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11/14/2014

Cyber-structuralism and Groundhog Day (1993)

The world of technology and media seems to be continuously changing and redefining how an artist can present a narrative. Film scholar Marsha Kinder explores in her essay “Narrative Equivocations between Movies and Games” the new methodology used to explore post-structuralism and cultural studies. Kinder calls such a term ‘cyber-structuralism’ and she uses it to compare and contrast the aesthetic and cognitive differences between the medium of videogames and cinema. “The perception of differences between games and films hinges on how one defines narrative and the primary functions in performs” (Kinder, 21). I decided to use Harold Rami’s comedy classic *Groundhog Day*(1993) as an example as it contains several patterns and interpretations of a discursive narrative that are highly identical to the aesthetics found in several video games.

Interestingly the narrative in *Groundhog Day* is looked at by several academics as the standard template for the perfect conventional ‘Three Act-Structure’ involving three key points: Exposition, Climax and Resolution. In many ways this formulaic three act structure is extremely parallel to the various stages of our lives, the only difference is movies try to condense these stages so they can fit within the time-frame of a 2 hour movie narrative. Everyone knows the basic layout of *Groundhog Day*, as it tells the story of a man named Phil Connors who finds himself stuck in a mysterious time loop, reliving the same day over and over again; February 2nd, Groundhog Day. Since Phil is the only person who knows that this is happening he goes through

a series of stages, a spiritual,transcendental journey which embodies human growth. Kinder explains in her article that narrative is essentially a simulation that stimulates a type of emotion and feeling for the spectator. “Aesthetically, the function of narrative is to arouse emotion or give pleasure; to create a simulacrum of the world or preserve one’s experience in the face of death” (Kinder, 121).

There are generally 4 central stages that Phil goes through all throughout the narrative in *Groundhog Day* and they all revolve around ideological and cognitive feelings or emotions. Phil's first stage is ‘fear’ as he doesn’t actually understand the occurrence of this mysterious phenomenon, seeking out various professionals for help and answers. The second stage is ‘revolt’ as he begins to rebel and go against rules and authority, taking advantage of the situation mostly by manipulating and using others for his own personal gain. The third step is ‘despair’ which is a dark period where Phil begins to sink into a deep depression, drink heavily and ultimately arrives at a decision to commit suicide. Finally Phil arrives at the final stage ‘acceptance’ and finally does something that goes against his entire nature: He begins to learn.

The Cyber-structuralism found in *Groundhog Day* is the repeated day that Phil constantly has to experience, and much of its mechanics perform similar to a traditional level found in a side-scrolling game like *Super Mario Bros*. Kinder explains that this newly defined ‘new media’ brings together a cultural shift from structuralist to post-structuralist, which is an approach to narrative that creates a series of connected events through the use of the actors on the screen. “I see narrative more broadly...characters and events interacting within a space-time setting with change and causality” (Kinder, 121). Phil essentially becomes the main player, and his level begins immediately when he wakes up. After getting dressed and leaving his motel room he does his best to avoid the talky neighbor in the hallway, quickly leaves the hotel to avoid the breakfast

lady and does what he can to strategically maneuver around Ned Ryerson; all while doing his best to not fall victim to that wet puddle which seems to be perfectly placed in an area on the street that Phil likes to step.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Groundhog Day* is the existential, metaphysical and philosophical ambiguities on rebirth, death and spiritual growth. Videogames are a world of constant déjà vu, which has been systematically constructed by humans to challenge and defeat its players. Phil can die and immediately start the day over again with absolutely no consequences or repercussions and that immediately brings to mind the laws and conventions in a videogame. Phil is able to restart the day over again and try to repair a mistake he made the day before, so he can ultimately reach his potential goal and make it to the end of the level. But Phil will forever be bound to the same level, until he evolves and becomes a good man, not because he 'has' to be but because he 'wants' to be. That itself will be his only way to finally break the cycle of this mysterious time-loop and only then will he be able to finally see a new day.

I believe the sequence with the homeless man is one of the most beautiful and poignant scenes in the entire film, and the one moment that goes against all the conventions and laws that are found within the world of a videogame. The death of the homeless man is one direct incident in which Phil cannot change the outcome and he is unenviably forced to accept that at the end of every day the homeless man will unfortunately die. This is an incredibly cosmic epiphany for the character of Phil, because he now comes to terms with the fact that he is not the all-mighty creator of this world that has been constructed for him, and that there are elements and laws within this time-loop that Phil has absolutely no control over. So in the end within the cyber-structural world of *Groundhog Day*, Phil is not the game creator (Could it be Harold Ramis?) but merely the player who is simply trying his best to succeed to the next level.