

The Semiotics of Video Games

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ABSTRACT

What is the difference between a game and life? Is the game really ending when we go back to our everyday activities? Or could *The Sims* video game not be a good representation of our existence?

It is with these questions in mind that I decided to explore the interdependence that exists between our everyday cultural reality and the rhetoric manifesting itself in video games.

This paper introduces some of the key concepts used in the semiotics of video games and attempts to articulate them in a single frame. It is a short introduction to storyworlds, procedural rhetoric and gamespace.

1. INTRODUCTION

Video games are now part of our lives. They are in our living rooms and in our pockets. They entertain us; we use them to socialize, train our skills and simulate what we call the 'real-world'. They are invading reality through new developments such as augmented reality and online social gaming. But what is the difference between a game and life? Is the game really ending when we go back to our everyday activities? Or could *The Sims* video game not be a good representation of our existence? Businesses and social groups are after all also relying on rules, measurable performances, winners and losers.

It is with these questions in mind that I decided to explore the interdependence that exists between our everyday cultural reality and the rhetoric manifesting itself in video games.

2. STORYWORLDS AND PROCEDURAL RHETORIC

First, there is the debate in games studies between narratologists and ludologists: should a video game be considered as a form of text, or is it something different? Long traditions have developed on both sides. If you consider a video game as a text, you can analyze it using all the techniques previously developed in literature. This does not go without complications. How to understand *Tetris* in terms of narratives for example, except by using a more abstract definition of what a text is? On the other hand, how could we understand the immersion of a player into the universe of a platform video game if we don't take into account its narrative?

The truth is that a video game is both a story and a game, but the theoretical tools for the analysis of such a hybrid cultural product are not yet well established. I personally favor two concepts to resolve this duality: storyworlds and procedural rhetoric.

In his book *Video Game Space* (2009), Michael Nitsche quotes the following two sentences from the Story Logic (2002) of David Herman:

"Storyworlds are mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate – or make a deictic shift – as they work to comprehend narrative."

"Narrative can also be thought of as systems of verbal or visual cues prompting their readers to spatialize storyworlds into evolving configurations of participants, objects, and places."

Storyworlds as they are defined here could challenge seriously the view that verbal and written languages are at the origin of intelligibility. They might only be one way to apprehend storyworlds. Michael Nitsche refers this time to Edward Branigan: A fundamental function of narrative, as it is understood here, is that of providing "a way of comprehending space, time, and causality".

Generalizing linguistic so that it can apply to storyworlds resolves the limitations of narratology. It doesn't only help better understanding the mechanism of video games, but also of urbanism and architecture to give few other examples.

The second concept I would like to introduce is the one of procedural rhetoric, defined in *Persuasive Games* (2007) by Ian Bogost as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions." Procedural rhetoric is not verbal, or written, it is rule-based and immerses the player into algorithms. It is a mental model like storyworlds. In his book *Gamer Theory* (2007), McKenzie Wark says that "what is distinctive about games is that they produce for the gamer an intuitive relation to the algorithm."

Video games immerse the players into an environment that is spatial, algorithmic, but also textual, acoustic and visual. All these dimensions participate in the construction of a mental model that the player enacts by his play. It is that mental model 'located in the head of the player' that gives meaning to the video game. The model is conveyed by rules, texts and voices, visual, acoustic and spatial modalities. It needs to remain consistent throughout the game to enable the immersion of the player, who can then make sense of the game's goal.

"The expectations regarding an object [in a video game] are in fact expectations regarding the regularity of the system." Joaquin Siabra-Fraile (*A Semiotic Analysis of the Spatial Dimension in Platform Video Games*, 2009)

Which of these modalities take precedence depends on the video game, some games are heavily relying on a linear narrative (e.g. interactive novels), some on rules and game play (e.g. puzzle

games), some on spatiality (e.g. 3D first-person shooters) or even acoustic (e.g. rhythm games). These modalities have already been covered extensively in the study of other media, such as literature, architecture and music. Except one maybe, rules and algorithms, which was until recently not even considered as being vector of meaning. It is now everywhere: in software, policies, organisational management, social networks, and in video games. In that sense, video games truly mirror contemporary society, and the rules that they convey are probably more revealing than any other of their modalities. Who could indeed give much significance to the story line of *Super Mario*, or the architecture of *Unreal Tournament*? The bulk of the games' significance lies elsewhere, in the rules that shape their universe. Why does your energy bar increase only at the expense of others, why do you need to reach the goal within a time limit, why do you need to buy potions in order to succeed? These are examples of rule-based questions that you might want to ask regarding certain games.

3. THE GAMESPACE

Video games are not anecdotic. I argue that they incarnate a procedural understanding of reality that is already well established in our societies. McKenzie Wark calls it the gamespace. In the steps of what oral myths, then science and much later consumerism tried to achieve before; procedural rhetoric wants to include the whole reality and to enclose our entire perception. Exactly like in mythical systems, procedurality naturalizes social conditions by establishing homologies between them and what is presented as 'natural', i.e. the rules of the video games. This is precisely why semiotics is such an important discipline; it helps us denaturalizing back the signs so that we can appreciate the relativity of our cultural system, and its motivations. As pointed out by Souvik Mukherjee in his blog post *Playing with Empire*, "As we think of Empire as a game, it might be worth thinking about whether nineteenth century politicians were also making similar assumptions and playing their politics by similar kinds of rules that we see in the empire videogames."

In this cultural ecosystem, i.e. 'semiosphere', we always need to 'win', in our studies, career and affective life. All these aspects are now mediated by a system of points similar to those in games. The points take often the form of money: making a step in one direction will provide you more points, money and thus success than in another. This metric suffices to make sense of many of our actions. The same principle holds true in health for example: eating a muffin reduces your health 'points' by x calories.

There is maybe a distinction to draw at this stage between game and play. Play could be that capacity we have to do something without having any goals. But in *The Sims* world, that simply doesn't exist anymore; every action has an impact, and earns or cost you some points. The game might have paradoxically killed the play. In our effort to introduce more play in life, we might have succeeded to transform life into a game, but in which play doesn't exist anymore.

"The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life." McKenzie Wark

The algorithms and rule-based representations that come with the gamespace have another effect on our perception of reality; they subordinate the other forms of representation. The civilisation you choose to play within the *Civilization* game doesn't matter so much anymore; the rules are still the same, just with other parameters and graphics. As far as the algorithm of the game is concerned, they are meaningless. What enables the production of

meaning in a video game is not so much the data entries, it is the algorithm that uses these pieces of data to make a procedural statement.

"Gamespace turns descriptions into a database and storyline into navigation." McKenzie Wark

After all, this is a logical consequence of the critics from post-modernism. There is no univocal truth anymore; facts can be understood from different perspectives. Storylines don't convince us as before, we don't believe in picking one to represent the whole reality, we prefer instead to classify and compare narratives, aware that more than one will explain satisfactorily the reality. We do the same in video games, storylines and scenarios alone don't make us want to play a game, they are most of the time interchangeable, and we are aware that they are merely pixels, texts and video files stored in a database. What makes a game unique is how these data entries are manipulated by the games' algorithm, which can be as expressive as a storyline, and in that sense doesn't save us from subjectivity. It is a twist of fate that just after having thought being liberated from the narratives of pre-modern and modern times, we find ourselves imprisoned in another dogmatic system, procedurality.

4. CONCLUSION: QUIT THE GAME?

We have seen that meaning in video games is not only produced through verbal and written language, sounds and images, but more characteristically through storyworlds and algorithms that the player is encouraged to interact with. Procedurality becomes the underlying mode of representation for reality, and turns it into a gamespace. This evolution might have started a long time before the rise of video games, which might have only echoed a change in our perception of reality. It could also be argued that video games played a more active role in that 'social construction of reality' (see constructivism in semiotics). I could not be sure.

Is this change of perception a good or a bad thing? Should we try to quit the gamespace? Or instead embrace it? The player needs to build the model of the game mentally if he wants to have any chance to win. That doesn't mean he agrees necessarily with that model; He can adopt various 'reading positions', he can reject the rules and decide that the game didn't mirror his values, use the rules for his own ends, or alternatively test the weaknesses of the rule-based system to hack the game play. Procedural rhetoric, like any other type of rhetoric, is just one side of a dialogue.

Additionally, video games can also express critical opinions against the rules of the gamespace. Authors have the power to make a 'bricolage' out of the procedural rhetoric, and alter its original meaning. Video games are perhaps the best media to challenge the kind of procedurality established in our societies, because they use the same means of representation.

"When we create videogames, we are making claims about processes in the human experience, which ones we celebrate, which ones we ignore, which ones we want to question." Ian Bogost

Far from being a deterministic mean of communication, video games can help us negotiating the gamespace itself. It is what makes so exciting the study of that media; it offers a unique opportunity to reflect on procedurality, and on how to position ourselves in this new digital world. Should we take as a standard that everything is a game, and let us guide through this reading of reality, with its pros and cons? Should we end the game, but how? Maybe with existentialism which asserts that we are free at all times of our actions, rules only being there to disguise the anxiety

of our freedom. Or should we remain in the game but not take rules for granted, just like we don't take our ancestors' stories for granted anymore?

5. REFERENCES

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