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Jessica Laney

MMAS 490
Senior Proseminar / History of New Media
April 28, 2009

Final paper

Action and Agency in Videogames: An Argument against Narratology

As an increasingly popular part of contemporary culture, videogames represent a relatively new kind of creative medium alongside books, television, radio, and movies. To the end of placing the videogame medium in cultural context with other forms of human expression, commonalities have been drawn between the strong narrative presence in other mediums and the narrative component of games. However, the use of narratological systems to interpret and criticize games is not sufficient, even when modified to fit games' use of interactivity. The unique forms of authorship, interaction, learning systems, and immersion experiences found with videogames requires a different, more specific type of analysis than that used for movies, books, and other creative products involving narrative. Narrative deconstructions of videogames fail to accurately interpret the experience of gaming, as the interactive reading of narrative, the psychological experience of gameplay, and the systems analysis of game rules are important aspects poorly translated into a narrative reading.

Videogames have evolved as a medium of the digital age, seeing their origins in analog or 'physical' gaming (tabletop games, board games, card games, sports, etc), written literature, and cinema. They began as student projects, and evolved along with the machinery that ran them, from room-sized computers to arcades to home consoles and

home PCs. The movement of the computer from public to private space affected the types of games created, and to who and how they were created. The earliest ancestry of videogames includes such hobbyist-made titles as *Spacewar!*(1961) and *Tennis for Two*(1959) (“History of Video Games,” Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia), in which simple conflict-based gameplay occurred between two players. Much of the interaction with these games was similar to what happens in sports, human opponents compete for victory within a determined rule set using physical and mental skill, but videogames are different by the inclusion of authorship, i.e. the design and space of the game as determined by the programmer.

As videogames evolved development shifted from hobbyists and pure programmers to teams that sought more integration with the movie and music industries (“History of Video Games,” Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia). With this shift as well as advancements in the technology itself, mainstream videogames changed as well, from the ‘arcade’ style of the ‘70s and ‘80s such as *Space Invaders* or *Pacman*, which more resembled board games and sports in simple, goal-oriented concepts and seemingly infinite replayability, to a gradual buildup of emphasis on story and context for the action in games in the ‘90s and 2000s. This is not to say there were no story-oriented games in the early days of videogames, text-based adventure games such as *Zork* (1980) and even action based adventure games like *King’s Quest* were created as a fusion of narrative and the possibilities of interaction (branching paths, player action story advancement), but the mainstream conception of videogames tied them more with analog games and sport than literary or cinematic traditions.

As time goes on, however, videogames have begun to be developed very closely with the ideas of story and narration. Most contemporary games have strong story components either driving or providing context for player action, and it is through this much of academic game theory has been attempting to translate game experience as a new form of literary experience, much as cinema has been interpreted in the past. Janet Murray, a leader in the advancement of the narrative interpretation of the videogame experience, sees games as a new medium for the age-old craft of storytelling. She points out the similarities in components used by videogames and traditional storytelling, “it is a medium that includes still images, moving images, text, audio, tree-dimensional, navigable space – more of the building blocks of storytelling than any single medium has ever offered us” (Murray, From Game-Story, 2), as well as similarities in the structural components, “The first structure is the contest, the meeting of opponents in pursuit of mutually exclusive aims. This is a structure of human experience [...] The second structure is the puzzle, which can also be seen as a contest between the reader/player and the author/game-designer.” (Murray, From Game-Story, 2). “Cyberdrama” is a word Murray coined to describe the new type of storytelling she saw developing in videogames. The “author” of cyberdrama is the designer, who, as Murray says in Hamlet on the Holodeck, creates the traditional narrative of the story, as well as the immersive environment surrounding it, the “world of narrative possibilities.” (Murray, Hamlet, 153) The relationship between the designer (or designers) of the game and the player in the narrative interpretation is one of co-authorship, wherein the player is able to create his own sub narratives using the tool provided by the author, to enrich and deepen the existing set of narrative scenes.

The use and importance of narration and the narrative component of videogames is indeed important and exciting as a literary development, but the narrative aspect is not the key aspect of videogames, in what makes them essentially interesting or culturally profound in the digital age. Thus, a purely narrative approach to looking at games is not sufficient to exploring their full potential or full experiential impact on people. The component in videogames that separates them so divisively from narrative structures is that of agency. The word 'agency' refers to an individual feeling that his actions have cause and effect in whatever space he is dealing with. Ken Perlin discusses how agency can be experienced in traditional narratives, but only from an observational standpoint as a reader makes an empathetic connection to a character, and then experiences that character's agency in the 3rd person. (Perlin 14)

Agency in videogames, however, provides and indeed relies on the player's action to advance or generate narrative as well as initiate exploration and create immersion. The action in games is both tactile and psychological, as the computer medium provides for direct input-response, from the player's mind to his body to the input device. Perlin says, when comparing fiction novel and videogame systems of characterization, that agency in videogames creates entirely new psychological connections to character, as a player can control the character, so the connection between them can no longer be empathic. "[...]when I walk away from my computer screen, I cannot sustain the fiction that an actual Laura Croft [video game character] continues to exist offstage, because I have not actually experienced her agency. All I have really experienced is *my* agency." (Perlin 15). Rather, a gamer loses the sense that the character is even a character at all, as it becomes an avatar, an agent of the player's will and choice.

The importance of agency in videogames is key to understanding how games are structured so differently from traditional narratives as to warrant their own specific form of interpretation. Agency plays off of the concept of ‘choice’ in games, and that in turn makes the main driving force of the medium ‘action.’ While a novel is read or a movie watched, a videogame is played. This notion of ‘play’ is active, while watching or reading are passive, and action is central to a videogame’s appeal. While Murray states that the computer and game are a new medium for storytelling, where the interactive components of games exist as new tools for expressing narrative, in truth ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ in games are trumped by action and agency, which can be referred to as ‘gameplay.’ Narrative and story elements in videogames are used as a way to justify, support, and create context for action, and the end of a game experience is not in the resolution of narrative conflict, but the resolution of gameplay challenges. The narrative generated by the player is very important to the immersion and agency components of gaming and, though it is ultimately under the control of the game designer to define the parameters, the designer himself may not know all of the options or paths a player might take. Thus, the agency of the player gains more importance, as the player is able to subvert even the imagination of the author (though never the parameters of the code unless by hacking.)

Espen Aarseth, a proponent of ‘ludology’—the study of games as detached from narratology-- holds a similar view as to the relationship between story and games, “Of course, games can be derived from stories (or the cultural mythologies that produce stories, such as espionage), but so can paintings. Surely, games can use stories as inspiration for the gameplay, but this does not mean that the games are derivative the way

a movie adaptation of a novel would be.” (Aarseth 366) But Aarseth then goes further in his supposition, saying that games and stories have different purposes to the reader/player, and that a game becomes a “quasi-game” if the gameplay leads to inevitable conclusions, in other words, a game is less like a game the more it resembles narrative. (Aarseth 366) This strict ludological interpretation has some merit in separating exactly what is videogame from what is narrative, but supposing the complete separation of the two, and setting them in opposition, is not true to the nature of games. While gameplay is tantamount to all other elements in the game experience, story or narrative elements, whether presented in linear scenes or progression, generated by the ‘co-authorship’ of the player, or interpreted from more abstract, open games, are necessary to give the driving force behind the gameplay. While a specific study of games-- ludology-- may be necessary for understanding and interpreting games, this does not mean that videogames and narrative are opposite of each other, but rather are used in synchronism to create an overall meaningful experience.

good
point

Videogames represent a new form of human expression rather than simply a new medium for an old one. While storytelling is and remains an integral component of games, a narrative interpretation of the medium is not enough to express how it affects people and why games are important. Culturally, videogame as an expressionary form represent the increased need for agency, or at least perceived agency, in the digital age. The contemporary consumer desires control of the protagonist, or to ‘be’ the protagonist, rather than the need to learn from an empathetic, observational point of view. The action-reaction loop model in games also creates a sense of lack of consequence, in which all possibilities are delineated, explorable, and subvertible. This desire for all

paths and all control of characters is a product of the abundance of fast-access information, in which an individual must seek, sort, and choose from a large amount of possibilities available in digital form, increasing his ego in relation to the world, and thus his sense of agency. This desire for agency, and the ability (or at least the perceived ability) to take actions with meaningful consequences are reflective of the digital age as opposed to the machine age, and the current mass popularity of games, now rivaling the movie industry in revenue (Jenkins), is a testament to society's changing self-perception.

Contemp. Culture's ^{desire for} Agency is an applicable point, but probably not the best subject matter for summary.

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Social inequalities in online social networking

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4/28/09

Introduction

Social inequalities and stratifications are in some ways perpetuated, and in other ways transcended, through online social networking. The digital divide between those who have obtained internet access and those who have not for lack of resources has been widely discussed. Instead, I will focus more on inequalities among those in developed countries who are able to access the internet. First, I will begin with a background discussion of online communities, social networking, and social inequality. From there, I will move on to a discussion of how social inequality can play out in social networking and the case of the jet-set elite culture. Using my arguments for the possibilities for perpetuation of social inequalities online, I will then discuss the case of aSmallWorld.net as a clear example of social networking inequality and exclusion. Finally, although there are perpetuations of unequal social divisions online, online social networking also offers some hope for lessening of social inequalities. I will end with a brief discussion of online social networking characteristics that can promote greater social equality.

clear, concise intro.

What makes a community?

Community belonging and mobility are important parts of human health, happiness, social, and financial success, but what exactly are communities? According to Urs E. Gattiker in his book, The Internet as a Diverse Community: Cultural, Organizational, and Political Issues, some important characteristic qualities of a community include, but are not limited to:

1. personal relationships making up a social network;
2. simple and open access to the community for interested parties;

3. personal meetings and understanding of each other;
4. dialogue and feedback as well as shared experiences;
5. a common history. (Gattiker, 2001:183)

Each of these characteristics apply to certain online social networks, but not all social networks or social groupings within social networks will share all of these qualities.

Within communities, human beings participate in discourses (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008:257). By simply navigating through life as a part of our culture, social circles, and societal beliefs, we operate within our community's discourses (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008:257). The human elements of the meaningful co-ordinations in discourses include "people's ways of thinking, acting, feeling, moving, dressing, speaking, gesturing, believing, and valuing" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008:257). These human elements of discourses evolve and operate in communities because the members share a common history, experiences, and understandings of each other. Community belonging through participation in discourses affords certain members societal benefits, such as better access to employment, other financial gains, life mobility, and increased status.

The community concept traditionally required members to live geographically close to one another. However, the internet has largely removed the physical distance boundaries from the requirements for formation of a community (Jones, 1997:57). Instead, the currently prevailing view of community is that it arises from the "sharing and identification perceived by participants" (Joinson, McKenna, Postmes, Reips, 2007:124) without the need for shared geographic location. With the recognition of the legitimacy of geographically disparate groups online as real communities comes the acknowledgment that online communities share many important societal functions with traditional

communities. If this is true, then inequality in online communities can exist and can have a meaningful impact on offline social equality.

About social networking

Social networks are web-like social structures that are made up of connections between people and groups according to their operation within shared discourses. The concept of a social network is nothing more than a network view of community (Joinson et al., 2007:125). The cyberspace of social networks is both private and public, as are community spaces (Jones, 1997:39). Using the Facebook social networking site as an example, there are at least three ways that users can connect to social networks. They can join the networks formally identified by Facebook, such as those for countries, cities, or universities. Facebook users can become “friends” with family, close friends, co-workers, classmates, and other acquaintances. Users may also become members of user-created groups within Facebook that concern topics or people of interest to them (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008:259). Site members construct a “public or semi-public profile” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008:251) that can enhance recognition between groups and individuals for network expansion. Through user interactions in online social networks, members have the opportunity to gain and develop important contacts resulting in greater job-finding power and social mobility.

About social inequality

Emile Durkheim, in his landmark *The Division of Labor in Society* (1933), asserted that although the division of labor in society should have the positive outcome of an open

culture, if certain conditions apply, abnormal results may occur (Hanson, 2007:6). One such condition exists when there are obstructions to communication between different parts of the system, or if communication simply fails to be established (Hanson, 2007:8). If communication becomes closed, then exclusion of people from certain groups or societal positions creates isolated coexistence of groups and compartmentalization of people (Hanson, 2007:24). When groups of people become compartmentalized, thoughts among group members do not often have to touch on the lives of members belonging to other groups (Hanson, 2007:24). Thus, it becomes easier to ignore poverty and other groups in general (Hanson, 2007:25). If socially and, ultimately, financially important interactions are taking place in online communities, then exclusion of certain members of society from an online community is a form of compartmentalization with all of compartmentalization's shortcomings. Online networks provide new methods for individuals to compartmentalize groups by immersing themselves in communities of like-minded people who support their preconceived beliefs, prejudices, values, understandings, and interests (Hanson, 2007:30). Exclusion from certain online communities results in access limitation to several fields of societal participation, including "the labor market, education, politics, culture, social relationships, spatial arrangements, and institutions" (Dijk, 2005:23).

good to bring in Denker

How social inequality can play out in online social networking

Online social resources include "social networks of information, communications, and support," and "the more wealthy and powerful people they contain, the more supportive they are in the acquisition of material access to all kinds of things" (Dijk, 2005:53). Online, there are certain individuals in social networks who are like "stars" or "centers" who have

Jet-set elite culture

Those belonging to the jet-set elite culture, the “top strata of ‘informational labor,’” and transnational “managerial nomads,” are examples of the wealthy who benefit from increased opportunities resulting from weak to strong tie conversions. According to a discussion of Manuel Castells by David Bell in his book, Cyberculture Theorists, there exists “a worldwide network of exclusive enclaves, which comprise the habitat of this elite: boutique hotels and loft apartments, VIP lounges at airports, exclusive restaurants, personal trainers, high-culture events” (Bell, 2007:65). These places and service practitioners practice extreme social exclusion by virtue of high cost and limited knowledge distribution, or advertising, concerning their existence to those without connections to internal information on the jet-set elite culture. Working now means networking and to get connected, it helps to already be connected (Bell, 2007:68).

aSmallWorld.net

One way to form connections with the socially elite and greatly increase your social mobility in all the most beneficial, wealthy circles, is to join aSmallWorld.net, an online “private international community of culturally influential people who are connected by three degrees” (www.aSmallWorld.net). As clearly stated on the home page for aSmallWorld, one must already be connected to someone in the circle to become connected. The site includes members who make such announcements as, “If anyone is looking for a private island, I now have one available for purchase in Fiji” (Ferla, 2007:1). Launched in 2004 by Erik Wachtmeister, ASW (aSmallWorld), includes membership restrictions that “no more than 15% of its membership can come from any one city” (Frank,

2007:1). The characteristics and setup of aSmallWorld are unabashedly and clearly designed to exclude those of lesser economic, cultural, and social status. ASW is an online version of the exclusive enclave discussed by Castells and Bell (Bell, 2007:65). If an unwanted person somehow gains membership and is noticed based on information in their profile or outsider behavior, she is removed to a mirror social networking site called aBigWorld without explicit notification of the transfer. In aBigWorld, the removed member no longer has access to the elite content or users on aSmallWorld. The members of ASW are able to enjoy access to the most elite of individuals for forming weak ties in the network with the greatest possibility of converting them to strong ties, while avoiding other discourses by compartmentalizing themselves versus outsiders. Wachmeister created the site as a means of profiting from providing very high-end advertisers with access to those with the strongest buying power (Langenberg & Schellong, 2007). ASW is not the only social networking site with these membership and business models, Diamond Lounge being another example. In order to join Diamond Lounge, new members must be invited by a "three-person membership committee" and pay a \$60 monthly fee (Frank, 2007:1). By virtue of such networks being elite and exercising such social exclusion, only a small portion of the population will ever gain access to their opportunities.

Ways equalities are promoted by social networking

Although online networks and communities can be used for such narrow, inequality perpetuating purposes, nothing inherent in the online experience requires that (Hanson, 2007:30). Jan Fernback mentioned the claims of McLuhan (1964) and Meyrowitz (1985) that the "development of electronic communication technologies has abrogated space and

time such that we live in a boundless 'global village' with 'no sense of place'" (Jones, 1997:36). Changing habits of getting and using information brought about by online technologies, including online social networking, "encourage open-mindedness and imaginative thinking by loosening the rigidity of culture, thus helping to alleviate the contradictions and compartmentalizations" that result in inequalities (Hanson, 2007:119). Online social networks possess properties that can support social equality, including connectivity and a flat structure. Online networks are able to connect more people at larger distances than local networks, allowing a "wider dispersion of information, contacts, goods, services, and resources in general" (Dijk, 2007: 147). Individuals have instant access to businesses, other individuals, and institutions through online networks. Would-be entrepreneurs are able to widely publicize and operate their businesses using online social networks like Facebook and MySpace for free. The flat structure of networks lies between hierarchies and markets, as described by Dijk:

"Hierarchies are characterized as based on authority, formality, and bureaucracy, making people dependent and subordinate, and markets are founded on contracts and often work on the basis of unequal property and exchange, making some people rich and some poor" (Dijk, 2007:148).

Online social networks use a third type of organization with a more flat structure consisting of agreements in relationships with "mutual advantages and dependencies" that operate as equalizing forces between individuals and groups.

would like more detailed analysis of advantages

Conclusion

Online communities and social networking sites are connection centers for important social resources that increase opportunities for upward social and economic movements. Relations between members of online social networks can consist of weak or strong ties, with the opportunities to create strong ties from weak ties being more numerous among the wealthy who are more financially able and likely to travel extensively. The jet-set elite enjoy many private enclaves for compartmentalized socialization and network building, including the online social network, aSmallWorld.net. ASW is an extreme example of social exclusion in an online community that allows only culturally elite individuals to become members on a private, invitation-only basis. The model of such exclusive social networking sites perpetuates social inequalities online by isolating members from outside discourses and excluding non-members from important socio-economic networking opportunities. Finally, although online social networks can operate in ways that perpetuate social inequalities, as with ASW, there are characteristics of online social networks that can promote equality. Such characteristics include the new opportunities afforded by online networks for connectivity, and the flat, non-hierarchical, non-market organization of online social networks.

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Documentary Film & Its Social Impact

One of the main reasons that documentary films are so appealing to an audience is because they are so provocative. They essentially confront an issue that generates dialogue, raises questions, or sparks debate. “They are direct interventions in public conversation (Aufderheide, 78).” Because documentaries are a representation of reality, they reach and engage viewers on an intimate level and therefore can have a major impact. For this reason, they were immediately recognized as a tool for persuasion—and “nothing persuades like reality (Aufderheide, 78).” This is why documentaries have become such a powerful vehicle for social change. They contribute to the molding of popular opinion, offer perspectives on historical events and social issues, and provoke dialogue. “We have witnessed the power of documentaries as a persuasive force for education and social change, with an ability to reach wide and diverse audiences (Thirteenth Disciple).” Because documentary film is so influential in shaping civil discourse, creating public memory, and framing social issues, it is a powerful vehicle for social change; however, since true objectivity in media is practically unattainable, documentary film is borderline propaganda and runs the risk of becoming exploitative.

The term documentary was first coined in 1926 by British filmmaker John Grierson who defined it as “the creative treatment of actuality.” Some of the biggest contributors to this genre at the time were Grierson himself, American filmmaker Robert Flaherty, and Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov. All three were faced with the challenge of how to represent reality in their films; however for Vertov, the concern was in how to

act as camouflage (McEnteer, 170).” Documentary films do more than just inform or educate, they cultivate an environment for informed discourse; and help us understand not only an issue, but also our position on it.

With technological advances in documentary filmmaking, the potential for manipulation has heightened to such a degree that the concept of objectivity is frequently up for debate. After all, the filmmaker is a “primitive artist [that] twists and tilts the various possible visual aspects until he fully explains what he wishes to represent (McLuhan, 56).” Whether the director is aware of it or not, the way he edits his film reveals something about his position on the topic. Besides editing, there are many factors and techniques that can affect how a film is interpreted. The way a scene is lit, the way shadows are cast, whether the scene is shot in black-and-white or color all contribute to the overall tone, and consequently the message, of the film. The introduction of synchronous sound opened up an entirely new dimension for conveying a message and also lends itself to a certain perspective while the camera’s point of view has many potential implications as well. “The problem is that this footage has been taken out of its original context, and placed in a brand new setting, one determined by the director or auteur. Therefore, it is essential to understand the filmmaker’s point of view and not allow it to influence factual analysis (O’Connor, 184).” With film manipulation and personal bias being virtually unavoidable, it is evident that true objectivity is unattainable in documentary film, or rather any form of mediated information.

Ever since documentary film was recognized for its value as a powerful persuasive force, it became difficult to tell whether it was being used as a vehicle for social change or just another propaganda tool. “Extending film’s potential from imperial

the culture would have represented it. For example, in *Born Into Brothels*, a story about a group of children in India who were products of the red light district in Calcutta. The filmmaker, whose presence is often seen in front of the camera, attempts to improve the lives of the children by enrolling them in school. However, because the film was just a single impression of a single *section* of a culture, the filmmaker has been frequently accused of perpetuating stereotypes and misrepresenting the parents of the children that she was claiming to help. Furthermore, it also appears that the filmmaker places herself in front of the camera in an attempt to portray herself as some sort of hero without regard to the impact this may have on the children by implying that they need to be “saved.” This film, having won an Oscar, has given the filmmaker some fame and notoriety, but what have the children gained? In a letter that translator, Partha Banerjee, who worked closely with the filmmaker, sent to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, he shows his concern of the implications the film has on the children, “They don’t even know that their misery, helplessness, and traumas are now being widely exposed and exploited to find fame and prosperity (Banerjee).”

Regardless of its controversy, the documentary tradition has developed side by side with feature films over the last eighty years or so and is beginning to give these films a run for their money. Mainly because the contemporary trends in documentary films are the tendency toward a hybrid of factual and fictional films, casting reality as narrative. This fusion is apparent in the rise of styles such as mockumentaries (fictional works in a documentary format) and docudramas (reality-based works in fictional format). “Because it shared dramatic narrative, documentary thus slipped, almost without friction, into the fiction cinema (Winston, 103).” There has also been a rise in contemporary

rubric for watching a documentary film consists of realizing that truth is subjective and flexible while also understanding that an infusion of the filmmaker's point of view is always inevitable. However, even though documentary film's claim for truth may get a little sketchy, its only real power and impact resides in its ability to amplify that claim.

Occasionally
Some
awkward
grammar.

Good,
Your analysis allowed
the topic to be ambiguous,
which it is. You traced
contours of the dilemma
w/out forcing a facile
conclusion.

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