Lecture 9: Ludology

CM 148
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The coming of age of video games

- Computer games becoming a more recognized as a culturally significant media
- Great scholarly potential!
- 2001 can be seen as the **Year One** of Computer Game Studies as an emerging, viable, international academic field
  
  — Espen Aarseth
Not a great start for games

According to video game historian Steve L. Kent, “What got everyone upset about Death Race was that you heard this little ‘ahhhk’ when the person got hit, and a little gravestone came up.” Due to public outcry, Death Race’s manufacturer takes the game off the market.
1997: First Lawsuit filed against video games by Jack Thompson

No, I’ve never played this “Legend of Zelda”, but I’m sure it’s some sort of murder simulator.
“computer games are a sign of cultural decay”
How does Game Studies get itself to be taken seriously?

• Stories
  – Stories are old
  – Everything boils down to storytelling

• Games
  – Games are older than stories
  – Even animals play games, but they don’t tell stories
The three readings for today are written by three influential scholars who early on called for an new, autonomous discipline for studying games

- Espen Aarseth – *Genre Trouble*
- Espen’s book *Cybertext* is a foundational text for ludology
- Markuu Eskelinen – *Toward Computer Game Studies*
- Gonzalo Frasca – *Simulation versus Narration: Introduction to Ludology*
Tension

• Gameplay vs. narration
  – The goals of each are in opposition
  – We’ve seen this before in class

• Ludology vs. narratology
  – Parent fields of study in opposition
    • Game studies vs. literary theory
  – Games must be defended from the colonizing influence of narrative and textual analysis
    • We have looked at games through this lens in class
Ludology

• Ludology is the study of games with an emphasis on the formal elements:
  – Rule systems, gameplay, representational elements

• Not meant to disdain the story part of games, but claims that games are not held together by narrative structure
Games are not textual

• "Games are not "textual" or at least not primarily textual: where is the text in chess? We might say that the rules of chess constitute its "text," but there is no recitation of the rules during gameplay, so that would reduce the textuality of chess to a subtextuality or a paratextuality."
Games are not textual (2)

• “Any game consists of three aspects: (1) rules, (2) a material/semiotic system (a gameworld), and (3) gameplay (the events resulting from application of the rules to the gameworld). Of these three, the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game.”

• Semiotics
  – The study of meaning-making
  – The philosophical theory of signs and symbols
Games are not textual (3)

• Analysis of semiotic system is not enough
  – “Likewise, the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it.”
Games are not intertextual

- Intertextuality refers to the meaning of a text being derived from its relationships to other texts
- In contemporary literary theory, there is no autonomous meaning in a text, only a web of meaning
Games are not intertextual (2)

• “It follows that games are not intertextual either; games are self-contained. You don't need to have played poker or ludo to understand chess, and knowledge of roulette will not help you to understand Russian roulette.”
Games are not intertextual (3)

• “Knowing Star Wars: The Phantom Menace will not make you better at playing Pod Racer (Juul 2001a). Unlike in music, where a national anthem played on electric guitar takes on a whole new meaning, the value system of a game is strictly internal, determined unambivalently by the rules.”
Games are not intertextual (4)

• “The value system of a game is strictly internal, determined unambivalently by the rules.”

• Do you agree/disagree?

• Stuart Moulthrop’s response:
  – “You’re totally ignoring multiplayer games!”
Story-game hybrids: the adventure game genre (Aarseth)

• Traditional-looking narratives can be found in certain games
• Story-like, episodic structure, where player/hero progresses in a linear fashion through the maze
Gameplay in conflict with desire to tell a story

• Need to force the linearization of events

• Myst-creator Robyn Miller stopped making games and turned to animated movies because he felt game format was in conflict with storytelling and character development

• “Most critics agree that the Miller brothers (Myst) succeeded eminently in making a fascinating visual landscape, a haunting and beautiful gameworld, but to experienced gamers, the gameplay was boring and derivative, with the same linear structure that was introduced by the first Adventure game sixteen years earlier. Nice video graphics, shame about the game.”
Big problem: believable characters

• Early adventure games avoided characters
• Later games introduce prescribed, repetitive dialog
• Unlike narrative media like novels or film, games are unable to express interpersonal relationships and inner life
The computer game is the art of simulation (Aarseth)

• “The hidden structure behind these, and most, computer games is not narrative – or that silly and abused term, “interactivity” – but simulation.”

• “Simulation cannot be understood just through its output”
  – Central theme of *Expressive Processing*

• "Video games imply an enormous paradigm shift for our culture because they represent the first complex simulational media for the masses"
Simulation vs. narration

- Frasca argues that what’s fundamentally different between games and narrative is that games can *simulate* while narrative *represents*.

- To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system.

- The sequence of signs produced by a simulation might look the same as a static representation, but the experience of producing that sequence (playing) is radically different.
  - Computational media artifacts are machines – generative sign systems.
Two genres of simulation: paidia and ludus (Frasca)

- **Paidia**
  - Open-ended play
  - Present in early childhood
  - Construction kits, legos, make-believe
  - Sim City, Minecraft

- **Ludus**
  - Games with strong goals
  - What you must do to win
  - Chess, soccer, poker
  - Follows the three-act rule behind Aristotelian stories
    - Rules acknowledged
    - Players perform
    - Game concludes and draws line between victors/losers
Four ideological levels (Frasca)

• Representation – same as narrative
• Manipulation rules (paidia)
  – Govern the manipulation of the gameworld
• Goal rules (ludus)
  – What you must do to win
• Meta rules
  – Govern player modification of the game and other rules
Interactivity vs. simulation

• Aarseth bashes “interactivity” a bit, calls for focus on “simulation”
  – Are games entirely about simulating things?
• Chris Crawford responds
  – That’s fine, just make sure to expand it a bit
  – Simulation tends to suggest technical accuracy and precision, which might not be appropriate for games
  – Suggests developing “dramatic laws of physics to express this notion”
How would you define a game?
Video games are a mess

• Ian Bogost in 2009 (readings are from ~2004)
  – [http://bogost.com/writing/videogames_are_a_mess/](http://bogost.com/writing/videogames_are_a_mess/)

• Frasca argued that narratology united people, wants to do the same for games

• "By pitting one kind of formalism against another, the result became a foregone conclusion: formalism wins."
  – “Whatever a game is, some part is more real than another”
Critique of the ludology vs. narratology “debate” as a whole

Is a game a system of rules, or is a game a kind of narrative?

...becomes...

Is a game a system of rules, like a story is a system of narration?
Jesper Juul: Games can be both ludic and fictive

• “...video games are two rather different things at the same time: video games are real in that they are made of real rules that players actually interact with; that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon, but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world and a video game is a set of rules as well a fictional world.”
Bogost and Montfort: Platform Studies

- Games should be studied and discussed at many different levels

- “It should no longer be satisfactory to seek one answer to the question, *what is a game?*”

- “Videogames are a mess. A mess we don’t need to keep trying to clean up, if it were even possible to do so.”
Game Design as Narrative Architecture by Henry Jenkins

1. Not all games tell stories.
2. Many games do have narrative aspirations.
3. Narrative analysis need not be prescriptive. There is not one future of games.
4. The experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story.
5. If some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories.

http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/lazzi-fair
Errant Signal - The Debate That Never Took Place

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBN3R0m31bA
Readings

• Required
  – Build It to Understand It: Ludology Meets Narratology in Game Design Space
    • Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern
  – Beyond Myth and Metaphor - The Case of Narrative in Digital Media
    • Marie-Laure Ryan

• Recommended
  – Game Design as Narrative Architecture
    • Henry Jenkins