GAME RESEARCH LAB

Socio-Cultural Research on Games

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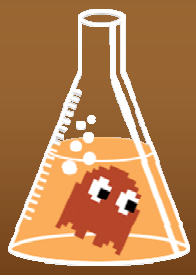

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Games as an Object of Research

- Games present multiple challenges as objects of research because of their interactive and highly malleable character
- One theory and method of games research does not necessarily fit another game, another player, game culture or research question
- Therefore, game studies is field inherently multidisciplinary

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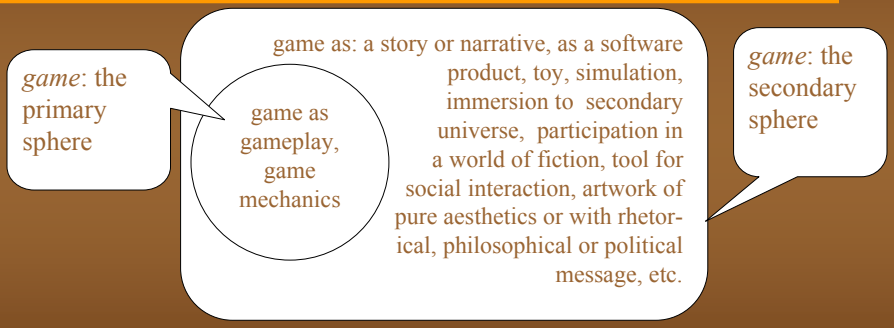
Two spheres that make up a 'game'



Two spheres for identifying significant structures in games.

How to Research a Game?

- Long history of art and media studies, but too little systematic work on game analysis and its methods
- One approach (Konzack 2002) lists 7 layers for analysis: hardware, program code, functionality, gameplay, meaning, referentiality, socio-culture
- This kind of comprehensive analysis is thorough and also a laborious undertaking
- In practise, one often has to focus and narrow down

Analysing the Core, Gameplay

- Two basic alternatives: empirical and heuristical (observing and interviewing 'real players', or relying on the game researcher's own models, observations and expertise)
- Both can contribute important knowledge
- Both have to produce a theory of 'gameness': what are the elements, relations and operations that constitute (good/bad) gameplay in this analysed case?

Fundamentals of Playability

- 'Playability' answers to questions: What is gameplay; what constitutes good playability?
- We have developed a heuristic model with four components: **Functional, Structural, Audiovisual, Social Playability**
- These cover aspects like the control mechanisms, rules system, narrative structures, looks and sounds in a game and ways the game supports or obstructs social playability
- Model is aimed to operate as a checklist for designers and as a tool for analyzing digital games

(Järvinen et al. 2002)

Analysing the Secondary Sphere

- Several ways to proceed, both in empirical and heuristical directions, e.g.:
  - —analysing the construction of meaning and narrative from gameplay sessions (gameplay diary, post-session interviews, RPG debrief sessions, player authored memorabilia)
  - —critique of the ideological and rhetorical set-up of a game (by an academically trained games scholar)

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Empirical Analysis of a Gameplay Experience

- Formation of a gameplay experience is a complex process, and can be analysed as an equation of the **game** (in a particular context of game genres) and **player** (in the context of his/her games culture), modified by **situational factors**
- In an empirical test situation we can e.g. record the performance of a player, measure the gaze direction, heart rate, skin conductivity (arousal) and even brain activities (activation in the different neural areas) and then judge this data against game session recordings, self-reporting or interviews

Gameplay Experience Model

(forthecoming, Ermi – Heliö – Mäyrä 2004)

Recognizing the Player

- There are clearly different attitudes available on how to play, or even temperamentally different player types
- 1) Problem solving & combat ("gamist" attitude) is common, but often modified by 2) storytelling impulse ("dramatist" side) and 3) pursuit for credibility and realistic accuracy ("simulationist" approach); derived from RPG/larp community
- Richard Bartle (1996) identified four main player types by their goals in relation to online games: 1) "achievers" (achievement within the game context), 2) "explorers" (exploration of the game), 3) "socialisers" (socialising with others) and 4) "killers" (imposition upon others)
- More detailed social-psychological, or cross-cultural studies still to come

Key of Success: Collaboration

- There is no way a single individual or even a research group can singlehandedly solve all the methodological, theoretical, social (even cultural and political) challenges that game present to academic research
- There has to be wide dissemination of information and interdisciplinary collaboration; the Network of Excellence initiative is aiming to achieve this in Europe
- Digital Games Research Association (www.digra.org) has also been established to contribute in this in international scale; see also www.gamesconference.org