

Video Games: Rousseauvian Dream or Skinnerian Nightmare?

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There is a great deal to like in Gideon Dishon's thoughtful account of the Rousseauvian aspects of contemporary video games. To some extent, I share his optimism: the possibilities of well-regulated freedom are precisely what make me think that gaming may be able to help us recapture some of the most exciting but difficult-to-execute possibilities of the progressive classroom. Through a system of carefully designed rules and feedback loops, a great deal of learning about complex social systems may be possible. In sum, I agree with the overall thrust of Dishon's argument.

My sole disagreement with Dishon (to which I will devote this response) concerns his use of Rousseau, which I think is neither helpful nor necessary for his argument. I have two misgivings. The first is an incompatibility with Rousseauvian principles: I do not think that video games are promising natural environments in the Rousseauvian sense, nor do I think that Rousseauvian principles can warrant the degree of construction that one sees in these environments. The second misgiving is more general, and stems from my feeling that video games are proceeding in a far more Skinnerian direction than a Rousseauvian one.

WHAT DOES A CONSTRUCTED, NATURAL EDUCATION LOOK LIKE?

A good place to begin exploring the first concern — an incompatibility between video games and Rousseauvian principles — is Rousseau's definition of nature, which he outlines in the opening pages of *Émile*:

We are born with the use of our senses, and from our birth we are affected in various ways by the objects surrounding us. . . . These dispositions are extended and strengthened as we become more capable of using our senses and more enlightened, but constrained by our habits, they are more or less corrupted by our opinions. Before this corruption they are what I call in us *nature*. It is, then, to these original dispositions that everything must be related . . . ¹

The key idea here is that we have a set *telos* that we have lost sight of over time, and the mission of Rousseauvian education is to clear space for the reassertion of this developmental path. This reassertion comes in the context of modern civilization, which is hostile to this growth path and is, hence, unnatural in Rousseauvian terms.

This definition of the natural clearly opens up a certain amount of space for construction on the part of the tutor, since deliberate action is necessary in order to allow the natural tendencies to reassert themselves in the current unduly artificial context. Rousseau must therefore construct lessons that will allow *Émile* to have experiences that will teach him the things he would have learned in a more propitious natural environment. Hence, *Émile* must have his beans rooted up in order to teach him about property, he must be deliberately stranded in the forest so that he can find his way out, and he must have the cold wind blow in on him so that he understands that windows should not be broken.

But how much construction is justified on the part of the tutor? I would argue that all that is justified is the strict minimum necessary for *Émile* to get back on the natural path. As Rousseau demonstrates with some of his more baroque examples, the strict minimum does seem to be more than one might suppose, but this does not mean that one can justify immersion within an entire world of artifice, which is what most video games entail. Throughout the text, Rousseau suggests that one should, where possible, leave children to their own devices to have unmediated contact with the world. This is why Rousseau says that the most important thing in education “is not to save [gagner] time, but to lose [perdre] it,” and this is why *Émile* is, during the early years, largely left to his own devices in the countryside and forbidden to read books.² Even once he is able to read, *Émile* spends his time re-enacting *Robinson Crusoe*, an activity Rousseau feels will keep him as close to his natural state as possible. The artificial devices of the tutor are, granted, occasionally present, but their presence is as subtle as possible so as not to interfere with *Émile*’s natural development.

The upshot of this argument is as follows: if video games were to be “natural” on Rousseauian grounds, their construction would somehow need to be *more* conducive to a child’s natural development than the minimally mediated environment that Rousseau proposes. This seems unlikely to me; even the best kinds of games — the deep simulations and exploratory open worlds which are the kind that most interest Dishon and myself — will likely not fulfill the Rousseauian dream in this sense. Worse yet, as I will argue in the next section, many video games are overwhelmingly anti-Rousseauian.

WHERE ARE VIDEO GAMES HEADING?

Dishon rightly notes that in the early days of personal computing, educational video games looked a lot like behaviorist teaching machines: a great deal of early educational software (e.g. *Math Blaster*) was a direct technological translation from the teaching machines of the 1960s. Today, Dishon maintains, those early efforts have been replaced by “complex simulations and immersive game worlds”³ that provide for the possibility of well-regulated freedom with the help of networks of feedback loops and programmed rules.

Although I am also interested in the educational possibilities of the kinds of games that Dishon discusses here, I have a much less rosy outlook on the overall state of gaming, and one of the major reasons relates to feedback loops. Contemporary video games may have moved away from Skinner’s programmed instruction, but they now integrate a great deal more behaviorist technology than they once did. The most popular games use rewards to shape desired behaviors very deliberately, much as Skinner deliberately shaped animal behavior.

Perhaps the most significant behaviorist element of the contemporary game context is the deployment of intermittent reinforcement systems, in which the gamer receives an occasional reward that is calculated to keep them hooked. In “The Experimental Analysis of Behavior,” Skinner comments:

We are all familiar with [intermittent reinforcement] because it is the heart of all gambling devices and systems. The confirmed or pathological gambler exemplifies the result: a very high rate of activity is generated by a relatively slight net reinforcement.⁴

This is what the spate of “free to play” games (e.g. *Candy Crush*, *Clash of Clans*) that are especially popular with children is all about: the player is lured in with a fixed early schedule of reinforcement, which becomes more variable as the game proceeds. The result is predictable, as Skinner notes: “After prolonged exposure to a ratio of 900 [pecks]: 1 [reward], the bird was put in the apparatus with the magazine disconnected. During the first 4 ½ hours it emitted 73,000 responses.”⁵ Trapped in a fugue state in its cage, the pigeon pecks furiously at the dead machine. The frustrated child tapping away at his mobile device is, at least, living cage-free, but he feels trapped enough to make a micropayment to move to the next level.

This is not to say that there is no space for agency in modern games: as Dishon notes, particularly in the case of more expansive and open game worlds such as *Minecraft*, there are some intriguing possibilities in this regard. For the most part, however, players are shaped by behaviorist technologies in specific and deliberate ways that are profitable for the game companies. On the individual level, they may feel as though they are free explorers of a fantasy world, but from the birds-eye perspective of the game designers, they are behaving in highly predictable (and profitable) ways. It is an outcome far more in keeping with Skinner’s *Walden Two* than with *Émile*: the individual feels free, but most of his actions are engineered from above. These compliant and routinized behaviors are about as far from the Rousseauvian archetype as it is possible to get.

A MAN OR A NEOLIBERAL CITIZEN?

Rousseau opens *Émile* with the claim that, given the level of corruption of contemporary society, one must choose between making a man or a citizen. The entire project of the book is to make the former choice — to create an individual who is deeply countercultural; who will not obey the dictates of conventionality blindly, but who will, rather, live *in* society without being *of* it. The tutor says to *Émile*: “As long as there are men who belong to the present age, you are not the man who will be sought out to serve the state.”⁶ Living peacefully in the countryside, *Émile* will have enough truck with civil society to get by, but he will remain free in his heart.

The contemporary ethos of video games is unlikely to produce this kind of person. Rather, as I have suggested above, the excess of behaviorist technology will tend toward the production of non-agentic citizens who are motivated extrinsically, but who suffer from false consciousness about their own agency. This is, furthermore, far from the only problematic aspect of game worlds. Elsewhere, I have argued, following scholars like Leonard Waks and C.A. Bowers, that some game worlds promote technocratic, colonialist, efficiency-maximization mindsets.⁷ If we are correct, the dominant ethos of gaming may not produce much of a man in the Rousseauvian sense, but it is an excellent proving ground for the kind of mindset required for the successful citizen of the neoliberal age: a compliant but unprincipled person whose primary loyalty is to a myopic view of his own bottom line.

Now, this doesn't mean that video games are educationally hopeless. As Dishon correctly claims, the designed environment of certain video games offers significant potential. But if a parent means to take Rousseauvian principles seriously, he is better off moving to the country and throwing his mobile devices into a nearby lake.

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1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books), 3.
 2. *Ibid.*, 93.
 3. Gideon Dishon, this volume.
 4. B.F. Skinner, "The Experimental Analysis of Behavior," in *The Cumulative Record* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts), 106.
 5. *Ibid.*, 107.
 6. Rousseau, *Émile*, 475.
 7. See, for example, C.A. Bowers, *Let Them Eat Data* (Athens: University of Georgia Press); David Waddington, "Dewey and Video Games: From Education through Occupations to Education through Simulations," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 1: 1-20; Leonard Waks, "Computer Mediated Experience and Education," *Educational Theory* 51, no. 4: 415-432.