Approaching game-studies: towards a reflexive methodology of games as situated cultures

Sybille Lammes
Utrecht University, Netherlands
Sybille.Lammes@let.uu.nl

ABSTRACT

This paper will address why and how a reflexive and situated methodology could be employed to study cultural functions of play. Starting from the supposition that playing is pivotal to all game-research, I will follow Aarseth's claim that any (cultural) approach of games asks for an inclusion of the position of the player/researcher in its methodology [1]. Being particularly interested in games as a cultural practice, I will add to his claim that for such kind of research a methodology is needed that enables us to see games *as* culture. My hypotheses will be that reflexivity and situatedness lie at the heart of any approach that wants to include both issues. I will show that reflexivity and situatedness may be needed as complementary tools to come to a cultural study of games that takes Aarseth's call for reflectivity serious.

I will claim that the researcher needs the combined tools of reflexivity and situatedness because both situatedness (intertwining agent and environment) and reflexivity (distance/proximity) take into account the involvement of the researcher/player with its material and view this as a cultural praxis. Situatedness allows for game-research that shows the physical locality of playing whilst still relating play to a more global or national context. Reflexivity permits us to show how the researcher is culturally and locally involved in her quasi-object of study through play.

Author Keywords

Methodology, player/researcher, reflectivity, situatedness, games as culture

INTRODUCTION

Clear methodologies

Game-studies as practiced within the humanities still lacks clear methodologies. It remains debatable whether this should be conceived as a shortcoming or an advantage. Seen from one angle it is seems unavoidable that an interdisciplinary field combines different approaches and as such game-studies can never have a clear demarcated methodology. Although this is of course true to a certain extent, game-studies nevertheless still needs *clear methodologies*. Every research topic calls for a fitting and coherent approach that enables the researcher to find an answer to a posed question. However diverse the issues at stake may be, the approach should always be made explicit. Furthermore every research topic needs a methodology that takes the qualities of the object that is studied into account.

Although I would thus make a case for clarity rather than exclusivity when it comes to defining methodologies for games-studies in the humanities, all approaches should take into account that games have their unique intrinsic values. This uniqueness should be at the centre of any chosen tactic, since it determines how one should approach its material. As Espen Aarseth states in his paper "Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis" the most important quality that should be taken on board in any "aesthetic study of games" is that of play, for the very simple reason that the researcher has to play to be able to study a game. He therefore advocates a methodology that includes this reflective position [1].

In this paper I will take up the implicit challenge posed in Aarseth's paper and try to refine his first outline of a methodology by defining a suitable approach for games as cultural spatial praxes. I will nevertheless do more than refining his proposed methodology, by showing that when play as a distinctive quality of games is acknowledged in the chosen method, an interdisciplinary approach is not out of the question. I will demonstrate that the tools of reflexivity and situatedness can help the researcher by keeping play at the centre of her exploration as well as enabling her to study games as culture. Hence it will become clear that an approach that takes the uniqueness of games as its staring point can still look for methodological allies in other disciplines. We are not all ships at sea.

To be able to come to a better understanding of which methodologies may be needed to be able to study games as cultural regimes, I will start this paper by discussing Aarseth's paper and look at how his proposal can be used for this objective. Which of his strategies can be used for such a methodology and where are other insight needed that are fit for studying games as culture? Secondly I will turn to an article by Tom Boelstorff " A Ludicrous Discipline? Ethnography and Game Studies" that appeared in Games and Culture in which he calls for using anthropological

ways of inquiry for cultural game-studies [3]. Here my main question will to what extent his proposed methodology can be used as an addition or refinement of Aarseth's.

DEBATING WITH AARSETH

Game as play
In his aforementioned paper Aarseth makes an undeniable and strong plea to develop a methodology for games that includes the position of the researcher as player. Aarseth's paper starts with the assertion that game-studies may have become a highly visible field within the humanities, yet that hardly any work has been done on developing a suitable methodology. The methods used so far seem to be rather eclectic.[1] Narrowing his scope to the study of games as aesthetic object, Aarseth sets out to give a first outline for a fruitful approach to games.

What makes Aarseth's argument so valuable and compelling is that he tries to define a suitable approach by taking the basic qualities of a game as its departure point. Hence his main objective seems to be to develop a methodology that takes the intrinsic characteristics of games (what he calls "games in virtual environments") as its starting point. True to this line of thought he first of all states that play should be an explicit central focus in any approach.[2] This seems to be indeed a highly justified beginning of developing any suitable methodology for game-studies.

Then he continues to give three intrinsic dimension of games, that could according to Aarseth help specifying the research interests and line of inquiry of the researcher, namely *gameplay*, *game-structure* and *game-world*. *Gameplay* focuses on the player and her actions, *game-structure* on the rules of the game and *game-world* on the fictional and spatial content. While he first presents these categories as of a similar order, he goes on to recognize that game-structure is actually a prerequisite of the other two categories (without rules no game). Hence, I one could

---

[1] It needs to be said that this eclectic state of affairs is not exclusively characterising game-studies, but also other field such as media-studies and literature.

[2] To a certain extent the researcher becomes her study of object, since a "game is only a game when it's played" (Bryce & Rutter 2006).

actually alter his typology slightly by naming *gameplay* and *game-world* as central categories for understanding games within the parameters of the stronger or weaker *game-structure*.

Aarseth states that different genres and different research interests determine which category the researcher focuses on. *Game-world* would be the main centre of attention for "[a]rt, aesthetics, history, cultural/media studies" and "economics" whilst *game-structure* would be more interesting for designers, computer scientist and for studying issues of law and business. Finally, *gameplay* would be the predominant perspective for sociology, ethnology and psychology [1].

At this point his argument becomes a bit tricky. To begin with, Aarseth re-introduces an old matrix of disciplines that seems not to fit seamlessly on game-studies. I can for example easily name several articles or imagine possible topics that are about *game-rules* or *game-play*, but that are clearly situated in or indebted to social studies, one of the fields he mentions under *game-world* [4, 5]. This partly has to do with the fact that the difference that he makes between cultural studies (which he positions in *game-play*) and sociology (which he places in *game-world*) is not as clear as he suggests it is. Aarseth's quest for disciplinary order becomes clearly problematic at this point: he tries to fit games-studies in a set of frozen disciplines, that should be and are in themselves (as game-studies) changeable.

However, and most importantly, the categories he introduces could be used in a different way to develop his own argument about methodology further. It would be more true to his line of argument if these dimension would be acknowledged in any research but at the same time to maintain that any methodology should have the category of *game-play* as it main starting point. Aarseth maybe right that many aesthetic studies of games are more interested in the game-world than in the other two categories and that different game-genres accentuate different dimensions, yet their methodology should always have gameplay (of the researcher, that is) as its main entrance. The first is a question in the order of theory and the second of methodology. Here Aarseth looses himself in a theoretical exercise of categorisation instead of staying close to this objective of coming to a better methodology of game as play.

Situating game-play
Nevertheless, Aarseth clearly does acknowledge that computer game research cannot be limited to one field, and that the methodology we choose is always predetermined by our research question "It all depends on *who* we are and *why* we do it", he states. He therefore calls for a methodology in which the researcher explicitly acknowledges what type of player she is. Extending Bartle's typology of players of MUD's he comes to the

following roles a researcher can take up depending on motivation and material: the *achiever*, the *killer*, the *socialiser,* the *explorer* and the added type of *cheater*. Thinking in these types can clarify position us as researchers and elucidate how we approach and are involved with the game we play to research.

However helpful these categories maybe, they present some restrictions. Limitations are of course the downside of any categorisation, but as it happens these limitations have repercussions for developing a *cultural* methodology of game-play. Aarseth's a priori belief that the given types "create a general model of human behaviour in virtual environments" hinders a view of game-play as being culturally heterogeneous. It may for example be that the suggested types are not appropriate for researching the gaming situation in Japan and are Eurocentric. It may also be that I as a (female) player will categorise myself differently than how an onlooker would typify me. Furthermore typologies may differ according to the environments in which a game is played and with whom a game is played [4]. All these limitations point to the fact that an all-purpose use of Bartle's typology creates a blind spot for situating the player/researcher in its particular local culture that is much more diverse than these five categories seem to suggest. To refer to the title of this conference: Bartle's typology when used as a universal typology encumbers a development of a methodology that situates play both culturally and locally. A typology of the researcher as player alone seems to be too universal. To situate us as part of our methodology we have to include our culturally embodied positions as researchers.

Aarseth's closed circle

Clearly, Aarseth's project of finding a suitable methodology is rooted in a search for an approach that takes the intrinsic qualities of games as its basis. This is a very important way of anchoring any approach of games. Yet, it also has its restrictions, since its claims about 'the laws' of games tend to be rather universal and hermetic and make it harder to approach games as culture. Although one should keep in mind that Aarseth does not pretend to give a complete and all-encompassing methodology, this drawback does partly explain why he at first includes culture in his definition of game-studies (by naming it as a disciplinary field and focussing on game-studies in the humanities) yet comes to a first outline that misses any clear cultural dimension. He seems to be captured by making typologies that describe games and gaming in general, whilst play is a more messy cultural practice. We need methodologies that enable us to describe it as such as well.

A 180° TURN: TALKING TO BOELSTORFF

Playing with anthropology

In the first issue of the journal *Games as Culture* anthropologist Boelstorff points precisely towards this problem when he states that most authors in game-studies employ a rather narrow definition of culture in which it is presumed that social relation (in games) are determined by a set of rules:

Most discussions of culture in game studies to date (…) employ a symbolic or semiotic definition that frames culture in terms of schemas, cognitive maps, and meaning. Although these elements are certainly part of culture, they reflect somewhat outdated views of culture that anthropologists would term *structuralist, structural functionalist*, or *cognitive*.[3]

Boelstorff indicates that perceiving culture as a set of rules is problematic. His main objection against such a view is that the idea of culture as governed by a grammar, a set of rules or schemas, eludes the fact that culture is practiced by its participant as "an intersubjective domain of experience, one that takes shape not in individual heads but in social relations." Besides that this lived reality is being ignored when culture is seen as consisting of general rules, it also obliterates omplex social issues of "economics, power, and history". Furthermore such a view produces a predetermined notion of culture in which games have a preset place in relation to culture. Or as Boelstorff puts it: "[s]uch theorizations of culture further the idea" that *culture* is to *game* as *context* is to *text*, making it difficult to ask how in some circumstances games can act as contexts for culture" [3]. Boelstorff therefore calls for an approach that allows for a less fixed idea of game-culture.

He argues that anthropology may offer game-studies an approach that overcomes such limitations since it is a discipline concerned with culture as an everyday practice. An interdisciplinary connection between game-studies and anthropology may therefore proof to be fruitful. In this respect Boelstorff especially finds the methods used for participant observation helpful for game-studies since they permit the researcher to be critically involved with its research material, instead of claiming a position of overview and control:

In place of surveys or interviewing, participant observation implies a form of ethical yet critical engagement that blurs the line between researcher and researched, even when the researcher is clearly not a member of the community being studied. It is a method based on failure, on learning from mistakes to develop a theory for how a culture is lived—for its norms and its "feel"—that may not be reducible to rules.[3]

He thus maintains that the method of participant observation allows the researcher to leave the myth of being the objective researcher behind by making its involvement with its research material part of its methodology. In such a way game culture is no longer perceived as a frozen category but as a lived and heterogeneous practice.

Although Boelstorff's assertion that anthropology and especially participant observation should be the prevalent methodology for studying games as culture seems to me somewhat too pre-determined, anthropology may indeed offer some interesting tools to study games as culture. It would however be necessary to enquire how one can make such a disciplinary leap without loosing sight of the intrinsic qualities of games, in other words to investigate how anthropological approaches may be compatible with what Aarseth sets out to establish.

When anthropology and game-studies meet

At first glance Boelstorff's approach to games may seem irreconcilable with that of Aarseth. While Aarseth takes the question of what a game is as his central focus of attention and looks for rules of play that may help us with developing a suitable approach, Boelstorff departs from the question of what culture is and looks for a methodology that does justice to the messiness of games as culture. Even so, a dialogue between these two positions seems to me pivotal when one wants to come to an approach of games as culture that still does right to what games are about.

The strongest compatibility between there views is that they both stress that an involvement between the researcher and its material is unavoidable. Boelstorff says that such is the case with any cultural/anthropological research. Aarseth draws our attention to the specificity of game-studies in this respect since the researcher has to play games to research them and is therefore strongly and interactively involved with her research material. To a certain extent the researcher becomes her study of object (or quasi-object). To use an anthropological term for Aarseth's assertion, the game-researcher has "to go native" to be able to study her quasi-object. Hence the position of the researcher as player as advocated by Aarseth always requires a degree of participant observation and, vice versa, the method of participant observation as proposed by Boelstorff always entails a degree of play when it is applied to games. From this perspective their thoughts seems to be highly well-matched and anthropology may actually offer us a strong methodology to realize the approach of game studies as play.

Reflexivity

Actually both authors' standpoint on this matter seems to be very close to what is called a reflexive attitude of the researcher. Reflexivity is seen as a means to show the position of the researcher as being simultaneously an observer and a participant, or "that one is part of what is studied" [11, 17]. It is most commonly used in the process of making description of fieldwork in which the researcher unavoidably becomes more and more involved with her material. The tool of reflexivity serves to render this process clearly by always reflecting upon your own involvement, thus paradoxically creating distance in the process of getting closer [7, 8]. Although reflexivity is not explicitly mentioned in Boelstorff's article, it is definitely part of the anthropological approach he advocates. It also comes near to what Aarseth means with reflectivity. Aarseth considers reflectivity as an indispensable instrument for the game-researcher. He describes this as a mode of observation in which the position of the researcher as player is always taken into consideration.

Interestingly, a reflexive way of going about research makes the assertion of Aarseth that 'bad' players are bad researchers per sé difficult to maintain. A self confessed cheater/researcher that takes this position as a reflexive practice could actually engender very interesting material. Surely, researchers should get acquainted with their research material through playing extensively. In that sense the researcher should not cheat and cut corners. Yet it may actually proof to be intriguing if the moments of failure of which Boelstorff also speaks are made visible in this process. Also, it could be enlightening if the researcher shows when play is interrupted by looking for walk-throughs or more severe cheats.

It seems to me that reflexivity may proof a valuable tool for a lot of game-research. It offers a methodological instrument that can make the playing of the game part of our quest, without having to let go of our observational role as academics. Instead a more complex process of observation is being made part of our academic endeavours. Reflexivity thus offers a means to secure play as a central focus when studying games as culture. By and large research on games as culture would be enriched if the player/researcher shows her trajectory of going tribal, of getting acquainted with her material starting from a more or less informed position and including moments of failure and success. In other words, when playing is seen as a quintessential part of any methodology for researching games as an aesthetic culture, reflexivity seems to be a necessary tool.[3]

---

[3] An unbridled use of reflexivity can however result in loosing sight of what is being studied and result in academic vanity. See also: D. Pels, Reflexivity: One Step Up. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *17* (3). 1-25; M. Lynch, Against Reflexivity as an Academic Virtue and Source of Privileged Knowledge. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *17* (3). 26-54; J. Law, On the Subject of the

Situatedness

Yet, as the title of this paper indicates, I would maintain that such a methodology should also contain an acknowledgment of the situatedness of games as culture. Keeping faithful to the claim that games are about playing, one cannot see them as separate from the local environment in which they are played. When I use a rather broad definition of situatedness - since it is a common term that is used in game-studies and in many related fields such as cognitive studies, educational sciences, AI studies, feminist studies and science and technology studies - it follows that an agent should be situated *in* its environment and that (fractured) views, behaviour and cognitive processes are always the outcome of this union [6, 9-16, 18]. Consequently situatedness enables an approach in which games are seen as an outcome of local cultural practices.

Although reflexivity and situatedness are interconnected terms in that they both leave behind a homogenous objective notion of the researcher and what is researched, their emphasis and goals are dissimilar (which may have to do with the fact that they were developed in different fields). While reflexivity is always about paying tribute to the involved position of researcher – and in this case about the researcher as player - the emphasis of situatedness lies on the local embodiment of any agent, be it the researcher as player or the game she studies. In the case of situatedness the emphasis lies therefore on the embeddedness of any agent and not primarily on the involved position of the researcher. Hence the first term serves to make sure that the researcher position herself as a player, whilst the second is employed to secure that game culture is viewed as a local and embodied social practice and to avoid making universal knowledge claims.

As reflexivity, situatedness is closely linked to what games are in essence about. While reflexivity guarantees that a methodology includes the activity of play, situatedness secures that the local embodiment that is part of every game is put on the agenda. As terms they actually correlate with the two main characteristics of game pleasure as being specified in the paper "Game Pleasures and Media Practices". Trying to identify a cultural notion of pleasure that is specific to games, the authors of this paper define two traits of game pleasures, namely *embodiment* and *action* [2]. It seems to me that the *action* of the researcher as player is the main focus for the reflexive dimension of the proposed methodology, since its emphasize lies on the researcher's active involvement through playing and that *embodiment* is more related to the situatedness that such an

approach entails, since it accounts for the way the game (and the researcher/player as being part of that game) is locally and physically embedded.

Depending on the cultural question the researcher asks one of the two dimension may gain dominance. Take for example Bryce an Rutter's chapter "Killing Like a Girl: Gendered Gaming and Girl Gamers' Visibility" in the *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. One of the main methodological statements the authors make is that a "game is only a game when it's played" [4]. They maintain that this idea has not been sufficiently acknowledged in studies about gender and gaming so far, which has according to the authors led to erroneous statements about the relation between gender and games that underestimate how woman can be avid gamers as well. To overcome this inadequacy they propose a spatial turn. They argue that when games and their players are no longer seen as isolated from the (public and semi-private) spaces in which they play, a different and more heterogeneous picture about gender will emerge. Hence Bryce and Rutter tend towards a methodology in which situatedness is pre-dominant. However, for making such an approach possible, they would need a certain degree of reflexivity. Since their proposed manner of research seems to be close to that of participant observation it always includes, as Boelstorff indicates, "a form of ethical yet critical engagement that blurs the line between researcher and researched, even when the researcher is clearly not a member of the community being studied" [3]. To conduct research in a situated way one always needs a certain degree of reflexivity. Conversely, a research question that calls primarily for a reflexive angle, by for example studying a *game-world* as a cultural space through play, calls for a certain recognition of situatedness in its approach since the researched material is always rooted in the local or embodied space of the player/researcher and has no universal meaning as such. Consequently reflexivity and situatedness are complementary requirements for a cultural study of games.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to further an indispensable discussion about what methodologies game-studies needs to develop to study games as culture. Since not much has been written on this subject so far, I have mainly focused on two authors that have suggested valuable methodologies for studying games, one from the self-proclaimed field of game-studies and one with anthropology as a back-ground. I have tried to compare their views and distill from these the necessary ingredients for such a methodology. While the authors started from opposite directions, I have showed that a comparison between their views and the fields in which they position themselves, can bring about a fruitful approach that enables us to study games as culture.

Object: Narrative, Technology, and Interpellation. *Configurations*, 8. 1-29.

The tools of reflexivity and situatedness seems to be essential for studying games as culture. They both guarantee that the researcher as player does not pretend to observe her material from "out there" but through play. Reflexivity by rendering visible how the researcher "goes native", situatedness by not "standing back" and rephrasing objectivity as a local, embodied and "fractured vision" [11]. Which of these two dimensions are more prevalent in the used methodology and how these methods are exactly applied (e.g. auto-ethnography, Actor-Network-Theory, participant observation) depends on the specific research question that is being posed. But as an overall methodological framework they both secure a cultural approach of games that incorporates the position of the researcher/player.

REFERENCES

1. Aarseth, E. Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis *Digital Arts & Culture 2003*, Melbourne, 2003.
2. Ardévol, E., Roig, A., San Cornelio, G., Pagès, R. and Alsina, P. Game Pleasures and Media Practices *9th Bi-Annual Conference. Europe and the World*, Bristol, UK, 2006.
3. Boellstorff, T. A Ludicrous Discipline? Ethnography and Game Studies. *Games and Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 2006), pp 29-35.
4. Bryce, J. and Rutter, J. Gendered Gaming in Gendered Space. in *Handbook of Computer Games Studies*, MIT Press, Massachusets, 2005, pp 301-310.
5. Consalvo, M. Rule Sets, Cheating, and Magic Circles: Studying Games and Ethics. *IRIE. International Review of Information Ethics*, vol. 3 (December 2005), pp 7-12.
6. Copier, M. The Other Game Researcher. in Copier, M. and Raessens, J. eds. *Level Up: Digital Games Research Conference*, Utrecht University, Utrecht, 2003, pp 404-419.
7. Davies, C.A. *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*. Routledge, London, New York, 1999.
8. Fook, J. Reflexivity as Method. *Annual Review of Health Social Sciences*, vol. 9 (1999), pp 11–20.
9. Haraway, D. Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), pp 575-599.
10. Haraway, D.J. A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies. *Configurations*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter 1994), pp 59-71.
11. Law, J. On the Subject of the Object: Narrative, Technology, and Interpellation. *Configurations*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Winter 2000), pp 1-29.
12. Lindblom, J. and Ziemke, T. Social Situatedness: Vygotsky and Beyond, 2002. Available at http://www.lucs.lu.se/ftp/pub/LUCS_Studies/LUCS94/Lindblom.pdf
13. Simpson, D. *Situatedness, or, Why We Keep Saying Where We're Coming From*. Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002.
14. Smith, B. Situatedness-Embeddedness *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, 1999, pp 769–770.
15. Squire, K. Cultural Framing of Computer/Video Games. *Game Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2002).
16. Steinkuehler, C.A. Learning in Massively Multiplayer Online Games. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Learning Sciences* (2004), pp 521-528.
17. Woolgar, S. and Ashmore, M. The Next Step: An Introduction to the Reflexive Project. in *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Sage, London and Beverly Hills, 1988, pp 1-11.
18. Yates, S.J. Understanding Computer Game Cultures: A Situated Approach. *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1999), pp 566-583.