



STEVEN POOLE

# The “Citizen Kane” of VIDEO GAMES


 What is the “Citizen Kane” of video games? This is what we might call a zombie question: one you thought was righteously killed long ago but that keeps popping up anew, shambling around dripping gobbets of putrefying flesh, with a terrifying void where its higher intellectual functions used to be. With remarkable regularity, a new video game of which the non-interactive narrative portions (known as “cutscenes”) resemble computer-generated cinematic interludes, will be hailed by the cognoscenti as representing, finally, video games’ “Citizen Kane moment.” It’s not that all those so eager to announce the latest “Citizen Kane” of video games really love the film



Fig. 1 / *The Last of Us*  
(Naughty Dog, 2013)



Fig. 2 / *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013)

CITIZEN KANE itself so much. We are not to imagine that they have walls fully papered with CITIZEN KANE posters or the sound of a dying man wheezing “Rosebud” as a ringtone on their smartphones. Instead, the incantation of CITIZEN KANE’s title has become a kind of shorthand. What it means is something like “a medium-defining masterpiece.” It is odd, though, to take Orson Welles’s film as the first such example, given that it was released in 1941, and had already



Figs. 4–5 /  
*The Last of Us*  
 (Naughty Dog, 2013)



- been preceded by movies such as Sergei Eisenstein's *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (1925), Fritz Lang's *METROPOLIS* (1927), Alfred Hitchcock's *THE 39 STEPS* (1935), Charlie Chaplin's *MODERN TIMES* (1936), and Jean Renoir's *LA RÈGLE DU JEU* (1939).

The more serious problem with the whole question, however, is that video games and films are different media, with different strengths and affordances. The "Citizen Kane" comparison is sometimes used to imply that now, finally, video games have proven they can do serious, emotional drama as well as films can. But why should video games, which are an interactive art form, aspire only or primarily to tell stories? They can, instead, do things that no film can: In games, we can explore wondrous spaces as we choose with the emotion of aesthetic wonder or be challenged intel-

lectually by amusing kinetic or spatial puzzles. In such ways, video games and films are simply incommensurable. It is clearly absurd to ask other cross-medium questions. What is the "Mad Men" of popular song? What is the "Paradise Lost" of television? What is the "Smells like Teen Spirit" of classical ballet? What is the "Love's Labour's Lost" of pottery?

It is true that most earthenware bowls are not trying to be complex romantic comedies, and most classical ballerinas are not straining to produce deafening grunge. But a lot of video games are trying to be like films, which is why the Citizen-Kane-of-games trope has arisen. It has come about because of a reinforced mistake: a mistake made by video game designers, and then repeated by their uncritical fans as well as their critics.

This has happened in recent years to games such as *The Last of Us* (2013) and *BioShock Infinite* (2013) – games whose extremely repetitive and limited palette of naturalistically depicted violent action, extended over dozens of hours, would not be tolerated for more than a few minutes in a film, but which are packaged in a mode of "storytelling" (mainly through non-interactive cut-scenes) that invites the audience to think of them as "cinematic" (figs. 2–3). *The Last of Us* (2013), for example, is a standard video game murder simulator. Within minutes of beginning the game one is obliged to start killing men in decrepit city locations –



↑ Fig. 3 / *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013)





but the player's middle-aged male avatar has a sensitive relationship with a young girl – and so the game therefore passes for artistically mature among its rivals (figs. 1 and 4-5).

One hears critics claiming of such games, indeed, that “the storytelling rivals cinema”: This was said of *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), a game based on tropes from Western movies, but with a special emphasis on slaughtering wildlife as well as everyone you meet (fig. 6). (Eventually, I was driven to such depths of nihilistic despair by the game's systematic encouragement of me to become a virtual property entrepreneur that I shot and skinned my own horse. This, to my knowledge, does not happen in even the most lurid pulp Western on the big screen).

Such games do not pass muster as visual storytelling even if we consider only the non-interactive parts. In general, to pretend that such video games can yet rival cinema in terms of telling dramatic stories is to insult even the most workmanlike sub-Leone or sub-Ford genre movie. And so one has to embrace embarrassingly low standards to maintain any kind of competitive comparison with film in the representation and storytelling stakes. If videogame aficionados are willing to slum it aesthetically in this way in the hope of defending their medium, they cannot then complain when an outsider takes one look and snorts: “Well, if this is the ‘Citizen Kane’ of video games, it's just as I thought: they're all rubbish.”

The “Kane” comparison, in sum, is not only stupid but it is actively harmful, insofar as it might prompt more developers to try to “make a ‘Citizen Kane’” rather than making a really good video game. The difference is clear if we consider two outstanding



✦ Fig. 6 / *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego, 2010)

examples of each form from 2014. The cinematic fantasia *WHIPLASH* (Damien Chazelle, 2014), on power-pedagogy and jazz drumming, is an outstanding film. Meanwhile, the beautiful retro shoot-'em-up *Resogun* is an outstanding video game, though it features no dialogue at all and human beings are represented only as tiny green squared-off anthropoids. Each masterpiece plays to the strengths of its respective medium and doesn't try to do what a different medium is best at. This is the lesson we should draw from all such fruitless attempts to rank different artistic forms. The right way to respond to the question, “What is the ‘Citizen Kane’ of video games?” then is to ask in turn: “What is the ‘Tetris’ of cinema?”

From:

Films and Games. Interactions.

ISBN 978-3-86505-242-1

© 2015 DIF e.V. | Bertz + Fischer Verlag