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“Games Studies as Media Studies” Panel Position Paper
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As an academic whose research focuses on games, along with television and film studies, my own experiences and approaches to the field have always been grounded in the humanities but informed by a variety of disciplines. In a fashion befitting of both the heterogeneity of the discipline(s) of game studies and its interdisciplinarity as suggested by the roundtable topic of “Game Studies as Media Studies,” my own approach to game studies is interdisciplinary by necessity of my own professional experience and my own academic and professional careers that have bridged multiple fields and practices. My undergraduate degree in Media Studies in the mid 1990s combined critical theory with video and media production, along with coursework in Computer Science and Studio Art. While I was interested in continuing the study of interactive media and games as cultural objects, I was confronted by the utter dearth of graduate programs which were focused upon critical theory and new media such as games. I instead worked for a number of years in video game design and software development, as well as in production for educational content for television. Following this professional stint, my graduate work was in Critical Studies at USC, which was then seeing the explosive growth of its Interactive Media division and the foundation of its EA Game Innovation Lab and the degree tracks in video game design.

After all this, I now teach in an English department. This year I taught an undergraduate seminar entitled “Practices of Games,” the first course on traditional and video games to be taught in my school. Students in the class came from departments across campus, including computer animation, business, engineering, journalism, and my own English and Textual Studies department; the composition of this class was quite unusual given the tendency of students on my campus to stay within the confines of their own school or department. One of the central themes of the course was the consideration of games as texts in order to engender close readings of the games themselves; while this is an essential critical skill in almost any media studies course, it is especially privileged within my department which advertises itself as being “committed to critical diversity, literary excellence, intellectual rigor, and cultural literacy.”

The notion of a game as a “text” became a recurring theme within the course, as did the challenges which one must confront when considering a game as a text. For example, where precisely is this “text” located? Is it in the rules of the game or the unwritten social contract into which its players enter? Or is located in the play of the game itself? Digital games present their own complications to this question: for instance, is the text of a game the actual software code in which the game is written? Or is the game’s consideration as a text intractably linked to the system on which it is played (such as an Nintendo Entertainment System) or the interface or controller which the game employs (such as the Xbox Kinect system)?

While these questions about the text of a game may seem quite abstract and akin to thought puzzles, they have dramatic real-world implications in the classroom. In every single film or other media studies course, I have taught, I have used required screenings as a central component; I will screen different material each week which accompanies the assigned reading and lecture/discussion for the week. These practices are commonplace within the academy; however, adding games to this familiar model complicates it considerably. How does one “screen” a game? While one might “demo” a game in class (as I did) or have the students play different games during regular screening times (another approach which I employed), it is simply impossible to show any game in its “entirety.” This is true for both a traditional game (i.e. how do you “screen” chess in a complete manner) and digital games, such as contemporary video games which may require a player to play the game for more than forty hours to “finish” it in only one fashion.

My own questions for the panel start with how we might begin a critical assessment of games as texts. How does the critical consideration of games benefit from, expand upon—and perhaps be limited by—modes of textual analysis developed in other fields? Much as film and television studies have cultivated and expanded upon each other’s approaches and those established in areas such as literature and political economy, game studies demands an interdisciplinary approach which is simultaneously informed by “traditional” fields but cognizant of those properties which are unique to a game and its play. Now that game studies is finally slowly emerging on campuses (echoing the academy’s hesitatingly gradual adoption of film and media studies), the challenges of my

lifelong interest in game studies have come full circle. I am in the position to design syllabi and curricula with game studies at their core; yet I struggle with how best to help students perform a “close reading” of a game as they might a poem, a passage in a novel, a painting, or a scene in a film.