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LCC 6215 Game Design as a Cultural Practice
"Imaginary" Rhetoric: Simulation Games and Antisocial Play
November 5, 2002

One cultural framework for describing play is by ancient and modern concepts of man's place in the universe. Play, categorized as such, can be expressed as one of four types:
- ilinx — represented by disorder, chaos or silliness
- mimicry — described as simulation
- alea — characterized as chance or fate-bound
- agon — characterized as competition

Ilinx and mimicry forms of play are rooted in *ancient* ideas of play. The dominant rhetorics with which these two forms of play are discussed are, fate, power, identity and frivolity.

Alea and agon are *modern* models of play. As a result of Darwinism and industrialism, a new way of analyzing and modeling play became necessary. Thus, the idea of chance outcomes became a strong model known as alea. And the struggle for survival and domination through competition forms agon. As with the ancient ideas of play, the rhetorics of fate, power and identity are important ways to discuss these modern models of play. In addition, new rhetorics were formed to deal with the newly emerging models: progress, imaginary and self. This report deals with the "imaginary" rhetoric of play. Two analyses follow: Civilization III®, a computer simulation game by Sid Meier, and Grand Theft Auto® a video game.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the mid- to late-18th century, an increase in imagination's importance became an outgrowth of industrialization. As urban culture formed, lack of privacy and individuality influenced the desire to be free from the urban environment. An awareness and appreciation for artistic vision, originality and freedom from preconceptions (all of which embodied the innocence of childhood) evolved. Moral character and reasoning developed through play. Thus, a broad construct of play was built on "imagination."

Without imagination, it was argued, the hypothesizing required to begin scientific inquiry would not occur. Imagination, too, served as the bridge between the gulf of sensory input and reasoning. Within these arguments, imagination's role became elevated (in contrast to the ancient form of rhetoric in which play had been considered frivolous). But this broad construct was applied narrowly. The forms of play that were worthy of this scrutiny were idealized in character. Romantic notions of beauty were embraced, like the Olympic Games of Greece, or the harmonies of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." Forms of "dark" play, characterized by the bloody battles of Roman gladiators in their sports arena, or the irrational play of children, were not included. Not until the turn of the 20th century did Western culture begin to view play differently.

IMAGINARY PLAY AND ART

By the early 1900s, child's play and art became mutually associated through the role of imagination. Neither activity was performed for an ulterior motive — each existed for its own sake. Child's play, as partaking of the world in an unmediated, innocent way, was compared to the artist creating: both endeavors centered around a desire to express imagination.

Influenced by this realization, the modernist movement produced artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky and Klee that rejected the subjectified view of their world. The notion of play became one of power because of the freedom from subjective constraints. The relationship between between child's play and art, however, was mis-aligned as there was no differentiation between the two offered. Since then, play and art have been contrasted by various paradigms, respectively: frivolous vs. serious, diverse exploration vs. specific exploration, mastery of self and world vs. mastery of symbolic systems.

IMAGINARY PLAY AND LITERATURE

Play has been regarded as that which accompanied primitive man into a civilized state. (It was even suggested that there was no practical use for play once man attained a civilized state.) To the romanticists of earlier times, poetry was called the purest form of play. Today, the imaginary rhetoric of play suggests that play continues to help us develop morally and socially. Literature, with regard to the imaginary rhetoric, is analyzed in four ways:
- literature as play itself
- literature with playful content
- about play forms
- play forms as literature
- literary metaphors as a form of play

As Play
Partaking of literature, in writing or reading, is a form of play. The exercise of the subject to the literature (i.e., reading) is described as a play action. The subject suspends their place in the physical world for one in the literary work.

With Playful Content
Literature can contain content that is a form of play, as in mystery novels. In this example, the play is not necessarily the act of reading, but in assembling clues to second-guess an outcome. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass,* the dialogue between Alice and the Knight about the Haddock's Eyes song is playful, testing the doctrines of science against the humanities.

About Play Forms

Literature can be about forms of play, as in a story about a group of children playing. In Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, the play is a type of metacommunication — the story being told is play, and the children in the story are playing. In this example, Boccaccio's allusions to the Church and the plague through use of telling a story about children playing games show the relationship between escaping into the safe world of play while existing in the real, unsafe world: the distinction between reality and fiction is blurred. First, one steps into a safe world by escaping into the literature; then one steps further into an unsafe world when the story is about the dangers in the world; then, again, one steps even further into another safe world when the protagonists find ways to divert the dangers in their world.

Another example of play forms serving as subject matter of literature is the storytelling of Ribelais. His medieval carnivals and festivals describe characters of grotesque mannerisms who are escaping the reality of their poverty and servitude. These accounts more accurately reflect the true state of affairs in 1930s Russia than mediated news accounts of the time.

Play Forms as Literature

The kinds of irrational or nonsensical behaviors that can annoy adults, and are recounted as stories about things like a child's tantrums, a teenager's adolescence, or an adult's crude mannerisms become a play form as they are written. This plurality of experience, when the negative experience is transformed into an entertaining literary experience, becomes valuable to the rhetoric of imaginary. That discomfort and pain can be transformed into a form of play is a testament to the power of the imagination, and so the imaginary rightfully becomes a way to discuss play.

Literary Metaphors

As a figure of speech, play can be confounded. The example "Brian is a pig" can mean that Brian has socially unacceptable manners (as a metaphor) or that Brian is pretending to be a porcine animal (as play). The latter intent of the statement is a sort of framework for storytelling. In fact, a structural analysis of play and storytelling will reveal many similarities: a challenge, a resolution, and complications that enrich the experience and which make attainment of the resolution more enjoyable. Imaginary rhetoric of play can help decipher which meaning is play and which is metaphor.

IMAGINARY PLAY OF SIGNIFIERS

All forms of media — text, photography, sculpture, video, music — are signifiers (representations of reality). If we say that play is a way of using our imagination to escape reality, then it follows that consuming media is a play form. Baudrillard takes this analogy to an extreme, calling our consumer-oriented world so heavily mediated that it has become our reality. Advertisers take advantage of this in the hopes that we'll base our actions on this pseudo-real world.

Our heavily mediated environment induces greater freedom and imagination through a reduced degree of accountability. Computer networking and MUDDs are an outgrowth of this concept. The accessibility of this freedom has given rise to a fear that we are in danger of losing ourselves (without the boundaries of reality which accountability gives us). Advertising sponsors have little responsibility for our personal actions, yet have powerful control over what images they feed us. One can argue then that our world becomes a simulation or parody.

What is not taken into consideration in this simplified argument is that people are individuals and that the mind is not simply a reactor to sensory input. Reasoning also occurs, providing that variable that keeps us grounded. (To what degree our reasoning may be compromised is debatable.)

THE PLAYFUL AND METAPLAY

Play is often characterized as routine (those well-organized culturally-infused activities such as games, sports and entertainment), while the playful (that which is unorganized and often spontaneous) is idealized. This duality of play/playful is comparable to the dualities of work/play, adult/child, heavy/light, serious/frivolous, corrupt/innocent.

Another way of comparing play and playful is to say that playful is a kind of metaplay, in other words, that which plays with the routine notions of play. If play can be thought of as mundane frames of an activity (although within these frames are moments of playfulness), then playful is the film of routines, a kind of parody.

CIVILIZATION III® AND SIMULATION GAMES

Civilization III® is a simulation game. Players construct a world in which everything is accurately depicted, from the graphical representations to the interactions. Within the rhetoric of imagination, Civilization can be analyzed in terms of:
- the form as play — the game is played for its intrinsic entertainment value; players engage with the knowledge that they will be using their imagination and exercising creative freedom.
- playful content — the interactions within the game are contests of power, identity and strategy.
- metaphor — players are transformed into the character; the play is a complete transformation into actions befitting the character that is being played (i.e. all the cultural elements of the periods have been carefully designed into each character and play).
- signifiers — detailed images provide rich background for using the imagination, as does the narrative. Sound is much less developed.
- metaplay — play is when the player takes his turn, chooses the type of warrior, whether to build roads or irrigation, whether to pursue the knowledge of pottery or masonry. These moments of play often follow rules and strategizing. Metaplay is

when all these moments of play come together into one fantasy of ruling an empire.

Grand Theft Auto® and Antisocial Play

Grand Theft Auto® (GTA) allows us to explore antisocial behavior. One can take advantage of this safe space and act out what would normally be prohibitive, both morally and physically. The threshold for immorality and taking advantage of the lack of responsibility for one's own actions is different for different people. Some players might find it difficult to engage in murder (a possible activity in GTA) and prefer to "race an obstacle course." Others might explore the "good samaritan" options (while in a stolen ambulance, the player has the option of taking a patient to the hospital). Still others might thoroughly play out the role of escaped psychopath, and kill all people encountered.

Reasoning is what keeps one grounded after playing. It allows us to leave the game and go back to our real world with morality intact. Then why do critics of violent games insist that people (especially children, who are easily influenced) become more violent as a result of playing one of these games? Can it be that a person's moral character is altered after playing GTA? Or is there a disconnect between the imaginary world and the real world? Debate on both issues continues, as we now become aware of our larger potential for antisocial behavior.

For those believing that morality is affected after playing these games, then is censorship the answer? At what point is our moral character fully developed (often through play), and no longer influenced by play?

If it is about confusion between the imaginary and the real, then should game safeguards be implemented? What does this say about our culture, one that is so heavily mediated that reality is obscured for some, and needs to be reinforced after play?