Doing game studies: A multi-method approach to the study of textuality, interactivity and narrative space

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Abstract:
The emergence of game studies is provoking a struggle between adapted older disciplines in the effort to forge a new, discrete field of study. This paper reports on a two-year project titled Textuality in Video Games1 and the range of research techniques that were employed in order to begin answering questions about role-play, pleasure, agency and narrative. The paper outlines how narratology and film theory, social psychology and social semiotics were deployed separately and in various combinations to analyse computer role-play games, the interaction between player and text, and the cultural work of player and fan communities.

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TEXTUALITY IN VIDEO GAMES:
Interactivity, Narrative Space and Role Play

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A two year project (September 2001 - Final report submitted November 2003)
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Our project involved playing and analysing computer Role Playing Games, (RPGs). We examined the overt textual characteristics of these games - the rules systems, narrative elements and imaginary worlds they establish, the visual characteristics they display - and the forms of engagement they invite from players. Central research questions involved interactivity, pleasure, the rules of play, narrative, role play and agency. We played the games, interviewed players, recorded play sessions, and spoke with game producers. A book from the project is being planned (Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play, Polity Press, 2004, see ref.9) It will consist of three inter-relating sections. The first section concerns genre and textual analysis. The second: players, agency and play. The final section involves looking at an online game, and a production case study.

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One of the outcomes of our research on this project was the design and inclusion of a computer games module on the Institute's MA in Media, Culture and Communication. The module, co-taught by Andrew Burn, Gareth Schott and Diane Carr, is titled Games, Gaming Cultures and Education.

Andrew Burn is now working on project titled 'Making Games: developing games authoring software for educational and creative use', with Caroline Pelletier, David Buckingham and

educational software developers Immersive Education Ltd. Gareth Schott has taken up a new post, as a senior lecturer in Media Studies with the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

From February of 2004, Diane will be working on a project titled 'Digital Technology, Learning and 'Game Formats': Computer games, motivation and gender in educational contexts'. The project is funded by a fellowship grant from the Eduserv Foundation.

The following is from the *Textuality in Video Games* project final report. The numbers refer to the project outcomes, listed below.

As per the original proposal, we undertook a series of analyses of computer games from the Role Playing Game genre. For the sake of comparison we also examined games from other genres, as well as games that might be considered hybrids. We collected and analysed a wide range of secondary texts, mostly from fan communities for specific games (fan websites, player forums, magazines) and these were analysed in terms of player agency, fan culture, textual transformations of elements of the games, extended roleplay, and communities of practice.

We conducted interviews with a range of game designers and programmers. These included: Katie Lea, who designed Primal (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe); Diarmid Campbell, lead game programmer of The Thing (Computer Artworks); Charu Gupta, a programmer who specialises in sound and audio research (SCEE Soho); an (anonymous) Australian games developer who is working on Escape From Woomera, a politically informed game set in a refugee detention centre; Katie Ellwood, game producer and co-writer of The Getaway (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe); Mike Dicks from Fightbox, a new programme for BBC3 that combines a TV studio format with avatar-based combat games; and Donna Burton-Wilcock, Head of Education, and Ian Downend, lead programmer, both from Immersive, a software company specialising in using games technology for educational software. These interviews led on to some ongoing and very productive collaborations: Campbell, Dicks and Burton-Wilcock presented at our dissemination conference (see below); Ellwood is collaborating with us on a chapter of the forthcoming project book [ref.9]; and we have now gained funding for a collaborative research project with Immersive.

INTERVIEWING AND OBSERVING PLAYERS

Our research in this field was more methodologically diverse than the description in the project proposal, and enabled us to study a broader and more diverse range of players. Research included observing and collecting audio and video recorded game sessions in homes (including The Getaway, Soul Reaver, and Baldur's Gate). A request for 'informants' was posted to a local company's staff website, and we interviewed several respondents about their gaming preferences. We arranged an ongoing series of interviews with students at Long Rd VIth Form College in Cambridge (our project enjoyed a collaborative exchange with the college during its duration). We conducted seven interviews with a total of 13 players, and recorded five play sessions (Anarchy Online, The Thing, Final Fantasy VII).

Additionally an international sample of players who exhibit fan-art and publish fan-fiction online were interviewed via e-mail for our work on Abe's Oddysee [Schott, 9]. Furthermore, our engagement with Oddworld fan culture and participation in the on-line game Anarchy Online led to ethnographic observation and participation in the interactive communication thread between fans within the discussion forums. Finally, we interviewed a secondary media teacher (James Durran, Parkside Community College, Cambridge) about the teaching of computer games as part of a media studies programme, and filmed two sessions of his teaching with a Year 7 and a Year 8 group. Analysis of this material is presented in [Burn, 1].

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Our central questions were concerned with Interactivity, Narrative, and Role Play. In addressing these issues, we drew on recent games theory as well as previous work in a range of disciplines, including film and literary theory, social psychology, linguistics/semiotics and cultural studies.

INTERACTIVITY and PLEASURE

Here we analysed the fostering of momentum and flow states in RPGs, drawing on Friedman's (1999) work on Sim City as well as Douglas and Hargadon's (2001) account of flow, immersion and engagement [Carr, 6]. In addition to this, Richard Dyer's (1993) work on representational and non-representational content in film musicals allowed us to explicate the antinomies we found in the temporal organisation of Baldur's Gate, while Michael de Certeau's 'Walking in the city' (1984) offered us a route through which to approach and describe the differences between isometric and three dimensional games spaces, between rules, and the transience of play as 'practice' [Carr, 8].

Gareth Schott worked with Rafaeli and Sudweeks (1997) communication model of interactivity, applying it to console hardware and game software in order to assess the degree to which games successfully alter the unidirectional nature of traditional mass media. Albert Bandura's (2001) three tiered social cognitive theory of agency was used to produce a holistic account of player agency within and around different conditions of the meta-game, incorporating game-play, play support and fan production [Schott, 9].

NARRATIVE and PLAY

We used film and literary narrative theory in order to identify the manner in which Role Playing Games accommodate, and deviate from, conventional narrative structures [Carr, 9]. We also engaged with accounts of game and narrative as generated by game theorists (particularly Juul, 2001, Eskelinen, 2001, and Aarseth, 1997) We drew from Literature and cinema theory (particularly Chatman, 1978, and Todorov, 1977) in order to consider the characterisation of avatars [Carr, 7].

The RPG Planescape Torment was contrasted with the action adventure horror game Silent Hill, and an account of the manner in which each organises spaces and game-play in order to fulfil its generic agenda was developed [Carr, 10]. Aarseth's typologies in Cybertext allowed for structural aspects of the games to be identified and then measured against Janet Murray's (2000) models of spatial traversal: the rhizome and the labyrinthine maze. Aspects of cinematic phenomenology and psychoanalysis were employed in order to identify how the avatars in either game might be complicit in evoking affective experiences.

In our various observations [Schott and Kambouri, 15] and interviews [Burn and Schott, 4] with game players we also explored a distinction that emerged between the way games spawn narratives that a player can use to tell others what went on in a game session after the event, and within game play discussions of the game which revealed a tendency toward what Halliday (1970) describes as 'regulatory' use of language.

ROLE-PLAY

We examined the relationships between players and avatars, with a focus on the Final Fantasy series of games [Burn and Schott, 4]. We undertook a multimodal reading of the game and its central character/avatar, and conducted player interviews to investigate the relationship between this avatar's limitations and the wider game world, as perceived by users.

We examined the question of first, second and third person address in a number of papers [Burn and Schott, 4, Carr 7 and 10] and the difference between three dimensional, and isometric game spaces, in relation to questions of identification [Carr, 8,10]. We undertook a social semiotic analysis of the online RPG Anarchy Online, and outlined the various potentials for forms of dramatic interaction and identification invited by the game [Burn and Carr, 2]. We also explored how roleplay was experienced as a form of collective dramatic engagement by schoolchildren playing Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets [Burn, 1] and how the authenticity of this game might be mediated for players by the various modality structures of the game-text [Burn and Parker, 5].

Outputs of research

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