

# 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

suggests. 'But this game feels more like a game with toys rather than real war so no one needs to take offense on this game' (skater02468, December 6, 2005, GameSpot). Another adopts the position that, although 'lots of people think this game is racist, its [sic] a game, nothing more nothing less', even though it 'uses stereotypical views on different ethnic groups', a stance that seeks to deny any relevance to contextual markers within the game world (ikrikland, Scotland, May 28, 2004, Amazon). At least two respondents (one from each sample) suggest that the contemporary resonances were added to the game for purely mercenary reasons, to cash-in on what one terms 'gamer's patriotism post 9-11 and recent goings-on in the Middle East' ('A gamer', March 10, 2003, Amazon). The different qualities and capabilities given to each side in the game are evaluated by many at the level of what they contribute to gameplay, however, particularly in the balancing of the game (each side having different strengths). In the majority of cases, the discussion of this dimension is separate from any consideration of the real-world geopolitical context, but not always. As one suggests:

The GLA is perhaps the most interesting side, partly for the inappropriate subject matter. There are elements of the GLA that clearly reflect recent events. You can use terrorists with car bombs and truck bombs, suicide bombers with explosives strapped to their bodies, anthrax and biotoxin weaponry [sic], units hiding out in tunnels and caves, and angry mobs of Arabs wielding AK-47s. That isn't the only reason GLA are so interesting, however [sic] the gameplay mechanics for this side are the most radical of the three. They require a certain amount of stealth and patience and just a little more skill than the others to keep under control but once mastered can turn out to be the most deadly army of all (fishdalf, November 3, 2005, GameSpot).

A number of different orientations can be detected, therefore, in the relatively small proportion of reviews that make explicit reference to the geopolitical context. For some, real-world resonances are a barrier to enjoyment, particularly, it seems, when they include an adoption of the position of what would be considered by the majority of these constituencies to be 'the enemy' (in most cases assumed to be the GLA). What might normally be a valued core dimension of gameplay – the ability to play from a number of different positions, each with its own specific characteristics – becomes a potential or actual source of offence for the largest category of those who include a focus on this dimension of the game. For others, however, 'gameness' remains to the fore, either overriding or combining closely with any issues resulting from the potential sensitivity of the context within which it is set. It is important to note that almost all of the reviewers cited above, and most others who comment on the geopolitical resonances, also devote equal attention to gameplay in its

own right, including those who find the real-world points of reference a source of discomfort. None of the reviews in either sample comment on geopolitical context alone, without the addition of some reference to other qualities of the game. And dislike or discomfort expressed in relation to the geopolitical dimension is far from always accompanied by a negative overall opinion of the game. Quite the contrary in some cases. For James Anderson, quoted above, the quality of gameplay ('a well made RTS') provides compensation for the title's 'narrow, closed minded flag waving cartoon of life'. 'If the gameplay wasn't at least halfway decent', he concludes, 'most people wouldn't play this at all.' A similar balance is provided by another reviewer:

While I wasn't bothered by the fact that one of the armies were terrorists, I think that Generals takes it too far in the campaign. The last mission ends with a captured ICBM fitted with bio-weapons being launched at an American city. This seemed very disturbing that they would include that considering the current state of the world. Despite this, I think it's a great game for the money you pay, provided that your system can handle the requirements (Pat, USA, June 3, 2004, Amazon).

If only a minority of respondents comment on issues of geopolitical context, whatever their particular interpretation of the situation, the same can be said of the extent to which other non-game-specific associational contexts are cited. Association with other non-game media texts are limited to three citations of the same film, *Black Hawk Down* (2001), on the basis of the similarity between some aspects of the GLA and the Somali fighters represented in the film (which also has its own direct game spin-off of the same title). Story or narrative, however, is cited by numbers broadly similar to those who make explicit reference to the geopolitical context: 9.2 per cent on GameSpot and 20 per cent on Amazon. These numbers are not insignificant and might at first seem surprising, given the marginal role performed by narrative in *Command and Conquer: Generals*, even by game standards. The point made by the majority of posters who comment on this issue is to complain about a *lack* of story, however. This suggests that story is a significant dimension of games for some players, even for those in generally less narrative-oriented genres such as real-time strategy, and might be taken as a contribution to the still far from entirely resolved gameplay/narrative debate. It has a particular context in this case, in comparisons between *Generals* and earlier entries in the *Command and Conquer* series. Those who complain about an absence of story are players familiar with the franchise who express disappointment at the lack of a dimension that gave a particular flavour to the earlier games. For one the fact that 'the story has really taken a back seat' is 'one of the biggest flaws in the game.'

Thinking back to the previous C&C releases by Westwood Studios, I was always blown away by

the good stories and the wonderful cutscenes blending live action and CG animation. They were the glue in the games, the part that made it realistic and immersive. The characters had personality and human traits that made you feel like they were really there. *Generals*, however, is very lacking in personality. (Kayel Sokov 'God', Burlington, NC USA, November 6, 2004, Amazon)

Another respondent makes a similar point about the absence of 'good background storylines', but relegates these to the secondary status ascribed to narrative and devices such as cut-scenes by many commentators within game studies: 'when you get down to it, once you were in the mission, I forgot the cutscene (just kill the other guy! dah!)' (bchick1, December 12, 2003, GameSpot). A handful respond positively to what one describes as having 'no goofy plot to deal with' ('A gamer', April 16, 2003, Amazon) or give approval to the quality of story that is provided (which is essentially limited to the unfolding of the game's version of its immediate military campaigns). The prevailing view, however, is that *Generals* is left wanting in this dimension – which suggests something about the value put on narrative and character context by some players, if not the majority, and about the role of inter-game comparison by players, an issue of considerable significance to which I return below. This is a criticism to which the developers appeared to respond very rapidly in the *Zero Hour* expansion pack released some eight months after *Generals*, in which the game was brought into line with other entries in the series through the addition of full-motion video cut-scenes and the inclusion among playing options of sub-factions headed by individually-personalized commanders on each of the three sides.

#### **OTHER DIMENSIONS: GRAPHICS, FRANCHISE, GENRE**

The relative prominence of core gameplay mechanics and contextual background material such as story and relationship with real-world events is only one of several axes that can be drawn out from responses in the Amazon and GameSpot samples. The principal rivals to gameplay, quantitatively, are neither of the above but references to graphics, other games in the *Command and Conquer* franchise and to the wider real-time strategy genre of which *Generals* is an example.

Graphics receives the second higher number citations after gameplay with a striking consistency across the two samples: 58 per cent in Amazon and 57 per cent in GameSpot, the majority of opinions being positive although in most cases limited to relatively brief phrases such as 'good' or 'amazing' graphics. This is another dimension of interest in relation to previous debate among academic and some industry or game-design commentators. The relative importance of the qualities of graphics has been subject to question similar in some respects to that addressed to issues of narrative and other forms of contextual background,

although in this case with a more direct relation to the commercial context in which games of this kind are produced. Undue emphasis on graphics, driven particularly by the marketing end of the business, has been seen by some commentators as a distraction from what should be the 'core' dimension of gameplay. It is an undoubted fact, however, that higher standards of graphical resolution, often involving claims to greater levels of photorealism, are a major factor in the development and selling of new game titles, whatever impact this might have on standards of gameplay, and no great surprise that this should be reflected in a relatively large number of citations by reviewers. Graphics is one of the criteria on which GameSpot respondents are prompted to respond but the close similarity in the numbers who highlight this dimension unprompted in the Amazon sample suggests that little encouragement is required for this dimension to figure in player responses. A somewhat different conclusion might be made in relation to those who cite the dimension of sound, to which less attention is generally given in game discourses. In this case, the prompt provided by GameSpot appears to be responsible for a higher level of responses, 31 per cent in comparison with Amazon's 10 per cent.

The issue of graphics in *Command and Conquer: Generals* is often cited by reviewers in the specific context of the game's relationship with previous entries in the series, *Generals* being the first fully 3D installment in the franchise and thus marked out from its predecessors in this as well as several other respects (including the absence of background story and character, as indicated above, and the closer relationship of aspects of its setting to contemporary real-world geopolitics). It is clear from both samples that the game's situation in a series is a major point of reference for players, a dimension cited by 57 per cent of the GameSpot reviewers and 46.5 per cent of those posting to Amazon. *Generals* is a game to be evaluated for many in direct comparison with earlier *Command and Conquer* games, although the conclusions drawn by reviewers are sharply variable. Broadly similar numbers judge *Generals* to be either the worst or best-yet in the series, while some are more nuanced or equivocal in their judgements. Of most interest for my purposes here is not the particular opinion expressed but the general fact that the game's place in the franchise looms prominently for large numbers of reviewers. Similarly substantial numbers also situate the game in the wider context of the real-time strategy game, either generally or in relation to other RTS titles identified as such, 53 per cent in the case of GameSpot, 25 per cent on Amazon.

The extent to which the game is compared with others, either in the franchise or the wider RTS genre, is another factor that should not be surprising but seems significant in terms of the broader issue addressed above of gameplay and its relationship with a variety of situational frameworks. The nature of digital games is such that they are likely to provoke a great deal of close comparison between one title

and another. The same might be said of other media, but not necessarily to quite the same extent. A film might be expected to be subject to comparison with others in the same series or genre, for example. Each new entry in the *Star Wars* franchise was compared with those that had gone before, with a similar process of fans or more general viewers often making judgements about which they considered best or worst in the series. Such films might also be compared with other science fiction productions. The difference in the case of successive iterations of a game, or in the comparison between one game and another within a game-genre, is that there are often likely to be more substantial differences and resulting grounds of comparison between one and another than is found in the case of media such as film or television. This might be attributed to at least two factors. One is the faster pace of change in the case of games and gaming technologies, including but far from limited to changes at the level of graphical representation of the game-world. The other is the basic fact that differences of implementation generally have a more direct impact on the game-player than differences between two films or other such texts because they have potential to change the nature of what has to be done by the player him or herself, in a temporally extended set of procedures, and how satisfactory or otherwise the experience becomes for the player. More time and effort is usually expended in gameplay than in consumption of most of other media products, which means more is potentially at stake in the differences between one title and another.

This dimension is certainly a rival to any emphasis on historically, politically or ideologically specific contextual setting or associations. If we ask whether a game such as *Generals* is more likely to be played as a game version of relatively close-to-life geopolitics and warfare or as a version specifically of *Command and Conquer* and/or of the RTS genre more generally, the findings of this study would support the assumption that it is considerably more likely to be the latter than the former. It is also important to recall that many of those who express concern or discomfort on the political level do so when considering the game in the context of the series rather than taken in isolation. It is particularly in comparison with previous iterations that *Generals* is adjudged to have 'tried to go serious' and to lack the humour fondly associated by many reviewers with earlier installments such as the widely-cited *Red Alert* (1996) and *Red Alert 2* (2001). It is not just the real-world resonance that is the point of reference in this discourse but the way such material is used within the context of a particular franchise, a series that had established a reputation for the use of a broad measure of humour in its employment of scenarios that combine outright invention with imaginary counterfactual histories (including, in the *Red Alert* games, a near-future war between the allies and the Soviet Union, material that had a degree of potential-world reference in the quite recently post-Soviet era in which the game was released but safely distanced from much likelihood of generating real controversy or

discomfort at the time). The series context is also of significance to the history of the RTS genre, the original *Command and Conquer* (1995) being one of the ground-breaking early achievements of the form. Its reputation was maintained in numerous subsequent editions, including *Red Alert*, a fact that created high expectations against which *Generals* could expect to be measured.

The fact that an emphasis on franchise and genre is found in a higher percentage of reviews posted on GameSpot than Amazon might be taken to suggest that the inter-game dimension plays a greater role overall among more experienced or committed gamers, who might be expected to be represented in larger numbers in the former than the latter. The fact that the biggest discrepancy between the two samples lies at the level of references to RTS, cited by more than twice as many GameSpot reviewers without being included in the prompted categories, would support an assumption that the more 'expert' or specialized the constituency the greater the extent to which the focus might be expected to lean towards more generic or core dimensions of the game. The corollary, an assumption found in some comments around the gameplay/narrative debate, would be that forms of contextual background such as narrative or the presence of specific socio-political associations such as those found in *Generals* are likely to be of greatest significance to the more 'casual' game-player, or those who comment on games without the benefit of any – or any sustained – engagement with gameplay. This is suggested by David Myers on the basis of analysis of discussions within 'dedicated player forums' of the turn-based strategy game *Civilization* and its sequels (from 1991), a title that has attracted more socio-cultural criticism than most on the basis of a number of ideological assumptions built into the scenario within which its core gameplay is clothed. For Myers, 'it is only during initial and novice play – which is most compatible with a linear reading of the game as text – that *Civilization* game signs and symbols (i.e. game *signifiers*) might reasonably be associated with' real-world social, cultural or political signifiers [5]. This fits with my broad suggestion that specific external-world contextual resonances are likely to fade from consideration with extended and repeated play, but the situation might be rather less clear-cut than Myers suggests. It is notable that the GameSpot and Amazon samples display broadly equal levels and kinds of attention to the contemporary resonances of the geopolitical context of *Generals*, rather than any greater leaning towards this dimension being indicated by what might be expected to be the less specialist group. There is certainly little basis for assuming many of those who put real-world significations into play in their responses to be novice or initial players, judging by the nature of their comments about gameplay or the general level of familiarity demonstrated with the franchise and/or genre (a question of this kind might be asked about the reviewer quoted above who refused to play as the GLA, and thus did not have the chance to get beyond the initial stages in that part of the game, but no ground for

such a general categorization of the player is clear from the rest of his response, relatively brief though it is). It may be that *Generals* should be considered something of a special case, given the unusually pressing nature and potent resonances of some of the contextual material in the years after 9/11, but this remains to be established. As far as the deployment of issues of narrative is concerned, the balance is in fact reversed, story being cited by twice as many GameSpot as Amazon respondents, although the significance of these figures are complicated by the fact that this is in many examples a question of story-as-related-to-entry-in-the-series.

How far the two samples can be attributed to significantly different constituencies of game-players remains far from certain. The quantitative breakdown of results in the categories I have singled out for analysis is substantially similar in some key dimensions (and broadly so in some areas on which I have not focused in this paper, including, for example, the number who comment on the multiplayer mode of play). The most striking area of discrepancy, which might support the argument for some difference in the overall nature of the samples, is found in the extent to which attention is paid to technical issues relating to the game, specifically the processor, memory and graphics-card requirements for successful installation and play on the domestic PC. This issue is raised by approximately one-third of Amazon respondents (31 per cent in general, rising to 34.7 per cent including additional respondents who cite the issue specifically in relation to the multiplayer options), compared with equivalent figures of seven and nine per cent from GameSpot. The majority of those who raise the issue on Amazon do so in the reporting of technical difficulties, many suggesting that the 'minimum specification' indicating in the packaging is less than that really required for success (although this is refuted by a small number who respond directly to the comments of others and report no such problems). This might be taken to suggest that the GameSpot reviewers are in general better equipped, with higher-end machines, which would fit with the hypothesis that they are likely to be more serious or committed players.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the range and scope of the reviews posted on GameSpot and Amazon.com is variable, the more so for the potentially more diverse constituency of the latter. Some reviews are quite narrow in focus, offering brief qualitative judgements or the expression of singular concerns that seem to eclipse an interest in commenting on any other aspect of

the game, whether that be the result of technical problems in the case of a significant number of Amazon respondents or the political discomfort expressed by a minority of each group. Perhaps the most significant finding, although no great surprise, is that many reviewers devote attention, relatively brief or more sustained, to a plurality of different dimensions, with or without the greater prompting to do so that is found on the GameSpot interface. This seems to support the argument made by Krzywinska and myself that gameplay is, essentially, a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and experienced as such by large numbers of players. The relative importance of one dimension or another may vary from player to player, but a widespread tendency in these responses is an ability to shift across a non-exclusive range of points of reference and grounds for comparison and evaluation. Dimensions such as the heightened external-world geopolitical background of *Command and Conquer: Generals* might figure only as a minority strain, but no clear dividing line can be drawn between the expression of issues associated with this and with other levels of engagement

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