A Football Spiral Universe: What 17776 and David O'Reilly's Everything tell us about art

Opinion

September 21, 2017

by Eron Rauch

Sometimes, our expectations as fans can throttle our ability to appreciate more experimental design.

Am I the only one who thinks that the videogame *Everything* and the cult sci-football story *17776* could be set in the same universe? Or was it just a cosmic coincidence that I happened to be prancing about space as moons and footballs in the same week I was listening to the sarcastic conversations among bored satellites with nothing to do but watch humans toss around a pigskin as they spin far beyond our heliosphere?

Fate or chance aside, these projects have two immediate things in common. First, neither are shoestring-budget DIY projects. *Everything* was published by Double Fine, and at first glance looks like a gloriously colorful interactive version of the classic film *Powers of Ten. 17776* was published on SBNation, one of the web's top sports news sites.

Second, both have caused no end of frustration amongst fans. Right from the start, *Everything* seems to pick a fight. You start the game as an okapi (a relative to the giraffe which looks more like a deer) on a beautiful plain. Then you push forward. Kathunk. Kathunk. Faster and faster. Kathunktunkthunkthunkthunk. Your okapi doesn't run. It doesn't walk. It doesn't even glide. It just damn rolls snout-over-ass up one dune, down the next.

↖ ZOOM A herd of okapi traveling gracefully down a sand dune in *Everything*.

Likewise, *17776* starts its epic by having your scroll through untold years of calendars. Month by month, the fragments of text occur across the massive time that it would take for interstellar communication. Then, after the finger cramps that come with such intensive use of the scroll wheel, ta-da! You're met with a cheesy video made in Google Earth with license-free smooth jazz. Let's just say that fans of videogames and American football, respectively, were both pretty pissed off.

You can see frustrated expectations littered all over Steam's reviews and **forums** for *Everything*. Indeed, the first google result for "everything animals rolling" is a post asking "No animations for animals?" Hell, the reason I was Googling this phrase was that I too thought the flopping okapi was a glitch. This is a perfect example of fandom's genre expectations imposed on the medium of videogames.

The various animals are certainly animated: they just flop across the landscape awkwardly in the way you'd expect from something not entirely round. That clearly meets a general definition of animation. What the poster is really saying is, "No realistic 3D-modeled animation that seamlessly reproduces what we think each animal should do when rendered in a videogame?"

Walk down the the SF/Fantasy aisle of a bookstore and look for similarities. Centered realistic paintings of the characters on the cover. Lots of paperback trilogies. Roughly 300-400 pages. Opening the books, most of the prose is short sentences written with a near-journalistic directness. The plots are almost all based on the hero's journey.

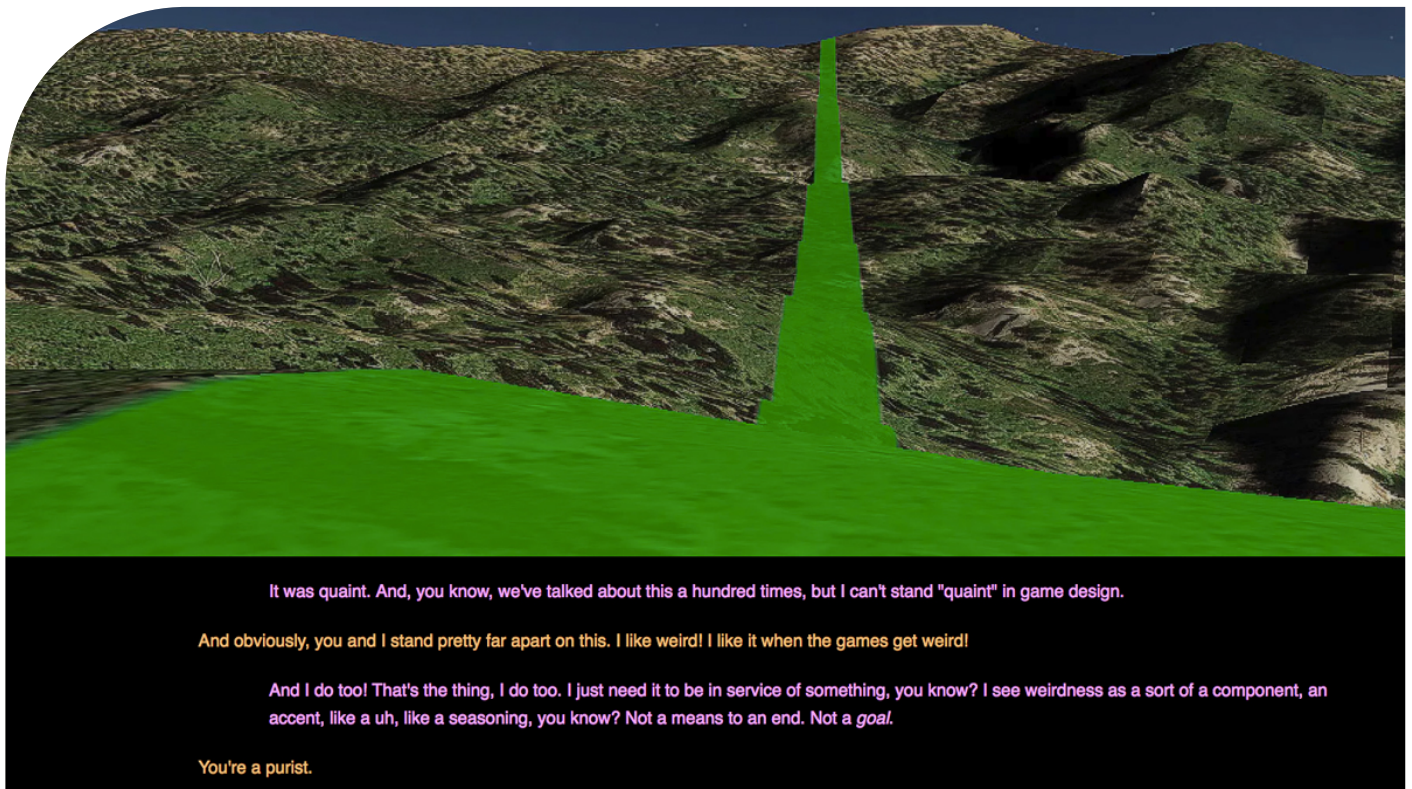A glimpse of *Everything*'s 'relative' realism.

These similarities are hardly a coincidence, and each genre section of the bookstore will have its own tropes. Even if they are basically arbitrary, these unstated requirements for how something

should be made quickly become a shorthand for readers to judge books.

Videogame fandom has built a set of its own conventions. Especially in regards to "quality" judgements about production in commercial game platforms, you see a rigid expectation based on ever-more expensively rendered *Transformers*-esque action-realism.

The so-called "core" demographic and the industry have deified certain strict genre conventions as the one Ring of videogame design.

You can also see how these supposedly-universal standards of "quality" are anything but neutral with the recent blow-up around *Mass Effect: Andromeda*'s occasionally awkward facial animations. These complaints were immediately linked to an asinine harassment campaign against women working in the industry. Let me distill their argument: Women can't make good tech, and videogames are exclusively about perfect hyper-realism via tech to create seamlessly immersive fantasies, ergo women have a deleterious effect on these fantasies. Which is garbage, I know, but telling garbage: it reveals a lot about the way the so-called "core" demographic and the industry have deified certain strict genre conventions, holding up simulated realism as the One Ring of videogame design.

It was quaint. And, you know, we've talked about this a hundred times, but I can't stand "quaint" in game design.

And obviously, you and I stand pretty far apart on this. I like weird! I like it when the games get weird!

And I do too! That's the thing, I do too. I just need it to be in service of something, you know? I see weirdness as a sort of a component, an accent, like a uh, like a seasoning, you know? Not a means to an end. Not a *goal*.

You're a purist.

ZOOM   A heated gaming moment in *17776*.

17776's increasingly incredulous descriptions of absurd variations on American football, apparently evolving over the span of 15,000, years could definitely have been made as a perfectly simulated videogame. I can see the pitch now: "It's like *Madden* meets *Ghost Recon* but with fan mod support and franchise tie-in DLC!" It probably would have cost 50 million dollars, gotten a 78% on Metacritic and faded into oblivion in the next Steam sale.

Would all that struggle and money put towards meeting the expectations of gamers get us any closer to the heart of the project? Would it give us any better reflection on how our culture grapples with our simultaneous scorn and fascination for the absurdity of sports and sporting culture? These ridiculous scenarios—not just the imagined games, not just the far-future Earth stuck in the early 2000s, but the notion that a trio of "woke" satellite AI's are trying to make sense of us—would have so much less impact if it were presented in a realistic, expected format.

"We've got to start thinking of the Internet as something more than a glow-in-the-dark newspaper." - Jon Bois, on *17776*.

17776's creator, Jon Bois, [has said](#) of his bricolage of text, links, videos, maps, images, simulations, and HTML5 wizardry, "The Internet offers a kaleidoscope of different formats, media, tools, sights, and sounds to tell your stories. And most of us are not even trying to scrape the surface of any of it. We've got to start thinking of the Internet as something more than a glow-in-the-dark newspaper."

My expectation that sportswriting is just a glow-in-the-dark newspaper is precisely why I avoided looking at *17776* for months. When I finally wandered over and was met with this sprawling, broken-seeming but savvy interactive web page studded with 1990s PlayStation graphics videos, it so confounded those expectations that I couldn't figure out what to do with it through any pre-existing genre lenses.

It would have been so simple for them to re-arrange their things. To me, it seems so likely, almost to the point of certainty, that at some moment within those 40 years, they might want to. They never did, and they never even thought to. And why would they? Things were just the way they wanted them.

ZOOM

In *17776*, humans confront immortality by remaining static.

Instead of focusing on how it was just a badly made webpage, I just kind of let *17776* be what it was. I let it wash over me and set up its own expectations. And instead of chaos, I found the presentation that made this oddball story come alive in ways a perfectly realistic physics-based videogame or black-text on white pages with medical ads in the sidebars could never hope to achieve.

This will sound farfetched, but like how satellites boost their velocity off of Jupiter, I need to take a bit of a tangent to explain how I started to make sense of the rolling animals in *Everything*. So if you could, imagine there is a nice fade out to some faded stock footage of a bustling European city in the early 1900s...

During this era called modernism, in cities like Paris, Vienna, Berlin, a lot of painters became famous for casting aside the musty conventions that had been inbred at the monolithic academies. These were people who realized that in an age with newspapers, electricity, cars, airplanes, and world wars, the realist genre tropes that defined classic painting got in the way of expressing how this new world felt to its harried inhabitants.

One painter from this era whom I've never really understood is Paul Klee. His painting technique always seemed dodgy, diffuse, even childish compared to the arcing shrapnel of a Duchamp cubist nude, or the exclamation of Mondrian's assertive squares.

'Landscape with Yellow Birds' (Paul Klee, 1923)

[Other than the fact his birds also roll](), while playing *Everything* I had a sudden realization about Klee's fuzzy paintings. The seemingly limp and naive painting style is instead an ingenious technical solution. Its feeling of constantly morphing forms, its very diffusion, its playfulness is its power. Klee's style of painting was developed explicitly so as to contain the contradictions and complexities in that expansive moment when modern life and the folksy life of the past were washing into each other. This effusive style is accommodating to this vast range of changes, from farmer folk traditions, global music, mythic landscape, modern cities, world wars, and science into one artistic expression.

In *Everything*, you can see an almost equally outlandish artistic vision. This is a videogame that addresses the place of humanity in historical epoch between the quantum future and the discovery of DNA by playing as everything in the universe. But how to accomplish that?

By the logic of big-budget videogames, it seems to cry out for even more future-forward computer graphics and blazing physics modeling. A game that simulates everything in the

universe should, at the very least, cause your graphics cards to melt like a particle accelerator catastrophe.

But that's not what happens. Instead, every scale of the universe is a series of very basic and functional repetitions: a flat plain, populated by medium-poly objects, which all perform some combination of three really basic animations (rotate around self, rotate around other objects, squash-stretch). The scaling is impressive feeling, but the rest, including the animations, are pretty basic stuff, tech-wise, as the original poster notes.
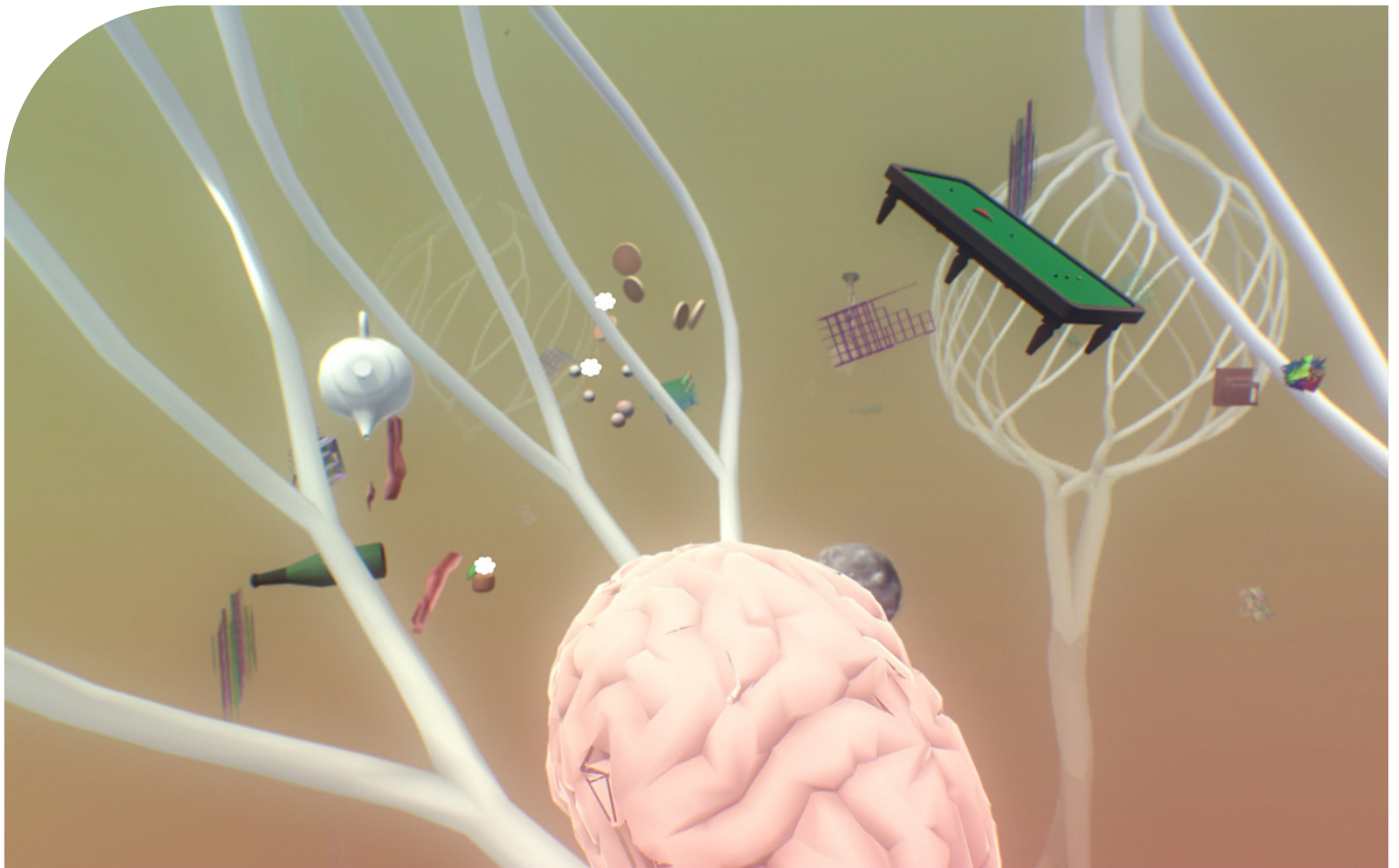
ZOOM   An assemblage of objects in *Everything*.

If we leave aside what we expect from "a $20 videogame on Steam," what we start to see is really pretty astounding: Everything in the universe, from sushi to nebulas, uses these same repetitions of animations. Whether you're a grain of sand or a duck or a galaxy, no matter how vast or how tiny, no matter how complex or how simple, no matter how long lived or fleeting, everything is stretching, rolling, and spinning in a grand fractal dance.

Would a hypothetical remake with "real" animations be better? Or does having a horse and a galaxy both spin better reinforce the ideas at the heart of the game: that everything in the

universe is connected, and that distinctions between things like species, time, scale, and **even life** are not nearly as simple and rigid as we ego-loving humans tend to assume?

If we step back from ourselves and stop boxing in videogames and art with rigid expectations, we can learn new modes of communication.

We all bring very specific expectations to the works of culture and art we experience. But those expectations, for realism via tech-polish, for the masculine edges of cubism, for overly-serious poetic enunciation in tweed coats, for the way horses shouldn't tumble end over end, or that a sports webpage should always read down (and definitely shouldn't contain weird simulations of Air BnB houses on the field), are far from universal.

Genre fandom tells us that our love of something, a specific something with specific criteria for quality, makes us special. Our own human brain always conspires to tell us that our viewpoint is objective reality. But if we step back from ourselves and stop boxing in videogames and art with rigid expectations, we can learn new modes of communication. If we open ourselves up to the infinite fascinating ways that art can be made, it will lead us to discover countless surprises about the world that were hidden behind our expectations.

#	17776
#	EVERYTHING

RELATED READING

5 games you missed in August

Opinion: Against games using dead kids as plot devices

5 characters we still really want to see in Super Smash Bros.

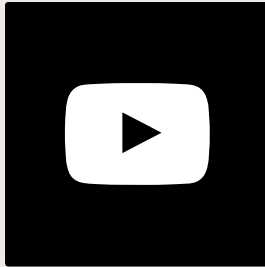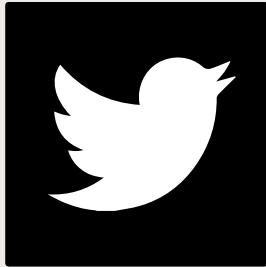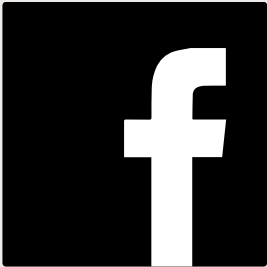You know what FromSoftware game really needs a remake? King's Field

The few times that Nintendo surprised us at E3 this year

READ MORE OPINION

ZAM

SIGN UP NOW

Featured Sites

Wowhead

Lolking

TF2Outpost

DayZDB

Hearthhead

Database Sites

Wowhead

Lolking

Addon Sites

MMOUI

WowInterface

ESOUI

About