

“These Violent Delights”: A Review of Timothy J. Welsh’s *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction*

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Abstract

Timothy J. Welsh’s monograph *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction* sets out to construct a new methodology, *mixed realism*, which analyzes the material consequences and experiences that occur from users’ interaction with virtuality and texts. This methodology centers the user, asking the user to reflect on and recognize their individual, social, and contextual positions as they consume texts as well as take responsibility for their interpretations of the narratives.

Timothy J. Welsh’s monograph *Mixed Realism: Videogames and the Violence of Fiction* comes at an appropriate time in American current events. In Welsh’s introduction, he tackles the question that continues to haunt new media scholars and literary scholars: does violence in media lead to real-life violence? After the recent Parkland, FL. high school massacre, President Trump placed blame on violence in video games, a tactic that has been used since the Columbine tragedy to center fault around one piece of media, rather than looking at the individualized and networked contexts [Ducharme 2018]. Welsh directly addresses this question in his introduction, arguing this logic centers around the immersion fallacy: video games and literature (the two types of media he explores) are simultaneously seen as immersive in that they remove us from the “real,” and influential in that they directly affect the “real”. For Welsh, the problem with this fallacy is the real/virtual dichotomy it sets up; this dichotomy does not recognize the very real, material consequences of wired culture – and not necessarily in the manner Trump and others believe. In order to further explore this notion, Welsh coins the phrase “mixed realism,” a methodology that examines both the “virtualities and the lived contexts in which we engage them” [Welsh 2016, 18] by analyzing the affective and material experiences that result from consuming and participating in digital media.

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Just like the media Welsh explores in his book, *Mixed Realism* is not a comfortable (in the affective sense) read, especially for an avid gamer and reader such as myself. The violence portrayed in media—particularly around guns and vengeance—permeates the video games and literature that Welsh examines. Welsh’s choices are not necessarily cherry-pickings, either, as a large percentage of commercially popular video games revolve around violence in some way. His methodology demands consumers of violent video games and literature to be accountable for how they choose to read and analyze media. In the introduction, Welsh frames his argument by examining the controversy around the game *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!*, a game that was simultaneously critiqued for its inadequate representation of the massacre and its power to influence another school shooting that followed the game’s release. Welsh argues, though, that the importance of *Super Columbine Massacre RPG!* is not necessarily to represent the shooting in a “realistic” way, but rather make explicit “one’s position as media user within a culture steeped in violence and in turn acknowledge responsibility...for the real-world violence that happened that day” [Welsh 2016, 15]. Although he is not arguing that violence in video games causes the horrors of a school shooting, he reframes the role consumers play in the reproduction of violent media and culture. His move reflects the *mixed realism* methodology by beginning to think about the role of virtual media in the material consequences and experiences that occur from users’ interaction with the virtuality.

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Welsh spends the first major half of the book working through the history, theory, and methodology that has led him to

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develop this lens using *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote and several self-reflexive video games. In the first chapter, he pours through different theorists' interpretations of immersion and Hayles' notion of embodiment – a new model of readership – to better demonstrate how the lens of immersion fails in Capote's non-fiction, New Journalist novel that claims to show what “*actually happened*” in the murder of the Clutter family. Welsh argues that this novel simultaneously makes explicit the constructedness of the narrative while also asking the reader to interpret what “*actually happened*,” yet Capote presents the novel as the objective truth. While this argument is compelling in demonstrating the immersion fallacy and arguing the paradoxical nature of claiming a representation is what “*actually happened*”, Welsh seems to use Capote's novel to build up to the core of mixed realism – how does the explicit constructedness of a “true” representation tie into the “virtualities and the lived contexts in which we engage them” [Welsh 2016, 18]?

Welsh begins to tackle this question in the next chapter titled “Incomplete Worlds”, which centers around how the constructedness of narratives always leaves gaps. He uses *Super Mario 64*'s video mechanics as an example: the user can control both Mario and the camera watching Mario. By drawing out these paradoxes, the user is always aware of the constructedness of media narratives while also recognizing their role in following (or challenging) the rules of the game. Finally, The “Gaming in Context” and “Metafiction” chapters pull from the theoretical discussions Welsh brings into the piece in the former chapter in exploring several self-reflexive games that make explicit their constructedness. Exploring the gaps and constructed nature of narratives in media is a compelling argument, but I found myself again wanting more from these sections, especially “Incomplete Worlds”. These chapters paid little attention to the real and urgent problem of wired culture and the representation of violence; Welsh even admits in one moment towards the end of the book that his argument was initially not concerned with violence, but one of his colleagues pointed out how central violence was in his argument. This first section seems to stand apart from the rest of the book because of this change.

The latter half of Welsh's book is where his argument begins to shine. He implements his *mixed realism* lens to examine two pieces of media: *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski and the controversial videogame *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. Welsh addresses the problematics of violence and gaps in narratives by showing how those media make explicit these problematics. For *House of Leaves*, Welsh focuses on the section “describing” ^[1] Jed's death. In this section, the form of the book follows its content, or as Welsh argues, the “real-world ‘happening’ of reading the book belongs to the novel's fiction” [Welsh 2016, 104]. Similarly in the previous chapters' focus on the explicit constructedness of narratives, Welsh looks at Danielewski's choices in literal gaps on the page as representative of the gaps in narratives. Although this argument is based off Welsh's previous chapters, chapter six gets at the core problem of the narrative gap as both a form of violence and a failure to represent violence; “analysis, discussion of the event, and even descriptions on the page are always inadequate, always tangential, and always too late” [Welsh 2016, 117]. By acknowledging these failures and gaps, we can better understand our own individual, social, and contextual positions as we consume texts as well as take responsibility for our interpretations of the narratives.

The most powerful chapter in Welsh's book revolves around the controversial *No Russian* level in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*'s (*CoD:MW2*) campaign. I want to emphasize the importance of chapter seven as it provides a model for not only how to explore a text through the mixed realism lens, but also for how to handle sensitive and traumatic topics such as war-at-a-distance and drone warfare. In the *CoD:MW2* level, a player participates in a terrorist attack at an airport and makes the choice to either kill or stand by and watch others kill innocent civilians. Instead of diving right into this level, he looks at the context of the rest of the game, examining how the different events in the game mirror the very real and urgent “war-at-a-distance.” Such war is fought in the digital realm and values faceless enemies until there is need to justify the violence, as Welsh explains in his analysis of the face-to-face combat portion of the campaign. For Welsh, the ways in which *CoD:MW2* mirror and replicate drone warfare, or bombing of an area from a distance, are more frightening than the controversial *No Russian* level. In fact, Welsh argues the *No Russian* level is when users may feel empathy and disgust as they watch the horrors of warfare on innocent civilians (or pixelated representations of innocent civilians) unfold; meanwhile, the drone warfare prevents players from engaging and empathizing with victims as the user bombs pixelated shadows. What Welsh begins to explore here is one of the most powerful moments in his piece: how do users ascribe value to the millions of pixels, the algorithmic responses, the rules of a game, and the narrative gaps that are presented?

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In his conclusion, Welsh has a paragraph that mentions GamerGate, the Arab Spring, NSA surveillance, and other current events in which mixed realism might be applied [Welsh 2016, 160]. The sandwiching of these event mentions in the conclusion with the Columbine and other tragedies feels rushed, but by doing so, Welsh offers his readers a chance to pick up where he leaves off. I do believe Welsh's lens can extend across media and ponder more deeply the portrayal of "real violences, both local and global" in media. He ends his book by bringing in seemingly amoral media: Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and *Red Dead Redemption*. For those two pieces of text, he argues that there is little in the presentation of violence to provide an ethical and moral guide for users; however, what Welsh finds valuable are the "unguessed kinships" [Welsh 2016, 170] that users form with characters, thus ending the book in a surprisingly optimistic manner. I cannot help but wonder, though, kinships for whom?

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Welsh's methodology is important for exploring affect and the very real dangers and violence that can result from wired culture. Because he spends so much time framing his *mixed realism* lens in the first section, though, many of his choices in media and topic left me wanting more. Welsh addresses this in his introduction when he says "mixed reality circulates a little differently in each and every configuration, sometimes turning on a unique interaction or specific media affordance...reading mixed realism is a process of careful tracing, following sometimes a singular aspect of the virtual as it reframes entirely our engagement with it by situating us within the broader media ecology" [Welsh 2016, 18]. In our broader media ecology of digital humanities and new media studies, though, there is already acknowledgement of the very real and tangible influences of wired culture; new media scholars—such as N. Katherine Hayles and Elizabeth Losh [Losh 2015]—have already been thinking about how we place value on the billions of pixels we consume every day. What Welsh's methodology offers is an extension of this, but he does not take advantage of some necessary critical lenses: embodiment and feminist gaming studies. While Welsh is able to be critical of the gaps in textual narratives, there is a lack of attention to race, gender, and socioeconomic class; those who are most heavily affected—and often erased—by these narrative gaps are people in marginalized groups. [2]

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When thinking about violence in gaming, first person shooters are an obvious place to look. Patriarchal ideologies of violence and individualism are often embedded in violent texts and video games—like *Call of Duty*, *Halo*, *Fortnite*, and several texts mentioned by Welsh. I also would have liked to see him dive further into the ways in which games, both the violent content and the ways in which these games are taken up, encourage toxic behaviors, especially for young men and further explore how these toxic behaviors may stifle empathy and compassion. He also mentions GamerGate and Anita Sarkeesian in passing, but does not take time to emphasize the violence of online harassment, not just for feminist gaming critics like Sarkeesian, but for gamers whose voices suggest they are not white cis-men (for those gamers brave enough to venture onto their mic) or even gamers whose usernames may be read as feminine. I would have liked to see him do more work focusing on games' violent representations of and online harassment towards women (especially women of color), queer people, and other marginalized gamers and consumers. How might the mixed realism lens shift when looking at violence towards pixelated characters who represent very real people who have historically and currently had very real systematic violence enacted upon them?

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As Welsh points out, games are narratives woven through a series of rules and algorithmic response, but in commercially popular video games, these narratives are typically violent in nature. When talking about gaming, it is difficult to avoid conversations of violence. As gamers, readers, and new media scholars, how do we wrestle with the idea that the medium we care about is often violent? How do we continue to prioritize games' politics, as Ruberg and Phillips call for in the introduction to the *Game Studies* special issue on "Queerness and Video Games"[Ruberg 2015]? Merging feminist gaming scholarship and Welsh's mixed realism centers the material experiences and consequences of wired culture as well as the ways in which we as users, consumers, and critics are responsible for how we engage with and analyze media.

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Notes

[1] I use the scare quotes around "describing" here because there is actually very little description of Jed's death.

[2] I do want to acknowledge that Welsh uses the "she" pronoun when talking about gamers, a move that seems to be a response to

Works Cited

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