Ludocriticism -
Steps Towards a Critical Framework for Games

Hartmut Koenitz

HkU University of the Arts Utrecht
Postbus 1520
3500 BM Utrecht, The Netherlands
hartmut.koenitz@hku.nl

Mirjam Palosaari Eladhari

Södertörn University
Alfred Nobels allé 7
141 89 Huddinge, Sweden
mirjam.palosaari.eladhari@sh.se

Keywords

Game critique, frameworks, ludocriticism

INTRODUCTION

An essential aspect of an established mediated form of expression is well-developed critique. Literary and cinematic works are reflected by professional critics in broadsheet newspapers and other outlets. This kind of criticism is crucial in educating the public, in shaping public opinion, in discovering new talent and in influencing future productions. The important function of critique is well recognized for literature, the cinema, theatre, and the fine arts and consequently some critics become famous in their own right, e.g. the late US movie critic Roger Ebert. In contrast, game criticism is still a rarity in the same outlets, and mostly happens in specialized magazines, blogs, YouTube channels and the trade press. This fact alone means that games are relegated to the margins of cultural production. The absence of mainstream game critique translates into a lack of recognition – for someone not connected to games as a scholar, indie game designer or member of the games industry, games are mostly cheap entertainment and even many avid gamers are careful to hide their "low brow hobby" from colleagues and relatives. Our approach in this paper is not to propose yet another novel analytical model, but to draw attention to a more general problem with many existing approaches and to discuss what we consider to be a crucially missing part of the puzzle, the lack of a framework for games criticism. Finally, we propose steps to fill that void.

WHAT IS MISSING?

The lack of well-developed games criticism can be traced to two separate, yet interconnected issues: 1.) The uncritical reliance on analytical frameworks developed for expressive forms other than games and 2.) a scarcity of efforts in developing critical semantic/pragmatic/aesthetic frameworks for video games. In the following sections we will explore both of these aspects.

Limitations of Existing Frameworks

Vocabulary developed to analyze pre-digital and unchangeable artifacts is still often used to describe computer games. We see the use of textual analysis for games (Fernández-Vara 2014), the notion of "close playing" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011) inherited from close reading or the use of vocabulary from film studies like "scene", "framing" or "mis en scene" in game analysis. Indeed, this might be the problem underlying the narratology vs. ludology debate (Frasca 1999; Juul 1999; Aarseth 2001; J. Murray 2004; Jenkins 2004), and something that Aarseth has been later warning about (Aarseth 2012), but one that still has not been properly addressed (Koenitz 2018). To this day, many terms in frequent use in game analysis are borrowed from other disciplines, used often with little discussion of their original meaning and context. For example, the notion of patterns (Bjork and Holopainen 2005) is taken from architecture (Alexander 1977), but the question whether game design actually resembles architecture well enough to apply the concept without modification needs further investigation. Similarly, textual analysis is proposed as sophisticated framework to analyze games (Fernández-Vara 2014), yet again, there is little discussion whether games are "texts" in the same way literary artifacts are. If we agree that playing is neither reading, nor planning and building a house, we need to address the question whether these frameworks are adequate to describe video games. In that sense, the ludological project remains unfinished.

Critical Frameworks

The focus of early work in games studies was on distinguishing games from earlier forms and on defining what games are, but less on the development of specific instruments and vocabulary to contextualize and critique them. In that sense, much existing work can be understood as *functional* in contrast to *semantic/pragmatic/aesthetic*. Functional frameworks describe what a phenomenon is, while semantic/pragmatic/aesthetic frameworks concern themselves with meaning, context and artistic value. For the field of narratology, Gerald Prince describes the scope of existing frameworks as functional: "for narratology, there are no great, or beautiful, or profound narratives (there are only well-formed ones)." (Prince 1982) Similarly, existing frameworks for games can be classified as functional in that they are focused on describing foundational models and essential elements of video games. The lack we focus on is therefore on frameworks that help us to identify aesthetically accomplished, deeply meaningful and societal relevant video games. It is precisely these categories that criticism of more established forms focuses on - we do not read about what a novel or a movie *is*, but whether a particular one is accomplished in its presentation speaks to the audience and offers insights into the human condition.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

Prince (ibid) points out that no general theory of meaning exist and thus a grand semantic/pragmatic/aesthetic theory might be elusive for the time being. Yet, this does not mean that we should give up hope on developing critical frameworks entirely.

Indeed, work in several important areas can be recast as elements of what we might describe as a critical meta-framework. Perspectives on gender-related aspects (Cassell and Jenkins 2000; Consalvo 2012; Ruberg and Shaw 2017) provide ways to analyze games in a societal context, while work on video games ethics (Sicart 2011) and religious aspects (Bosman

2016) add perspectives on these dimensions. Ethnographic perspectives help to appreciate the production process e.g. (O'Donnell 2014; Hagen 2010; Zackariasson 2007), and to understand how games are approached by players (Taylor 2003; Taylor and Witkowski 2010). Further understanding of how games are appreciated by players can be gained through analysis of 2nd order narratives of play (re-tellings), such as fan-fiction (Eladhari 2018). Biographical perspectives (Rosenthal 2004; Neustaedter and Sengers 2012; Khaled et al. 2018), as well as postmortems written by developers and researchers, can add dimensions to appreciate the artistic goals of the creators. From the perspective of a critical framework, Juul's "Art of failure" (Juul 2013) identifies an important aesthetic element, that of failure. He thus adds a game-specific dimension to Murray's general aesthetic qualities of interactive experiences: immersion, agency and transformation (J. H. Murray 1997).

WHAT IS MISSING?

Given that many elements of a critical framework exists, we might wonder what is actually missing? Two aspects, we argue: first, a more holistic perspective that understands diverse analytical approaches as dimensions of an overarching critical meta-framework applicable to many different games. Secondly, a translation process making academically written critical perspectives more accessible to game creators and the general public. While such an effort might be criticized as a "watering down" of academic writing, it also has the potential to greatly increase the impact of games studies with developers and the general public. We see these as two necessary steps towards developing an impactful critical framework for games.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aarseth, Espen. 2001. "Computer game studies, year one." *Game studies* 1 (1): 1–15.

———. 2012. "A narrative theory of games." In *Proceedings of the international conference on the foundations of digital Games,* 129–133. ACM.

Alexander, Christopher. 1977. *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction.* Oxford university press.

Bizzocchi, Jim, and Joshua Tanenbaum. 2011. "Well read: Applying close reading techniques to gameplay experiences." In *Well played 3.0,* 262–290. ETC Press.

Bjork, Staffan., and Jussi. Holopainen. 2005. *Patterns in game design.* 1st ed. Charles River Media, December. ISBN: 1-58450-354-8.

Bosman, Frank. 2016. "The Word Has Become Game: Researching Religion in Digital Games" [in English]. *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 11:28–45. ISSN: 1861-5813.

Cassell, Justine, and Henry Jenkins. 2000. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: gender and computer games.* MIT press.

Consalvo, Mia. 2012. "Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology,* no. 1.

Eladhari, Mirjam Palosaari. 2018. "Re-Tellings: The Fourth Layer of Narrative as an Instrument for Critique." In *Interactive Storytelling,* edited by Rebecca Rouse, Hartmut Koenitz, and Mads Haahr, 65–78. Cham: Springer International Publishing. ISBN: 978-3-030-04028-4.

Fernández-Vara, Clara. 2014. *Introduction to game analysis.* Routledge.

Frasca, Gonzalo. 1999. "Ludology meets narratology: Similitude and differences between (video) games and narrative." *Ludology. org.*

Hagen, Ulf. 2010. "Designing for Player Experience: How Professional Game Developers Communicate Design Visions." In *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players.* Stockholm: Digital Games Research Association.

Jenkins, Henry. 2004. "Game design as narrative." *Computer* 44:53.

Juul, Jesper. 1999. "A Clash between Game and Narrative - A thesis on computer games and interactive fiction." Thesis (Master's), University of Copenhagen.

———. 2013. *The art of failure: An essay on the pain of playing video games.* Mit Press.

Khaled, Rilla, Jonathan Lessard, and Pippin Barr. 2018. "Documenting trajectories in design space: a methodology for applied game design research" [in en]. In *Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games - FDG '18,* 1–10. Malmö, Sweden: ACM Press. ISBN: 978-1-4503-6571-0. `http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=3235765.3235767`.

Koenitz, Hartmut. 2018. "Narrative in Video Games." In *Encyclopedia of Computer Graphics and Games,* 1–9. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Murray, Janet. 2004. "From game-story to cyberdrama." *First person: New media as story, performance, and game* 1:2–11.

Murray, Janet H. 1997. *Hamlet on the Holodeck.* The Free Press.

Neustaedter, Carman, and Phoebe Sengers. 2012. "Autobiographical design: what you can learn from designing for yourself" [in en]. *interactions* 19, no. 6 (November): 28. ISSN: 10725520. `http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=2377783.2377791`.

O'Donnell, Casey. 2014. *Developer's dilemma: The secret world of videogame creators.* MIT press.

Prince, Gerald. 1982. "Narrative analysis and narratology." *New Literary History* 13 (2): 179–188.

Rosenthal, Gabriele. 2004. "Biographical research." *Qualitative research practice:* 48–64.

Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw. 2017. *Queer game studies.* U of Minnesota Press.

Sicart, Miguel. 2011. *The ethics of computer games.* MIT Press.

Taylor, T L, and Emma Witkowski. 2010. "This Is How We Play It : What a Mega-LAN Can Teach Us About Games." In *Proceedings of the fifth international conference on the foundations of digital games,* 195–202.

Taylor, TL. 2003. "Power Gamers Just Want To Have Fun?: Instrumental Play In A MMOG." In *Level Up Games Conference Proceedings,* edited by M. Copier and J. Raessens.

Zackariasson, Peter. 2007. "World builders: a study on the development of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game" [in English]. PHD Thesis, Umeå University.