video games are a great escape from a bland reality, a way to stimulate your mind and relax your soul in colorful, distant worlds that the talented minds of the creators have conceived" (Abanes, 2006, pp.

15). Certainly, not all video games can make the claim of being mentally stimulating cultural artifacts. Puzzle video games – for example – are meant as a pastime, and quite often one in which one finds a way to compete with, or against, friends. The same can be argued for sports and racing video games. Likewise, the party game compilations made popular as of late in the Nintendo *Wii* and *DS* game systems lack any meaningful cultural value beyond that of an entertaining pastime which allows for socializing. Although it may be debatable, these game genres do not offer large amounts of cultural information (and in some cases none at all), as they are virtual representations of abstract systems of rules that when put into practice produce an activity which may have been created centuries ago – they do not offer any information beyond their own existence. While this might make some argue that video games are not meaningful cultural artifacts worthy of the same critical attention of media traditionally related to ‘high culture’, like books or music, these commentaries are often accompanied with mentions of *Wario Ware* or *Madden XX* as main examples to deny video games their much deserved critical attention. One has to take into consideration that not all books or songs are considered part of the ‘high culture’ tradition. One would be hard-pressed to find that, for example, a critical analysis of Sophie Jordan’s romance novel *One Night with You* written by Harold Bloom or an in-depth critical review of Tay Zonday’s *Chocolate Rain* written by Peter G. Davis. Sports games and mini game collections, among other types of games, are the video game equivalent of what romance novels are to books and pop-music is to music – means of entertainment considered as part of a popular culture. The types of video games that lend themselves to critical attention like that given to Wordsword’s *The Prelude* are those that would qualify as what Stephen Meadows calls interactive narratives.

According to Stephen-Meadows “interactive narrative is an emerging art form that borrows from multiple disciplines” (Stephen-Meadows, 2003, pp. 67). Despite there being several ways of writing interactive narrative and the fact that not all games qualify to be labeled as such, one has to keep in mind that, despite claims to otherwise, video games represent some of the highest forms of interactive narrative currently possible. Interactive narratives must include a virtual world to be explored by the gamer and rules that govern the player’s engagement with the game, but it also should have the potential of being an educational tool, of developing critical thought about topics, of analyzing events and ideas with a through a new lens, and of potentially changing the player’s outlook on certain topics, ideas, or the world itself. This can be accomplished through the plot presented in the narrative. The more detailed the plot and the character interaction and development the easier it will be to design a meaningful video game.

In order to fully understand the kind of video game that is worthy of the same critical attention as, for example, *Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, one needs to understand the evolution of narrative and successfully juxtapose it to the evolution of the video game narrative. The first narrative of which there is knowledge, *Gilgamesh*, is an epic poem. In this poem the main character, Gilgamesh, sets off in various quests in order to accomplish goals. Likewise, the early narratives of *Dragon Warrior* and *Final Fantasy* followed this same principle. The epic trend of engaging in quests, killing opponents, and forcefully taking their land is prominent narrative style even modern video games. Stephen-Meadows agrees that “the epic stages of narrative we saw in the days of Homer and Virgil were essentially about the same thing [as modern video

games]: stab the guy and take his stuff” (Stephen-Meadows, 2003, pp. 238). He further suggests that “contemporary video games represent the Epic stages of interactive narrative” (Stephen-Meadows, 2003, pp. 238). Certainly, epic poems like Ancient Sumeria’s *Gilgamesh*, Homer’s *Iliad* and Anonymous’ *Beowulf* are worthy of critical attention, just as the epic video games like *Shining Force*, *Star Ocean*, and *Grand Theft Auto* are. The number of academic books and essays dealing with issues of gender, race, language, and ideology in epic video game narratives, though relatively small compared to the criticism of other media, is evidence of how these video games are the equivalent of a ‘high literature’. Despite the cultural impact of the epic poem, the narrative eventually evolved, and likewise, video game narrative is currently taking that evolutionary step. According to Stephen-Meadows, “the Epics of traditional literature were followed by questions of morality and how we get along as members of society” (Stephen-Meadows, 2003, pp. 238). The first steps of this evolution can be seen in religiously motivated video games such as *Left Behind* and, to a greater degree, in Ian Bogost’s *Persuasive Games* (2007), but the fruition of what Bogost suggested in his book actually comes into full fruition in Tri-Crescendo’s 2007 title *Eternal Sonata*.

Eternal Sonata

Previously mentioned in this essay is the common notion that works like William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Salvador Dali’s *Persistence of Memory*, or Frederic Chopin’s *Grande Valse Brillante* are works of high culture worthy of critical attention while video games are not. However, *Eternal Sonata* seems to mix elements from Blake’s *Songs* into its design while offering the player astonishing visuals inspired by the surrealist movement from which Dali arises. Furthermore, the game revolves around the composer Chopin as he lay on his deathbed. The game opens with a 39 year old Frederic Chopin lying in bed in No. 12 Place Vendome in Paris France. Chopin is dying of consumption, now known as tuberculosis, and it is in this state where, at 10:48 p.m., he begins his journey.

Chopin’s world of dreams is designed in a visual style reminiscent of paintings from the surrealist movement. Colorful, flower-covered fields inhabited by morphing onions give way to purple swamps swarming with poisonous toadstools, and floating fish guard the entrance to colorfully lit graveyards inside caves. Amidst the vast sands of the desert there lies an oasis with a gigantic neon door overrun with emerald plants which leads to colorful dungeons, and next to it a giant castle surrounded by purple and orange tornadoes. Inside the castle lies a flowing stairway of purple sand gleaming with starlight that leads to gates as bright as the sun which hides a fiery, desolate hell on a mountaintop. The way the scenery unfolds is reminiscent of the surrealist dream, while the way the characters interact with the lighting of this interactive painting is reminiscent of Blake’s *Songs*. In Blake’s *Songs*, the reader is treated to varying views on the same topic. *Songs of Innocence* presents a piper turned poet, a lamb, and the innocence of childhood, while the *Songs of Experience* present a poet turned bard, a tiger, and the inquisitive, critical mind of experience. Likewise, *Eternal Sonata* offers both sides of the coin. While some characters give the innocent opinion – Beat’s comments on how good Count Waltz is because he does not tax mineral powder come to mind – while other offer the grownup critical

commentary on the same topic. The commentaries offered by the characters in the closing credits also present the same innocence versus experience confrontation.

The game play of *Eternal Sonata* is fairly straightforward. Following the tradition set by *Final Fantasy X*, the player is 'guided' through the world following a heavily linear story – necessary to make the author's statement come across as clearly as possible – and controls the characters through menus. During battles the player engages with an innovative battle system which mixes elements of traditional turn-based role playing games with real time elements. As the player becomes more adept in the game the battle system evolves, finally becoming a battle system composed almost in its entirety of real-time battles. The most interesting feature of the battle system is the light system. If a character is standing in illuminated places it will use certain skills, while if the character is standing in a shadow it will use a different set of skills.

An interesting concept about the game is that it seems to vindicate itself not only as a legitimate art form, but also as an art form worthy of "God's attention". In Double Reed Tower, the game's final dungeon, Chopin is told by Claves that "music allows the listener to experience time arranged in a particular sequence and therefore invoke specific emotions" and "painting allows the experience of the same emotions in past, present, and future". These are unique, yet valid, interpretations of each of these two art forms. Chopin is then told that "if there is ever a means to combine music and painting it would create an art form that even God would appreciate." This may be hinting to several art forms, such as film and, it can be argued, poetry, but it seems to be specifically talking about video games themselves. Certainly, as argued above, not all video games can or should be considered as valid art forms. As Northrop Frye suggests in his seminal criticism of romantic poetry *Fearful Symmetry* (1990), art is the result of imagination, and it doesn't take too much imagination to produce titles like *Madden XX*, *America's Army*, or *Gran Turismo 5*. In each of these designers simply take an already existing concept, such as sports, war, or racing, and make a virtual simulation. It does take imagination, however, to create the virtual landscapes, people, interactions, music, and narrative in *Oblivion* (2006), *Lost Odyssey* (2008), *Persona 3* (2007), or *Eternal Sonata* (2007). *Eternal Sonata* is not only a work of contemporary imagination, but also of an imagination that comes from the nineteenth century – that of Chopin. It is set in Chopin's dying dream, and the game integrates the famed composer's music with a surrealist landscape to create a highly imaginative game which makes strong commentaries on society's current state.

Overall, the game is an excellent title with solid game play, good character development, and a solid – if short – story full of societal criticism and in-depth analysis of modern issues, which will be discussed in the following section.

Social Criticism in Eternal Sonata

At first glance, *Eternal Sonata* might seem like a game designed for children. The colorful graphics, linear plot, easy to control systems, linear plot, and abundance of underage characters might make it seem as if the game was devoid of any critical content. Certainly, a musically themed game which, at first glance, seems to force the existence of famous pianist and composer Chopin into the game to make it a quasi-

educational experience is not something that may sound controversial at all, specially with games like *GTA 4* and *Fallout 3* in the market, and the fantasy setting and cartoon-like visuals do not help the game to be taken seriously. However, playing the game will make one discover that the plot, dialogue, and even the ending credits all make powerful statements about the world we live in and individual and collective perception of the world.

Throughout the game the most prominent critic is to modern society. In one of Foucault's many discourses on the carceral system which society has taken, he suggests that we live in a society that is a universal prison where individuals simply try to amass as much wealth as possible. Although *Eternal Sonata* does not offer any commentary on whether individuals in a society are unwilling slaves to a particular system, it does offer critical commentary on people who try to amass wealth at the expense of others, as Jazz reminds the player in the ending credits of the game that "people tend to act in ways that suit their best interest, and before they know it they turn all their efforts to seeing how powerful they can become." The first example of this can be seen in the first few minutes of the game. The town of Retardando seems, on the surface, to be a normal town set in a fantasy setting. In this town, however, children are starving. Reminiscent of the history books and poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century where poor children were either overworked, underpaid, and often died before reaching puberty, or abandoned to their own means, the poor children in Retardando are forced to live either by working or by stealing and living in the sewers. The main example of this discrimination is seen in the party leader Allegretto – a sixteen year old Robin Hood character who steals bread from the wealthy store owners in order to feed the younger children who live in the sewers. In his conversations with Beat, an innocent eight year old boy from Retardando, Allegretto often remarks that "as long as people have food on their table, they don't care if others are starving". Beat seems to act in an apologetic manner in the ending credits and states that "Of course the bread you're eating is more important than the bread of a stranger". This is not only a reference to Foucault, but also a commentary on the present state of the world, where governments and large corporations serve their personal interests while forsaking all others. The game does not allow for such a world to be accepted, however, and right after Beat states that "your bread is more important than the other person's bread" he says that there is really no difference. Still, even though the end credits challenge the player to do something about the fallen state of the world, the general behavior of the world in *Eternal Sonata* is essentially an emulation of our "fallen world".

Another example of this kind of behavior can be seen in how the people of Retardando interact with Polka. Polka is a girl from a neighboring village who travels to Retardando to sell floral powder. Because floral powder has become obsolete thanks to mineral powder, a government-sanctioned drug, Polka's stock of floral powder usually goes unsold. The problem, however, does not arise because of Polka's investment in outdated medicine, but because of the way she is treated by the people. In the world of *Eternal Sonata*, when someone is about to die they can use magic. Polka can use magic, and although she keeps this fact hidden from people, she sometimes uses her healing powers to help those in need. She is repaid with a cold disdain and cries for her to "go away", and while this kind of behavior may come about thanks to myths begin by people who say that those who use magic have an incurable, contagious disease, these myths themselves come about

because of distrust. This distrust stems from the loss of innocence and the acquisition of experience – a topic explored in Blake's *Songs* and rediscovered in *Eternal Sonata*.

The topic of innocence and experience is explored in-depth in various conversations between Beat and Allegretto. One example can be seen in Beat's comments on Count Waltz and mineral powder where he states that "mineral powder is not taxed because it's good. Count Waltz is doing something good for the people." This is a comment made by Beat after mineral powder is discovered to be a poisonous drug and after speculation of Count Waltz' sinister plot to make mindless soldiers by means of mineral powder. Beat's innocence seems to blind him to the obvious negative effects of mineral powder, allowing him to only see the potential good in people. The same can be seen in his commentaries about revolution, where he states that "a revolution can improve people's lives, and that's a good thing, right?" If one would look back at the major revolution in history – the French revolution – it can be easily seen that revolutions cause unnecessary bloodshed and little change. The power of the line of kings was replaced by the power of the bourgeoisie, and King Louie XIV was replaced with Napoleon Bonaparte. The revolution was simply a ritual to transfer power from one social group to another. Still, the most explicit example of innocence against experience can be seen in a scene where Allegretto and Polka are sitting atop a cliff overseeing Retardando. In this moment Polka tells Allegretto how the lights of the city were more beautiful when she was a kid. Allegretto responds by saying that it's because when she was a child, all the lights in the city were filled with innocence. Now that she has outgrown her innocence the only lights shining are the fires of mistrust – the mistrust that created the myth of a contagious disease being carried by magic users. Of course, neither in the world of *Eternal Sonata* nor in the real world one can be blamed for not trusting people, after all, as Allegretto reminds us, "mistrust is the norm. People who lose everything for caring too much are called idiots by society".

The twenty first century is a time where people live disconnected from each other and individuals have no regard for others, and *Eternal Sonata* reminds players of that. It may be that, as Polka suggests, if humanity finds a way to spend all the energy they use fueling mistrust in other meaningful activities the world might become a better place; however, as Chopin reminds players during the credits, "the standards for justice in this world are decided by the driving ambitions of a small handful of people who just happen to possess the greatest influence", and this influence, driven by the desires of a few, cause social injustice and war.

War, it seems, is an innate human quality. The first epic poems sing of a history of war, fiction is constantly being erected in war, and the history of all the great nations of history is etched in war and bloodshed. The world of *Eternal Sonata* is no exception. When Chopin first dreams of the world of *Eternal Sonata* he is thrust into what at first seems to be a peaceful land. As the story progresses, however, one discovers that the kingdoms of Forte and Baroque have been at war for ages, the reason lost to time. As Chopin discovers more of the reasons behind the war, he states in chapter 2 that "no matter how much time passes, war remains". Here Chopin is not talking only about the wars in *Eternal Sonata*, but also about the uprisings in Warsaw, his hometown, which eventually turned into all-out war, about the French revolution, and possibly about the current wars in Iraq and all over the

world. One might argue that certain wars are justified for the sake of some abstract ideal or another, but the truth is, as Allegretto reminds players, that “in a war, ordinary people have no way of knowing who is right and who is wrong”. Thanks to the media and the small degree of freedom of speech which some nations enjoy, people might look at the facts and come to conclusions about the nature of wars on their own, but they should also keep in mind that, as Allegretto suggests, “all sides might be evil, but they might all be good in their own way.” If this is the case, *Eternal Sonata* asks the player, how do we figure out whose justice is true justice? The answer is we don't. We just take what we can on faith and, hopefully, try to change what we don't agree with; after all, “you can't just sit back and accept a destiny of death. You have to fight back and resist as hard as you can” (Allegretto, *Eternal Sonata*, 2007).

Closing Comments

Eternal Sonata is an excellent role playing game which makes powerful statements about the society in which we live in and challenges the player to do something to improve the world. By offering a detailed, surrealist landscape and integrating classical and contemporary music, it achieves a degree of visual and musical harmony that few games manage to obtain. Furthermore, the plot, characters, and themes presented in the game can be suitable for all ages, although a child will certainly see the game from a different perspective than an adult. The design of the game itself might seem simplistic at first, but as the combat system evolves, making it faster paced, the game becomes more and more challenging. In the end, while not everyone might agree to the brilliance and innovation of the battle system and some might feel frustrated with the linearity of the game, no one can argue that the game has enough unique elements to make up for the lack of branching paths and multiple endings, and no one can deny that *Eternal Sonata* is truly a game worthy of critical attention.

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Notes

¹ For a commercial review of the game, visit
<http://xbox360.ign.com/articles/819/819923p1.html>