

Compete, Command and Conquer: Playing for Space at the International Games Cultures Conference

IGCC 2001, June 29 – July 1st at The Watershed Centre, Bristol, UK

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Delivering his keynote paper to the International Game Cultures Conference, Espen Aarseth identified 2001 as the first year of video game studies. His statement was confirmed in many ways by the grandiose scale of the event, bringing together an international community of video gamers and academics to discuss this new and exciting discipline.

For Jesper Juul, Aki Jarvinen and Espen Aarseth the terminology of video game theory had to be drawn from the language of 'play'. However, the concept of theory being intertwined with play/pleasure appeared unexpectedly problematic for some academics. Even the field of ludology in which Juul and Jarvinen situated themselves was new and unfamiliar to many at the conference. Although not entirely incompatible, the narratological perspective adopted by Henry Jenkins and Greg Smith did not sit well with ludology. Similar tensions arose where methodology was called into question. Ethnographic studies presented by T.L. Taylor, Kirsty Horrell, David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green emphasized the benefits *and* the limitations of conducting empirical research into video games.

Henry Jenkins's opening keynote address was a productive enterprise in applying film-theory to video games. Using the phrase, 'an art of narrative architecture', he described the relationship between games and cinema as a two-way process where both media share aesthetic devices along with a similar cultural status. As vessels of a so-called 'popular aesthetic', cinema and video games exist somewhere in between a continuum of pure convention and pure invention. Jenkins argued that they are both in a constant process of movement between the conventional and experimental, and between urban and technological worlds.

As objects of comparison, Jenkins selected two texts of 'pure invention', namely Sergei Eisenstein's cinematic masterpiece *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and the critically acclaimed computer game *The Sims* (2001). Both texts were united by the presence of what Jenkins termed 'micro narratives'. A still from the famous Odessa Steps sequence of *Battleship Potemkin* is composed of a number of micro-narratives. A revolutionary waving a flag or a defeated Tsarist lying dead on the ground, both tell a simple story and also threaten to undermine the importance of any unifying narrative. In *The Sims*, micro narratives dominate as simple events adjust and change according to the actions of the player. This kind of narrative is termed 'emergent' because it has no predetermined outcome. On the opposite side there are 'embedded' stories; narratives that cannot be manipulated by the player. This second definition seems slightly problematic given that most games will have at least two possible outcomes dependent upon *success* or *failure*. If this is true, then why is there any benefit from making such a distinction? Furthermore, the absence of textual examples from the 'conventional' end of the spectrum perhaps signified the privileging of invention and innovation. This was just one example at the conference where one could observe the transference of a high culture/low-culture hierarchy from cinema to videogames.

Espen Aarseth's initial argument that 'game theory' should be separated from film theory, psychology and physiology seemed far from pragmatic. This is not to say that Aarseth believes games theory can exist independently from other academic

fields. Arguably it is the 'fear of playing' implicit in these disciplines that leads him to reject them.

Another significant tension between Jenkins's and Aarseth's papers was the importance of narrative. Presenting examples of games without narratives such as *Tetris* (1989), *Furby* (1999) and *Anarchy Online* (2001), Aarseth questioned the valorising of games that attempt to tell stories. But arguing that the agendas of games and stories are incompatible is more difficult than might be expected. Arguably, it is not an over-reliance on narrative that makes a game like *Myst* (1993) awkward and lacking in playability, but rather an over-reliance on cinematic convention and *mise-en-scène*. *Myst* might have been an excellent game had it maintained the same storyline but improved its storytelling techniques (i.e. game engine).

Similarly, it is possible to argue that games with only an abstract relation to the real world still possess a kind of basic narrative. As a critic observed in the closing questions, even the simplest of actions such as a block falling in a game of *Tetris* can constitute a kind of micro-narrative. Perhaps Aarseth could have made a more conclusive argument had he considered why other communicative methods (film, literature, word-of-mouth, etc.) might be more appropriate for storytelling than video games. Arguably, no story exists in isolation from the means by which it is communicated and whilst video games change the nature of storytelling they are perhaps no less effective tools than the spoken word.

The paper delivered by Jesper Juul represented a compromise between ludology and narratology. In a refreshing attempt to define what we mean by 'games', he used the step-by-step development of a simple program like *Pac-Man* as an example. Drawing from existing theories by Chris Crawford, Juul argued that games are: 1) a means of representation delineated as 'unreal' or separate from the material world, 2) rule-based, 3) loaded with criteria for evaluating performance and 4) lacking in any material outcome. In terms of the development of *Pac-Man*, the eponymous hero is a somewhat abstract representation of the player, occupying a simple representation of space (i.e. a blue box). *Pac-Man* can move around this space freely but cannot move outside it. However, this does not yet constitute a game. Juul added a system of rules by including a maze for *Pac-Man* to move around. It was only with the final addition of 'Ghosties' and 'power-pills' for *Pac-Man* to eat that the game attained criteria for success or failure and thus became complete.

It is the absence of a material outcome and the representation of physical space that aligns a game like *Pac-Man* with narratological theory. On the other hand, the concept of rules and goal-orientated play seems largely incompatible with traditional story-telling. One of Juul's most important observations is that as a player becomes more focused on a particular game, narrative and representation can often become subordinate to an awareness of rules and performance. This argument appears sound, however, more empirical work into the act of game-play needs to be done before such an observation is confirmed.

If a general lack of empiricism could be considered one of the weaknesses of the conference, then another would have to be an occasional absence of self-reflexivity, particularly when it came to the theorists' own experience as games-players. Although largely anecdotal, evidence of a 'fear of playing' could be observed during a *Pac-Man* tournament on the first day of the conference. Out of nearly eighty delegates, only three were willing to participate in the game. It is conceivable that more would have played the game had there not been such a large group of spectators. Other delegates might have been simply demonstrating

their gaming preferences by avoiding *Pac Man*. Indeed, it is important to question whether it is essential that games theorists should experience the act of playing.

During Greg Smith's narratological analysis of the role-playing-game *Final Fantasy 7*, he made several claims about the relationship between audience and text. With particular reference to emotion and pleasure he cited Noel Carroll's work on horror film audiences. According to Carroll, the emotional responses of horror audiences are supposed to mimic those of the on-screen 'victim' in a kind of empathy. Arguably, Smith's detailed knowledge of *Final Fantasy 7* was largely drawn from his personal experience of playing the game. It appears that one not only attains deeper knowledge of the video game text through playing but one is also able to relate the experience with a greater sense of enthusiasm and passion.

Throughout his paper, Greg Smith demonstrated a number of textual interpretations which may have differed not only from the intentions of the game's creators but also from the comprehension of other players. Gavin Mackie considered the polysemic nature of video games in his paper on 'Techno-science'. In emphasising the multi-directionality of the video game text, Mackie argued that the player's influence over emergent narratives gives them almost equal status to that of the producer. He used the term 'structures of feeling', to describe the act of playing video games as a kind of productivity. This includes the development of intuition, the exploration of 'mythic' possibilities and the creation of narrative. Even these qualities, however, complied with the ruling hegemony of the conference in their exclusion of more hedonistic (but perhaps no less important) pursuits such as voyeurism, sadism and desire.

Issues highlighted by Aki Jarvinen in his paper *Computer Games as Spatial Toys* included the need to incorporate 'fun' into games studies along with the danger of romanticising or valorising the trade. His comparison between video games, traditional toys and environmental toys (i.e. theme parks, etc.) examined similar pleasures to the ones identified by Mackie. Exploration of space is another pleasure that appears to unite various kinds of games. Perhaps Jarvinen's most revealing statement was that 'the toymaker is missing from the programmers' family portrait'. This is a call for a better understanding of the origins of video games and the concept of 'playability'.

If certain theorists are unwilling to explore their own habits as gamers then perhaps ethnographic research will provide something of a substitute. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green's pedagogical analysis of *Poke'mon* provided an excellent example of a wide-scale ethnographic study. The '*Poke'mon* Project' united researchers from seven countries to discuss children's varying use of *Poke'mon* and compare this to the marketing strategies behind the video game/merchandising phenomena. According to Buckingham there were three motivating factors behind the game's success. Primarily, Nintendo created a text which was most appropriate to its typical core audience, the family with young children. The unique integration between software and hardware that *Poke'mon* achieved through the use of peripherals such as the Game Boy 'Link-lead' and 'Transfer Pak' was another determinant. The third factor was that by 1998 Nintendo had put a large proportion of their research and development budget into finding a 'killer-app' for the ailing Game Boy console. Previous experience with *Tetris* had demonstrated to Nintendo that the success of a single game could sustain sales of their portable games system.

Applying *Poke'mon's* tag-line, "Gotta' catch 'em all", Buckingham considered the cross-demographic appeal of the game. This appeal resides largely across gender and various age groups due to textual themes of varying complexity and

universal themes such as cooperation, competition, fighting and nurturing. Cultural themes did not translate so well, requiring Nintendo to localise the game for different countries. In exploring children's use of *Poke'mon* and its related merchandise Julian Sefton-Green observed that they would often use the game in accordance with the gaming culture of their domicile. Whilst *Poke'mon* trading cards were popular amongst the children of New-York stockbrokers for their collectible/fiscal value, French children would often purchase them for use in traditional card games. Considering the value of *Poke'mon* as an educational tool, Sefton-Green argued that the game would never be accepted in an institutional context. Although it can help children to read, develop numerical skills and build relationships with other children, most schools have effectively 'banned' the game. Conversely, it was argued that if schools were to accept *Poke'mon* as a teaching aid, this would seriously damage the game's popularity. Amongst all these astute observations, it is only the claim that the *Poke'mon* phenomenon is dying that seems unfounded. Although the 'craze' reached its peak in 2000, a similar rise and fall can be traced for 'Super Mario Bros', a game which dominated the industry in 1986 but which never quite 'died', remaining a popular franchise today. It might be useful to note in future studies if the 'recyclability' of video game franchises alters the nature of children's crazes.

As demonstrated by Gareth Schott and Kirsty Horrell, ethnography is particularly useful in counterbalancing general assumptions about games players. Focusing on 'girl gamers', Horrell evaluated the participation of females in gaming. This paper was valuable in terms of its discussion of research design, a dialogue generally lacking throughout the conference. Female players were interviewed in their own homes during the act of game-play. Interviewers built up a rapport with their subjects and interacted with them throughout the course of the game. Amongst their observations of girl gamers they found a dislike for intense competition, 'claustrophobic' environments and exaggerated physical representations (e.g. Lara Croft). Most notable in this study was the 'casual' nature of the subjects' playing habits and the way in which their access to gaming seemed largely restricted by the males in their households.

Further dispelling the concept of female gamers as an homogenous group, T.L. Taylor explored a very different section of the gaming community. Her paper, 'Multiple Pleasures – Women and Multiplayer Worlds' argued that women *do* enjoy competition, conflict and power, using players of *Everquest* (2000) as evidence. The game in question provides an on-line 'world' that runs in perpetual real-time, meaning that the environment and characters are constantly evolving and changing even when the player is absent. It provides a forum for competitive play and cooperation between players around the world and offers a series of 'pleasures' to the player. Pleasure in socialising found in players of *Everquest* was entirely absent from the single-player experiences of Horrell's girl gamers. Similarly, enjoyment of mastery and status appeared unique to the women in Taylor's study. This is perhaps not simply attributable to the audience demographic but also to the type of text they were playing. Whilst *Everquest* facilitates the development of status and dominance, the games played in Horrell's study did so to a far lesser extent.

Only when examining the pleasures of space did the two studies concur. Indeed, the exploration, manipulation and dominance of space appeared to be a common thread throughout the conference. Jenkins observed games in terms of spatial narratives, like a map of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* that seems to tell a story of its own. Although Espen Aarseth disagreed on the issue of narrative, he also affirmed the importance of space, claiming that 'computer games are spatial discourse'. Aarseth's textual examples, including *Tetris*, *Dungeon Master* and *Civilisation*, also involved the mastery of space in some way.

External to the video game text, control of physical and theoretical space were paramount issues at the conference. Whilst narratology and ludology struggled to become the foundation of video game studies, Helen Kennedy argued that a new generation of female gamers and virtual heroines (particularly Lara Croft) represent an intrusion into masculine space and the concept of male-orientated gaming. In terms of physical space, feminist-orientated papers were restricted to a smaller lecture theatre than those involving 'masculine' issues, causing a little resentment to be directed at the organisers. Other theorists sought to generate clear distinctions between represented space and physical space; Julian Sefton-Green argued that video games, particularly *Poke'mon*, represent a positivist space where it is possible to discover everything given enough time. Conversely, Mackie argued that the enterprise of hacking can alter the nature of represented space with players altering game-worlds to suit their own tastes.

Overall, the conference itself appeared to offer a productive and engaging space for everyone involved. Not only did it open a dialogue between theorists from different academic backgrounds, it also began to locate a common ground to be built on. This is not to say, however, that a unifying theory for video game studies is in sight. Thankfully, each different approach to video game theory remained clear and distinctive at the end of the conference, albeit carrying a little more insight and generating a wealth of ideas for new directions in research.

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