

THE MIND & THE MACHINE: performance, game design, and humanities

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Introduction

This article argues in favor of teaching video game design as a humanistic discipline. In *The Art of Videogames* (2009), Grant Tavinor defines video games as a form of fiction and art. Based on some of the ideas that Tavinor highlights, Chris Crawford's standpoint on game designers' preparation in *Chris Crawford on Game Design* (2003), and Huizinga's description of the functions of play in *Homo Ludens* (1964), I will reason for the approach of housing the undergraduate game studies and design in the faculty of humanities as one discipline. The rationale of why the art and technology of games should meet in humanities emerges from the present state of games' content in the mainstream games; that is, what they show and what they tell. This is of course a case for intellectual, enlightened, inspired, and thought-provoking game stories, and how this could be achieved in the humanities.

The methodology used in this essay starts by corroborating the kinship between video games and other narrative arts from a structural and taxonomical point of view. Manfred Jahn's organization of the narratives genres in a taxonomical tree (2005) guides this article to finding where do video games stand among other traditional genres and what that means: the structuralist perspective tells us that games are performative narrative art form closest to the cinematic art in terms of performance and substance. The methodology of locating games within the narrative art ecosystem is one way to shed the light on games' disposition and thus argue about their place in universities.

Taxonomy

The motivation to relate video games to other fictional forms is twofold: first, to understand one aspect of games multifaceted nature by using an already acknowledged framework; that is, to understand where games stand among other fictional and art forms in the traditional tree of genres. Second, to elaborate that games are in fact a performance

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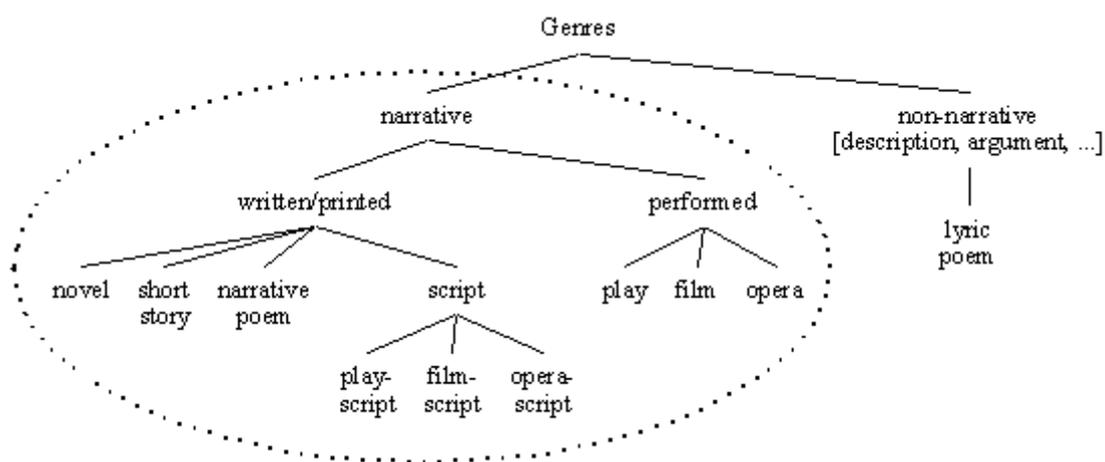
carried by the player to tell a story. Games are a young form of artistic and narrative expression and performance is key to understand the new ways games make us tell and perceive our stories.

While the difference between games and film is held with respect, games are closest to cinematic art in the structural sense: a product of collaborative imagination of writers, artists, level designers, and other talents. This will in turn direct us toward the importance of content in games and the kind of training that universities need to provide or continue to provide for future game designers.

Let us start with an extensive quotation by Roland Barthes that offers a useful framework for pursuing this question of the game genre:

There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drame [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, paintings (in *Santa Ursula* by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories, and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds. (1975, p.237)

Manfred Jahn organizes the different genres, forms, and media referred to by Barthes in the following taxonomical diagram, encouraging his readers to add unaccounted for genres to the tree structure: “If you come across a genre not accounted for by any prototype...radio plays? hypertext narratives? comic strips?...try fitting it in” (2005, N2.2.1.).



In Jahn’s tree structure, video games would have to be located among the performed narratives: Genre > narrative > performed > video games. Game fiction belongs to performed narratives for two reasons: the performance involved in the storytelling and the substance of which games are made.

Performance

Drawing on the studies of Huizinga, Laurel, Pearce, Whitlock, Newman, and Hand, we can claim that performance is an integral part of the storytelling in games, just as it is in film and theatre, where the story cannot be told without the actors’ performance. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Huizinga identifies two overlapping functions of play: it functions both as contest and as representation (1964, p.13). He emphasizes the element of performance in the functions of play since to him the aspect of “representation” in such a case always involves a display before an audience. He argues that “[t]hese two functions can unite in such a way that the game ‘represents’ a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something” (13), and thus he underlines the element of “performance” in this process; that is to say, play as representation indicates a display before an audience. He describes performance in play as an imaginative “stepping out of common reality into a higher order” (p.13), which leads to a transformation of the self and loss of consciousness of ordinary reality. Both functions of contest and representation are interconnected and evident in video game fiction, while in the case of fiction transmitted through other media only representation can be a function; the story is not a contest with which the audience is engaged. To

summarize, players of game stories experience a contest in which they are challenged by the virtual world of the game to devise the best representation and performance.

The foregoing analysis of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* shows the conceptual bond between play and stories in terms of three significant traits: the creation of a pretend world with its own time, space, and consciousness; the inevitability of the suspension of disbelief so as to sustain this world; and the fact that the players are challenged to achieve the best performance for the best representation.

Looking at Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1993), we see how the critic grounds her human-computer activity theory in Aristotle's dramatic theory in the *Poetics*, where the Greek philosopher defines performance as the material cause of the dramatic work (what the dramatic work is made of). In the human-computer activity, Laurel argues that performance is the material cause of the pleasurable perception of pattern. The pattern in human-computer interaction, according to her, is made through the selection and arrangement of signs, including verbal, visual, auditory, and other nonverbal phenomena when used semiotically (1993, p.50).

In "Towards a Game Theory of Game", Celia Pearce describes six "narrative operators" in video game narratives. The second narrative operator she identifies is that of the "performative": "The emergent narrative as seen by spectators watching and/or interpreting the game underway" (2004, p.145). She argues that the narrative in games is the product of play and that conflict in games produces a performative action.

Katie Whitlock argues, in "Beyond Linear Narrative", that playing games is performance due to interactivity, and that the narrative houses this performance (2005, p.189), while James Newman in *Videogames* underscores performance as an integral component in games' narrativity (2004, p.105) and maintains that a player's performance creates the plot and establishes the communication between the player and the system. Similarly and finally, Richard Hand in "Theaters of Interactivity" refers to game play as performance, and maintains that this performance is an important point of access to studying games from a dramatic perspective (2005, p.210). Play is conceptually performative and it is an obvious component of game fiction because the player is a performer in the story.

What we can take away from Huizinga, Laurel, Pearce, Whitlock, Newman, and Hand's previous claims, is that (1) play and performance are inherently connected by

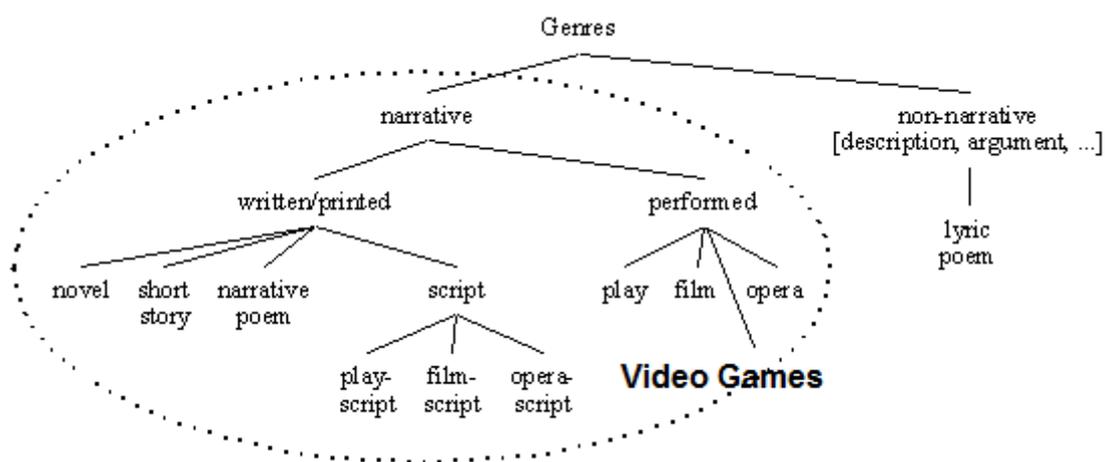
nature (2) playing the game is an act of representation from at the player's end – the game player assumes the role of a performer during play. However, in these pages we will keep our focus on actors in the performance other than the game player: the nonplayable characters. BIOSHOCK (2K Boston, 2007) is perhaps one of the best examples of successful game storytelling, where the designers did not rely on noninteractive cut-scenes for storytelling, rather, they allowed the story to unfold through the live interaction of the player with the nonplayable characters. The lively performance of nonplayable characters allows fascinating and genuine fictional situations in BIOSHOCK, for which the credit goes to writers, artists, animators, and programmers. The point here is not only that the credit for such an artistic creation goes to a team of diverse skill sets, but mainly that such team was inspired by the past and its intellect: the political idealism of the early twentieth century, Ayn Rand's 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*, the Art Deco style of the environment, and above all, the nonplayable characters' over-the-top melodramatic theatrical performance reminiscent of the era. Now we can begin to argue that such creative team has been exposed to history, literature, and performing arts. This brings us to the second aspect that anchors games to the narrative performative arts.

Substance

The second reason for placing video games among the performative genres is because of the substance of which they are made. Here it is useful to repeat a section from Barthes' citation (1975, p.237): "as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man's stories". Barthes points to the potential that all substances can be used in storytelling. The video game as a vehicle of narrative is made of a mixture of written language, cinematic clips, pictures, graphics, and the three filmic sound tracks (dialogue, music, effects). Films are generally created from an ordered mixture of text, pictures, and sounds, and the filmic components in video games bring them closest to the cinematic form.

Adapting Jahn's generic map

Based on the performative aspect and the substance of video games, such games can be considered a performative narrative genre, and, therefore, we can add games as a separate node on Jahn's generic map:



What we can take away from the previous structural reasoning is that games, as films, come to life through the collaborative imagination of writers, artists, and technologists. Since the video game remains as one of the many tools that we use to tell stories and express artistic concepts, the time is opportune to discuss what they express and what a humanistic training can contribute to the talents behind games. At this point, this article turns to be especially concerned with games content.

Humanities and the future of game content

With the rise of games as a form of art and narrative, the overall content (what games tell and show) gains a great importance because games have become a powerful and far-reaching medium of expression. The 2011 statistics of the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) on the gamevideo gameindustry in terms of economic data, sales figures, and game player data all show that the game industry has been rapidly growing to such an extent that it has come to surpass the film industry both in the size of its audience and in terms of revenues. This telling piece of information becomes even more relevant to our subject when we take a closer look at the ESA statistical report (p.8), which proves by means of figures that the types of games that tell stories – such as Shooters, Adventure, Role Playing, Action – all combined are the ones with largest share of the game audience. In this context, it is of further significance that video games are becoming more and more concentrated on storytelling and that they tend to remain by and large in the narrative ecosystem, which in turn warrants humanist interest.

However, despite the rapid rise of game art and fiction, many have expressed reservations of the kind of content being pumped into the mainstream. Barry Atkins' in

More Than a Game: The Computer Game as a Fictional Form (2003) points out that game fiction has not yet received much “serious critical attention” (p.5) because the genres concentrated on by game designers and consumers (such as war, science fiction, fantasy) are “low down the literary pecking order” and so they “add little to the respectability of the computer game” (p.6). Grant Tavinor as well voices out dissatisfaction with artistry of narratives in games: “too often ham-fisted, clichéd, awfully voice-acted, or simply lacking interest” (p.110). In the game studies classes I teach, students are often required to develop a video game as part of their coursework – inspired by game theories we discuss – and while most excel at the necessary technical development skills, I usually clash with my students over the fictive content and the artistic conceptualization of the game being developed due to the dominant popularity of clichéd fictional conventions. Time and again, I must challenge my students to break away from dominant clichés, and my exasperated question to them is usually one or another version of the following: “Are we destined to spend the next one hundred years dealing with mad scientists, zombies, genetically modified soldiers, and mutant Nazis in games?”

Blaming consumerism for game clichés is misleading: as many would agree – including academics and art critics, there are numerous well-scripted AAA game titles that respect the mind of mature art-conscious audience. Therefore we need to turn our attention to game programs and game educators. The vast majority of the present great game designers have not graduated from a game program due to the infancy of the medium. However, Chris Crawford in *Chris Crawford on Game Design* points out that they are all great readers. The names he lists include Sid Meiere, Dan Bunten, Brian Moriarty, Gordon Walton, Greg Costikyan, and Eric Goldberg. This is the first thing a veteran game designer advises: “You want to populate your mind with a wondrous and colorful diversity of ideas, a grand carnival of conceptual heterogeneity. And how might you go about this task? Simple: You read. Herein lies the greatest failure of younger designers” (Crawford, 2003, p.99).

The approach of teaching both game studies and design as one discipline in humanities carries such ideals as serious game content and art, and the production of intellectual, enlightened, and sophisticated ideas acquired through exposure to arts, history, classics and storytelling. It is safe to assume that all games have been imagined before they were conceptualized and produced. Now we concern ourselves with the future

games yetto be imagined in cultivated minds, and because artistic imagination neither originates nor flourishes in vacuum, we better galvanize it with the study of culture, art, literature, and the human condition.

The mind and the machine

No jurisdictional claim is being made here over where games design should be taught; this is only to highlight the different priorities in teaching games in universities and colleges. While the latter is known for their focus on the hands-on approach and the required technical skills for the video game craft, this article seeks to present a model with a different emphasis. Among the motivations to write this article is the one to present an educational model within humanities and to reflect on its experience. The Interactive Arts and Science (IASC) at Brock University in Canada is a five-year-old program that offers students an opportunity to study a variety of interactive digital media including video games. Two of the core courses I have taught in IASC are on game studies and game theory, and have evolved over a number of years to include game design.

Students in these courses explore the philosophical, cultural, artistic discourses on video games and their design, and gauge their influences on issues such as identity, play, aesthetics, and stories. One third year course emphasizes that innovative game design requires creativity and imagination, and neither of which can thrive without inspiration, and hence the immersion in arts, classics, literature. In general terms, this is to underline the need to uphold the academic humanistic and interdisciplinary strengths, which the game industry recommends that we do in universities (Gouglas et al, 2010, p.48). Along with the seminar discussions, the annotated bibliographies, the reflection papers, and class presentations, the students develop a team-based game prototype. One of the challenges involved in teaching a course like this one includes variable levels of skepticism from the students regarding the theoretical matter of the course, and perhaps some disappointment because the course is not a 100% game development class, which is understandable since making games in class – for an undergraduate group – may seem more attractive than reading, thinking about, and asking art and narrative theory–related questions about games.

Another course in the second year deals with game criticism and aims to place games in the larger context of humanities, address the problem of extant game critiques,

and connect games with cultural studies. While the goal here is to think hard about the different sets of values in games, another part of the of this course includes training students on game design and exposing them to the reality of innovative design, originality, writing for games, and team management. To place game design in the Arts perspective, it is stressed again in class that imagination and creativity do not originate or grow in vacuum; and therefore, for example, the class is encouraged to examine a classical work of art, such as Jean-Léon Gérôme's 1872 painting *Pollice Verso*, so as to look for inspiration, to analyze, to deconstruct, to problematize, and finally to apply a certain value inspired by the work in designing a character, a setting, a plotline, or a game play technique.

Reflecting on teaching game theory and game design in humanities, I could say the main challenge there is an interdisciplinary one; that is, to find the balance between two academic worlds that have been traditionally apart and only recently came together. These worlds are the disciplines of the machine and of the mind: computer science and humanities. To overcome this challenge, an academic game program should seek students with backgrounds in computer science, literature, art, digital art, web development, music, and business to work in interdisciplinary groups. Game programs also need a curricular balance, variety and flexibility in order to train students on the machine that brings the game art and fiction to life, while building the belief that what games show and tell does matter.

Games represent a hybrid cultural artifact containing elements of software development, computer programming, digital art, storytelling, culturally inspired writing, and music. One doesn't need to make an extensive argument about how humanities build minds, thus motivating students to think independently as an inspired and educated game designers who can relate game content to arts and literature and place their creative work not only in a humanistic context but also anchor it to cultural heritage.

Conclusion

Even if games' content is clichéd, immature, or vulgar, I have to always remind myself that games are entertainment systems: they simply do what they are supposed to, which is to entertain. However, entertainment itself is not to be taken lightly; games also convey meaning and ideas by depicting fictional worlds, events, and characters.

Moreover, games have turned into a powerful tool of expression reaching a rapidly growing audience, and therefore it is important to start thinking about game content, which is what many world-class game designers do: in 2006, David Perry stated in a TED TV lecture that designers convene to discuss ideas such as emotions, purpose, and meaning in games rather than hardware. He predicts that future games will be emotionally-abundant experiences rather than mere fun for the next generation of gamers. Academia has an invaluable role in the process, which is not only to prepare the new software-savvy game designer, but to prepare an inspired one by placing game teaching in the humanistic context; that is to think about the future game designer as the future storyteller, artist, and entertainer.

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