The Pleasures and Dangers of the Game

Up Close and Personal

Tanya Krzywinska
Brunel University

What are the pleasures and the dangers of the way that the study of digital games has crystallized over the past 3 years? The author argues here that a pluralistic approach is required if the full complexity of games is to be addressed and analyzed, and as such, textual approaches to the analysis games should not be dismissed no matter what the particular focus of attention. To understand a game's design, the way it seeks to shape the player's experience and to make the game meaningful, it is essential to take account of the formal features of a given game. Being up close and personal forces one to think through the specificities of a game and what it is like to play that game. The author therefore advocates a combination of a formal and phenomenological approach as a means of exploring the complex relationship between game text and player.

Keywords: game play; textual analysis; phenomenology; power; pleasure

I'm on my way to Iron Forge from the night-elf outpost of Astranaar; it's quite a journey, involving running, catching a boat, and flying on a hypogryff. My bags are full of booty robbed from the newly slain, and I'm looking to trade it for a stave with better stats. Sitting astride the hypogryff, I type my elation to guild friends about the sensational experience of flying over the spectacular patchwork world of Azeroth in real time. My mind teems with choices between tasks, sorting what has priority among a host of competing demands. World of Warcraft continues to draw my thoughts when I am not playing, perhaps more fully than I'd like; I find myself thinking about the game when I should be focused on other things, and these thoughts are often present in my conversations and lectures. The many hours I spend hunched over the keyboard, the toleration of aching shoulders, the way the game has crept under my cerebral skin testifies to some of the powerful pleasures of digital games. It is the pleasures of playing games—how they are generated through the particular configuration of a game and what they speak of personally as well as in broader cultural terms—that drives the engine for my particular interest in games. Keyed into this is consideration of what makes a "good," pleasure-generating game, which is of course contingent on a range of cultural, formal, and industrial circumstances (including the cultural organization of taste, gender, age, identity). What this approach to digital games offers is useful for

the industry seeking to broaden its market and offer innovative products but also to the academic and general community concerned with the impact of games on the social and cultural landscape. It may be a personal approach, it may not be empirical or technical, but it is intent on understanding the lure of games and the subjective experience of playing them.

With the evolution in digital games into mainstream media it is not perhaps surprising that academics from different disciplinary backgrounds have become interested in theorizing, measuring, and developing them. In a recent column written for the Digital Games Research Association's (DiGRA) *hardcore*, Frans Mäyrä (2005) called for universities to adopt game studies as a new discipline. Many of us welcome this type of validation of our research, and I for one look forward to a time when I don't have to smuggle games into my film courses under the rubric of *genre*. What I fear however is that if all game research is done within dedicated departments a kind of new orthodoxy of approach will crystallize. This may be the price of the development of our subject. It might mean blindsiding those who are for example engaged with philosophy or political economy because they are not essential, apparently, to running practical game design programs. There must always be room in the research community for newcomers from whatever background, who may bring ideas that challenge new orthodoxies.

A range of recent articles in a number of fora has focused on the state of play in game studies (seemingly a more popular topic of interest than studies of individual games). Laudably, many advocate learning from each other. Dialogue and argument work to create a thriving and vibrant research community. In some cases, old debates about the values of disciplinary approaches are resurrected; if the focus on games enables old debates to be seen in a new light, it's good news, but straight rehashing without consideration of the specificities of games should be avoided. Divisions can prove productive and positive but under certain circumstances become negative. The polarization of debates into extremes produces divisive factionalism—sidelining work of a dissimilar type in peer review is a form of grief-play perhaps. Polarization arises in part from the institutional context of competition within which we work. The effect is that subtleties are flattened out and the exploration of byways likely to be closed off, particularly when they are speculative and involve experimental thinking. In short, vistas become narrowed. Academia is now industry focused, funding hungry, and biased toward empiricism and entrepreneurialism; as a result, speculative and idiosyncratic work that values intellectual inquiry is becoming an endangered species. If experimental thinking is devalued, academia becomes a less interesting place to work and study. All approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, and each formulate issues and perspectives according to particular rhetorics. Power and pleasure are not therefore simply a dynamic at work in the playing of games. Speculative approaches have their place and are essential components in making game studies a rich, evolving, and multifaceted entity. It is therefore imperative for a research body such as DiGRA to remain committed to encouraging dialogue between researchers and ensuring that all "flavors" of game research are represented, accommodated, and supported.

As a result no doubt of an arts background, my approach to games is based on the analysis of the player/text relationship. Counter perhaps to the general trend, I regard

this relationship as central to ludology, and it ties into the address of broader questions about games as cultural artifacts and agents. Any game has a set of "textual" features and devices; a game is a formal construct that provides the environmental, stylistic, generic, structural, and semiotic context for play. Images, audio, formal structures, the balance of play, the capabilities of in-game objects and characters are all features that operate "textually." The concerted action of a game's textual strategies facilitate, at least in part, the generation of emotional, physical, and cognitive engagement, shaping the player's experience of game play and making it meaningful. To understand design, the way it seeks to shape the player's experience, and to evaluate the values of a game, it is important to conduct a detailed textual analysis. Being up close and personal with a given game forces you to think through its specificity, helping thereby to ensure against the temptations of overgeneralization and testing the validity of top-down analyses of "games" as a general category. Even empirical studies of gamers might benefit from such analysis, necessary if they are to understand the role of differ-ent player styles and the ways players might subvert "preferred" modes of play and interpretation.

It is often assumed that the textual refers to the noninteractive aspects of games; this appears to come from the understandable desire to look at games as games in their own right. It is certainly the case that the functionality of games marks them off from other media. The analysis of a game as text takes into account all formal aspects of a game, including all those factors in play in the way that functionality operates in the games. What we have here is a means of focusing intently on what is offered by the text to the player, the extent to which a game enables the player to bring things to the game—either in terms of play or interpretation—and the types and sources of pleasures on offer. Games demand things of the player in ways that other texts do not, but the performative doing aspect of games is always located in a particular "environmental" context; these differ, as does the amount of freedom to play or interpret in a given game. The analysis of the game as text means that it is approached as an aesthetic form, but not in the same way as other texts. The focus is on the relationships between text and player in terms of game play, design, style, reception, and cultural/semantic context. To regard games as texts does not therefore mean simply that they are stories.

What I enjoy about playing games is the sense of being an agent in a textually rich and coherent game world. Empirical studies are useful for finding generalizable facts about gaming, but rarely are they able to capture the experiential breadth of being-and-doing-in-the-game-world. My work aims to engage in detail with the ways that experi-ence is constituted between player agency and textual determination, as well as taking into account intertextual, cultural, and epistemological resonances that are likely to come into play. This combination of textual and performative analysis is grounded in phenomenology, which allows a very up-close and personal engagement with the specificities of games and the ways they are keyed into much larger issues about the way that fantasy and pleasure are configured and expressed. This type of approach might produce strange fruit, fruit that might not prove to be generalizable or grounded in objective analysis. Nonetheless, speculative engagement may well produce insights not available via other approaches to games. This might help toward a more open

understanding of what makes a game, why games are appealing, how they operate in terms of identity, interpretation, and "effects" on behavior.

Research bodies such as DiGRA, designed to champion the value of game studies, have a responsibility to promote and nurture a range of approaches, including "softer," more speculative approaches. It could be argued that an evolutionary process might be at work—theories and approaches that yield little of direct use in technical terms to the industry or attracting funding die out. But, this would not be good evolution because it is based on a bias toward certain investments (discursive or financial). If lone researchers in non–game studies departments or who don't swim in the current of the new orthodoxies are left without acknowledgement or community sustenance, then the game studies of the future will be a far less rich and interesting place.

Reference

Mäyrä, F. (2005). *The quiet revolution: Three theses for the future of game studies*. Retrieved May 2005 from http://www.digra.org/hardcore/hc4

Tanya Krzywinska is a reader in film and TV studies at Brunel University. As well as editing *hardcore*, she is the author of *A Skin for Dancing in: Possession, Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film* (Flicks Books, 2000), *Sex and the Cinema* (Wallflower Press, in press), coauthor of *Science Fiction Cinema* (Wallflower Press, 2000), *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (IB Tauris, in press), and coeditor of *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces* (Wallflower Press, 2002). She is currently editing *Videogames/ Text/Player* with Barry Atkins (MUP), has recently begun work on *Imaginary Worlds: A Cross-Media Study of the Aesthetic, Formal and Interpolative Strategies of Virtual Worlds in Popular Media*, and is currently developing an MA program in video game design.