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Différance at Play

Unfolding Identities through Difference in Videogame-Play

This paper approaches the debate over the notion of "magic circle" through an exploratory analysis of the unfolding of identities/differences in gameplay through Derrida's *différance*. Initially, *différance* is related to the notion of play and identity/difference in Derrida's perspective. Next, the notion of magic circle through Derrida's play is analyzed, emphasizing the dynamics of *différance* to understand gameplay as process; questioning its boundaries. Finally, the focus shifts toward the implications of the interplay of identities and differences during gameplay.

In the game studies debate, the works of Jacques Derrida have been related to the dynamics of videogame play. For example, Galloway (2006) has brought to attention Derrida's notion of play and compared it to the conceptual framework of Huizinga and the anthropological approach of Clifford Geertz (1973) in order to analyze videogames as actions. Bogost (2006) has drawn an analysis conceptualizing videogames as simulation in a postmodern perspective in which Derrida was taken into account.

In a more conservative approach, this paper focuses on theoretic concerns over elementary concepts in game studies – the magic circle and game play – having as a main objective a reading of these concepts through Derrida's *différance*, thus focusing on dynamic/processual relationships in gameplay. The main objective is to question and broaden the theory perspectives over the given conceptualizations constructed in the past years in the field.

The analysis is directed to the unfolding of identities/differences in gameplay. In the Derridean literature, one of the possible conceptions of "play" can be understood as the temporal and relational pro-

cess in which things appear as such for someone. In this text, I take this particular aspect to analyze the magic circle, at first in terms of concept, then as the phenomenon of gameplay. In other words, the concept of gameplay – or the magic circle – is analyzed through the "play" of its systemic relationships, the constitution of boundaries or its erosion.

Différance and Play

In Galloway's comparative analysis, the term "play" is investigated through the theories elaborated by Geertz, Huizinga, Callois, and Derrida. Galloway notes: "Play brings out for Derrida a certain sense of generative agitation or ambiguity" (2007:28). The term is paramount in Derridean literature and yet the reader will not find a (precise) conceptualization. Galloway's analysis highlights the linguistic/semiotic aspects in Derridean literature – "the play of signification."

In contrast, my approach to the theory is directed to the systemic relations that certainly engender a semiotic dimension but do not dismiss the hermeneutic/phenomenological aspects involved in the act (and theory) of play. These systemic relations are understood as temporal processes but do not necessarily constitute a text or a narrative.

The words "game" and "play" are extensively used in everyday life as metaphors and expressions related to a myriad of circumstances. While play indicates, for example, a pleasurable and inconsequential activity, it can also be understood as in the expression "to be in game" or "play" [*être en jeu*]: to be in question, at stake, at risk, open to change, to the future, finitude or outcome. The emphasis in this perspective tends to be passive rather than active. In other words, it does not refer to an agent pursuing a strategic objective in a system as is the case in many videogames, but rather refers to the process of being affected by relations or by "what comes."

"Play" in a Derridean context is understood as this "stakeness" in which any element, sign, or entity enters when in relation to others; and occurs in both phenomenological and semiological dimensions. Thus, "play" is a twofold process of signification and "becoming." To be in game or to "play" in Derrida's terms would be the equivalent of "being" in traditional thought. The notion of play is inseparable from *différance*, which is neither existence, nor essence. It cannot be followed by the lines of logical-philosophical discourse or by empirical-logical approaches. *Différance is not*; where "not" is the silent/invisible unfolding of the ontological difference. *Différance* is not a being or phenomenon, neither is it a sign or a concept. This process is both temporal and spatial. Derrida describes it as

> The trace beyond that which profoundly links fundamental ontology and phenomenology. Always differing and deferring, the trace is never as it is in the presentation of itself (Derrida 1982:23).

In this "play", an element is always in relation with other elements; it is derived/departed from, or referred by something else. For example, a triangle is commonly defined by three lines in a specific placement. In traditional thought, these are the essential characteristics of a triangle or in other words, what is necessary to identify such an object as it is. Yet, thinking in terms of the play of *différance*, this definition is only meaningful as it relates and differs from other shapes or configurations, such as a circle or square, or three parallel lines.

In my example, I refer to a geometric concept, but in Derridean thought, any concept, element, subject, or object is at play (in terms of signification and as phenomenon.) Any identity appears in an inter-related process with other identities, although not necessarily given as a "representation." – *Différance* establishes differences between elements in a system, and as a result the identity of each element. In Derridean thought, there is no elementary or primordial structure, neither is there essence to define or generate identities, there is just the trace: *différance*.

This perspective contrasts to structural thought, where a system is conceived as an elementary or primordial arrangement, that is, the implication of an essential order between elements, or an essential set of characteristics constituting element identity. For Derrida, identity and meaning are not necessarily stable or permanent, they are processes. Thus, what is at play is the differentiation between elements in an open-ended un/ordered temporal arrangement. Whatever can be thought is always conceived in relation to something else, differing from something else, and consequently always in the process of forming its own identity; any concept, any sign, any structure, any being.

Play (Différance) and (Game)Play

So far, I have outlined the movement of *différance* as identity process, contextualizing "play" in Derridean thought, and thus discerning it from the practices of play as in, for instance, the context of game studies. Now I ask: How can this generic and theoretic "Derridean play" explain gameplay?

For Huizinga, gameplay is associated with "secrecy", as "inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count" (Huizinga 1955:12). What binds players and creates the sphere of magic are rules, which must be obeyed for a game to happen as such. The magic circle and the game are over when cheaters or spoil-sports participate. Spoil-sports disrupt the magic circle, while cheaters make the game meaningless. Huizinga indicates that the magic circle (gameplay) differs from reality. In my reading of Derrida (1982), it differs from reality, constituting its identity as such by this interplay of identity and differentiation. Therefore, gameplay can be conceived as something foreign from reality (difference) as well as through the characteristics shared by them (identity). For instance, at the same time we play "realistic" games and generate simulated environments, we also conceive "reality" as a game: markets, politics,

work, or any other system where one becomes involved in a strategic agent position. – Game and play belong together as a process; for a game to happen it must be played. Aarseth indicates play as a hermeneutic process to understand the magic circle dynamics:

> If we have not experienced the game personally, we are liable to commit severe misunderstandings, even if we study the mechanics and try our best to guess at their working (Aarseth 2003:5).

Salen and Zimmerman have also observed the interdependence of game and game play, by suggesting that play is an element of games, "a primary schema to understand them" (Salen/Zimmerman 2004:303). Games are also a subset of play, it is one of the possible ways which the act of play occurs, consisting in a formalized form of play. Moreover, Salen and Zimmerman suggest that games are emergent systems, by introducing Jeremy Campbell's concept of emergence, in which "a modest number of rules applied again and again to a limited collection of objects leads to variety, novelty, and surprise" (cit. by Salen/Zimmerman 2004:158). – "Emergence is a crucial facet of understanding how the system of a game becomes meaningful to players" (Salen/Zimmerman 2004:158). Game and meaning are both processes that occur through play.

To a certain extent, this framework coincides with Derridean thought. In the play of *différance*, identity and meaning are given by the relation or interaction with objects and signs, in a twofold process: semiotic and hermeneutic. Identity and meaning *emerge* through play. In other words, to identify anything as such, a set of associations take place in terms of identities and differences from other objects; signs, entities, etc., constituting a relationship between elements that is at the same time systemic and processual.

However, Derrida's theory contrasts the works of Huizinga and Salen/Zimmerman, as these authors reinforce the importance of rules in the creation of meaning and thus a positive gameplay expe-

rience; while in Derrida's approach the rules are also in a process of articulation – play – among objects and identities. For example, card games depend strictly on rules to be played as canasta or poker. For Huizinga, if rules are changed or disobeyed, the game or match is spoiled, disrupted. In contrast, thinking in terms of *différance*, rule definitions are conceived as a process, that is, card games rules are in constant articulation through play, and thus games as poker or canasta are singularities, among many other different card games extinct, present, or possible.

In both perspectives, gameplay is understood as a systemic relationship between rules, players, and game elements. The difference is the way these systems are articulated. For Huizinga, the system of the magic circle is closed, while for Derrida the play of elements would be the equivalent of system, or in other words, an infinite open-ended system of relationships in process.

The conception of closed systems presumes the notion of boundary between what belongs to the system and what is foreign. In contrast, Derrida invites us to think about the relationship between the intrinsic elements in a system and what is foreign to this system in terms of identity, difference, and differentiation between these elements. There are no boundaries, unless through conceptualization and appearance of how something is in relationship to another.

For Huizinga, the boundaries of the magic circle are "broken" whenever a foreign element "invades" it. Following this argument, when a player modifies a game by adding elements to the game or changing the rules (modding), the act of play is disrupted into something else. First, the algorithm is altered, resulting in a different game process and player experience. Second, the act of play is subverted, as the player is playing a game not as an actor, but as a creator. A modder interacts with a game by breaking the magic circle or engaging with the game in a particular way- as an art practice (Postigo 2007). The idea of an essential magic circle hinders play possibilities, limiting it to specific roles or (re)actions.

Perhaps the *magic* is not in the *circle*, that is, the boundaries of play might be inadequate to understand certain games. For example, hybrid reality games are designed to be played through mobile technologies which "create new spatial perceptions, by merging physical and digital spaces, and new possibilities for social networks in both spaces" (Sousa e Silva 2006:234). The gameplay in these games is through articulation of material and semiotic elements, and not necessarily apart from reality.

Moreover, it is difficult to establish the limits of gameplay and player interaction in general, considering the social space where game occurs: One enters in a game realm but also maintain the dynamics of sociality with peers (Dixon 2004). That is, gameplay is one form in which social interaction is performed. Even the player identity in avatar performance is given through multiple relations (e.g. Meadows 2008, Boudreau 2007).

By considering game and gameplay as open-ended systems, it is possible to analyze a wide range and inter-relations between games and players in social, phenomenological, and semiotic aspects. Another example that illustrates these complex relationships is introduced by Consalvo (2007), who defines the process of "cheating" by understanding the dynamics of the relationships at stake between the algorithm and player, game developers, media and market. In the author's analysis, all these elements are at play.

Difference through Gameplay

I have previously mentioned that game emerges through gameplay; constituting its identity as such. How does this process occur, or in other words: How does this Derridean play contribute to the study of games and videogames?

In recent years, many conceptual attributes of games were defined and investigated by researchers; such as rules, fiction, narrative, algorithm, simulation, to name the earliest ones. Although it is necessary to ground an object through conceptualization, such projects

can be enriched by considering exogenous relationships – conceptual or interpretive – between games and other objects or phenomena.

From my perspective, a game would not be strictly conceptualized; rather, it *appears* from its differential relations. Instead of thinking in terms of essential or primordial qualities in a game, it can be understood as several different objects and systemic associations at play, resulting from *différance* through gameplay.

In a broad sense, games are understood as hybrid objects. This hybrid character is usually investigated in terms of what a game inherits from other objects, may it be as textual analysis where a game is conceived as representation, or else, in the example of (new) media studies, regarding issues of remediation.

Yet, it is possible to draw the analysis considering both relations of heritage and difference among objects. Instead of asking what games represent and thus investigate how they represent something; I invert the question: How do games differ and from what do they differ?

A game has to relate to something outside the game in order to constitute something playable – such as a narrative, film, an everyday life situation, or a subjective experience. Certainly, these relationships can be understood as representations, especially in the analysis of simulation videogames. However, even if in many cases these differentiations occur from narratives or result in realistic simulations, narrative or simulation are not necessary in constituting a game. As noted by many authors, the notion of representation is inadequate to understand a game like TETRIS (1985), although TETRIS can be related, for instance, to geometry knowledge.

For Derrida, the relationship between signifier and signified is at play, thus what is called representations is a process of differentiation between signifier and signified. In other words, what we play in a game is always something else than what is represented, although these elements inherit some of the characteristics from the signs or elements they derive from.

By playing ping-pong, I know it is somewhat like tennis, some-what like soccer, and these hints allow me to interact with it and understand its singularity – as ping-pong – and not as a simulation or representation of tennis. In a game like CIVILIZATION (1991), what I interact with is a map that pinpoints my troops, cities, and territory, resembling a cardboard game. The relationships I trace between ele-ments in a game and foreign elements – map/gamemap; cardboard game/digital cardboard game – from my experience, general knowl-edge, or memory are fundamental to the gameplay.

Moreover, as player, I expect also that every match will be different as well as its outcomes, different process in which the elements in the game are rearranged and meaning is highly variable and unsta-ble. As suggested by Carr, "if meaning is associated with reception and interpretation, then a significant portion of the meaning of Civ III is generated by or emerges through play" (Carr 2007:233).

In the play of *différance*, the associations between elements take place differing and deferring. In the CIVILIZATION game example, the cities, buildings, and religions are elements in which their iden-tities are in a systemic relation in the game and beyond the game, constituting differentiations, decontextualized and recontextualized and always at play.

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