Play vs. Procedures

Emil Hammar (elha@itu.dk)

Introduction

This paper aims to analyze how the procedural aspect of digital games might be argued to be affected by play, if we understand play as an appropriative and disruptive activity. At first, I outline the paper's understanding of play through the sociologically oriented characterization of play provided by Thomas Henricks (2006), in addition to the hermeneutic-aesthetic characterization of play by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1993). Gadamer's view on play suggests that we ought to view the phenomenon as a to-and-fro movement structured into a specific pattern through being oriented towards a 'task' that 'takes over' players to bring itself into being that sets up a closed world of its own and that presents itself through being played. Meanwhile, Henricks' modification of a Huizingan understanding of play defines play as an appropriative activity that takes over and manipulates external objects and structures.

Subsequently, I argue that the relationship between play and game can be understood as dialectic and disruptive, thus challenging understandings of how the procedures of games determine player activity and vice versa. As such, I posit some analytical consequences for understandings of digital games as procedurally fixed in the interpretation of them (Boghost, 2007; Flannagan, 2009; Sharp, 2010). That is, if digital games are argued to be hermeneutically fixed by their procedures, but play is an appropriative and dialectic activity, then it could be argued that the playing of games possibly entails that the intended procedural interpretation and configuration of them are less rigid and much more indeterminate. Consequently, theories claiming that games are procedurally fixed in their intended meaning

have to take into account the appropriative, disruptive, and dialectic nature of play, as highlighted by Henricks and Gadamer. As such, the motivation for this paper is mainly theoretical in the sense that it highlights the need for a clearer and more concise understanding of how games convey their meaning in the context of player-interpretation and -configuration of them.

Henrick's notion of play

Henricks contributes to this paper's understanding of play by providing sociological approaches and frameworks in how play can be regarded as a social phenomenon utilized in accordance with and within specific social structures. Accordingly, Henricks argue that sociology puts play as a process and individual play into broader institutional contexts[1], thus highlighting how, in the phrasing of Pickering, play can be instantiated "beyond the platitudes about creativity, human development and group bonding." (Pickering, 2008, p. 112). Specifically, the thematic red thread that runs across all chapters is the comparison between Huizinga's classic understanding of play and the ideas of the theories of Marx, Weber, Goffman, Durkheim, and Simmel[2] to shed light on how play can be understood and analyzed within different social contexts and frameworks, and in that way illustrate how the field of sociology can contribute to studies of play. In this way, Henricks contributes to and modifies Huizinga's notion of play, in which play is characterized as an appropriative activity[3] that takes over and manipulates external objects and structures[4], as well as the claim that play do

---

[1] (ibid., p. 187)

[2] By explicating these sociological theorists' ideas, Henricks illuminates some of the complexities of play. However, a comprehensive summary of Henricks' treatment of each theorist is beyond the scope of the preparation, but

[3] "(...) playful behavior is ultimately an antinomian enterprise, a protest against orders and orderliness. As complaints against externally imposed routine, these little bursts of creativity are surely important to the participant themselves." (Henricks, 2006, p. 209)

[4] "Play represents a scheming or manipulative stance of subjects toward external objects and patterns." (ibid., p. 190)

in fact have semi-permeable boundaries[5] in which serious and actual consequences can come through some games[6].

These above modifications provide some excellent insight into how play can be understood as an appropriative activity that is not simply about a subject being subjected to an external object and neither is the activity a closed-off experience, as it sometimes can affect players beyond the activity of play. These modifications share many similarities to how Gadamer (1993) characterizes play[7], but unfortunately Henricks fails to include any mention of this very similar notion of play. In turn, I outline Gadamer's play-centric aesthetic theory to complement Henricks' sociologically oriented definition of play below.

Gadamer's notion of play

Although Gadamer's intention with his hermeneutical aesthetics was to provide an alternative contribution to the philosophy of aesthetics[8], his characterization of the activity of play is beneficial to this paper's further understanding of the concept. In short, Gadamer suggests that it is possible to view the activity of play as a constantly dialectic to-and-fro movement[9] structured into a specific pattern through being oriented towards a task that takes over players[10] to bring itself into being that sets up a closed world of its own and that presents itself through being played.

---

[5] There will be personal or social consequences for what occurs (...) however, these consequences are for the most part kept 'in the room'" (ibid., p. 201)

[6] "(...) games in fact have boundaries that are semi-permeable. Certain issues inevitably come through" (ibid., p. 151).

[7] One compatible claim with Gadamer's notion of play is the following: "But living so willfully in the moment has its limitations. Without some abstract framework or structure, people cannot link their own activities systematically or evaluate them comparatively. Thus, behavior is merely something that starts and stops" (ibid. p. 209)

[8] Davey, 2011

[9] Gadamer (1993), p. 103

[10] Ibid., p. 106

Gadamer's understanding of how "all play is being-played" (ibid., p. 231), which to some extent dissolves the relationship between object (game) and subject (player)[11], is sufficiently compatible and complementary to Henricks' decentering of individualism in play. Pickering identifies these similarities in the claim that;

> "[P]lay is neither the antithesis of seriousness, nor simply a subjective attitude standing over against an object – a game, or an opposing player – and that as a mode of experience, play has its own dynamic, its own power to take over and affect the person involved in the experience, then this dynamic does not belong to the person involved, as a property of individual subjectivity. It is not dependent on any individual consciousness, or any special state or mode of consciousness." (Pickering, 2008, p. 113)

Therefore, Henricks' understanding of play should be seen in conjunction with the hermeneutical principles of Gadamer's treatment of the same phenomenon. That is, that play is an activity that dissolves player and game into a constant to-and-fro movement that subjects the game to the player and vice versa, thus emphasizing the notion that the activity of play is able to take over and affect not only the player, but also the game through the dialectic relationship between player and game.

Implications for understanding the procedurality of games

In establishing play as an appropriative activity that not only subjects the player to the game, but also the game to the player, it is possible to identify the analytical implications for prior understandings of how the procedures of games facilitate certain types of meaning[12]. As proposed by others (Bogost 2007[13]; Swain, 2010[14]; Flannagan, 2009[15]), the procedures of

---

[11] Ibid., p. 112

[12] Note that I define the meaning of a game as the overall argument, theme or point that the creator of a game might intend to convey through the game's procedures.

[13] "Procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular. […]Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created." (Bogost, 2007, pp. 2-3), in addition to the claim that "[p]lay refers to the possibility space created by processes themselves" (ibid., p. 42)

games affect or determine how players understand a game's conveyed meaning (if there is any). However, if we agree with the proposed notion of play as an appropriative activity that subjects the game to the player and vice versa, the established procedures of a game are less fixed and increasingly more indeterminate due to the characteristics of play suggested by Henricks and Gadamer. I.e. if the appointed procedures of a game are no longer fixed and rigid in their conveyance of meaning, *qua* the appropriative and dissolving nature of play, then understandings of games as conveying a fixed meaning through their procedures are inadequate in capturing the complexity of how games convey their meaning to the player and how players interpret and configure this meaning. Thus, I primarily argue that we need to consider the complex ways in which players engage their played games in our approach to the understanding of play, players, and games[16].

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined two complimentary notions of play – Henricks' view on play as an appropriative and dissolving activity that takes over a game's procedures, along with Gadamer's view on play as a dialectic to-and-fro movement between subject and object. Through this outline I have established play as an activity that takes over and subject both the player and the game in question to the activity of play, while also dissolving the relationship between them. This proposed notion of play carry analytical implications for previous understandings and arguments on how games convey their meaning, i.e. that intended meanings through a game's procedures are no longer fixed or rigid in the sense that play as an activity is able to take over and dissolve this fixity or rigidness of whatever intended meaning

---

[14] "When the mechanics of a game align with the values the game's designer strives to communicate, then the player is learning those values experientially." (Swain, 2010, p. 217)

[15] "a game's mechanics is its message" (Flannagan, 2009, p. 185)

[16] Note that this does not entail that it is impossible to reduce a game to its intention, material, or convention, but rather "that each of these elements comes into their own when taken up within the playing of the game." (Davey, 2011, his emphasis)

there may be. Further inquiry into this particular analysis and discussion could potentially produce a more nuanced with on how the nature of play affects both player and game.

References

Avedon, Elliott M. "The Structural Elements of Games." The Study of Games (1971): 419–426.Bandura, Albert. "Selective Activation and Disengagement of Moral Control." Journal of Social Issues 46, no. 1 (April 1, 1990): 27–46. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.1990.tb00270.x.

Bateson, Gregory. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." Psychiatric Research Reports 2, no. 39 (1955): 39–51.

Bogost, Ian. Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames. The MIT Press, 2007.

———. Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism. The MIT Press, 2006.

Brathwaite, Brenda, and John Sharp. "The Mechanic Is the Message: A Post Mortem in Progress." Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play (2010): 311–329.

Caillois, Roger. Man, Play, and Games. University of Illinois Press, 1961.

Consalvo, M. "Rule Sets, Cheating, and Magic Circles: Studying Games and Ethics." International Review of Information Ethics 4, no. 2 (2005): 7–12.

Davey, Nicholas. 2011. "Gadamer's Aesthetics." In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Winter 2011. http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/gadamer-aesthetics/.

DeKoven, Bernie. The Well-Played Game: A Playful Path to Wholeness. Writers Club Press, 2002.

Ehrmann, Jacques, Cathy Lewis, and Phil Lewis. "Homo Ludens Revisited." Yale French Studies no. 41 (1968): 31–57.

Flanagan, Mary. Critical Play: Radical Game Design. The MIT Press, 2009.

Gadamer, Hans Georg. Truth and Method. Continuum International Publishing Group, 1993.

Henricks, Thomas S. Play Reconsidered: Sociological Perspectives on Human Expression. University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Huizinga, Johan. Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-element in Culture. Beacon Press, 1955.

Juul, Jesper. Half-real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds. MIT Press, 2005.

Malaby, T. M. "Beyond Play A New Approach to Games." Games and Culture 2, no. 2 (2007): 95–113.

Myers, David. Play Redux. University of Michigan Press, 2010.

Pickering, M. "Review: Thomas S. Henricks, Play Reconsidered: Sociological Perspectives on Human Expression. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006." European Journal of Communication 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 112–116. doi:10.1177/02673231080230010511.

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. MIT Press, 2004.

Schechner, Richard. "Playing." Play & Culture (1988).

Sicart, Miguel. The Ethics of Computer Games. MIT Press, 2009.

Stenros, J., and A. Waern. "Games as Activity: Correcting the Digital Fallacy." Videogame Studies: Concepts, Cultures and Communication. Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford (2011).

Sutton-Smith, Brian. "Conclusion: The Persuasive Rhetorics of Play." The Future of Play Theory: A Multidisciplinary Inquiry into the Contributions of Brian Sutton-Smith (1995): 275–295.

———. The Ambiguity of Play. Harvard University Press, 2009.

Swain, Chris. "The Mechanic Is the Message: How to Communicate Values in Games through the Mechanics of User Action and System Response." Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play (2010): 217–235.

Weinsheimer, Joel C. Gadamer's Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method. Yale University Press New Haven, 1985. http://library.wur.nl/WebQuery/clc/282996.

Winner, L. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" The Social Shaping of Technology 29, no. 3 (1999): 28–40.