

The list of artists whose work appears is a virtual who's-who of major SF and Fantasy-oriented comics artists. In addition to Wood, there is also work from Vaughn Bodé, Howard Chaykin, Reed Crandall, Steve Ditko, Frank Frazetta, Jeff Jones, Jack Kirby (only one pin-up, sadly), Gray Morrow, Ralph Reese, Al Williamson, and Berni Wrightson, and numerous other well-known and not so well-known comics artists. (There is even some early, undistinguished work by Art Spiegelman, though generally figures associated with the Underground are glaringly absent from *witzend*—Spiegelman and Bodé being among the few exceptions). Despite the talent involved, though, the result is very much a mixed bag. There are two probable reasons for this.

First, an editorial policy of no policy is great in theory, but theory is almost always better in theory than in practice. The openness to diverse material in some ways is a strength for *witzend*, in that it allowed for an eclecticism rare in comics publications at the time, and it is certainly interesting to see the range of materials here—from the almost photorealistic styles of figures such as Frazetta or Reed Crandall (several issues run some stunning illustrations he did for the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs) through the more stylized work of figures such as Ditko to the cartoony work of, say, Don Martin—rubbing metaphorical shoulders with each other. On the other hand, the absence of editorial policy or direction means that the magazine really has no voice, vision, or direction. Material advertised as forthcoming in subsequent issues never materializes; stories begun are not continued; and some bizarre shifts and turns occur (notably the fascinating but anomalous issue devoted entirely to the film work of W. C. Fields).

Second, while *witzend* offered its artists the copyright in their own work, it offered no other compensation, and when it began, there were few other venues for author-owned material to be published. It is probably no coincidence, therefore, that the number of well-known and highly-visible comics creators decreased drastically by the end of the run. None of the 1980s creators one would see as on a par with Williamson, Ditko, Wood himself, and so on turn up in the later issues.

So, the content is hit and miss; however, there is much of interest, especially in the earlier issues, and certainly to readers interested in genre work. Vaughn Bodé is one of the relatively few underground artists who had a strong interest in genres such as SF, and a couple of his stories (including the well-known “Cobalt 60,” which has been widely acknowledged as an influence on Ralph Bakshi’s film *Wizards*) appear in early issues. Their pres-

ence alongside the more classic SF stylings of figures like Williamson and Frazetta allows for some fruitful consideration of the underlying assumptions we have about how SF should look; Bodé is rather an innovator in his creation of a messier, more baroque SF landscape than was typical of comics in the 1950s and 1960s, with their clean lines and clean-cut heroes. To be fair, even the more classically-oriented artists here begin to challenge the expectations of SF-oriented comics, notably Wood and Williamson in “Savage World” in the first issue, an unpublished and reworked Buster Crabbe comic that looks like a typical 1950s/60s SF story in some respects but offers a slightly more nuanced and disturbing view of human/alien interaction. Frazetta’s “Last Chance” (issue 3) offers a similarly revisionist post-apocalyptic scenario, albeit with a disturbing casualness about rape.

Most interesting, though probably of least direct relevance to SF, are the major Ditko stories here: the first Mister A stories, in which Ditko’s Randian revisioning of the crime-busting masked hero first appeared; and his two “Avenging World” stories, dizzying Randian allegories in which a personified planet Earth pontificates politically.

In short, this is probably not a book anyone would want to assign for a SF course—especially not at its high ticket price—but it is definitely of value to anyone interested in researching the genesis of alternative comics and/or the broadening of the parameters of SF and Fantasy in comics, and there are certainly several stories that one could profitably assign to students for analysis, should one’s library happen to have the book.

SF-Worlds and the First-Person Perspective

Lars Schmeink

NaissanceE. Entwickler: Limasse Five. Publisher: Steam. 2014. <<http://www.naissancee.com>>.

The Talos Principle. Entwickler: CroTeam. Publisher: Steam. 2014. <<http://www.croteam.com/talosprinciple>>.

Order option(s): [NaissanceE](#) | [The Talos Principle](#)

SINCE THEIR INCEPTION, video games as media have been closely entwined with the genre of science

fiction, not only recognizable in the thematic proximity of early games such as *Spacewar!* (1962) but also in the technological development of the medium itself. The success of the first-person shooter (or better the subjective perspective used in action games) for example has to thank for many of its favorite themes and tropes, which led games such as *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992), *Doom* (1993), *Quake* (1996), and *Half-Life* (1998) to their success, and provided the dominant position that first person perspective has in today's mainstream games market. The subjective perspective has become one of the most important game mechanics used today and would probably not have enjoyed so much success had it not been for the strange landscapes to be explored and the alien threats to be eliminated that the sf genre presented.

One aspect that yields an interesting analysis of the “productive intersections between SF as a cultural mode and video games as a medium” (227), as Pawel Frelik put it, might be the evolution of this first person perspective, as showcased in recent years by games such as *Portal* (2007), *Mirror's Edge* (2008), *Dear Esther* (2008/12) or *The Stanley Parable* (2011/13). Two independent game developers have made use of the proliferation and variability of the first person perspective in 2014: *The Talos Principle* by Croatian developer CroTeam and *NaissanceE* by French studio Limasse Five.

The Talos Principle is technically a puzzle-game, in which players are tasked to find Tetris-like sigils in a ruined landscape. In order to do so, they have to explore an antiquity-inspired world, which is nonetheless equipped with highly technological equipment to hinder the player in gathering the sigils. Players will need to use equipment such as jammers and connectors in order to bypass force barriers, guard drones and gun turrets to get to the sigils. These, in turn, allow the player to open new paths to other parts of the world or to receive additional equipment for solving the puzzles. As with *Portal*, the creative use of the first person perspective is essential to the puzzle designs and players will need to experiment with the limitations, combinations and possibilities of each solution. How everything works is not given in a tutorial but needs to be experienced. There is a disembodied voice, but its instructions are rather philosophical in nature and do not address the game mechanics. Aside from this commentary aimed towards the avatar, the game does not provide a direct communication with the player, but counts on his/her intrinsic motivation to explore the intradiegetic cues for background narrative (such as QR codes and computer terminals with emails and archival information). Players will need to explore

the world, traverse it and experience it physically (by moving their avatars) in order to grasp their own being in this world – by doing so, they will discover that they are playing an android and that the game world is a virtual simulation designed to test the cognitive skills of the avatar. The puzzles are symbolic representations of the growing self-awareness of the android AI and within the game, two oppositional forces vie for the player's allegiance. The conflict between Elohim (the disembodied voice) and Milton (the archival AI of the terminals) enacts a philosophical debate on the concept of free will, on human knowledge and science and on the possibility of transcending human nature and allowing for a future in which humans do not exist.

Similar to games such as *The Stanley Parable* or *BioShock* (2007), *The Talos Principle* in addition opens up a metafictional level of discourse in which the game comments on the constructivist nature of the human experience, connecting the game experience (of simple puzzle solving) with the experience of the world. Which set of rules do you follow? How do you decide if all moral guidance and compass are missing? How is the human experience defined? What parts do faith, knowledge, obedience and free will play in being human? The game mechanics – referring to self-perception (via the first person perspective), individual decision-making (which guide to follow – Milton or Elohim or neither?) and the solving of puzzles (as representative of individual growth and education) – are thus entwined with the message of the game, dealing with human cognition and construction of the world. The topoi of sf – most importantly discourses of posthumanism and the singularity – are shifted from passive consumption to interactive manipulation and experience.

NaissanceE on the one hand also has parts that function as a puzzle game, but larger portions need to be seen as a game of dexterity and exploration (similar to *Mirror's Edge*). This makes the experience of the game much more physical for the player (in the sense that you will need hand-eye coordination, delicate movements and perfect timing to master the levels), leading to frustration of less experienced players. The game begins *in medias res* with a disembodied avatar being chased by a black worm-like creature through a surreal cityscape. Aside from the introductory words “Lucy is lost” and a few subtitles to explain the controls of the game, no further communication with the player is given. There is no tutorial and no apparent goal of the game, except to explore the landscape and “find a way out” (where to is unknown). The traversal of the world and the explo-

ration of the surroundings are emphasized as key to the game. In terms of mechanics, the game thus blends aspects of puzzle gaming – allowing players to manipulate objects such as balls of light, elevators or barriers – and aspects of a dexterity game, in which the traversal of the Labyrinthian world is key and timed jumps between platforms provide the challenge. Both of these aspects do not provide a storyline though; there is no narrative element motivating the movement through the game space – exploration is key. Non-obvious challenges to the game experience are the disembodied nature of the avatar (no bodily limit can be seen, no hands or legs) and the lacking precision of the collision programming – leading to frustrating deaths in the game, when, for example, the non-existent avatar fails the jump.

The central appeal of the game is not its (lack of) narrative though, but the world, which needs to be explored in detail. And it is here that *NaissanceE* reveals its science fictionality by presenting a specific iconicity in its design. On the one hand, the game reduces its representation of world to the interplay of light and dark, extracting color (for the most part) and concentrating on optical illusions, shadow play and the disorientation of

over-exposure to light. In this, there is a scientific reduction in the construction of world that limits the experience to geometry and optics. On the other hand though, the game celebrates form and abstraction of design beyond the scope of reality or practicality, flaunting excess in level design that can only be described as visually science fictional. Players fluent in the visual language of sf will find designs reminiscent of and going beyond that of the high rises in *Blade Runner* (1982), the CPU architecture of *Tron* (1982), the subterranean world of Harlan Ellison's "I Have No Mouth..." (1968) or the industrial tunnels and shafts of the death star in *Star Wars* (1977) – at the end even the desolate and disorienting deserts of Arrakis (from *Dune* [1968]) or *Tatooine* (from *Star Wars*). *NaissanceE* is an experiment in architectural abstraction – it explores the sf worldliness of industrial vents and tunnels, huge alien halls, inhospitable landscapes and hypertechnologized cities, all of which is made the central novum of the game world.

In terms of player experience then, *NaissanceE* is challenging at best, if not frustrating for players, especially in its resistance of standardized game mechanics such as a narrative motivating gameplay, a teleology for players



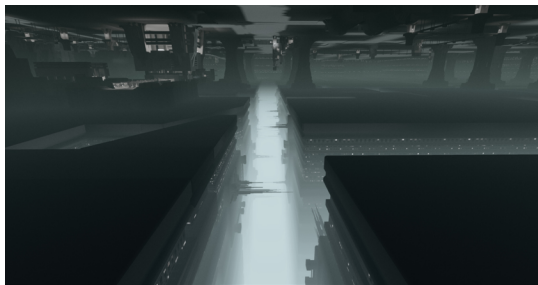
The Talos Principle

to pursue or even a satisfying moment of closure (where the game reminds us of Vincenzo Natali's film *Cube* [1997]). All of this is an intentional negation of player expectations and a feature of the game, which highlights the geographical exploration of the game space as motivator for play. In terms of sf then, the game needs be understood, as Frelik argues, as an "iconographic archive of science fiction in which signature images [...] are not only deployed in various permutations but also literally mobilized and made available to the players" (233) – the game provides a living canvas of sf imagery.

The variability with which sf video games such as *The Talos Principle* and *NaissanceE* appropriate entrenched game mechanics such as the first person perspective and redesign its use, makes clear the expressive potential of the cultural form of the video game. The "productive intersections" of genre and medium are important starting points for academic inquiry into our understanding of the function of video games beyond a pleasurable reprieve. Similarly, they provide evidence that games are able to blend artistry and message with game mechanic and thus allow for a deeper and more meaningful game experience, as well as pushing the envelope on what encompasses science fiction in the 21st century.

Works Cited

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NaissanceE

The Signal [film]

Artem Zubov

The Signal. Dir. William Eubank. Perf. Brenton Thwaites, Olivia Cooke, Beau Knapp. Automatik Entertainment. 2014.

Order option(s): [DVD](#) | [Blu-Ray](#) | [Amazon](#)

YOUNG DIRECTOR William Eubank's *The Signal*, the second title in his filmography (following *Love*, 2011), premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in early 2014. Both films present the director's reflections on human nature and how far a human will go in order to survive or save a loved one. While both films may seem to be categorized easily as science fiction, the director only uses conventions of the genre to create impossible situations to play out how characters react, elucidating the extremes of human nature. Responding to questions as to what *The Signal* is about, the director himself notes that it is "a personal story about a kid trying to examine his emotional and logical self," (Zimmerman 2014) and "is kind of about choices and sort of what drives somebody – the decisions we make, whether we make them based off of thinking logically or thinking emotionally" (Thompson 2014)

From beginning to end, *The Signal* addresses a variety of 'horizons of generic expectations.' It starts as a road movie —fellow hackers Nic (Brenton Thwaites) and Jonah (Beau Knapp) and Nic's love interest Haley (Olivia Cooke)—are going on a road trip. Nic (a former runner who had to quit because of a leg injury) gradually becomes distant from Haley in order not to be a burden for her. Since Haley is headed for a year-long study program, this road trip is their last chance to be together. Simultaneously, the movie promises a solid cyberpunk sub-plot with Nic and Jonah trying to locate a hacker (we only know his nickname—NOMAD) who almost got them expelled from MIT and is now sending them enigmatic e-mails. Locating the hacker's computer signal, the trio is led to an abandoned house somewhere in Nevada, where they get attacked by an invisible foe. This completes the movie's first, 'realistic' part and takes us to the second, 'science-fictional' part.

Transported to a laboratory, Nic meets Dr. Damon (Laurence Fishburne), who tells him that the three friends experienced 'contact' with EBE ('an extra-terrestrial biological entity') and are now dangerously contagious. While Damon says that Nic and his friends are