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Constructing games-based discourse through analysis of machinima and counterplay

The majority of contemporary games-based discourse is guilty of either attempting to bend critical analysis of a game and its community to fit traditional media-theory, or conversely abandoning all traditional media theory and analysing games as entirely unlike any other art form. Attempting to view games through either of these two lenses is both reductive and simplistic, and ultimately results in a loss of detail in any study of a game, its culture, or its politics. Simply distinguishing between traditional and new media theory when applied to games is simply not possible, due to large aspects of both sets of theory existing within games. This combination is particularly evident is through the concept of 'counter-play' whereby a player or group of players might twist and warp the game's mechanics to create an entirely new experience, beyond that which was intended by the designer. In particular, counter-play in the creation of 'machinima' and 'fan-art' can be examined to carefully begin constructing a discourse for games that incorporates pre-existing theory without distorting the theory or the game to make one fit the other.

Larissa Hjorth attempts to divide games media and traditional media by showing that unlike traditional ethnography, gaming ethnography is unique due to the lack of clear divide between a game's audience and its performer (Hjorth 2011). This distinction between traditional and game media is a useful starting point in the construction of games-based discourse, but is, however, limited, when used to talk solely about 'playing a game.' Although a gamer might have an influence on the sequence of events within any given game, and ultimately weigh in upon their outcome, it is overly-simplistic to state that this causes them

to be a 'performer' in a game any more than an audience member in any form of media. A member of a crowd at a play may choose to yell out an obscenity in a quiet moment, leave partway through, or simply sit in silence. A visitor to a zoo may choose to see certain exhibits and forego others, choose to tap on the glass of the snake exhibit or not, or spend the entire day at the zoo's restaurant. Audience members in any art-form are allowed varied amounts of agency in how they might experience a given medium, and yet in traditional ethnographic terms remain defined as the 'audience'. Although games are typically far more open-ended and interactive than traditional media forms, simply playing a game allows a player only to experience within the realms of what the developer - the performer - allows them to. Although the player may *feel* that they are the performer, they are ultimately participatory audience members expressing agency within pre-determined bounds. What Hjorth has instead demonstrated through her study of games is that any attempt to cleanly divide between audience and performer in any ethnographic study, traditional or not, is naïve due to the fundamental free-will of the audience, a statement supported by post-structuralist ethnographer Norman K. Denzin who discusses the limitations of traditional ethnography as a whole by stating

> *"We inhabit a performance-based, dramaturgical culture. The dividing line between performer and audience blurs, and culture itself becomes a dramatic performance."* (Denzin 2003)

Although the line between performer and audience blurs significantly in the playing of games, this alone cannot be used to separate them from traditional media theory.

Machinima is the term that has been created to describe the use of game engines to create video content, often unrelated to the source medium (Vandagriff 2009). Machinima, game modifications and other forms of 'fan-art'

are ultimately more crucial in the formation and study of a game's community than the game itself. Such art is a contemporary and emerging media form which allows a unique perspective both on games and the gaming community as a whole (Lowood 2006). Although they may be simplistically viewed as traditional media created with new media tools, the expressivity and imagination required to bend the rules, twist the mechanics, and in many cases, go entirely against the developer's intended playstyle of a game in order to create machinima means that the resultant art can be viewed from unique, games-oriented perspectives. Analysis of a game's machinima can reveal much about the political and social status of the original game, the game's developers, the artists, and the audience community that forms. Uniquely, however, the communities surrounding such practices can also be almost entirely disparate from that of their source material.

For example, the Bungie's 2001 first person shooter *Halo* can be viewed as a game based largely on the male power fantasy. Players assume the role of large, 'heroically' proportioned males who save the galaxy through genocidal levels of killing. The game glorifies themes of violence and war, rewarding players as they wipe out wave after wave of alien enemies (Starrs 2010). The games feature little to nothing in the way of female or non-binary representation, with no more than three female characters in the entirety of the game's campaign, one of whom is a naked, holographic Artificial Intelligence. The game's multiplayer similarly reflects this in terms of the vocal, visible demographic, with the voice chat community being 'largely male-dominated and often misogynistic' (Raz 2015). Thus, the politics of Halo can be seen as both pro-war and pro-male. In 2003, one of the pioneering machinima series, *Red vs. Blue* created by Matt Hullum and Burnie Burns, began. Created using Halo's

multiplayer, Red vs. Blue was a 'slice-of-life' sitcom that deviated majorly from its source material both thematically and politically. The opening line of the series,

"Do you ever wonder why we're here?" (Hullum and Burns, 2003)

asked by one soldier to another when questioning the purpose of the whole conflict, reflects the anti-war message that is pervasive within the show as a whole. Where Halo glorifies war, and diminishes the significance of death, Red vs. Blue shows that any death has immense significance, and that the lives of seemingly 'bit characters' in the grand scheme of conflict are far more than statistics. The cast of Red vs. Blue is also more diverse than the characters of Halo itself, featuring strong female leads as well as non-binary characters. That no female character models even existed for use in the machinima in the early seasons of the show was not seen as an obstacle, with female characters either given the same body as males or creatively represented in other ways, such as a female anthropomorphic tank. The audience of the machinima further reflects this diversity, with the show gaining enormous international popularity, even amongst people who had never played the game or were atypical of the Halo community. Large, passionate and vocal sub-communities exist within the machinima's community as a whole, including all-female groups and LGBTQI groups. This dysmorphia between the politics and culture of the game and of the machinima reflects the unique perspective that only analysis of such fan productivity can allow into a games community (Wirman 2007). This represents a shift of power from the game's developer to the game's fan-base, and is ultimately truly a viewpoint found only in video games, and is therefore a key component in the creation of a gaming discourse.

There is perhaps no facet of games media theory that is the subject of more debate than that of the 'magic circle', referring to the supposed divide between what occurs within the bounds of play, and what exists outside of it.

(Huizinga 1970) A large amount of current games discourse surrounds attempts to either 'prove' or 'disprove' the existence of such a barrier. (Apperly and Dieter, 2010) These attempts often do not look at what the concept both allows and does not allow in terms of critical games analysis. It is abundantly clear that there is no insurmountable boundary can exist between games and the players and the outside world, as games, like all art-forms, are heavily reflective of the politics, culture and context of their developers as well as their audiences. This does not mean, however, that the concept is totally without use. What Halo and Red vs. Blue and gaming fan culture as a whole have shown is that a game can have entirely different politics and culture when compared to that of its fan-base. Looking at a game in isolation, as if it did exist within such a 'magic-circle' is not only useful, but is entirely necessary in order to create a complete analysis of a game or games-culture. It is through the existence of such significant differences in political and culture between games and their audience that games are truly unique. A simple blanket dismissal or acceptance of the magic circle is therefore both reductive and damaging to the creation of games-based discourse, as it is through comparing and contrasting the ethnography of a game as opposed to its audience that a game can begin to be truly critically analysed.

What machinima and related counter-play practises perhaps best reflect in terms of media theory is post-structuralist theorist Michel Foccault's theory of power. Foccault states that

> "Power must be analysed as something which circulates... it is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth." (Foccault 1980)

This idea that power is not exercised from the top-down but instead circulates amongst the entire population of a community is abundantly evident within

video games ethnography. Whilst the developer may have the initial power in shaping the politics of a game, upon a game's release to the public this power is instead transferred into the hands of those that play it. A game's culture is entirely reshaped by those that play it, rather than the game reshaping its players. Game modifications such as the so-called 'Fem-Doom mod', which changed the hyper-masculine player-model in idSoftware's 1993 *Doom* into a female, allow players to fundamentally reshape the politics of a game (Apperly and Dieter, 2010). Power in video games, more than any other medium, is a bottom-up concept due to the interactivity and creativity that they allow, and must be analysed as such.

If games discourse is to evolve, it must move beyond attempting to analyse solely through binary perspectives. Attempting to study a game solely through traditional media concepts or new media concepts will never allow a theorist to examine the entirety of a game, nor its politics and culture. What counter-play practises such as machinima and games modifications have proven is that games and their communities are uniquely placed with roots in both new and old media, and must be analysed as such. Whilst an analysis of a game is incomplete without discussing those who play it, it is similarly incomplete if one does not examine the differences that exist between the game in isolation and the game as perceived by its audience. Whilst games are a unique and contemporary art form that ultimately form their own unique and contemporary ethnography, theorists must not dismiss the foundations of traditional media theory. Games are not entirely disparate from other media forms, nor are they entirely the same. It is only through the breaking down of theoretical binaries in games discourse, such as by the incorporation of both traditional and new media theory, or both 'magic circle' and 'non-magic circle' theory, that a comprehensive games-based discourse can be constructed.

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