

English 345: Cine/Technology

Keane Reading Guide

Film Questions

1. How does *eXistenZ* use cinematic techniques to represent “reality”? The game world?
2. What types of gaming systems do we see in the film? Which are more organic? Which less organic? Why do you think hardware is depicted as it is?

Article Citation

“From Hardware to Fleshware: Plugging into David Cronenberg’s *eXistenZ*.”
ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces. Eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska. London: Wallflower Press, 2002. 145-156.

Article Guide

In the first four pages of his article, Keane states his purpose—to analyze *eXistenZ* in terms of the “physical connection and control” involved in game playing—justifies his approach, and examines the physical aspect of interactive game playing. While Keane discusses current hardware and compares it to Cronenberg’s version of the game interface, but he intends to go beyond simple consideration of how the imaginary hardware of the film indicates the director’s awareness of real gaming systems. Instead, he wants to focus on the film’s imaginative exaggeration of players’ physical interaction with gaming hardware.

Pay particular attention to the following passages:

- At the bottom of packet page 115 and top of page 116, Keane points to a key difference between *eXistenZ* and other videogame and virtual reality films. Make a note putting Keane’s observation into your own words. Also, underline the sentence where Keane indicates the purpose of his essay.
- The first two paragraphs of the “Designs for Life” section may confuse with its discussion of VR films and technologies. Understand that Keane needs to explain why he’s focusing on hardware when VR and VR films emphasize the experience of immersion rather than the physical interface. According to Keane, what is the main purpose of VR films? Make a note restating this purpose in your own words and thinking of VR films you’ve seen that function as Keane describes.
- The remainder of the “Designs for Life” section (packet pages 116-117) discusses interface design and function and examines the physical aspects of player/game interactivity. What does Keane say about how console designs have changed? How does he define function? How does he define interactivity? Highlight passages that answer these questions or answer them in your own words in the margins of your packet.
- The final paragraph of “Designs for Life” addresses the incongruity between the action of manipulating console buttons and the action that results onscreen. What does Keane say about the ways makers of VR films deal with such limitations?

- The first part of “The Pleasures of the Interface” section (packet pages 117-118) discusses the game interfaces we see in *eXistenZ* in terms of current systems. What are the three systems, and how does Keane describe the progression of the interfaces? Which system is the closest to current hardware? What is distinct about the MetaFlesh pod? Highlight passages that answer these questions.
- After comparing interfaces, Keane refers to the “preoccupation with the body” evident in all of Cronenberg’s films (118-119). What is the connection between the body and the mind in the director’s films? What is the “trichotomy of mind/body/machine”? What are the three levels on which the body works? How is Pikul a key character to the audience’s understanding of game playing? Highlight passages that answer these questions or answer them in your own words in the margins of the text. If you can think of an example of how the mind/body/machine relationship functions in *eXistenZ*, note it in the margin.
- The final paragraph of “The Pleasures of the Interface” section argues for a necessary distance between player and game. Without such distance, the game is no longer pleasurable. In videogame and VR films, games typically become too real. How does *eXistenZ* become too real, according to Keane?
- The “Outside In” section (packet pages 119-120) may seem disjointed. Keane’s purpose is to point out how the film asks us to consider our own interaction with games and to distinguish Cronenberg’s work from other videogame and VR films. The “uncanny,” or strangely familiar, organic technologies in *eXistenZ* represent Cronenberg’s interest in and exaggeration of current trends and seemingly speak to the desires of dedicated gamers. The consoles and players’ interactions with them focus on attention on the body rather than absorbing us in the spectacle of the game. *eXistenZ* is cerebral and detached rather than kinesthetic and immersive, an experience more akin to cinema than games. In this sense, *eXistenZ* differs from other videogame and VR films. However, we eventually “los[e] ourselves in the screen” and travel “into uncertainty” (120).