Week 11 - Gaming:
Group 6 Responses

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Group 4 – Bogost & Raessens

Sjoerd:

Group 4 does a great job of pointing out the key ideas of the author and supporting it by contemporary examples. Although with the example of *Left 4 Dead* contestation is discussed as contesting players with the certain multiplayer reliant gameplay, it is becoming more vague how this relates to political framing as an ideological frame in which a world is presented. From the example of *Tax Invaders* it shows how the gameplay mechanics themselves become part of that political message (getting involved in those is like replaying someone's political concepts), but I wonder how you see the co-op game to be contesting beyond the ideas of multi-player objectives and the plain gameplay for that matter, and if so how political those inquiries are. This implementation of ideas is much more obvious in your *America's Army* example, in which signals of framing could be found in several tangible game-factors.

As with the response on Raessens, I can't really find how the popular revival of 8-bit culture changes the discourse of game research. Again, the question arises how this rebirth should be analysed beyond the acknowledgement it's impact on "personal and cultural identity". This sudden 8-bit niche revival could somewhat problematic to research because it relies so heavily nostalgia instead of that the games were actually an integrated (as zeitgeist specific) part of culture of that time. Of course it's a signifier of a lively subculture, but I wonder how you perceive this particular example within the discussions of how to research games.

John:

Bogost's paper does a huge service for developing a mode of analysis that can be used to unearth ideological frames within video games, whether they were consciously planted or not. The response group does a good job by mentioning *America's Army*, but they could have gone further with their discussion of the ideological frame. For instance, as a propaganda tool, does *America's Army* reflect the actual ideology of the US military or only the ideology expressed in their "public relations"? The response group notes that *AA* does not include gore, which seems like an explicit PR move. This reflects an ideology that war can be fought cleanly, that violence can occur devoid of consequence (which the group does note). Whether this ideology exists within the actual military infrastructure, it is certainly espoused by it's public relations. What happens when a "false" (in the sense that it does not truly represent an organization's ideology) ideological frame is embedded into a game in order to facilitate the adoption of a separate ideology which has not been embedded? Their example is very relevant and it seems that deep inspection would reveals unique nuances.

Another example that could be useful is the conservative talk show channel found in *Grand Theft Auto IV*. A player can select radio stations in there car, and on one of the radio stations is a "caricature" of conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh. The host can be heard ranting against a "homosexual agenda" and other conservative talking points. While asking players about this generally elicits the response "it's just a joke," the well-documented homophobic language of online multiplayer games is alive and thriving in online *GTAIV*. The very presence of the radio station presents another piece of conservative ideology: that sensitivity to language is a fault of any offended listener, and not of the person speaking. Changing from that station to another could represent a "unit operation" that enforces a "if you don't like it, your only option is to ignore it" ideological frame.

Marc:

Group 4 provides a good overview of the key-ideas of the article and a lot of relevant examples. In addition, I'd like to elaborate on Bogost's idea that videogames are the only medium of mass appeal that can be seen as procedural systems that rely on conceptual frameworks (rule base interactions) as their core mode of signification. Bogosts mentions that videogames can help citizens to a political challenge: "discussing unconscious conceptual frameworks behind a discussion", which Lakoff calls this process frame shifting. In other words, the video game players 'go meta' (Beck and Wade, 2004) : getting accustomized to analyzing the interaction of proceduralized logic as a part of the play experience. Their 'meta' experience could be "attached to a particular worldview; and thus welcoming all varieties of ideological frames." According to Bogost this isn't the case (yet), but he also concludes with the idea that videogames could be part of the public political discourse already. My question to the group: Do you think that the videogames are part of the public political discourse? And if they aren't (according to you) should they?

In respect to Raessens article, the group mentions the authors key ideas, though they could have described the Aarseth-Jenkins debate and the author's position in it more clearly. Raessens concludes with the question: 'Do we as an academic community of game researchers accept the coexistence of competing frameworks of interpretation, in accordance with the tradition of the humanities?' For example, is narratology (as described in the article by Jesper Juul) an outdated paradigm to study games, like Aarseth argues? Are we in need of a new discipline to study games? Raessens seems to agree with Jenkings that both 'narrotology and ludology' can be equally productive. Raessens argues that we should further develop new theories and methods, but also keep the latter objects part of the research and discussions. Arguably this places Raessens in the middle of the Aarseth-Jenkins debate.

Sources

Beck, J. C., & Wade, M. (2004). Got game: How the gamer generation is reshaping business forever. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press. (in Bogost, 2006)

Group 2 – Aarseth

John:

Group 2 questions Aarseth's proposal to engage "games within virtual environments" through analysis rather than working solely to develop theory. Yet Group 2 claims that 'New Media' may be characterized by its general lack of theory. They then point out the importance of "new media practices" that force us to engage with the processes unique to new media. How, then, is this a critique of Aarseth's position? If new media does not have many theories, then engagement and discussion of new media practices necessarily involves analysis over theorization. Shouldn't theory naturally evolve from the gross analytical output in a field? As Aarseth shows, the domain of study that involves "games within virtual environments" overlaps so many disciplines as to make a general/universal theory improbable. Analysis seems to be the only road to theory, in this case, as prematurely invoking theoretical frameworks on findings may reduce the applicability of, for instance, research into educational uses for such games to another angle of study? What is theory in the face of a lack of analysis?

There are many instances of potent game analysis from "outsiders" in the sense that the authors of the text do not write for, or from, an academic standpoint. The contributions are nevertheless important, not least of which because it can point to additional objects worthy of study. For a decent example see Rock, Paper, Shotgun's Retrospective: Planescape Torment. Is such writing worthy of citation? Can it be included with writings from academics in a review of literature? What is the role of the game criticism in light of the fact that, unlike film and literary criticism, there are few (or zero, as Aarseth claims) acceptable theories for game criticism? Is it worthy to note, in light of the Aarseth-Jenkins debate, that this paper is discussing a game that is most notable for it's *narrative*

Sources

(1) `http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2007/09/25/retrospective-planescape-torment/`

Sjoerd:

Group 2 gives a clear insight in the key points, and elaborates widely on how to approach games as study material. As today ethnographic methods are quite broadly used in game-research, I wonder about what you think about what kind of insights this method provides. As with the *Morrowind*, Aarseth describes how the information-rich forum and databases spoiled the game for him. When I was reading this, I wondered if the author pointed this out as merely a player experience or as a warning to other researchers. I did not find it very clear here what initially were the Aarseth goals when exploring the game, and why 'spoiling the fun' by researching non-playing-wise should be a considerable factor even while doing ethnographic research. I wonder how the response group thinks about how immersed (or embedded) a researcher should be and if (or how) he/she should formulate different goals or hypotheses while researching.

Marc:

Group 2 provided an excellent overview of the explored issues and key ideas concerning game theory that Aarseth addresses. Aarseth points out in his conclusion, that as a 'playing' academic scholar, it would be crucial to study ethics. This could be related to Bogost's notion of the incorporation of conceptual (political) ideological frameworks in experienced rule base interactions in videogames. An example could be the record setting videogame *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. The CDA (Dutch Christ party) tried (and failed) to ban the videogame in the Netherlands. The reason was a scene at an airport where the player would be part of a terrorist group that would kill innocent civilians (1). The interesting thing about this example is that the player has the possibility to choose whether he wants to view and be part of this violent scene or not. So a possible question would be: does this exemplify how public political discourse and ethics are both embedded within the videogame? Can politicans judge a videogame without 'playing' it ?

Sources

(1) `http://tweakers.net/nieuws/63638/cda-kamerlid-verbod-modern-warfare-2-juridisch-niet-haalbaar.html` (Dutch)