

Theme: defining computer games

Defining games-as-played: sketch for a non-trivial 1st person perspective on games (working title)

It is acknowledged that the player is fundamentally involved in the object of study for game studies, and the researcher often has to step in the shoes of the player. For example, Aarseth (1997, 4) refers to a cybertext, in comparison to a traditional text, as a “story that could not be without me”. While secondary sources may supply valuable additional material, to study a game not as a ‘black box’ one needs to play it. Another established premise is that a “game” is a hybrid, with properties that characterise it simultaneously as a process, an object and an experience. If one cannot study a game without it being played, and playing it implies taking the player’s perspective, one might conclude that the notions of “player’s perspective” and a “game-as-played” are tautologies as what they signify is already part and parcel of accepted practice. However, the current state of “player’s perspective” within game studies warrants a closer look.

Recently many (Smith 2006, 242; Aarseth 2006, 1-2; Calleja 2007, 12; Bogost 2008, 22) have pointed out, sometimes half-jokingly, a potential division between those who study players (e.g. empirical psychophysicologists, social scientists) and those who study games (e.g. humanities-inclined scholars). While the distinction might be hasty and flawed, it is justified as an illustration of a (historical) difference between methodological orientations (cf. Aarseth 2006, 2). At first glance the positions seem rather distanced, and the procedures of making plausible claims from the two perspectives do not seem to have much in common. However, they share the ‘objective’ scientific perspective.

While striving for ‘objectivity’ is self-evidently embedded in methods of empirical games research, we can describe it in game studies, too. According to a *de facto* methodological paradigm of humanities-inclined game studies (e.g. Konzack 2002, Aarseth 2003, Consalvo & Dutton 2006), the lived and historical gameplay carried out by the researcher is not material in itself, but one means among others by which to gather material to support claims about the game. The ‘particularity’ in the researcher’s playings is a source of anecdotal illustrations, not a quality of the material. These methodologies are not in any better position than those of empirical sciences to account for “what is it like to play”.

Games studies seems to be proceeding from a third-person perspective. Perhaps this is why the ontological hybridity and the necessity of personal involvement, both inherent properties of the object of study, lend to a great deal of ambiguity concerning good practices. Open questions include: how can the researcher’s own gameplay inform her about the game? (cf. Aarseth 2003, 3) To which extent can we attribute qualities of play to games? (cf. Malaby 2007, 96)? That these questions are debated seems to suggest that perhaps negotiating the “player’s perspective” is not, after all, as straight-forward as it may seem.

In the proposed paper I argue against the trivialisation of player’s perspective, which involves reducing the qualities of a game’s particular playing to the level of anecdotes. I suggest that because games, as they take place in the world and are encountered by players, are not like prime numbers which can be exhausted by a single definition, it is impossible to simultaneously occupy a ‘player’s perspective’ and strive for ‘perfect knowledge’ implied by statements beginning with “a game is...”. Such statements must then be read as either referring to an ‘essence of a game’ or as normative claims “we ought to look at games as...”. This is to suggest, in other words, that to occupy a

“player’s perspective” necessitates bracketing the metaphysical question “what a game is”. One is then left with the minimum commitment with which sense can be made out of computer games; the assumption that they can be played. Thus the objects of study for a non-trivial first-person perspective can be defined as games as played.

I will (loosely) adapt a framework which Sartre used for the study of emotions (1939 <1994>) and imagination (1942 <2001>), which describes the “secondary and empirical structures” of human reality (Smith 1979, 433), and considers such a thing existing “strictly to the extent that it signifies”, (Sartre 1994, 29) instead of attempting to describe things that are signified *by* the secondary and empirical structures. Van Lennep has adopted a similar framework in his descriptions of a hotel room (1987a) and driving a car (1987b). Concentrating mainly on single-player games, I analyse them *as played*, by assuming the materiality of a computer game, as it exists equally for all players, as an “intersubjectively accessible structure” (cf. Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, 28) at whose *a priori* terms the player’s position is negotiated. (This is not unlike Sartre’s [1946] notion of the human condition as referring to the *a priori* limitations.)

From these premises I explore, as an attempt to establish congruency between the perspectives, if it possible to “return” (parts of) the ontology established within the third-person paradigm onto the study of games-as-played: for example whether what is signified by “goal” and “game time” can be described as significant also from the first-person perspective. Knowing that games are results of “intelligent design”, it seems possible that in the place of ontology we can describe a *teleontology*.

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