

## What games are made of

To understand the educational values of game, I should first explain what games are made of. Many theorists gave a distinctive definition of gaming, games or play. Mostly play is considered as an activity without formal rules (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). Although Timmer (2006) argues that play is simply the activity concerning gaming. As I do not see the logic of play without rules, the absence of rules indicates the existence rules, I will stick to play as the verb of game. Playing and Gaming are the same.

A Game is an artificial conflict, defined by rules with a quantifiable outcome (Salen & Zimmerman). Like many other researchers, game designers Salen and Zimmerman tend to differentiate gaming from real-life or 'serious' happenings. Although problematized by Copier (2006) the so-called 'magic/rusty circle' divides the game world from the real world, making the game a 'free activity, standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life' (Huizinga, 1950), 'separate [in time and space]' (Caillois, 1961) or an artificial conflict representing a subset of reality (Crawford, 1981). In short, gaming does not have real life consequences and is always voluntary, according to many researches.

But there are some serious problems with using a metaphor to define and explain gaming. Copier argues to use Huizinga's relation of games as ritual and ritual as games. In order to understand not the boundaries but the construction of the game/play space, she proposes to withdraw from these metaphorical ways of speaking and visualizations of the 'magic circle'. Because a metaphors never really covers the subject as a whole and leave great room for misinterpretation. The magic circle seems to imply that the game space is circular and to have an authority of its own. Gaming is not about rules alone, but about people player (read negotiating) with these rules. The metaphor of the 'magic/rusty circle' become rusty itself as Copier argues that

'we can easily separate play and non-play, in which the play space becomes a magical wonderland. However, [...] the space of play is not a given space but is being constructed in negotiation between player(s) and the producer(s) of the game but also among players themselves.'

(Copier 2005: 9)

So the key to calling a game a game is by negotiating its core mechanics and the connected discourse to the player. This is an obvious conclusion as Sturken and Cartwright (2001) already explained that meaning is never imbedded in an object but given by its observer. To understand this process of meaning construction, we can take a closer look at Lindley's (2005) model of narrative meaning construction. Lindley explains how narration, 'the act or process of production of the text', creates a narrative text. This can be a novel, film or play. The narrated text expresses a plot which reveals the story. The story instantiates a structural substrate or presents the underlying meaning of the narration.

Although Lindley does not comply with me using this model to describe meaning construction by games, I constructed a model of ludic construction of meaning, based on Lindley's model of narrative meaning construction. He argues that games are fundamentally and qualitatively different from traditional linear narrative forms, because the player is a joint reader/author of the narrative structure, there are more semiotic levels with textual manifestations and those text levels are generatively interdependent.

First of all, it is strange that Lindley explains how the model works for (theatre)play, but can not be applied to games. As Copier and Huizinga already argued; games are rituals and rituals are games. I

would argue that (theatre)play is ritual, thus gaming too. Also some novels, films and plays are written by both the author/ performer and audience. Think about how improvisational performers and stand up comedians use their audience in their play. And what about interactive television and co-written novels.

Then, Lindley argues that digital media/computer games concern multiple semiotic levels with textual manifestations which are generatively interdependent. Meaning that there are many layers of meaning incorporated in a game, more than there are in a novel or movie. Lindley makes a fundamental flaw when explaining that

'If one were to watch the screen while someone else is playing, the artefact would effectively be a movie. However, a game is [...] intended to be played and the player has a major role in determining what occurs in the unfolding history of the screen. [...] The player then has a role in creating the context for a bridging sequences between [...] narrative elements by their play.'

It seems that a player who reads a book cannot construct their own story while reading. They have to read the book chronologically as do movie watchers, according to Lindley. But (non)linearity of media is not the flaw Lindley is making. He describes how meaning is intended and imbedded in an object. This is never the case, as I argued above, meaning is constructed by the player/observer who is in constant negotiation with the object (its core mechanics) and the connected discourse. So it does not matter how many impulses are received or how much interaction is concerned with the object. When creating meaning a player will follow the same steps, constructing meaning, as it does when reading a novel or watching a movie.

To translate Lindley's model of narrative meaning construction to gaming. One can say that the rule-system creates a play-system which expressed itself in goals. The rules and goals reveal the game, which represent the underlying meaning. A game designer should take these steps into account and must be aware of the connected discourse concerning the rule-system. Some rule-systems do not communicate a particular meaning well, as the cultural discourse does not correspond to it. A nice example is the game *Avatar The Last Airbender* (THQ 2006). As IGN game reviewer Casamassina puts it: 'In the show, the Avatar's primary power is that he can fly. He's an Airbender and he can take to the skies. In the game, he rarely leaves the ground' (2006). The cultural discourse connected to Aang the avatar is his aviation. Soaring the sky, Aang is a character, light as father, fast and ingenious. If the gameplay does not fit these characteristics then the game does not correspond with the discourse. This will lower the game's overall appeal to the audience by failing to communicate the 'right' feeling. There is no synergy between the substrate layer and the rulesystem which are continually negotiated by the player and the player's community.

Above could be called a design paradigm, and does not explain the true nature of (video) games. Instead the whole writing moves to a design paradigm. Let us focus on gaming again. Much discussion about gaming in its earlier years of research concerned the debate between narrative and ludology. As an advocate of a ludologic approach to game-research and game-design spoke Aarseth (2003), Juul (2004) and Eskeling (2004). According to these scholars, game research should be concerned with the rulesystem, the intrinsic value of games which differentiate it from other media. Pleating that games are bad media to communicate some kind of narrative and that only by focussing on the structural working of the rule system, the true nature of gaming could be exposed and understood, the ludologists criticised the work of other researchers like Murray (1997), Perlin (2004) and Mateas (2004). According to game essentialist Aarseth semiotic theorists want to believe in the relevance of one training by using the (new) media discourse to understand gaming. Games are essentially different

then other forms of media. After much debate, mostly derived from the ludologists corner, Murray (2005: 3) called for a halt to the discussion.

‘games are not a subset of stories; objects exist that have qualities of both games and stories. [...] It is time to recognize the difference between the useful formalist methodology and the distractingly prescriptive ideology of game essentialism. No one group can define what is appropriate for the study of games. Game studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving.’

The difference between ludologists and narratologists is mostly methodology concerned as Murray puts it. And although Juul places himself as doing ludological research, Juul's (2003) game definition seem to take a different, more multi dimensional approach. Juul defines a game by six points.

1. **Rules:** Games are rule-based.
2. **Variable, quantifiable outcome:** Games have variable, quantifiable outcomes.
3. **Value assigned to possible outcomes:** That the different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values, some being positive some being negative.
4. **Player effort:** That the player invests effort in order to influence the outcome. (I.e. games are challenging.)
5. **Player attached to outcome:** That the players are attached to the outcomes of the game in the sense that a player will be the winner and “happy” if a positive outcome happens. And loser and “unhappy” if a negative outcome happens.
6. **Negotiable consequences:** The same game [set of rules] can be played with or without real-life consequences

A game is a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable. (Juul, 2003: 35)

Only one of the six characteristics of this definition describes the rule-system. According to ludologists, the rules should be researched as formalistic systems. Juul is pleading for a more cultural communicating approach by incorporating the value giving and emotional attachment of players into the six point. If players negotiate for meaning we can speak of a certain type of communication. And while communication must always have some narrative element, the rule-system is dealt with as a text. The model of ludic construction of meaning, addressed above, treats narration equally to rule-system. The rule-system becomes a new language to speak with. But to understand a medium, scholars should not limit themselves to grammars, spelling and signs alone, as they can never be seen apart from their cultural heritage and social construction.

So, games are texts but ‘speak’ a different language. Many times the difference with games and text is found in the linearity of texts and the agency in games. As Murray explains: ‘Agency is the satisfying power of take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices’ (1997: 126). We rarely experience agency in texts and movies due to the lag of meaningful interaction. Still, agency is experienced in reading a book, by flipping a page, browsing the text and reading books the way the reader prefers. For example, when my mother read a book, she starts with the introduction, reads some pages to get to know the main figures, brows to the end of the book to read the final pages. After being satisfied the conclusion she starts reading the middle pages of the book to complete the story line.

I do think my mother experiences agency when she meaningfully skips some pages to choose whether she likes to read the whole book or just some pages. As nobody is forcing one to read a book in the way it is preferred by the writer, readers have some agency on their reading. Murray is right in assuming this experience of agency is less expected in narrative environments (read novels and movies), it is still there. Agency does not significantly set games apart from other media. Agency in a game is most of the time pre-programmed like a book is pre-written. Every choice the player makes is designed by the developer, even in open ended spaces. The openness is created by a designer. An illusion of free choice is presented to the gamer, making games as (non)linear as text are. Although freedom of choice and linearity are not the same concepts they share some characteristics. Players can choose what to do in a game, there is the illusion of more freedom, making the game nonlinear.

In one of the most discussed 'open ended' games of the moment, *Grand Theft Auto 3* (Rockstar 2001) an illusion of freedom is created by the game designers. A player can otherwise roam the city by any available means of transport, or perform a couple of mission based games to advance in the game. These missions follow each other up linearly. Without completing the first mission, the second one will not be available to the player. This restriction makes the game more linear than a book in which the reader can browse to every page of its liking.

I will conclude that rule system and narration are equal, they only differ in form and grammar/structure. But what makes a game a game, and what makes a novel a novel is the negotiation of the player with the system and its connected discourse. If the negotiator thinks a rule-system is a game, then the game-system comes into being. The differences between games and texts, which were made equally to one another, are differences in nuances. If we can control a character within a virtual world, we would call this a game. There is a greater experience of agency than when reading a book and players have the illusion of freedom of choice and nonlinearity.

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