

Dimensions of Play: Gameplay, context, franchise and genre in player responses to *Command and Conquer: Generals*

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of online reviews of *Command and Conquer: Generals*, the focus of this paper is on the various dimensions within which play is situated in the accounts of players. Starting with responses that highlight potentially contentious political associations of aspects of the game, it considers how these are balanced against or combined with concerns relating to gameplay mechanics, graphics and the situation of *Generals* within both the *Command and Conquer* franchise and the wider real-time strategy genre. The paper concludes by arguing that the evidence of player reviews supports the suggestion that game-playing is, essentially, a multi-dimensional experience.

Author Keywords

dimensions of play, player reviews, gameplay, political context, franchise, genre

From the most hectic of core gameplay operations to the various contexts in which they are situated on screen and in the broader social-cultural environment, digital games offer numerous different dimensions of playful experience. A number of these dimensions – also including the exploration and virtual inhabitation of game-worlds and the pleasures of on-screen realism, spectacle and sensation – are explored by Tanya Krzywinska and myself in our book *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* [4]. Our emphasis in that work is on the various dimensions of gameplay *offered* to players through the structure of game-worlds and their gameplay operations. My aim in this paper is to go beyond the scope of *Tomb Raiders* to consider, through one case-study, which of these aspects of games figure prominently in the responses of players. The data on which this is based is a sample of written reviews posted in two online forums: ‘customer reviews’ on Amazon.com and ‘player reviews’ on GameSpot.com. These two sources were chosen in an attempt to encompass a range of differently situated

potential responses, from those supplied to the leading general online retailer and the more specific constituency of a site targeted solely at game-players, or ‘loyal gamers’ as they are described in GameSpot’s introductory text.

The game chosen for this study is *Command and Conquer: Generals* (2003), a title that can be taken as a representative example of the popular real-time strategy format, but also selected here as a game I have examined previously in the context of debates about the relative weighting that might be ascribed to different dimensions of the gaming experience. The starting point for my interest in *Command and Conquer: Generals* was an analysis of the extent to which political or ideological dimensions are likely to be actively in-play in games during the performance of core gameplay tasks. This was situated in the context of debate about the relative importance that should be ascribed in game study to gameplay and/or to the contextual frameworks within which it is situated on-screen, an issue most frequently addressed in relation to arguments about the relevance of narrative to games (the ‘ludology vs. narratology’ debate that provided one of the most prominent controversies in the development of games studies in the early 2000s). *Generals* was a good example for these purposes, given the highly contemporary and potentially contentious nature of some of the contextual material on which it draws. Enabling the player to undertake missions from the perspective of the USA, China or the Global Liberation Army (GLA), a generic ‘international Arab terrorist’ group, the game contains many references that might be considered uncomfortably close to contemporary geopolitical issues such as the so-called ‘war on terror’ in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq.

My previous suggestion was that a number of factors are likely to influence the extent to which contextual associations such as these are likely to be overtly in-play. These include factors such as different stages of gameplay (context being liable to recede as gameplay progresses or

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individual stages are repeated), the mode in which a game is played (on easy or hard settings, the use or not of ‘cheats’), the volume of contextual reference found within the game and its contentiousness or temporal proximity (high in the case of *Generals*), and the orientation and degree of receptivity of the individual player. Even in games in which the contextual material is most likely to be drawn to attention, and in the case of players who are highly attuned to that material, my conclusion was that the balance is always likely strongly to favour attention to the performance of core gameplay tasks at the expense of attention to associational context. The bottom line of this argument was that if anything has to give, in the competition for cognitive resources imposed by the rival demands of various gameplay activities and awareness of situational background, it would be the latter that would be likely to be lost, for the simple reason that gameplay can proceed without noticeable attention to specific background while the opposite is not the case.

The analysis of player reviews on which this paper is based began as an attempt to test this hypothesis and to gain a sense of the balance of concerns, and how these are framed, that emerge from player-generated online responses. My initial aim was to chart the relative attention given by players to dimensions related to core gameplay operations and to the particular contextual background setting of *Command and Conquer: Generals*. This subsequently evolved to include a broader analysis of the balance of attention given to these and certain other dimensions of the gameplay experience such as the situation of the game within both the *Command and Conquer* series and the real-time strategy genre to which it belongs.

Before proceeding further with the findings that emerged, it is necessary to say something more about the nature of the research sample used in this study: 184 reviews from Amazon and 100 from GameSpot. These samples are self-selected and cannot be considered to be representative in any scientific sense (much the same can be said of many other media-user/audience research samples). Amazon respondents are given the option to indicate their geographical location, the great majority of those who do so (90.8 per cent) citing a US base; no such information is included in GameSpot reviews, the bulk of which can also probably be expected to have been posted from the US. Amazon was chosen, as suggested above, for its potential to include a wide range of respondents, GameSpot for a more specialist and potentially ‘game-expert’ constituency. There is no guarantee that they meet these criteria, although some support for such an assumption is provided by the more diverse range of responses found in the Amazon sample (a strong consensus of positive reviews is clear on GameSpot, despite the presence of some dissenters, while the opinions expressed via Amazon are far more mixed) and some of the other results outlined in this paper. The Amazon reviews are highly varied in both substance and content, GameSpot correspondents tending to remain within a narrower band at

the levels of both opinion, length of review and focus. This appears likely to be the result of differences in the constituencies included by each, although GameSpot reviewers are given a more organized framework of response that might play a part in shaping the distinction between the two sources. GameSpot reviews are required to be at least 100 words in length, with general review text accompanied by gradings that are likely to steer the review focus in particular directions (textual descriptions chosen from drop-down lists in the categories ‘difficulty’, ‘learning curve’, ‘time spent playing, to date’ and a descriptive ‘classification’, in addition to separate numerical 1-10 scores for ‘gameplay’, ‘graphics’, ‘sound’, ‘value’ and ‘reviewer’s tilt’). Some reviews follow a similar pattern in the main text but this is far from always the case.

Samples of these kinds have the benefit of drawing on responses that exist for their own sake, rather than being artificially manufactured for the purposes of academic research, although it is important to note that they do not provide unmediated access to player responses. They should be considered, as Thomas Austin puts it in a different context, as ‘performative acts made about feelings and engagements, rather than as transparent reproductions of these’ [2]. What they can be said to measure is quite specific and context-dependent: that is to say, they tell us something about what some players choose to highlight when they post reviews to certain online forums, rather than providing a more encompassing measure of player concerns, interests or investments. Sources such as these also play an active role in the public mapping of game taste cultures, which gives them added resonances as resources for research. Bottom-up consumer feedback of this kind is a key component in an ‘amplified word of mouth’ considered by Chris Anderson to play an important role in helping to match supply and demand in the world of escalating choice created by the huge inventories of stock made available by online retailers such as Amazon [1].

GAMEPLAY BEATS CONTEXT

One of the most clear-cut findings from analysis of the reviews is that far more players devote attention to issues relating to gameplay than to the specific historical or geopolitical context in which the game is set. This is hardly surprising. If it is impossible to play without a focus on core gameplay tasks, while it is possible during play to pay little or no conscious attention to contextual specifics, something similar can be said of the process of reviewing. It seems a reasonable default assumption to expect at least some comment about the nature of gameplay in a review designed to convey an opinion of the game. This is the case for 82 per cent of the GameSpot reviews and 58 per cent of those posted on Amazon.com, reflections on gameplay ranging from very brief to lengthy and detailed observations. Reviews that ignore the gameplay dimension tend to be either relatively or very short (which might explain the lower figure for Amazon, which includes some very brief

postings) and/or to focus strongly on some other dimension of the game. I have not included here responses that make brief general comments, such as that the game is 'very good' or 'very bad' but that do not specifically address gameplay either by name or through some specific reference, however brief, to particular gameplay qualities. The number who make comments that relate the game explicitly to the real-world geopolitical context is much lower and broadly consistent across the two samples, reflecting the more optional nature of focus on this dimension: 11 per cent for GameSpot and 12.5 percent for Amazon. These figures increase to 31 per cent and 21.7 per cent, respectively, if more oblique references are included, largely to the effect that *Generals* offers a war context the nature of which is characterized more generally as 'realistic' or 'modern'. This remains a significant minority, in either case, worth consideration in more detail to see how exactly aspects of the real-world context are articulated by those who include a focus on this dimension, including its relationship to questions of gameplay, before we return to the emphasis put by reviews on some other aspects of the game.

Some of those who make direct reference to the broader geopolitical context do so very briefly, merely making the connection before proceeding to consider other issues. That the real-world context can significantly impinge on how aspects of the game are understood is suggested by two such examples in the GameSpot sample in which the GLA is misidentified as 'Iraq' or 'Iraqi terrorists'. The actual characterization within the game seems overdetermined here by the prominence of the contemporary conflict in Iraq, a point of reference that maintained high public profile from the 2003 invasion to the time of this writing in 2007. A number of reviewers suggest that the inclusion of the GLA, and its use of weapons such as suicide bombers, anthrax and SCUD missiles that resonate with aspects of recent or contemporary real-world events, is an actual or potential source of offence. For some, this results in an expression of alienation from any desire to play as the GLA. As one puts it: 'I havent [sic] tried the GLA yet because they make me feel dirty because they use underhanded tactics' (dilemma dood, December 17, 2005, GameSpot). Another asks, rhetorically: 'I mean who wants to play a bunch of focking camel-jockies with their suicide crapola and false-sense of dignity?' (lalafronza, Hopewell jct, New York United States, April 10, 2004, Amazon). The climactic event of the GLA campaign, an ICBM attack on a city, is singled out by some as a particular source of actual (their own) or potential (for others) discomfort. This is another detail in which real-world assumptions are mapped onto the game by reviewers, two of the three who refer directly to this event identifying the target as either New York City or 'an American city', despite the fact that no particular location is suggested by the graphical representation on screen; the presence of what appears to be oriental lettering on some of the building facades suggests, if anything, a target from the Chinese camp.

A minority of those who comment on the politics of the game take an opposing view, accusing it of being racist in its stereotypical depiction of the GLA and its activities. One of these in the Amazon sample, who reports being offended by the game's depiction of a 'war against Islam', gives a location in the primarily Islamic Persian Gulf state of Qatar, but the number of non-US situated responses is too small to provide any significant basis for comparison on a geographical basis. The few that indicate locations where the issues might expected to be of especially heightened sensitivity are mixed in the nature of their responses: one from Pakistan provides a positive review, making only neutral reference to the game being based on contemporary issues; another positive review comes from Israel, with no reference to contextual background. There is no general indication of greater or more critical attention to this dimension by those from outside the US.

Very little else is found in the way of criticism of the game from a perspective opposed to American foreign policy, or what might be interpreted as supportive representations of real-world interventions. Only one reviewer, from the US, expresses such a view explicitly:

Politically, this game should make anyone with any kind of knowledge of world events sick. The plot, such as it is, so oversimplifies world events that you really almost feel guilty for playing such a narrow, closed minded, flag waving cartoon of life (James Anderson, Fort Madison, Iowa United States, April 25, 2004, Amazon).

The key point for some of these respondents is that the real-world resonances detract from what they seek from playing games: a sense of 'fun' or 'escapism', entry into the arena described by games theorists as the 'play-ground' or the 'magic circle' [3, 6], marked off from the world of everyday reality. One complains that the designers of the game have 'tried to go serious', in comparison with the more comical dimensions included as clear signals of gameness in previous iterations of the *Command and Conquer* series:

I don't want to launch anthrax weapons, or kill civilians. I don't want to see terrorist attacks. I play computer games to get away from the real world for a while, and this just doesn't provide that (antonyf, UK, February 24, 2003, Amazon).

As another puts it: 'The parallels are a little too close to reality, and this does remove some of the fun and campiness from the game that was present in its predecessors' (David Lim, Hobart, Tasmania, April 21, 2003, Amazon). For some reviewers, it seems, aspects of the real-world context intrude on the pleasures of gameplay.

Others reassert the gameness of the game, however, despite its real-world resonances. 'Generals is inspired by todays [sic] middle east problems and will remind you of todays [sic] hard situation between middle east and usa [sic]', one

