CS4026 Documentaries, Games, and Narratives

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- Used to teach.

~~Thesis: Narratives and Games are mutually exclusive concepts.~~

Thesis #2: Games as a medium are a case where narrative and mechanics have to be treated as distinct.

Fabula/Sujet

Starting Questions

- Definitions:
  - What is "narrative"?
  - Northrop Frye - Theory of Myths

- ○ What are "mechanics"?
  - ■ Do "mechanics" exist in filmmaking?
  - ○ What do I mean by "distinct"?
- ● What *is* a game?
  - ○ How do you describe what a game is to someone who has no concept of a game?
  - ○ e.g.
    - ■ What are the constituent parts of a game?
    - ■ What conditions must a game fulfill?
- ● Having considered all of the above — what, then, is *not* a game?

Before Class:

- ● **Give one example of a game**.
  - ○ For this example, give 1 reason why you would consider it a game, and explain the reason. This reason has to be constitutive of its game-ness, i.e. removing this property of the "game" will make it not-a-game.
- ● **Give one example of a non-game**.
  - ○ For this example, give 1 reason why you would consider it a non-game, and explain the reason. This reason has to be constitutive of its non-game-ness, i.e. removing this property of the "non-game" will make it game-y.
- ● The owners of the least boring answers will get candy.
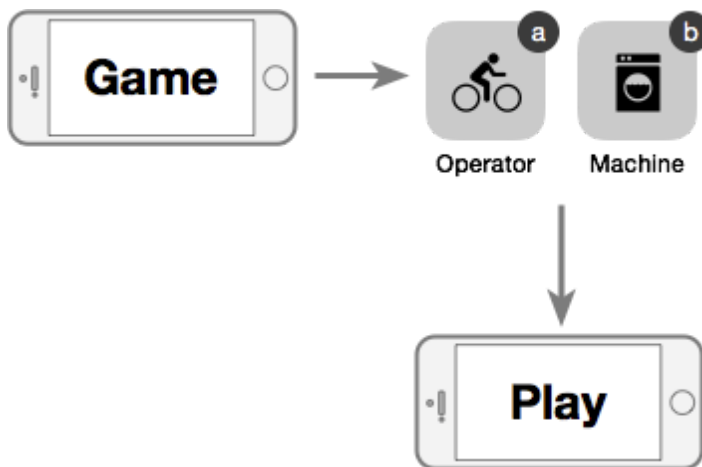
What is a Game?

"A game is an activity defined by rules in which players try to reach some sort of goal."[1]

"[…] playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unecessary obstacles."[2]

What are the constituent parts of a game?

MAGIC CIRCLE — Huizinga
Player(s), Rule(s), and Play.

Begin like this: If photographs are images, and films are moving images, then video games are actions. Let this be word one for video game theory. Without action, games

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[1] Galloway, Alexander R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p.1.
[2] Suits, Bernard. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* (Broadview Press, 2014), p. 43.

remain only in the pages of an abstract rule book. Without the active participation of players and machines, video games exist only as static computer code. Video games come into being when the machine is powered up and the software is executed; they exist when enacted.[3]

Operator and Machine relations

Galloway frames a video game as an interaction between the "operator" and the "machine".
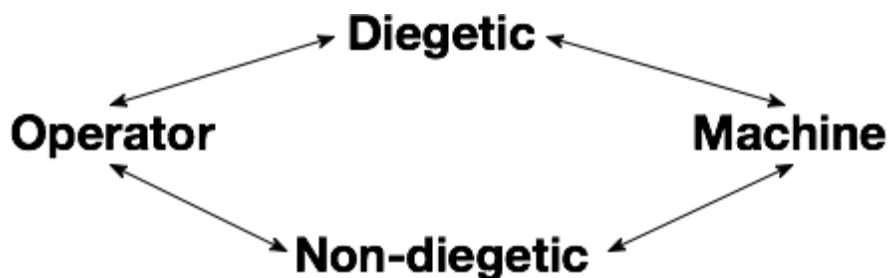
Operator <-> Machine

What is a "Machine"?

- Equipment? Electronics?
- How is the "Machine" related to "mechanics"?
- What form does the "Machine" take in games?
- Can the "Machine" exist outside of games?

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[3] Galloway, p. 2.
[4] Adapted from Galloway, p. 37.

Play

Fun?

Ian Bogost

Games and fun are connected not because games are intrinsically enjoyable, but games are fun because they are experiences that we encounter through *play*. And play is manipulating something that doesn't dictate *all* of its capacities, but it does limit many of them. So *Minecraft*™ asks you to survive in a world made of these inhospitable cubes that you can use as resources, and Candy Crush™ asks you to solve puzzles given a limited supply of powers. And play, it turns out, isn't limited to games at all. It's everywhere. It's in anything we can operate. A mechanism like a steering wheel has some play built in: room through which the steering shaft moves to turn the pinion. Play *isn't an act of diversion*, but a name for making something work - for *interacting with its materials*. And that it why we also say that we *play* an instrument, or a sport.[5]

Huizinga

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in

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[5] Ian Bogost in "WIRED by Design: A Game Designer Explains the Counterintuitive Secret to Fun," YouTube video, 10:42, published by "WIRED," 5 Dec 2014, accessed 24 Jan 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78rPt0RsosQ]

itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life".[6]

Wiener.

Play in video games must yet be distinguished from play outside of video games.

<mark>PvE.</mark>

Play and Diegesis

During the cybertextual process, the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical constitution that the various concepts of "reading" do not account for. This phenomenon I call *Ergodic*, using a term appropriated from physics that derives from the Greek words *ergon* and *hodos*, meaning "work" and "path." In ergodic literature, non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text. If ergodic literature is to sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranoematic responsibilities placed on the reader except

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[6] Huizinga, quoted in Galloway, p. 19.

(for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages.[7]

Aporia of Narrativity in Games

If narrative and mechanics set as distinct, then how do you tell stories in games?

Games as procedural texts[8].
What is procedure?

1. Pro
2. Cede
3. Sure

But what if procedure is not enough?
Artifactual Storytelling:

- @youarecarrying
- Use of "tapes" and "journals" in games.

[7] Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 1–2.

[8] Bogost, Ian. "The Rhetoric of Video Games." *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*. Edited by Katie Salen. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), pp. 117–140. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262693646.117

TWEETS 17.5K FOLLOWING 2,721 FOLLOWERS 3,546 LIKES 33

YOU ARE CARRYING:
@YouAreCarrying FOLLOWS YOU

@YouAreCarrying i or inventory for a list of items. Share your labeled drawings with #iamcarrying. By @avestal.

Great Underground Empire
thegia.com
Joined June 2014

Tweet to   Message

1 Follower you know

130 Photos and videos

Tweets   Tweets & replies   Media

Pinned Tweet
YOU ARE CARRYING: @YouAreCarrying · 2 Jul 2014
UPDATE: This bot now has all items from all Infocom games. msg "i" or "inventory" for a random list. Please RT and tell a friend!
236   90

YOU ARE CARRYING: @YouAreCarrying · 3h
reflective foil, a piece of paper, an instruction sheet, a twenty-ohm bedistor, a key, a space suit. (Stationfall)
1

YOU ARE CARRYING: @YouAreCarrying · 9h
a bronze plug, a wooden ladder, a brass hyrax, a flashlight, a tarry liquid, clothes. (Lurking Horror)
1

YOU ARE CARRYING: @YouAreCarrying · 15h
a broken brick, a two liter bottle of Classic Coke, a metal flask, a dead rat, a crowbar. (Lurking Horror)
1   2

YOU ARE CARRYING: @YouAreCarrying · 21h
a wrist watch, a sword, a price list, a wet suit,

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*:

> The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together,

these items weighed between 15 and 20 pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake. Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April. By necessity, and because it was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighed 5 pounds including the liner and camouflage cover. They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers. Very few carried underwear. On their feet they carried jungle boots—2. 1 pounds— and Dave Jensen carried three pairs of socks and a can of Dr. Scholl's foot powder as a precaution against trench foot. Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders, the RTO, carried condoms. Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. As a hedge against bad times, however, Kiowa also carried his grandmother's distrust of the white man, his grandfather's old hunting hatchet. Necessity dictated. Because the land was mined and booby-trapped, it was

SOP for each man to carry a steel-centered, nylon-covered flak jacket, which weighed 6.7 pounds, but which on hot days seemed much heavier. Because you could die so quickly, each man carried at least one large compress bandage, usually in the helmet band for easy access. Because the nights were cold, and because the monsoons were wet, each carried a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet or makeshift tent. With its quilted liner, the poncho weighed almost two pounds, but was worth every ounce. In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into the chopper that took him away.[9]

Stray Thoughts

Tech know-how.

On how mechanics can drastically change a game's affect.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xm5myQWcJxc

Does *play* only have to happen with games?
"What's in it for me" question
- Louis Castle, formerly of Westwood Studios - don't expect people to finish the game you made. Blade runner.

[9] O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Muffin, 1990).

- Colin Moriarty, http://m.ign.com/articles/2014/03/17/gdc-most-players-do nat-finish-games, citing stats presented at GDC 2014.
- Very fundamental difference between game making and film making.

The speech, called "Death to the Three-Act Structure," elaborated on game completion with some interesting statistics from Valve, based wholly on Steam Achievements. The percentages associated with the titles below represent how many players completed the game in question on Steam.

- **The Walking Dead: Season 1, Episode 1** - 66%
- **Mass Effect 2** - 56%
- **BioShock Infinite** - 53%
- **Batman: Arkham City** - 47%
- **Portal** - 47%
- **Mass Effect 3** - 42%
- **The Walking Dead: Season 1, Episode 5** - 39%
- **The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim** - 32%
- **Borderlands 2** - 30%

"Statistically, most players don't finish games. We've all seen numbers that say something like a third [do finish games], on average," Rouse III said later in the presentation.

Serialization?
http://www.poynter.org/2003/to-be-continued-a-serial-narrative-primer/18815/

Play and gaming as *navigational* — topology and architecture of digital spaces.

Further Reading

Designer Notes Podcast
[https://www.idlethumbs.net/designernotes/episodes].
Episodes of note:

- Amy Hennig — Speaks about game design from the perspective of one trained in filmmaking.
- Louis Castle — How mechanics and technology are core to game-making and story-telling in games.
- Ananda Gupta — Rulemaking for affective storytelling.
- Chris Avellone — This guy is a master storyteller, working with complex narratives in games for most of his career.

game studies: the international journal of game research
http://gamestudies.org

Game Maker's Toolkit
https://www.youtube.com/user/McBacon1337

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— in "WIRED by Design: A Game Designer Explains the Counterintuitive Secret to Fun," YouTube video, 10:42, published by "WIRED," 5 Dec 2014, accessed 24 Jan 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78rPtoRsosQ].

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Huizinga, quoted in Galloway, Alexander R. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 19.

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