

Internally Enacted Narratives: Jonathan Blow's The Witness

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ABSTRACT

Under what circumstances should a humanities or social sciences scholar consider making a game, rather than a text? Given that the goals of academic writing include communicating research results to peers (and at times the public), arguments along proceduralist lines have been successful in claiming that games are worthwhile academic objects insofar as they can represent ideas in novel ways (see Bogost, 2007). For instance, games might communicate in otherwise impossible or quicker ways than text. I am sympathetic to these arguments, but propose an alternate case in which games are worth pursuing. We can make games as experiments, performing the results of our assumptions. Here, games are leveraged for their ability produce unexpected situations, despite known rules and starting states.

In 1950, in arguing for the possibility of artificial intelligence, Alan Turing explained that there is a common fallacy made by philosophers and mathematicians alike, "This is the assumption that as soon as a fact is presented to a mind all consequences of that fact spring into the mind simultaneously with it" (451). Games in this case are like facts, whose ramifications are unknown until played. Put another way, games can demonstrate emergence. Briefly, this approach belongs to a very rich lineage stemming Turing's work, where John Von Neumann would propose the field of cellular automata, and later John Conway would develop out of that field *The Game of Life*. Bill Gosper would win Conway's prize offered to whoever could create a finite pattern with infinite growth. His "glider gun," would serve to demonstrate that unexpected complexity could emerge over time from simple rules (Rendell 17). While Conway's *Life* is called a game, it has 0 players and demonstrates very abstract ideas in mathematics. I propose here that games with one or more players can be setup according to social science and humanities research and then play out the results of those findings. The claim here is that games can work as scientific experiments do, validating or calling into question methods, assumptions, and findings.

The proposed talk offers a concretized example of this line of argument by exploring a game-experiment of my own. In *The Amalgamated*, players are expected to reconfigure nodes and edges in a graph in order to act on a system. In this case, the nodes and edges are preconfigured in a way which represents the state of Montreal's labour movement in 1915-1920. Gathering information using Actor-Network Theory (ANT) methodologies, the game attempts to model the various actors as nodes and their influences on each other as edges. Players take on the roles of a given entity and attempt to exert influence in ways that favour its accumulation of capital and labour. In this way,

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the game allows the player to recombine data according to politicized rules created by my own interpretations of my findings.

I have selected actor-network theory as a methodological approach because of its affinities to game design. Namely that both games and ANT can represent the world as a series of agents (both human and non-human) acting on one another in systems that change over time. ANT is a method for crafting a networked representation of a given sociological problem that models the unexpected properties of human and nonhuman agents acting on each other. In *Reassembling the Social*, Latour asks: “How to *deploy* the many controversies about associations without restricting in advance the social to a specific domain?”; “How to render fully traceable the means allowing actors to *stabilize* those controversies”; and “Through which *procedures* is it possible to reassemble the social not in a society but a collective?” (16). For example, in *The Pasteurization of France*, Latour takes all of the academic publications in four journals over a period of time to explore Louis Pasteur’s rise. Here Latour places bacilli, Pasteur, cows, syringes, doctors, journals, hygienists, politicians, waterways, labs, etc. in relation to one another and constructs a narrative for each explaining how they play off, reinforce or teardown each other for their own gains.

I approach experiment-game design in the same way that Latour points to controversies at a moment in time, generates lists of actors and then considers how each affects the others and their behaviour. Representation of the multiple crises that arose in the 1910s regarding the labour movement, trace a multiplicity of actors and create lines of influence from each to the others they affect. In this way, I have a dynamic system with unexpected properties where affecting one node risks affecting others and so on. *The Amalgamated* limits its gathering similarly by focusing on documents recovered from The Canadian Jewish Congress Charities Committee National Archives, The Jewish Public Library Archives of Montreal, and The Congregation Shaar Hashomayim Museum and Archives and supplementing it with historical works on the period. The resulting network includes a variety of actors including factory owners, factory workers, cardinals, churches, *landsmannschaften* (Jewish mono-lingual community centers), newspapers, bullets, federal parties, municipal governments, uniforms, and European soldiers.

Keywords

Serious Games, Experiment-Game, Labour Movements, Actor-Network Theory

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