

# Paul Taylor's Rantings

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms – Muriel Rukeyser

## Being Human

*Monday, September 23, 2013*

I became a sentient human being in the late 60's. I was born in the 50's but I became a reader as a young teenager. Before I became a reader, I was a dumb kid. I am going to say some things that make me sound like a dumb kid grown into one of those grumpy old guys who always complain that everything is worse today than it was when they were a dumb kid.

America is going dumb—not deaf and blind because there is more to hear and see today than yesterday—but dumb. An article in *Time* (<http://ideas.time.com/2013/09/20/grand-theft-auto-todays-great-expectations>) praised some new video game, opining that video games have replaced literature as the dominant art form of the new age. By all means let us celebrate the addictive, mind numbing, soul sucking virtual worlds created for our pleasure by purveyors of video games. If video games are indeed today's replacement for literature, then the human species is endangered and in danger. Language rewired the human mind. We are human because we use language. Cultivate language and cultivate humans. Play video games and cultivate gorillas playing with their joy sticks while flinging shit (or worse) at each other.

Janet and I were in Kansas City this weekend. We sandwiched a Bellini opera Saturday with baseball games Friday and Sunday—a plump protein nestled in a bed of cathartic carbs. The game Sunday was scripted as only baseball can be: bottom of the 10th, score tied at zero, bases loaded, two outs, full count. Both teams were battling for a playoff spot. The pitcher was Joakim Soria, the former Royal closer who blew out his elbow in a spring training game Janet and I attended two years ago. Surgically repaired and now with the Rangers, he had only recently returned to the major leagues. He had been the only truly successful player with the Royals during a lot of dark years. The batter was Justin Maxwell, a young outfielder the Royals picked up at the trade deadline from Houston, the consensus worst team in baseball (a role reserved for the Royals until recently). No one bothered even to yawn about the trade. He had a lifetime average below .230 prior to this season. Maxwell was known for three things: his father, a military dentist, was the personal dentist for several presidents; he hit a walk-off grand slam in the last home game for the Nationals in his first major league season; and he roomed with Jeff Taylor in the minor leagues. The stadium was full. Everyone was standing and screaming. If the Royals win, their slim playoff hopes remain alive. Lose and all hope would die. Did I mention that the Royals had won 11 straight games when Janet and I attended, or that, with one more win, the Royals would have a winning season for the first time in 10 years, or that it was the last home game of the season? Numbers tell stories in baseball as in no other sport.

Maxwell hit a grand slam.

I couldn't see where the ball landed because there was a mist obscuring my vision. Wizards often use fog to confuse and confound us when there is magic at work. It must have been that.

Bellini's opera was based on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. (You thought West Side Story was the first? Bellini did it 180 years ago.) With Bellini, it is all about the singing. Some operas use voice as an instrument in an orchestral universe. There are orchestral versions of operas by Wagner, Mozart, a dozen others which do just that—replace the singing voice with strings, flutes and horns—and the genius of the opera survives. If the bus carrying the orchestra to perform at a Bellini opera had a flat tire... well, sorry guys, but the real show must go on.

This staging of the Bellini opera was set in a post-apocalyptic world. Juliet was the last woman alive. In my mind, it had a Children of Men vibe. In that film, there were no reproductive women left in the world, and, when one woman became pregnant, men could not manage to quit warring and killing each other even to safeguard the woman with child representing the future of mankind. It added a layer of significance to the music and words which remained the same as when the opera first played in 1830.

Speaking of adding a layer of significance to the music and words... The role of Romeo was played by a woman from the Kansas City area who has developed into one of the leading mezzo-soprano voices in the world. Yes, I said woman. She had an amazing voice. [What most elevates the soul, the singer or the song?] The decision to use a woman in the role of Romeo created a subtext to the love affair forbidden by society and had the effect of "defamiliarizing" the story and energizing the audience.

Is there an equivalent nuance of performance in video game art?

I won't quite say the story (the libretto) is likewise a distant second fiddle in Bellini opera, but let's just say the plot of a three hour performance had the complexity of a Saturday Night Live skit. That might have been a fatal flaw—and I'm not saying it is not a serious flaw in some opera—but plot does not have to be complex when it is deep, and it is deep when it draws on a wellspring of myth, folk tale, or story buried in the collective consciousness. Tolkien wrote a seminal work on myth and fairy story in which he maintained language was born of myth. "The world is made not of atoms but of stories." Language rewired the mind of man and made it human.

The word made flesh.

I was thinking about video games while drinking in the Bellini. I was wondering what essential qualities separate opera and video games (other than genius since I had to admit I was not qualified to assess genius if it existed in a video game). Opera was a good test medium: it is full of sound and fury signifying... something, but signifying something without relying much on "literariness." I had to admit a video game could, in the hands of a video game genius, do the same.

I also have to admit I do not play video games.

What did the Bellini opera full of sound and fury signify? Boy and girl fall in love. Bellini skipped the "meet" part and joined the love affair in progress. Events and society conspire to keep the lovers apart. Instead of running away from those events and society, tricks and schemes are employed to join the lovers. Since it is a tragedy, the lovers both die in the end. (Both lovers do not have to die in order to make it a tragedy as long as one of them dies as in West Side Story.)

Tragedy: Maxwell strikes out.

Did you wonder why I wrote “since it is a tragedy...”? The only real difference between the plot in Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and his All’s Well That Ends Well (which is a comedy) is that boy and girl end up together at the end instead of dead. Comedies end with weddings and tragedies end with funerals. If Juliet woke up from her feigned death in time to stop Romeo from swallowing the fatal poison, the lovers would have embraced and the audience would have rejoiced, leaving the theater smiling.

I can imagine a video game using Bellini’s orchestral music and the plot of Romeo and Juliet. The “endgame” is getting the lovers married. If the player wins the game, it is a comedy—otherwise, tragedy. The video game sights and sounds, those lovely computer graphics that have transformed movies into candy for the eyes and the ears, combined with the obsessive compulsion of humans to create secondary worlds, can be amazing artistic creations—of that I have no doubt. Video sights and sounds, those same computer graphics, combined with the same obsessive compulsive behavior, can also create dehumanizing glorifications of violence, perversion, sadism, psychosis and sociopathic behavior.

Ever have a teacher ask, “What is the moral of the story?” We have lost the original significance of moral and story. It is not the same as asking, “What is the meaning of the story?” Great art is moral.

Video games, by their very nature, are games. Great art is not a game. John Gardner, On Moral Fiction: “The trivial has its place, its entertainment value. I can think of no good reason that some people should not specialize in the behavior of the left-side hairs on an elephant’s trunk. Even at its best, its most deadly serious... art, is partly a game, [but] fiddling with the hairs on an elephant’s nose is indecent when the elephant happens to be standing on the baby.” I use Gardner’s quotation here instead of many others I could use (Plato’s Republic being the one readers of literature might expect) because I have developed a bad habit of steering rants back to familiar territory—in this case, back to Grid. Trust me: I am not trying to sell books. Teachers use text books.

Until someone explains to me the moral of an “artistic” video game, excuse me if I do not celebrate it as great art. I will, however, celebrate Maxwell’s grand slam.