The Question of Computer Games

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A short, speculative account of the state of play in the formation of a discipline or field of computer games studies. The processes of academic teaching, research, and institutional positioning in regard to computer games are viewed from the perspective of wider currents and crises influencing knowledge formation today. It is argued that the different approaches to computer games cannot ignore the differences in their conceptions of the object of study in a naive pluralism. These different conceptions of games as parts of the technocultural milieu must encounter each other in the name of the struggle against the avoidance of critical thought concerning the nature and forms of technoculture that often prevails in the production of specialist "knowledge" today.

Keywords: *computer games; disciplinarity; reason; technoculture*

Freud more or less says that all the questions impulsively posed by children serve as relays for the one they do not pose, which is the question of the origin. In the same way, we interrogate ourselves about everything, in order to sustain and advance the passion of the question, but all questions are directed toward one question alone—the central question, or the question of the whole.

—Maurice Blanchot (1993, pp. 11-12)

The discipline of a short text to say what should be done in (or by) the study of computer games, what it has yet to do, and what it has done poorly allows for only an allusive, speculative response. Limitation is of course rightly acknowledged as an agent of effective and creative accomplishment, so I should accept this word length restriction as a gift rather than as a liability for at least giving me the opportunity (if not the guarantee) of accomplishment.[1] Paradoxically however, such a restriction inevitably causes the scope of my speculations to expand in inverse proportion to the shortening of word length, away from a reasonable, limited "intervention" in one or two areas of computer game research and toward the whole field of games studies—including the question of the possibility of the unified field—in its encounter with the young life of computer games. This dynamic and its paradoxical nature however are closely related to the question of computer games that I want to frame here for the community of researchers anticipated by the launch of this journal.

Computer games have been a significant cultural form for about 30 years. The scholarly, critical study of computer games is maybe 20 years old, and to argue for this figure (over others, e.g., Espen Aarseth's announcement in 2001 of "year one" of computer game studies), we already need more space to explore the histories and competing patrimonies of game study in different disciplinary fields such as simulation and gaming, education, social science, computer science, human-computer interaction, and video game theory.[2] "We"—and as we will see it is a question precisely of the nature and identity of the *we*—are therefore concerned with a "new" form of entertainment, expression, learning, art, community, and so forth, a form that has more recently provoked attention in academic networks of knowledge production, marketing, and dissemination.[3] The novelty of the phenomenon or rather, phenomena of computer games, and the variety and increasing volume of descriptive, categorizing, critical, and applied research directed toward these phenomena make it very difficult to make broad summative statements about the merits and shortcomings of existing games studies work.

What is happening today is that a plurality of game studies is developing in which different conceptions of the object of study operate in the various disciplinary and regional configurations of academic communities interested in computer games. We see the emergence of multiple conference circuits, publication opportunities, research funding avenues and interdisciplinary research center collaborations, different industry affiliations and community linkages, and so on. At the recent Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference hosted by Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Changing Views: Worlds in Play, this process of the multiplication and division of games studies was in evidence both within the conference program and in the areas of intense activity on games research not represented (or underrepresented) there, such as work from the older gaming and simulation field, game programming and artificial intelligence research, and so on. The point is not that this is a failing of Changing Views or of DiGRA, an organization that sees itself as promoting a catholic, inclusive approach to the variety of games research. It is rather that no conference could include the diversity of games research in any coherent fashion because the diversity of "computer games" as objects defined by different disciplinary frameworks of pertinence tends toward Babel and not toward a synthesizing perspective on what underlies this diversity.

"We" should, many may respond (as some have in e-list discussions and elsewhere), celebrate this diversity, respect the different beliefs and conceptions of the nature of computer games and the stakes of researching them. There is in this view no single essence of computer games, such is the variety of genres of games, game-playing hardware and contexts of use, and modes of game play. Or at least we should be realistic and accept that this is the way the institutional context of knowledge production is today, that it will unfold in a manner that will take care of itself, that the work of real value in the various versions of game studies will rise to the surface, that there will be some productive interchange between ludic *Weltanschauungs*, and so forth. I am one of these, one of "us," insofar as this means I identify with the illusion of this future community of scholars. One of the most heartwarming experiences I had at

Changing Views was at the panel where Shanly Dixon's and Bart Simon's critical theoretical and ethnographically researched critique of the "third space" figure influencing games studies was juxtaposed with Dmitri Williams's and Constance Steinkuehler's social science–based exploration mobilizing this very figure in a totally different disciplinary perspective.[4] Having said that, this panel did not so much evince a communicative interchange across epistemological frames as an encounter in good faith between incommensurables, an experience not so much of productive exchange as of the sharing of unworkable difference.

On the other hand, I have a problem with this, with this "we" that imagines diversity and plurality will eventually constitute the "we" for the best, for the good of knowledge, for the community at large. This problem and its elaboration have a history. It was identified by Edmund Husserl (1936/1970) in his last book, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, in which he examined the fragmentation of knowledge production into so many specialized compartments of the academy, each asserting its own objective validity. In Husserl's view, the conflict between the notion of reason as universal principle underlying all human understanding and the multiplication of specific and therefore individual, unique, and incommensurable rational programs across the different disciplinary fields of the modern university lies at the heart of this crisis. Specialized applications of reason that resist and conflict with other expert knowledges undermine the universality of reason as foundational principle of human knowledge. In *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, Derrida (2005) reads Husserl's assertion of a sovereign principle of universal reason ambivalently, exploring the aporia between the productive development of different knowledges, a situation problematic for universal notions of truth and communicability (and hence of community), and the transcendental notion of reason, a notion allowing for the possibility of commonality, community, and universality, but itself always harboring a relation to partiality, and to a violent imposition of a particular order of thought (of the universal), traceable to its appeal to sovereignty, that is, to an auto-foundation in its own intrinsic power and authority.[5]

Derrida's (2005) answer to the crisis is typically infuriating for those seeking certainty in an unequivocal "answer" as such, including for myself as representative of the "we" of game studies. He said one can justly neither simply reject the specialization of knowledges nor abandon the idea of a universal rationality with its promise of truth and human commonality and community. Nor can one simply avoid this paradox of the general and the particular by proposing a relativist acceptance of multiple truths, a position blind to its own internal contradiction inasmuch as relativism becomes the new and only nonrelativizable principle. The aphoristic solution he leaves us with here is that it is necessary instead to "reason with reason." What would this mean? This is another "bridge too far" for this little text, but more particularly, what would it mean for "us" here, faced with the proliferation of game studies, of which this new journal is representative and in respect to which it is aiming to provide effective orientation for its readers?

Here I have the time and the inclination to propose one answer, and no doubt both of these preconditions reveal something of the problem of partiality and totality that I have been outlining here on behalf of "us," as if I have the authority to speak thus

(which of course I do, prospectively, inasmuch as I am published in this journal of the scholarly community of game studies researchers envisaged during its production). To acknowledge reflexively that my scholarly meditation on the state of game studies is not impartial, not a product of pure, disinterested reason, but bears the marks of my predilections and my (and "our") career aspirations does not of itself guarantee a transparency through which the universal can be discerned behind the particularities of my take on the question before "us." It does at least foreground the positionality of the position I am asserting in and through my answer to the question of how to reason with reason in describing what is to be done in game studies.

My answer therefore follows the lead of Bernard Stiegler's (2001) challenge to fight the undermining of critical thought today (and it is for him a *lutte*, a contest or a struggle). In "Our Ailing Educational Institutions," Stiegler develops an account of the malaise affecting university education in France and elsewhere, an account with strong parallels to Husserl's 1930s discussion of the state of the European sciences.[6] His response is to insist on the necessity of proposing synthesizing accounts of phenomena rather than to remain mired in a state of disenchantment with the viability of interpretations capable of providing an integrated comprehension of diverse phenomena and events. These integrating accounts can of course, he argued, be challenged, questioned, modified, or rejected—indeed they must be—but it is the increasing absence of these theoretical ventures that is paralyzing for critical thought. What results is what he calls a disorientation, function of the increasing failure of contemporary knowledge production to provide an orienting perspective (or at least the possibility of one among others). Such a perspective interprets the origin—the "dawn" of the orient out of which "we" have come to be—of the existing state of things so that the nature and potentiality of the future provided to "us" precisely in and as the factical heritage of things (including computer games) are accessible through spatio-temporal coordinates that open up some way of adopting these things and not simply adapting to them.[7] For this is the alternative tendency today, one that I see across many aspects of games studies research inasmuch as it issues from these "ailing institutions," a tendency that is provided by a kind of "default" orientation to the things of contemporary technoculture, one involving instrumental acclimatization, uncritical subscription to projected innovations in computer and communications technologies, extension of the purview of information networks in the regulation of cultural, economic, and military processes, and so forth.

I would argue then that the questions posed in academic research about computer games are "relays" as Blanchot (1993) would say for the question of the origin, the whole of computer games, that is, of the nature of computer games as part of technocultural "life" today, its origin and therefore its telos or endpoint. This question animates all computer game research, however specific, specialist, conditional, and qualified its parameters, purview, and methodology. Consequently, I would call for a more rigorous and reasoned addressal of the dynamics of this animating process by "we" game studies experts. This would allow "us" to reason with the diverse "reasons" animating the proliferation of games studies research and development.

What is at stake when computer games are described as a "subgenre" of simulation? What does it mean to use a cybernetic term such as *feedback loop* in portraying game play dynamics? What is the "whole" implicated in the adoption of systems theory to discuss interactivity and player engagement? What orientations to the factical givens of computer game objects and routines of use are provided in the different notions of media, entertainment, learning, "virtual presence," "experience design," and so forth that circulate in different zones of computer games scholarship? What is the enduring legacy in computer games of the military technoscience that brought the digital computer into existence? Most of these terms and these wider questions relate not only to the study of computer games but to other technocultural forms, but that is one of the points to be grasped here. Of course, many researchers work at this level of the relation of computer games to other technocultural forms. Beyond that however, the thinking of technocultural forms, including all those emanating from today's defining technology, must also always be led to an interrogation of technoculture, culture, technology, and "life" today and into the future. For every thing "we" make—computer games themselves and the research we do about them (which also "makes" them)—is an answer to the question of "life." It does these things no justice to think any the less of them.

Notes

1. And this perhaps in the Derridean sense of gift, one which can only truly be a gift when it cannot be recognized as such by either the donor or the recipient, thereby escaping any fall into an economy of indebtedness.

2. See Ben Talbot's (2001) review of the International Games Cultures conference.

3. This assertion of the "newness" of computer games is made with acknowledgement of the legitimacy of debates over the paternity of computer games in other audiovisual media and in other mediations of games.

4. Shanly Dixon and Bart Simon, *Boyhood Spaces: Play and Social Navigation Through Video Games*, and Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams, *Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as "Third Places,"* were in the Boyhood Spaces/Third Places panel at DiGRA 2005: Changing Views: Worlds in Play (Vancouver, June 2005).

5. For reasons already given, my brutally short summary here does violence to the detailed and resonant reading of Husserl performed by Derrida (2005) in the essay titled "Teleology and Architectonic: The Neutralization of the Event" in that book.

6. Somewhat inexplicably, two thirds only of this essay are translated into English under the same title in *Culture Machine* (2003), available at http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/frm_f1.htm. Unfortunately, the last third of the essay is where Stiegler articulated his polemic about what is to be done about the illness of education today.

7. See Steigler (1996) for a more substantial discussion of this notion of disorientation.

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