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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Platforms and Texts, Rules and Play: Teaching game design and game analysis

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During our previous work on games and meaning we have noted the strategic advantages of drawing a distinction between claims about 'meaning' and claims about 'interpretation' (Carr and Puff, 2019). One way to summarise this would be to think of 'meaning' as a noun that exists somehow, somewhere 'in the game', and interpretation as a verb – something that is done by somebody, somewhere, during some form of playful entanglement with a game. In this presentation we reflect on the usefulness of this distinction for addressing some of the challenges that arise when teaching game design and game analysis.

We teach two different game studies modules within the same programme. One of us teaches a module on game design, platform studies and research by making; the other teaches critical perspectives on game analysis and player studies. Both modules are on MAs based in Media Studies and Cultural Studies. More than half the cohort identify as female, most are International students working in a second language, and few would identify as 'white' or 'western'. Many have an undergraduate training in film production or mass communications (journalism, advertising, etc.). Many share an interest in cultural politics – gender, race and representation, sexuality and queer studies, orientalism, nationalism, and disability discourses - while some of the production students are also interested in 'using games for a particular topic' (e.g. serious games), and skills acquisition (e.g. learning Unity3D). Our modules mix 'newbie' with 'expert' player-students (as in Zagal & Bruckman, 2008; Waern, 2013; Bergstrom, 2021). Both modules have seen issues with framing (e.g. rotating from 'mass communications' towards 'cultural studies'), and with moving past generalisations about players (e.g. the player as 'susceptible other'), and beyond descriptive or evaluative accounts (classifying games as 'good' or 'bad'; describing 'what happens' and how a game is played - Zagal & Bruckman, 2008; Rouse & Corron, 2020). The approaches that we have developed over time to address these issues involve a mix of hands-on play, group tasks and journal keeping (see Wearn 2013 for an in-depth account of similar strategies). A common thread – across the modules, and between these issues – could be characterized as a pull between meaning and interpretation. Perhaps this resonates with orientations found within games scholarship: towards platform, design and procedurality, structures or materiality; or towards textuality, ephemera, context and contingency. To help negotiate through these possibilities, we have engaged in forms of destabilization: dismantling the apparent stability of the software and platform through an engagement with debates about the social and cultural construction of technology, for instance, and destabilizing the notion of 'the player' (and the

player analyst) by inviting students to explore the connections between play, experience, context and interpretation.

Our game design-oriented teaching has a strong focus on the practical development of playful digital artefacts that are reliant on game engines. It is pedagogically informed by practice-based research (Westecott, 2020). Students work towards the production of a final (collaborative or individual) project of their choice. Their project work is supported by a series of different pedagogical activities, ranging from the demonstration of coding/design techniques to short practical design exercises based on problem-posing. Throughout the term, students keep a reflexive journal of this work, documenting their learning journey. To support the journaling process, we rely on game studies literature to provide students with a conceptual toolkit to critically engage with videogames and gaming culture. As this suggests, we look for ways to support students' practical work and professional aspirations, while at the same time productively challenge any assumptions about games and players. The aim is to promote a critical perspective onto gaming and game design (Geyser, 2018; Bergstrom, 2021), including here challenging modes of production traditionally linked to the industry (see Keogh, 2019; Westecott, 2020; Prax, 2020). Our ultimate goal is to support the constitution of a gaming repertoire while at the same time rejecting the idea of a 'gaming canon' (Zagal, 2012). As a practice-focused, collaborative course, one of the main challenges we face involves a need to move beyond deterministic models in order to analyse and discuss the outcomes of gameplay. In the classroom, it is our experience that a reliance on design-oriented models (e.g. Schell, 2019), as criticised elsewhere (Koenitz and Eladhari, 2021) risks naturalising a mechanistic, determinative approach to discussing games and 'the player'. As Waern and Back (2015, p. 342) remind us, some game design methods rely on "abstracting the player […] requir[ing] that we already know something about how players are expected to behave". These kinds of abstraction prove tempting to our students, apparently because it offers a predictable, compliant player, and suggests an all-powerful designer; a puppeteer capable of leading the player through a choreographed experience.

Our current approach is intended to disrupt any such assumptions via a critical stance towards game design and production. We ask our design students to engage in multiple reflections on the context and conditions they themselves experience when producing their artefacts (e.g. Nicoll and Keogh, 2019), or when playing games. Such reflections on the game engine – where they, as users, are placed in a position somewhat analogous to their players – has proven useful because it emphasises context, and by doing so, helps to undermine an attachment to deterministic accounts of meaning, especially to students focused on developing technical skills. We have found that by bringing reflexivity (de Paula, 2021) and criticality to their work with platforms, students themselves experience the instability and ephemerality of conditions of game production: features are added/removed; functions are deprecated or subverted for new finalities, different than those envisioned by engine developers. This experience, combined with other guided activities where students reflect about their own experiences as designers and players in tandem – e.g. playtest activities where students play simultaneously the role of researchers and participants and write short reflective texts on their experiences (see Waern, 2013) – supports students towards an understanding of the ways in which meaning-making, in games, is contextual and subject to the heterogeneity of play. These activities, therefore, promote a more nuanced model to produce particular arguments about 'meaning' (e.g. a stabler version encoded by the designer

such as a game critiquing '996' work culture in China) while recognising that such 'meaning' is not absolute, and that players might 'interpret' the same game in many different ways, destabilising the idea of an ever compliant, susceptible player.

This emphasis on reflexivity and the experiential is also present in our work in our module on digital games and play. As in our game design module, we have moved towards teaching strategies intended to destabilize pre-existing notions of 'the player', and disrupt deterministic accounts of meaning. Recognition that game-play (and thus game analysis) is culturally situated, embodied and experiential is long established in game studies (e.g. Lammes 2007; Kirkland 2007, 2012) yet the notion of a predictable, programmable, universal player waiting 'out there' persists in the classroom when attention turns to claims about meaning. To help address this, we open the module with a discussion of the knowledge that students bring, based on their memories and experiences of games and play (digital or otherwise). Building on these discussions, students are then required to keep a 'game diary' in which they write about playing games while testing out the concepts and arguments introduced in class. Playing, 'slowing down' and reflecting on fragments and feelings, the diary-keeping increases their familiarity with games, and helps leverage that experience (see Zagal and Buckman 2008). Our students tend to construct an unpredictable, erratic and emotional player in the diary. In keeping with frameworks that emphasise the relationships between experience and knowledge (including feminist, critical race and disability studies perspectives, etc.) we encourage students to reflect on the experiences documented in their diaries when they begin to explore the role of 'player analyst'. Yet these kinds of destabilization (these productive yet uncomfortable instabilities) can prove difficult to sustain. To help offset any such difficulties, we design collaborative activities that involve the reiterative application of key concepts to games, combining co-play and collective analysis. This might entail, for example, taking turns to play the opening scene from The Last of Us, while testing out arguments about affect and agency. It might involve taking turns to enact distinct versions of Lara Croft – Lara as athlete, Lara as lost arsonist, Lara as accident prone, or human/insect hybrid – and debating what that means for questions of representation. Our aim is to encourage students to keep bringing reflexivity and the experiential to their experiments with games analysis. We discuss if there are grounds for provisionally constructing a 'stable' version of the player-analyst, who produces a version of the game that foregrounds specific aspects of the rules, characterization or setting, in order to make a particular argument about 'meaning' possible. We also discuss what it might mean to foreground the ephemeral, distributed, contingent, chaotic and unruly aspects of games and play; to ask if a focus on interpretation as a situated and embodied process helps to highlight the potential for playful subversion and resistance. The point is not to argue that one of these options is 'more correct' than the other. The point is, rather, that opting to adopt one of these orientations rather than the other is a decision that has consequences for the analysis that is generated, and for the version of 'player analyst' that is being performed.

Contemporary digital games often are, as argued by Lankoski and Bjork (2015, p. 28) "too big to be described as whole" – from the required material conditions represented by the platform, to the actualization of a game during gameplay. This claim is compatible with approaches to analysis that foreground the epistemological (i.e. if the strategies we adopt provisionally construct the object we examine, as discussed in Carr 2019). In our teaching, we encourage criticality and reflexivity, and propose that all design (including research design) involves necessary and strategic omissions (Law 2004). All perspectives are partial,

and 'one size' does not fit all. In our classes, we have found that when seeking to disrupt the kinds of assumptions that result in deterministic approaches to both design and analysis, it is useful to ask our students to reflect on the possible differences between claims about meaning and interpretation. This is one way, we would argue, to help prepare students to question the idea that 'the meaning of the game' exists in a stable, authorised form, shaped by the intentions of a designer, undisputed by a compliant player, and 'revealed' by an analyst. Playing reflexively and playing together has helped to 'make visible' the messiness and multiplicity of play, and in the process, has helped unsettle lingering assumptions about what games are, and what players do. In this presentation we will discuss the kinds of destabilization that we foster in the classroom to support moves towards less deterministic accounts of meaning. These approaches help foreground reflexivity, while supporting an engagement with theoretical resources that potentially enrich critical analysis. The outcome is fewer generalizations about impact and effects, and more nuanced accounts of the relationships between game design and meaning, play, players and interpretation.

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