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LCC 6215 Game Design as a Cultural Practice

Maze and Riddle Games: Rhetorics of Fate and Imaginary

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Unlike arcade games, which can be described as chase and displace board games on steroids, adventure mazes and riddles challenge the intellect. There is no haptically-challenging input (unless one wants to consider the dexterity of typing!). Most of the play occurs in the imagination — the framework is representational so that mental models of our physical world can be built and navigated. Adventure.htm[®] and Zork[®] are examples of this type of game.

The rhetoric of fate is useful in discussing Adventure. htm[®] and Zork[®]. The goal of these games is for the player to master his environment. Playing either game means engaging in a story line that tests survival skills. In addition, these games can be analyzed in terms of the imaginary, a modern rhetoric used for discussing games.

FATE

Players of Adventure.htm[®] and Zork[®] must draw upon domain knowledge, both in the real world and in the computer world, to successfully play these games. By doing so, players master these worlds (both the implied physical world and the literal computer world).

Real world domain — making sense of the physical world and navigating it to achieve an end is the essence of survival, and the basis for the rhetoric of fate. By intuitively accepting an investigative role, the player quickly becomes engaged in exploring an imagined terrain . The player relies on prior knowledge in the real world to navigate: identifying obstacles to circumvent, navigating the proper directional according to terrain (“up” to climb a mountain, “down” to traverse a valley), observing more closely objects that appear to be out-of-place or extraordinary.

Computer world domain — with prior knowledge of computer games, computer programming or computer use, players can rely on knowledge of the rules-based nature of the underlying model to be successful. Syntactically simple commands can be assumed to be the correct ones. New players to the medium must learn these rules. These commands are often based in simple everyday language, not cryptic coding, thereby affording the player another opportunity to use prior real-world knowledge. When success is achieved (through multiple “legal” moves), a sense of mastery has occurred over the medium, paralleled by mastery of the implied world within.

IMAGINARY

Adventure.htm[®] and Zork[®] are text-based pre-cursors to role-playing MUD games. Their lack of a graphical interface forces the player to use imagination. The player must interact by “visualizing” the field of play, much in the same way that chessmasters internalize the series of moves that may lead to their demise or victory. And like chess, the lack of a graphical interface imposes an abstract way of thinking about the playing field that cannot occur without imagination.

This ability to internalize or visualize during play allows for a rewarding interaction for those so inclined to abstract thinking. However, these interactions are can be dependent on extrinsic variables, particularly cultural constructs, that map to those of the programmer’s. One must think in the same “language” as the game developer. A *graphical* description of a space can often be traversed by players of different cultural backgrounds because enough information is viewable that transcends cultural boundaries and are clues to the correct moves.

But in a *text-based interface*, when one considers the more intricate barriers that cultures might impose on connotations (“up” vs. “forward”), methodologies (“exploring” vs. getting it right the first time) and terminology (“urn” vs. “vessel”), one can see how the game play might not be suited for everyone.

RETROSPECTIVE

Computer games of today, taking advantage of the affordances of advanced computational processing, storage and speed, do not need to leave as much to the imagination, and so may not challenge it as fully. Instead, their strengths lie in providing opportunities for players to be immersed in complex rules-based activity. In the 1970s, affordances (or limitations, by today’s standards) of the computer brought to bear the simple rules-based, text-based games that challenged people in developing an abstract way of thinking.