Why Game Studies Now?

Video Games: A New Art Form

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Video games are a new art form, and this, the author argues, is one good reason why now is the right time for game studies. As a new art form, one largely immune to traditional tools developed for the analysis of literature and film, video games will challenge researchers to develop new analytical tools and will become a new type of "equipment for living," to use Kenneth Burke's phrase for the role of literature. This article discusses several of the features that make video games a unique art form, features that will, the author believes, come to play a role in analyses of games in the emerging field of game studies.

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Video games are a new art form. That is one reason why now is the right time for game studies (for other reasons, see Gee, 2003). The importance of this claim is this: As a new art form, one largely immune to traditional tools developed for the analysis of literature and film, video games will challenge us to develop new analytical tools and will become a new type of "equipment for living," to use Kenneth Burke's (1973) phrase for the role of literature. The claim that video games are art is highly controversial, so let me explain what I mean.

In Tetris, one of the most popular video games ever, players rotate simple shapes as they fall down the screen, attempting to lock them together with other shapes at the bottom of the screen. The shapes and movements in Tetris have no particular meaning. In a sense, all video games are like Tetris. They are composed of rules that specify the allowable shapes, movements, and combinations of shapes and movements in the game (Koster, 2005).

In a game like Castlevania: Symphony of the Night however, each of the shapes, movements, and combinations that constitutes the game is assigned a meaning. A given shape is assigned to represent an actor like Alucard (Dracula's half-human son) or a Sword Lord; another shape is assigned to represent an object like a treasure chest or a pool of water; and so forth. A certain combination of shapes and movements is assigned to represent an action like "Alucard kills a Sword Lord with an axe." Long-time players are aware that the shapes and movements in a game don't have to look much like what they mean. The original Metroid is made up of pixels so crude that one

can barely tell what they stand for, but players still know they are helping Samus Aran infiltrate the space pirates' home planet Zebes.

What Castlevania and Metroid do and Tetris doesn't is marry an abstract rule system about shapes, movements, and combinations with story elements. By story elements, I mean actors (e.g., hunters and vampires), objects (e.g., chests and pools), actions (e.g., opening chests, killing monsters), states (e.g., being damaged), and events (e.g., dying). I call these story elements because after all, stories are composed of such things. By manipulating these shapes, movements, and combinations, the player produces and manipulates story elements. Thus, games like Castlevania and Metroid are story element generators.

Of course, one could do the same with Tetris, and people have done just that, in particular making versions of the game where the pieces look like humans in different poses and locking them together represents sex. Tetris becomes—sadly in this case—a story element generator about sex. I use the term *story elements* and not *story* because in no sense does such story element generation, either in Castlevania or in sex Tetris, generate by itself whole stories of any depth—just elements of stories.

So what? So what that Castlevania allows players to freely generate story elements? There are three answers to this question.

The first answer is this: The assignment of meaning to each shape, movement, and combination in Castlevania helps determine what they should look like and sound like, either in the game or in the player's mind. Just as saying that a given shape in Tetris represents a human suggests we might draw the shape to look like a contorted person, the meaning assignments in Castlevania suggest—help generate—the very visual design of the game. The Sword Lord looks the way he does because this object has been assigned the meaning Sword Lord in a Dracula universe. There is of course still lots of room for what the Sword Lord can look like in detail, but he's not likely to look like an ice cream cone. This creates an ambiance or sensory metaphor for the game. It quite literally gives what is, after all, just an abstract rule system a certain mood, feeling, sound, and look.

Ambiance, mood, feeling, sound, look: These all sound like mere window dressing. But they are a large part of the pleasure the game gives. The original Castlevania game for the Sony PSone is subtitled Symphony of the Night. And indeed, moving through this game is like moving through a symphony where every "tone" (image) and combination of "tones" (images) creates moods, feelings, and ambiance, not primarily information (as in movies and books). The experience of playing the game is closer to living inside a symphony than to living inside a book. And the symphony is not just visual, but it is composed as well of sounds, music, actions, decisions, and bodily feelings that flow along as the player and virtual character (Alucard) act together in the game world.

The second answer to our so what question is this: Humans find story elements profoundly meaningful and are at a loss when they cannot see the world in terms of such elements. We try to interpret everything that happens as if it were part of some story, even if we don't know the whole story—and in fact, in life we rarely know the whole story (Bruner, 1986). Castlevania allows players to flow through the game always pro-

ducing obvious narrative sense, even in the absence of some whole and finished narrative.

This generation of story elements is also part of the symphony I discussed earlier. Because all the objects and movements in the game have been assigned meanings and these meanings have helped generate the visual and auditory design of the game, the actions we players carry out produce more and more of that design. We produce more and more notes that help create the symphony. Castlevania is an instrument on which the player plays a visual, motoric, auditory, kinesthetic, and decision-making symphony. For example, for me, the look, feel, and flow of Alucard's movements as he jumps across underground springs of water at the bottom of the castle while simultaneously breaking Frozen Shades into ice crystals is one particularly beautiful movement (and moment) in the overall symphony that the playing of Castlevania constitutes. And it is one I produce.

The third answer to our so what question is this: The marriage of rules and story element meanings in Castlevania allows for two quite different stories to exist in the game. The first story is the one told in the Castlevania games. This is the designer's story (which of course gets elaborated and transformed on fan fiction sites).

But there is a second story. Every player of Castlevania who does everything you can do in the game will in the end have done all the same things. A player who does less will have done some subset of this. However, each player of Castlevania will have done and found things in different orders and in different ways from each other. Players will have ventured into the parts of the castle in different orders, they will have revisited them a different number of times. They will have faced the bosses at different times and will have defeated them in different ways. They will have found key items in different orders. They will have made different choices of what strategies to use and what equipment to wear and use. This is to say that each player will have enacted a different trajectory through the game.

What allow us to feel and recognize a different trajectory in a game like Castlevania are the story elements. We can recognize that one distinctive event (e.g., Alucard killed his first Sword Lord) happened before or after another distinctive event (Alucard found the gold ring). Story elements give the player a way to mark time, and against this marking each player comes to see that they have enacted a unique trajectory through the game space.

This trajectory has an important consequence. Your Alucard is different than mine. Yours had a different trajectory than mine. The hero is thus not Alucard from the designer's story or you the real-world player. It is Alucard-you, a melding of the virtual character, Alucard, and you, the real-world player who has steered Alucard on a unique trajectory through the game.

This trajectory is the second story. Because it is a story produced jointly by the real-world player and the virtual-world character, I call it the real-virtual story (Gee, 2005). This is the important story in Castlevania. It is to this story that players attach their fantasies and desires. This trajectory is personal and individual in a game like Castlevania; it is personal and social in a multiplayer game like World of WarCraft.

This proactive production by players of story elements, a visual-motoric-auditory-decision-making symphony, and a unique real-virtual story produces a new form of performance art coproduced by players and game designers. We have as yet no useful tools for analyzing the elements that make up this art form. But it is a form that has the potential to integrate pleasure, learning, reflection, and expanded living in ways that we expect from art.

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