Time, Perception and Altered States of Consciousness in “Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth”

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Showing transitions between different states of consciousness, using sound and image, is an effective tool for creating a particular kind of narrative immersion. One might argue that conveying the inner state of a protagonist in a novel is purely a matter of skill with words and phrases, whereas with visual, aural and tactile technology at hand, storytelling has become a more intricate process. This paper will investigate a game text that illustrates Bergsonian notions of time, movement and affect through the sonic portrayal of altered states of consciousness. The example is Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth (2005), a digital game in the “survival horror” genre that exhibits temporal and spatial anomalies during certain segments of first-person gameplay.

What is interesting about this text is that it has a sonic trigger unlocking the transition into the realm of postmodern temporal and spatial flux, and its succeeding connection with the realm of the virtual, or potential. In other words, it shows manifestations of altered states of mind that are brought on by stress. To map out the postmodern and metaphysical conditions under which these transitions occur, the theories regarding time, perception and movement outlined by Henri Bergson in Matter and Memory (1911) are the most useful. His theories have subsequently influenced French theorist Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the time-image. These concepts, together with Brian Massumi’s theories on affect in Parables of the Virtual (2002) provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for an expanded Bergsonian philosophy of time, movement and affect.
Before embarking on a detailed analysis of the text, it is important to establish the framing of the transitions, and the environment in which they are shown. This might be called the meta-transition, which is the state of mind of the audience whilst watching the characters on-screen. As a result, we can establish the two layers of affect: between the audience and the text, and simultaneously, between the characters existing on-screen. Consider how the act of reading can make the reader disconnect from reality and “lose” time. Time is not literally lost, as much as it is experienced at a different rate, and as taking place in a different space. Perhaps the hour lost during reading has witnessed years of great battles fought and lands conquered. At this point, we may already conclude that narrative immersion can quite easily manipulate temporal and spatial perception. The reader is experiencing a transition between the real world and the world of make-believe, which is a similar condition to the transitions depicted on-screen. Therefore, one might argue that there are numerous parallel worlds in existence in a room where an audience is engaging with some kind of narrative, be it played or watched: the real, outside world parallel to the world of make-believe and dream, alongside their respective on-screen counterparts. One presupposes the other, in a chain of transitions that have to be entered in order – that is, to fully engage with the transitions depicted on-screen, one has to have already entered the state of make believe in the real world.

In The Condition of Postmodernity, David Harvey argues that the postmodern dislocation of time and space results in a “conflict […] between people living on different time scales and seeing and experiencing the world very differently as a result” (Harvey 1990:313). In other words, the immersed state of mind could be considered postmodern, because the mind is caught in a parallel, virtual reality. Harvey’s argument also pinpoints the important role of perception as “seeing and experiencing”. What the reader has just experienced can be called a temporal and spatial anomaly, which is in turn precisely what the protagonist in our text experiences. In portraying this on-screen, affect plays a very important
part in creating the otherworldly moods and ambiances necessary for showing how a person exists in a different psychological place.

Rather than focusing on the visual “seeing”, let us apply Harvey’s theory to perceiving sound, and what we might call “aural seeing”. Chion argues that “[e]ach kind of perception bears a fundamentally different relationship to motion and stasis, since sound, contrary to sight, presupposes movement from the outset” (Chion 1994:9). What Chion argues, is that sound, if ever so slightly, demands movement and agitation. This seems to conclude that sound is superior to sight when it comes to measuring and perceiving movement, and also that sound is inextricably linked to movement. Sight is furthermore easily obscured, because of slow visual perception and the possibility of difficult ambient conditions such as time of day, whereas hearing is not. Sound has a definitive spatial advantage in that we can hear 360 degrees around us. Sight needs conscious attention and focus. This is the reason why, as Chion states, some scenes that are particularly visually complex need sonic “spotting” to “mark certain moments and leave a strong audiovisual memory” (Chion 1994:11). These are the mechanics at work in the game. With careful and detailed sound design, perception is drawn to the manipulation of time, using movement and affect.

Let us now turn to the example Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth (2005). The opening cinematic sequence is indicated by the presence of widescreen edges on the screen, and the suspension of gameplay to watched narrative. In the scene, the private investigator Jack Walters is called upon to resolve some reported shootings outside a house in New England. The scene is sonically driven, in that it is hard to see clearly in the rain and dark. The spoken dialogue further enhances the narrative tension, by taking fear of a potential event from the future and pulling it towards the present:

Jack: How is it looking, Henry?

Henry: I don’t like this one bit, Jack. Check the alley on the right. Victor holds over
there in the shadows. He’s waiting for you.

Jack: Can we trust him?

Henry: No, but we got you covered. You better take it slowly though. They’re a bit twitchy.

As Jack crosses the front yard of the house in the darkness and rain, a single shot rings out. It is loud, reverberated and massive, possibly originating from a shotgun rifle, and Victor, the mysterious negotiator, is visibly shot, falling dead to the ground. Abruptly, superfied sounds are suspended, and movement severely inhibited. There is a faint, melodic pitched down sound of shattering glass as the shot rings out. Vision becomes hazy, and lagging as if the perceived passage of time is no longer ephemeral and unnoticeable, but thick and persistent, the last half second still visible as a shadow slowly lingering alongside the perception of the present. Thumping heartbeats muted but loud, give the moment a submerged feeling of quiet suspension. It would seem as if the past and the present exist simultaneously, but it is not an objective version of the present we perceive. It is a highlighted, discerned version where what is less important has been peeled away and what is more important is heightened. The heartbeats of the character are all we hear, because perception is focused on the inside rather than on the outside, as is the case before and after this particular scene, what might be called real-time. This manipulation of temporality is not an isolated instance in Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth. The uniqueness lies rather in the purpose it serves. Here, it illustrates immersion at its purest. This is a territory where time is out of joint, and where movement through space is, if not suspended, at least obstructed, seemingly by the sound of muted, laboured heartbeats. The triggering traumatic moment of the gunshot (sonic) and the after-image (man falling down), suggests an acute sense of awareness through slow motion and rapid perception. The initial reaction of shock is due to the sharp sound, not to the after-

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1 Michel Chion describes “superfield” as the environmental, ambient sounds that are multi-tracked onto a scene, that provide a particular sense of space (Chion 1994:150).
image. It is the sound that is frightening, whereas the figure falling to the ground is barely visible in the rain and dusk. Though movement is perceived as slow and inhibiting, it is rather the simulation of an increased speed of thought that creates that perception through difference. Because thought processes remain intact for the player, the manipulated pacing of game-time and slowed movement lead to a dream-like sense of frustration and anxiety over not being able to move fast enough. To be exact, the only way to simulate an adrenaline rush and speed up the thought processes in the player, is to slow down the game, to simulate the speeding up of thought, by virtue of difference. Bergson describes this acute sense of surroundings as “attentive perception”, and argues that:

[E]very attentive perception truly involves a reflexion, […] that is to say the projection, outside ourselves, of an actively created image, identical with, or similar to, the object on which it comes to mould itself. If, after having gazed at any object, we turn our eyes abruptly away, we obtain an ‘after image’ of it: must we not suppose that this image existed already while we were looking? (Bergson 1911:41)

This shift in (postmodern) temporal perception is described by Brian Massumi in Parables of the Virtual (2002) as that of “potential”, a condition governed by “a different temporal structure, in which past and future brush shoulders with no mediating present, and as having a different recursive causality […] cresting in a liminal realm of emergence” (Massumi 2001:31). What Massumi is referring to is the non-sequential tendency of the body to react before the mind, even when the mind is the first stimulated. Massumi describes an experiment that concluded that the sensory receptors of the skin have to be stimulated for a minimum of half a second before the mind deems it significant enough to register. Anything shorter than that will fall out of consciousness. This half-second harbours the transitory realm called “potential” or “virtual”, and moving in and out of this state is a recurring theme translated and depicted in the game.
In this territory, sonic perception is internalized, and sharply focused on the body. All other sounds have been muted. Bergson argues that pure perception comes in the form of virtual images, and that the perception of an image is always a matter of representation. When an image transitions from being simply an object to being “my” object, i.e. becoming a representation, it is not by *adding* properties to that object, but rather by *subtracting* properties. Bergson states that “[c]onsciousness, - in regard to external perception, - lies in just this choice. But there is, in this necessary poverty of our conscious perception, something that is positive, that foretells spirit: it is, in the etymological sense of the word, discernment” (Bergson 1911:13). The remaining heartbeats are perceived as loud, because they are heard over complete silence and suspension of superfield sounds. Felt through the vibrating game controller device, the heartbeats are physical reactions of Jack Walters that are projected and subsequently transmitted to the player. Rather than first-hand affect, this is transmitted affect. The pleasure of playing the game arises from the fact that the body does not distinguish between projection and reality. Through suspension of disbelief and mimesis², haptic³, perceived heartbeats become experienced heartbeats. Perception becomes affection, and subsequently fiction becomes reality, or as simply stated by Bergson, “affection must, at a given moment, arise out of the image” (Bergson 1911:20).

The nature of the transitional territory described in the game, is a space where time – past, present and future – fracture and converge, and where reality and fiction bleed into each other. The trigger is, in this case, a traumatic experience – the sound of someone being shot and killed, and the fear of the possibility of oneself being killed. As Jack runs to find cover, perceived time – what we might call game-time, or perhaps Bergsonian mathematical time –

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² “Mimesis”, in this instance, means transference. Socrates, in the *Republic* distinguishes between two forms of “mimesis”, on one hand the image or likeness that resembles the original it imitates, and on the other hand the semblance, that only mimics, or mimes its model without bearing any true resemblance to it. Writing would subsequently be an example of “bad” mimesis and speech an example of “good” mimesis. Thus for Plato, there are two kinds of signs governing mimesis: images (icons) and simulacra (phantasms) (Bogue 1991:2).

³ The technology allowing for the sense of touch to enter gaming is sometimes referred to as “haptic”, particularly in relation to the perception and manipulation of objects using the sense of touch. “Haptic interfaces convey important sensorial information that helps users achieve tactile identification of virtual objects” (Burdea and Coiffet 2003:92).
is experienced as having longer duration than the actually elapsed, real time. The extended reality is a magnification of detail that sonically reflects the body’s fight-or-flight instinct. As he takes shelter behind a small structure in front of the house, there is another sudden bang from a second gunshot, and a perceived jerk. The single beat, or sound accentuates this reassertion, and as Annie Turner argues in “They’re Here: The Rhythmic Accent, the Single Beat and Rhythmic Silence”, that while “[t]he visual image of the action provides us with evidence of its occurrence, […] its aural match concretizes the event’s location at a temporal point, because sound is a temporal phenomenon and validates the motion of time” (Turner 2003:3). Thus, time, sound, perception and movement are restored for the character but not so for the player. The abrupt shift leaves the player behind, as sounds and movements are now perceived as being faster and louder than before. It becomes a virtual and cognitive spring effect of narrative tension and difference that subsides once Jack reaches and enters the house and realities begin to reassert. The speeding-up effect exists between the player and the screen, and is a result of the transferred affect emanating from the tensions existing between the character on the screen and his surroundings.

As normal time reasserts with the second reverberated gunshot, the cinematic music score comes in, accompanied by more gunshots and a disarray of agitated voices. The sonic focus has shifted from on-screen inner suspension and shock, to on-screen outer chaos and mayhem, and this is evidence of a second transition within the game. The scattered shouts and gunshots become superfield sounds, almost drowning out the rain, wind and thunder, creating a sense of confusion and panic in the character, chasing him into the house for cover. It is the harrowing effect of sound design and potential that has nudged the player in the direction of the game narrative rather than the usual narrative cues. Again, to absorb the nature of this transition, the player must be in a state of gameplay immersion. The scene comes to an end, as the door slams shut behind Jack Walters.
David Rodowick argues in *Deleuze’s Time Machine* (1997) that action and movement are invariably captured in successive or even single still photographs. The illusion of movement and flow – and subsequently of duration and time – can, according to Rodowick, be achieved in two ways: either by being reduced to a consonant (1997:9) or being “restricted to a line of action […] that flows only through rationally segmented contiguous movements” (1997:9). He argues that time in these instances serves as “a measure of space and movement” (1997:10). This statement is interesting when taken together with Chion’s argument that sound is connected to movement. With Chion and Rodowick in mind perhaps there is a connection to be made between time and sound, and that sound has the ability to measure time. Consider here Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the “crystal image” or “time-image”. Deleuze defines the time-image as “the actual image cut-off from its motor extension”, and that the crystal image is a crystallization of the actual with the virtual, and the collapsing, or merging of the two (Deleuze 2000:69). Bogue paraphrases Deleuze, and argues that the time-image is a concept consisting of the *opsign* and the *sonsign*, which can be seen as “pure optic and sonic images that open directly onto time” (Bogue 1991:88). Let us focus for a moment on the sonsign, as a sound that draws our attention to time itself, and to the passage of time. Thus the sonsign in conjunction with Harvey’s parallel temporality would produce a sound that draws attention to the intricate ways in which one might perceive time differently.

How this focused and deliberate time perception works, is discussed in Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1911), where he touches on the notion of two separate types of time – “pure” and “mathematical”. Pure, or “real” time is continuous, inseparable, and can, according to Bergson, only be experienced by intuition. Mathematical time, on the other hand, is intellectualized time that can be broken down into segments and calculated durations (Bergson 1911:9). The scene’s multiple transitions from one consciousness into another, seem to demonstrate a transition taking place from real time to mathematical time.
Consider then, as argued by Deleuze, the presence of two simultaneous time-images that we might call “peaks of present” and “sheets of past”, where “time [...] makes the present pass and [simultaneously] preserves the past in itself” (Deleuze 2000:98). On one hand there is the hidden ground of time revealed by the crystal, with multiple versions of the present. On the other hand there is a single, conglomerated, virtual past, a “dimension of commingling past components that have never been present, but have coexisted with their various corresponding present instants as virtual ‘doubles’ of those components” (Bogue 1991:88). The oscillation between these two time-images, Bogue argues, offers direct images of compossible presents and a pure virtual past. [...] The virtual and the actual are rendered indistinguishable. Imagination, dream, fantasy, hallucination, memory and waking consciousness become undecidable categories. (1991:88)

To conclude – the metaphysical experience, watched and played, differs from traditional narratives in that it is not a simple matter of perceiving the narrative itself. The focus has become that of the reflective meta-narrative, and perhaps more importantly, of the reflective meta-transition. When playing *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* we are seeing a reflection, a mirrored image of ourselves, and our inner, psychological states. The state we are in whilst watching and playing is what we see on-screen, in other words, the immersive transition we have entered into by virtue of the text, takes on the characteristics of the transitions experienced by the characters on-screen. Time is manipulated for us, as it is manipulated for Jack Walters. It becomes a matter of a meta-transition where we, by watching on-screen characters, also watch ourselves.

By taking on the characteristics of the fictional characters, we have ourselves become the fiction, and come to embody the text, effectively flattening the existing transitory states of immersion and affect. This is the self-reflexive postmodern perception at work, where the text as virtual reality not only takes the audience on a narrative journey beyond the theatre, but
furthermore on a journey of self-exploratory inner perception, time and affect. With regards to storytelling and narrative, the final frontier might not be outer space, but rather inner space. The important facilitator remains the metaphysical agency of sound perception, which remains the centre of a postmodern mode of perception.
Works Cited


