

Online Gaming as a Virtual Forum

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ABSTRACT

As videogame scholarship takes hold in the academy, attracting the attention of researchers and critics from a variety of disciplines, a frequently asked and salient question is, “What existing theoretical frameworks are appropriate for this nascent field?” This short essay argues that Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch’s article, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” provides a useful starting point for conceptualizing the social meaningfulness of online, multiplayer gaming. Skins, mods, fan sites, and in-game communication channels emerge as a cultural network by which players can speak through, and about, their communal play.

Keywords

forum, fans, online, multiplayer, mods, skins, television

NEWCOMB & HIRSCH’S CULTURAL FORUM

In their co-authored text, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch (1994) present an alternative framework to the dominant “literary approach” and “media effects” camps of television criticism [3]. As the title suggests, they propose re-conceptualizing television as a cultural site, where audiences are exposed to, and in turn speak about, a range of topical, social issues vis-à-vis television’s multi-textual flow. “We suggest that in popular culture generally, in television specifically, the raising of questions is as important as the answering of them” (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1994, p. 507). Of critical import is that the authors do not conflate the literal formal conclusions of televised fictions with any hidden or overt ideological message. Instead, “the rhetoric of television drama is a rhetoric of discussion” (p. 508). Newcomb and Hirsch’s analysis focuses on the manifold ways audiences talk about television to one another. In doing so, the authors design a hermeneutic for understanding television culture as an engaged community-centric dialogue, not as a one-way, analyst-centric monologue *about* that audience.

In his primer on videogame studies, James Newman (2004) claims that video gaming has been neglected by academics (as “the forgotten medium”) because it has been viewed as a child’s activity, in practice, and a low-art artifact, in form (p. 5) [4]. It is no surprise then, like television studies, that two frameworks have dominated the young and still developing area of videogame scholarship: effects and content analysis. Most social science research projects have focused on

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the supposed harmful effects of videogames, most notably on children, and the negative messages propagated by their interactive narratives. Newman rescues the gamer in light of this popular image, saying, “the popular perception of a video game player as an isolated, withdrawn loser is based as much on presupposition and anecdote than on the findings of scholarly study” (p. 148).

Current videogame scholarship is in the same predicament as early television scholarship. On the popular front, it seeks liberation from its low-art status. On the academic front, it strives for credibility as a discipline. And, on a theoretical level, it looks to situate its audience -- its players. In light of these needs, Newcomb and Hirsch’s “forum” presents a valuable framework by which to locate and situate contemporary online gaming communities.

This short paper will touch on three aspects of the online game experience: online intelligences, inter-textual game modifications, and gaming speech. In doing so I hope to demonstrate that videogames, like Newcomb and Hirsch’s television, “does not present firm ideological conclusions - despite its *formal* conclusions,” rather, “it *comments on* ideological problems” (p. 508).

MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMING AS A FORUM

Competing Intelligences

The most obvious difference between multiplayer offline and online play is the absence of nearby, flesh-and-blood gamers. In offline play, players generally sit close to one another and share a single screen, or in some LAN configurations, multiple screens. By contrast, online gaming eliminates the need for gamers to be physically proximate (though it does not prevent it). Because there is no familiar, spatial context, online play has the added effect of giving all the avatars, whether controlled by human or AI, equal simulated weight. That is, there is nobody sitting next to you to act as a “real” referent for their online, electronic signifier.

Online games commonly integrate human players and AI-controlled avatars (a.k.a. bots) into a single field of play, meaning, that players must interact with both humans and AI to achieve their goals. Newman (2004) stresses the importance of this dynamic, saying:

In this way, tackling the game clearly requires exploration of the parameters of the simulation both in terms of the handling and performance of the player’s character and the AI of the opposition, and is an exercise of learning the strategy and tactics, strengths and weaknesses of the other player and their command and mastery of the simulation (p. 150).

A player moves her avatar in response to the expressive communication of others (human and AI), who in turn, respond to her in-game expressions. “Communication” in this sense can include any manifestation of avatar movement, in-game text chat, or voice communiqué that the game allows.

Mods and Skins

Mods and *skins* are two means by which gamers have been able to speak through *and* to one another in the game world. *Mods* (short for modifications) are alterations made to the game

environment by the players. *Mods* commonly include, but are not limited to: weapons, vehicles, tools, audio files, and new levels (e.g., such as college campuses, players' homes, or preexisting entertainment properties, like *Die Hard*'s Nakatomi Plaza). The avatar's appearance, or *skin*, is another common target of modification. Some players choose to alter some aspect of the title's prepackaged avatar, while other may elect to create entirely new ones. Talking about television's media makers, Newcomb and Hirsch state, "They are cultural *bricoleurs*, seeking and creating new meaning in the combination of cultural elements with embedded significance" (p. 505). Gamers, too, are able to expand online expression through *mods* and *skins*. They contribute creative expressions to these ebbing online forums by way of their creative offline efforts.

Online Speech

The forums for online gaming are most evident in the inter-game communication (between online players), and on fans' websites. Online games often provide players with a number of communicative channels to suss out information, coordinate their collaborative efforts, and, of course, to flame (or insult) fellow gamers. Text messaging, customizable tags, emoticons, and the spoken word are all available options for online gamers. This multitude of communication forms allow gamers to share their location, status, knowledge, and strategies with others to achieve team tactics that would be impossible if such expressions were not an option.

Websites are common locales for fans of all interests. "It is clear...that the Internet, and particularly the web, have considerably extended the communicative and discursive potentials of fans and the various interconnected websites, discussion groups and other forums have become the nexus for fan activity" (Newman, p. 156). Nintendoland.com is one such example. Fans post their art and creative responses to popular Nintendo-owned properties and narratives. Using Henry Jenkins' Textual Poachers (1992) [2] as a springboard, Newman notes:

fans and their interpretive practices not only rehabilitates and sustains characters through the creative reinvention of fan art and literature but also provides a mechanism through which the feelings of disappointment, agitation and frustration with videogames may be discussed (p. 153).

Fans post walk-throughs, cheats codes, *mods*, *skins*, original art, software patches, and other self-generated artifacts of their gaming experiences.

NEW FORUMS, NEW SCHOLARSHIP

A central difficulty in cultural studies is establishing a theoretically viable link between the text, as an object of study, and the audience, as the user and interpreter of said artifact. Newcomb and Hirsch's analysis is valuable because it stresses that this relationship, like multiplayer gaming, is in a constant state of flux. "The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence" (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1994, p. 506). Like TV genres, videogame genres too, are diverse and eclectic. For example, Berens and Howard (2001) list seven distinct genres in their text, *A Rough Guide to Video Gaming 2002* [1]. Genres alone, however, may not accurately and completely contain the variety of experiences found in gaming. Newcomb and Hirsch see "television as a whole system that presents a mass audience with the range and variety of ideas and ideologies inherent in

American culture” (p. 508). The same may be said of videogames, especially those that are online and are multiplayer.

This brief essay aspires to function heuristically, to help redefine gamers’ online leisure activities as not only being meaningful speech or expression, but as constituting a dialog. The virtual forum, like Newcomb and Hirsch’s cultural forum (or like genre theory in film studies), recognizes the cultural dilemmas and commentaries embedded in online game artifacts and the social activities that bring them to life.

The next logical step is to interpret what is being said. What does a particular *mod* or *skin* say? What might *fragging* and *flaming* in different games mean? If the development of early television studies forecasts the still developing terrain of game studies - and there is compelling reason to think that it does - critics interested in forming cogent theories about videogame use must go beyond chronicling gamers’ variety of expressions in a forum, as this paper has done. Antecedent to any and all gaming forums lie the basic gaming interaction - the relationship between the gamer, her controller, and the screen. The test for critical-cultural scholarship is to locate the *social meaningfulness* that is embedded in the manifold expressions of button-pressing and joystick clicking that predates online play. Or, said differently, the challenge of future gaming criticism is that it must articulate the gamer’s interactive, embodied experience before it manifests in the social forum.

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