Player, reader and social actor

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ABSTRACT: When we approach the videogame as a text we have to take into consideration that its recipient is a player, not a reader. In this paper I discuss some implications of this problem and suggest the concept of metacommunication as a way to cover the new aspects of the recipient.

INTRODUCTION

Videogames have become an issue within the field of arts and humanities during the last few decades. As the audiovisual aspects of the games reach new levels of sophistication and as new ways of forming plot and action have appeared it becomes gradually more relevant to study them as texts and carriers of cultural signification. The theoretical and analytical frameworks we usually apply to such kinds of phenomena might not suffice, however, since the videogames possess a number of characteristics that are not traditionally accounted for within the field of arts and humanities. Videogames, as the name suggests, have their roots in the old field of games and play and these are not traditionally studied as texts. Accordingly, some problems appear when we try to assimilate the videogame into the context of textual analysis and one of them has to do with the "recipient" of the game. We will have to take into consideration that this recipient is a player, not a reader. The activity of playing constitutes quite another context for the act of decoding and interpreting than the one we are used to and this concern should be built into the analytical framework with which we approach the videogame as a text. To make things even more complex the videogame might also, in a very literal sense, become a frame for social interaction. Multiplayer videogames have become a widespread phenomenon that opens up new opportunities for communicating and socialising. This provides the traditional recipient with another unfamiliar characteristic: that of the social actor. Thus, while studying videogames as texts we should be aware that the recipient has changed and with him the entire context of reception.

It's not my intention to claim that these characteristics make it entirely impossible to study the videogame in terms of text and signification. Somewhat contrarily I believe the videogame to be a very interesting combination of these traditionally separated phenomena: Text, game and social interaction. (Though different genres include these characteristics to varying degrees). How they come together, or rather, how we may understand this coupling is the question of this short paper. In my attempt to answer it I will present a number of theoretical perspectives on the position of the player and how it might be related to that of the reader and the social actor. Along these lines I will begin with a discussion of the different ways the player has been conceptualised within game theory. These concepts will be held up against some views on literature as a game in order to identify the possible common features between the player and the reader. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the relation between games and social interaction – how do they connect and what does it tell us about the player and the social actor as related positions? Finally, I will suggest Gregory Bateson's concept of "metacommunication" as a possible "metaconcept" that might be able to cover more broadly the new sort of recipient within the field of videogames.

It should be noted that this is part of a preliminary theoretical work leading up to an empirical inquiry. Thus, what is presented in this paper are the efforts to reach a theoretical understanding of the problem that might be able to guide an examination of the phenomena as the take place in practice.

CONCEPTS OF THE PLAYER WITHIN GAME THEORY

The most obvious place to look for a definition of the player is in the literature on games and play. In general those writings are more about the games than the players that play them but some of them do describe the player more specifically. Thus, Johan Huizinga states that play among other things, is accompanied by *"…a feeling of tension and joy, and the consciousness that it is different from ordinary life"* (Huizinga 1955 p. 28). In a similar manner Bernard Suits includes the "lusory attitude" as an essential part of his game definition but he describes it as the willingness to accept the rules of the game for that simple reason that the activity of playing the game would otherwise not be possible (Suits 1978 p. 38 - 40). Other theorists are less explicit about their understanding of the player. However, their basic understanding of the game concept does more indirectly imply a specific sort of player. At a very general level these basic understandings can be divided into two groups. On the one hand the game may be understood in terms of its rules, that is, as a formal rule-system. On the other hand it may be understood in terms of the separate frame of reference it tends to establish.

If the game is defined in terms of the rules, the position of the player may be understood more specifically as a position toward these rules. This is more or less what is stated in the "lusory attitude" of Bernard Suits and in

this perspective the player is the one who accepts the rules. The real threat to the course of the game is not the cheater (who somewhat confirms the rules by breaking them) but the one who openly questions the rules and in this way exposes them as basically illogical and arbitrary. (See for example Huizinga 1955 p. 11). If we take this definition a little further the player is also the one who acts in accordance with the rules. To play the game is to strive for a specific goal without breaking any of the rules: The game has not been won unless the rules have been followed. (See for example Suits 1978 p. 31). This absolute submission of the self to the rules and the goals of the game might lead to various sorts of flow-experiences as they have been described by, for instance, Csikszentmihalyi (1997). Anyway, the most important aspect in this case is that the focus on the rule-structure of the game provides us with a specific understanding of the player.

While they do represent a very important aspect of the game definition it might be a little reductive to understand the game entirely in terms of these rules, however. Several aspects of the game experience remain invisible within this perspective and some of them might turn out to be very important in relation to the problem I state in this paper. Thus, another way of defining the game should be mentioned here: The game as a separate frame of reference.

The definition of the game in terms of its separate frame of reference includes a number of characteristics that have to do with the status of the actions within the framework of the game. This can be stated in several ways: The game is "disinterested", it is not supposed to serve any instrumental purpose (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1958, Suits 1978, Jessen 2001), it establishes a separate context, that is, it is detached from ordinary life (Huizinga 1955, Caillois 1958, Jessen 2001) and the actions that take place within this context have another reality status, they are not to be interpreted in the same way as ordinary actions are (Caillois 1958, Bateson 1972, Jessen 2001). The latter is the most important one in this case: the actions that take place within the framework of the game have another reality status – they are not to be taken literally. For instance, Caillois writes that the game is "*accompagnée d'une conscience spécifique de réalité seconde ou de franche irréalité par rapport à la vie courante*" – it is accompanied by a certain conscience of a second reality or of utter unreality, in relation to ordinary life[i]. Gregory Bateson makes a similar statement when he says that the activity of playing represents a sort of paradox in relation to its referentiality: while the actions that make up the activity of playing seem to denote situations taken from ordinary life their entire meaning consists at the same time in their difference from those situations – they are *not* the things they refer to (Bateson 1972 s. 179). This phenomenon Bateson defines as "metacommunication" and it might turn out to be an important key to our problem. I will develop this argument a little further in the final

section. At this point, however, I will only emphasize that the player might as well be understood in this perspective. That is, apart from defining the game and the player in terms of the rules they might as well be defined in terms of the context established by the game. Thus, the player can be understood as the one who recognises the separate frame of reference and who acts in accordance with this knowledge.

These understandings are not necessarily mutually exclusive. While some writers tend to hold themselves strictly to one of them others include both. Chris Crawford, for instance, defines the game as: "*a closed formal system that subjectively represents a subset of reality*" (Crawford 1982) which seems to cover both understandings above. On the other hand Roger Caillois, quite interestingly, mentions both features as part of his game definition but consider them to be complementary: The game is defined *either* by its rules *or* by its status as fiction (Caillois 1958 p. 21 - 22). Also, the different understandings might bring some readers to think of the distinction between games and play. In some cases the rule-structure has been considered to be the decisive factor in this distinction but it is not my ambition to solve this matter here. The game/play discussion involves a muddle of different standpoints and distinctions that I prefer to keep out of this discussion and I refer instead to Huizinga (1955), Caillois (1958) and Frasca (200?) for some clarifications.

At this point I would rather like to emphasise that the understanding of the player, quite obviously, depends very much on the theoretical perspective. In this section I have introduced the rule-structure and the separate frame of reference as two general ways of understanding this phenomenon and I would like to retain both in the coming sections. Thus, I would like to discuss both aspects of the player in relation to the activity of decoding and interpreting a literary text as well as in relation to different sorts of social interaction.

PLAYER AND READER: THE GAME METAPHOR IN LITERARY THEORY

As regards the relation between the player and the reader some of the uses of the game metaphor within literary theory might bring some important aspects into light. Within the previous decades the idea of the game has been widely used by literary theorists in order to describe various literary phenomena. Marie-Laure Ryan has written an excellent discussion where she brings forth some of the advantages and weaknesses of this comparison (Ryan 2001). As her understanding of the game concept mainly has to do with its rule-structure her discussion throw some interesting perspectives on the possible connections between literature and games seen as formal rule-systems.

Of course, what these connections consist of depend on the way the comparison is made. When literature is said to have something in common with the game is it

then to be understood metaphorically or literally? And is it a comparison that applies to a few literary genres or to the phenomenon of literary signification in general? If the comparison is to be made at a more broad level, Ryan states, the common features between game and literature seems to be a more loose conception about rule-governed activity: "*If the concept of the game is to capture the essence of the literary (…) texts, it must be reduced to its bare essentials: a rulegoverned activity, undertaken for the sake of enjoyment*" (Ryan 2001 p. 181) Here the framework of the game and the framework of the text may be said to be related because they both imply a set of rules for their interpretation. For instance, the rather strict formal conventions that characterise the crime novel and related genres could be compared to the conventions that direct player-action in the classical adventuregame. This might sound rather plausible but Ryan points out that there is a problem with regard to the status of the rules in the two situations. With reference to the writings of John Searle she defines the rules of the game as constitutive principles while in contrast the rules of the text are more comparable to descriptive conventions. Also, while the rules of the game have to be followed strictly it is more less a trademark of literature to go beyond the conventions (ibid.) Actually, within the writings of the poststructuralists the game seems to consist in the breaking of all of these rules – to assume an anarchistic and playful attitude toward literary conventions (; p. 189-190).

Thus, if we are to make a comparison between literature and games as rule-governed activities we will have to be aware of some important complications. It is necessary to make explicit which type of rules we happen to compare and on which grounds this comparison is possible. This does not entirely disqualify the rule-governed activity as a possible perspective though it might be an idea to look for some other ones as well. Ryan suggests the categories of Caillois[ii], but I would rather like to go back to the other theoretical perspective I introduced in the previous section. The game seen as a separate frame of reference might turn out to be an advantageous perspective.

Within literary fiction this phenomenon seems to be so fundamental that we often don't even care to mention it: Each literary work establishes a separate frame of reference that is supposed to make sense on its own terms, not by referring to its surroundings. As readers we more or less instinctively "jump into the game", that is, we accept the fictional world as having its own frame of reference and evaluate it on these terms. Ryan uses the concept of "possible worlds" in order to explain this phenomenon (see Ryan 2001 chapter 3). "Possible worlds" theory originally developed within philosophy as a tool for evaluating, for example, the truth value of hypothetical statements. According to this theory different types of human communication and thought include the imagination of possible states

of affairs within possible worlds that exist as mental realities in periphery of the actual world we happen to live in. Ryan as well as another few literary theorists has adopted this view in order to explain how the reader is drawn into the fictional world of the novel. Only here the novel is said to establish a sort of alternative actual world with its own possible worlds (; p. 103).

Ryan does not seem to include the principle of possible worlds in the game phenomenon. She mainly understands the game as a formal rule-structure while our dispositions for imagining possible worlds and participating in make-believe are understood as something else (which is not to say that she considers them to be irreconcilable). However, it is possible to see the latter as a part of the game phenomenon as well and in this case our capability of understanding fiction might be an alternative link between the player and the reader. Both of them can be said to engage themselves in fictional worlds that they choose to believe in at the same time as they are aware of their status as fictions and less binding realities. From this standpoint the fictional worlds of Tolkien and Counterstrike do not differ drastically. As I put forth in the previous section Gregory Batesons concept of metacommunication might be an important key to this phenomenon, but before I continue along these lines I would like to say a few words about the relations between the player and the social actor.

PLAYER AND SOCIAL ACTOR: THE GAME AS SOCIAL INTERACTION

It becomes increasingly difficult to describe the field of videogames without mentioning the growing number of multiplayer videogames as well. Here the computer generates the audiovisual and/or semantic surroundings and makes possible a specific set of actions while the role of the opponent is taken by the other players. Thus, a more complex social pattern is likely to appear and forces us to give some thought to the relation between the player and the social actor. As the format of the "short paper" does not allow for an unlimited number of discussions I will have to keep this very brief and limit myself to the suggestion of some possible theoretical approaches.

To begin with, the relation between the player and the social actor is different from the one I discussed in the previous section. Play as a general concept is not distinct from- but rather a subcategory of social interaction, that is, playing is one possible way of interacting socially with other people (se for instance Caillois (1958) for a further elaboration of this point). Thus, the most proper way of asking would be: what characterises play as a social activity? There are many possible answers to this question but what I would like to concentrate on in this case are the theoretical perspectives I defined in the beginning of the paper. That is, we may consider play to be a rule-governed social activity or we may consider it to be a social

activity that takes place within a specific frame of reference. The former would make us question the form and status of the rules: Do they in their structure or origin seem to differ from other social interactions? The latter would to a greater extent be about the frame of reference within which the social meaning is created – does it differ from the ones that are established in other forms of social interaction?

While I do not have enough space to present this discussion at length I would still like to suggest a possible approach to the problem. Thus, I believe the works of Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman[iii] to be useful perspectives in this case. They represent a close and detailed portrait of human interaction and their concepts of rules and representation in the creation of social meaning provide us with some interesting perspectives on the social characteristics of play. This might help us to study play as a social activity and how it connects to other sorts of social interaction. However, this study will have to wait for some other time and instead I would now like to bring some sort of conclusion to this short paper. In the final section I would like to suggest the concept of metacommunication as a possible way of connecting the diverse elements I have been discussing up till now.

METACOMMUNICATION AS A POSSIBLE METACONCEPT

In the previous sections I have partly discussed some possible ways of approaching the concept of the player and partly discussed how this might be held up against the concept of the reader and the social actor. In this context I suggested the concept of metacommunication as a possible link between the player and the reader. This line of thought I would now like to develop a little further since this might be were to look for a link between the relatively separated positions of the reader, the player and the social actor.

Gregory Bateson (1972) developed the concept of metacommunication as a part of a theory of play. He defined the metacommunicative message as one that has the relationship between the speakers as the subject of its discourse (; p. 178). Bateson illustrates this phenomenon with an example of two young monkeys playing in their cage. While the signals and actions in this activity all refer to combat the true meaning of the exchanges seems to be quite the opposite, that is, "not combat" (; p. 179). What makes this thing possible according to Bateson is the monkeys' capability of making a sort of metastatement saying "this is play" or, more precisely, "*these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote*" (; p. 180). In this way engaging in metacommunication is to assume a specific attitude toward the communicative act and to the exchanges it involves.

The most interesting thing in this case is that metacommunication involves the establishment of a communicative frame within which all statements have

a certain status. The exchanges are separated from ordinary life and their meaning is to be interpreted on these grounds. In this way it might function as a conceptual bridge between the player and the reader/recipient of the traditional fictional text: both seem to be capable of acknowledging the altered status of the communication and interpreting its individual exchanges with this thing in mind – whether it be the fantasy creatures of Tolkien's literature or their cousins within the game worlds of Warcraft or Diablo.

As regards the element of social interaction this is more or less an innate part of Batesons concept. As metacommunication is basically a communicative attitude toward the relationship between the parts involved in the communication it already implies the communication and interaction between two or more subjects. In this way metacommunication as such represents a perspective on play as a social activity: the ability of several players to communicate on several levels. Furthermore it may also be a useful way of explaining more specifically how it relates to other forms of social interaction.

Of course the concept I suggest does not describe the player, reader or social actor in their totality. However, it does represent a possible conceptual bridge that enables us to discuss the three together – how they relate and how they work together in the context of the videogame. In this way it becomes possible to go beyond the traditional notions of player, reader and social actor and consider them as different aspects of a new sort of recipient that engages himself in the activities of playing the game and interacting socially. Further development might lead to the distinction between several levels of metacommunication and differentiations regarding its function in different types of videogames. However, I do not have the space to engage in those matters here. My main ambition is to suggest this as a possible way of studying the videogame in terms of text and signification while also taking into consideration the altered position of the recipient.

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NOTES

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[i] My own translation.

[ii] Caillois suggests that we divide the broad field of games into four general categories: agon, alea, mimicry and ilinx representing the elements of contest, chance, make-believe and "the pursuit of an extraordinary mental state" (Caillois 1958 p. 30 – 51).

[iii] Here I am thinking more specifically of *Studies in Ethnomethodoly* 1967 and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1959