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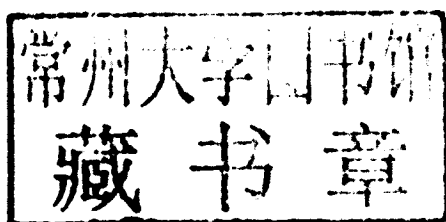
Essays on Control in VIDEO GAMING

Edited by Matthew Wysocki

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Introduction

MATTHEW WYSOCKI

I would rather be gaming than writing this. In my home office, I have three game consoles connected to a television and on those consoles are a haphazard collection of games that I have either just completed, am in the middle of playing, am saving for when I have "more free time" or need close at hand for research purposes. I imagine that I am far from alone in having such a set up. In fact there are a lot of us, with the Entertainment Software Association reporting 79 percent of all American households play computer or video games (2011). And I am not so egotistical to believe that at least some of you would likewise rather be gaming than reading this. Like the other contributors to this collection, we are gamers. And we have become the mainstream. Video games are spun off into major motion pictures and many action films are now followed up with an obligatory action game. The release of a big budget video game is often done with the same sort of marketing blitz seen in older forms of media. In fact, during the writing of this piece, *Mass Effect 3*'s launch was preceded by a fake Twitter promotional account that detailed the start of the invasion of Earth that plays out in the beginning of the game. Anyone buying the game at midnight could match up their game with the timeline of @AllianceNewsNet.

Likewise game studies is making the same transition into mainstream academics. Part of that is the move away from "What is gaming?" and "What is game studies?" texts and into works that expand our analysis and understanding of the medium of video games. The idea for this book came about as a panel proposal for the 2011 Popular Culture Association Conference. The proposers discussed different ideas in contemporary games research and real-

ized that what they had in common was they were analyzing the way that control played out in video games. They also realized that this term was mostly nonexistent in the field. Not the idea of control, per se, but the term itself was conspicuous in its absence. In discussion with the other members of the panel and some of the other scholars at the conference, they realized there was an interest in conceptualizing this theme more fully. The essays in this collection are an effort to incorporate this concept of control into the video game research discussion.

The word control has many implications when it is used in connection with video games. Obviously on a basic level, unlike other media, if a player does not control the game, there is no experience. You must participate to keep the story moving forward. While other media might require their audience to be mentally active, they remain physically passive. Their agency consists of little more than pushing play on a remote control or turning a page. A video game demands response. Buttons and joysticks must be manipulated, paths must be mapped out, and flaming barrels must be jumped. Failure to do so means failure to continue the gaming experience.

Furthermore, much of the video game industry focuses on questions of control. How can they improve the methods of "playing" to make the gamer feel more connected? How can the player "control" the game in a way that makes them feel more like they are "there"? Each generation of game console that gets released redesigns the game controller in small or large ways. And Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft have released motion controllers designed for new ways of involved game experiences. In fact the unique nature of the Wii propelled a mediocre game, *Wii Sports*, into a best selling title based upon being packaged with a Wii motion controller.

This is not to say that other scholars have not conceptualized these ideas. Research into interactivity, agency, affect, ludology, and gameplay touches upon aspects of control. But control has a larger implication of power inherent in it. When we bring control into the picture, we are not just interacting with an avatar; we are commanding it, directing it. We are attempting to enforce our will into the game world, not just acting within it. Yes, we are playing a game but we are playing to win the game. Likewise, a video game is a game of rules and algorithms that limit what we can and cannot do, that direct us and require us to perform as the game wants us to. And the essays that follow continue the explorations into these concepts and more.

Theories and Definitions of Control

The first section of this book explores different ways we can theorize and define control within video gaming. Each essay approaches the idea of control

in video games and seeks to provide a structure for understanding its nature.

Gerald Voorhees starts things off by focusing on what leading game scholars have called the "game/player problem" in the study of digital games. Voorhees feels this leads to a dichotomy in that two schools of thought focus on either the player or the game due to different critical approaches and how they conceptualize control. Because these approaches locate control in either the games or the players, they are not able to study the interface of the game and player: gameplay, defined as "an ongoing process organized by an 'economy of desire.'" This is where he feels the focus of game studies should be. By rethinking game studies in this manner, this places more control in the hands of the player but also in the structures that oversee the games we play.

In the next essay, Paul Toprac focuses on "The Psychology of Control and Video Games." It is human nature to seek to control situations with uncertain outcomes. But he argues that such control is only perceived control, a psychological construct. When we play games, we are reacting to the emergent patterns but not truly in control of them, despite our perceptions to the contrary. This perceived control exists, however, as one of the most important and entertaining elements of playing video games. Still it remains a primarily subjective experience that must be understood before one can hope to analyze technical aspects of gaming. To understand it, we must conceptualize control as it connects to both uncertainty and enjoyment. Toprac finds that we most enjoy games when we feel our actions are overcoming that uncertainty and leading to "desirable proximal outcomes."

In the third essay, Nadav Lipkin looks at the construction of affect in video games. He starts with the concept that a game would not be a game if the player could not alter any aspects of the object's text and consequently how the text controls player behavior. He theorizes that affect, rather than a self-conscious interpretation, is the strongest influence on these player behaviors during a gaming session. Conceptualizing affect as a theory of control for video games has been lacking and Lipkin outlines how this can be accomplished. This results in a method that others may use to place affect in a text within a hierarchy of controls and structures during play events.

Thijs van den Berg then theorizes about how the notion of player control is potentially undermined by the patterns of addiction that video games activate. He spells out that video games are "addictive" precisely because of their structure that encourages player input through reward, motivation, and especially the "postponement of satisfaction." This places player input not as a controlling element but as a reactive element, problematizing the notion of player agency. Player progress involves breaks and interruptions that call for player input. But rather than leading to gratification, the input leads instead

to denial of rewards. The enjoyment potentially comes from continuing the game, not completing it and this works to subvert player control.

Control and Game Design/Play

In the middle section, the essays are concerned with how control impacts upon elements of game design and game play. Nick Webber investigates the negotiated nature of control in Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs), focusing on how these game worlds should function. He seeks to understand to what degree such games have a perceived need for control that originates out of the game rules. Players, game designers, and regulators within the game system negotiate such rules, and the control that comes with them. Such negotiations traditionally lead to a sense of fairness and game balance, which is in essence agreeing that control is something that is built out of the relationships and tensions of the game community. These efforts to negotiate control can also be seen as having implications for other online communities.

Like Lipkin, David Owen also tackles the issue of affect. But for Owen the concern is how it relates to the illusion of agency with video games. In order to truly control the narrative of a game, one must have input in the manufacture of that narrative. In gaming, such narrative agency is actually an illusion. But the player believes in the illusion and this results in deeper immersion and emotional satisfaction due to feelings of affective control. This immersion is a goal for game designers and Owen outlines some of the strategies that have been attempted to create the affect of agency. While true narrative agency and control have not been achieved, the efforts to create the appearance of it have lead to greater gamer enjoyment and entertainment.

Next, Meagan Rothschild, Amanda Ochsner and Jonathan Gray explore how narrative and meaning are created through play. Game mechanics and story provide a greater sense of the narrative structure, and through these we can analyze how player participation creates meaning-making. This participation creates play that results in agency for the player to create a personal narrative that interacts with the intentions of the creators. So by negotiating and testing the boundaries of game designers and game space, players seek to control the game experience. From these interactions emerge many of the things that are most valued about game play.

Shawn Edrei's essay follows this up by also focusing on video game narratives, specifically the impact of pseudo-editorial control on them. He feels that the issue of diegetic control — the player's ability to directly affect the digital environment via manipulation of an avatar — is traditionally considered as an element of ludology. However, recent games allow more player

control over elements of narrative, impacting on game plot. Edrei is concerned with how this narrative control might impact player experience and game play. As games move beyond just allowing for multiple endings and actually incorporate plot branching, players are able to interact with the sujet, the arrangement of story elements into a plot, allowing for new "narratological structures" created by player involvement and control.

Peter McDonald considers how the physical video game controller is a complex site of mediation for the player's identification with an avatar or perspective. He considers that while previous scholars have considered the various roles of a controller for users they have overlooked its semiotic function where signifier is the button press and signified is the onscreen action that results. These button presses can be read as "differential chains of signs." Meanwhile the controller itself occupies a space in the unconscious because of its connections to both activity and attention. McDonald argues that the controller functions as a mediator of the game, allowing us to identify with characters within it.

Alison Gazzard considers the controller in a different way in her essay on bodily interfaces and game spaces. She argues that it is through "somatosensory" and "proprioceptive" systems that we are aware of how we use the controller as a feedback device while gaming. This feedback allows us to develop our sense of location and direction within the game world. Microsoft's Kinect device, however, involves no hand-held controller requiring us to rely on audio and video feedback only. This alters our sense of spatial agency and allows the game coder a greater element of control over the game experience. Instead of focusing on manipulating the controller, we must instead consider other elements such as how our own body interacts with the virtual bodies of our avatars. Doing so forces us to make sense of variable scenarios and how a player's sense of agency may need to be constantly reconsidered.

Reading Control in Video Games

The last section consists of close readings of specific games to see how each one locates elements of control in their structures.

Chris Pallant focuses his analysis on developer Rockstar's games *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *LA Noire*. Rockstar has had a history of controversy regarding game content and player control. But Pallant argues that these three games have attempted to reach a level of balance regarding player and game control. While the size and choice available in these three sandbox games appears to create a great deal of freedom for the player, Rockstar's desire to create "narrative coherence" leads to reductions in player control rather than increases.

Brent Kice then compares and contrasts the perceptions of player control in open world format games versus first person shooters, specifically examining Rockstar's *Red Dead Redemption* and Treyarch's *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. He finds that in addition to providing gamers with different experiences they also provide differing levels of control. Overall, due to its focus on narrative, *Red Dead Redemption* creates the illusion of control for the player. The "narrative" for *Call of Duty: Black Ops* is the process of leveling one's character that causes players to focus on that over other concerns. Both of these games reveal that once a game starts incorporating narrative into its form, control over the player is sure to follow.

Karl Babij explores how the *Fallout* series and *Dragon Age: Origins* negotiate developers' attempts to incorporate ethical decision-making for the player as part of the game's mechanic. Babij points out that previous games would discourage or penalize players if they attempted to find a morally ambiguous course rather than choosing the strictly linear good or evil, which allowed for benefits for maxing out one of those paths. These two games attempt to address this discrepancy in different ways; either by offering a neutral option or eliminating the ethical meter entirely. While this increases complexity in these games, giving more, but still limited, options is not quite the same as extending more control to the player. For true ethical consideration by the player, more effort will have to be made to separate choice from game mechanics.

Elisa Meléndez considers how gender is coded as an element of control in music games, primarily focusing on the *Rock Band* franchise. Music and video games have a long history of feminist critique. Rhythm games like *Rock Band* bring these two media together, potentially resulting in a highly gender coded performative space. An analysis of these types of games reveals that they are both products of the music business and video games and as such, gender is a highly mediated construct. Meléndez considers these games as "cover versions" of the real rock band experience and so the games echo gender disparities found in the real world. The female gender is marginalized and sexualized in these games. This creates a sense that being female is a novelty or the Other and this controls what game players read as acceptable in these games.

The next essay has M.-Niclas Heckner questioning the level of influence of game code and narrative on players leading to close readings of *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Call of Duty: Black Ops*. He argues that, contrary to many who conceptualize it as negative, we should reconsider the meaning of player passivity. Both games contain moments where the player must deal with the loss of control. *GTA IV* strongly pushes the idea that freedom is an illusion as a narrative motif while *CoD* contains a storyline that concludes with the

player watching "historical" events while powerless to stop their avatar from performing them. Rather than removing the player from the game experience, these moments of passivity allow for a greater sense of emotional impact and contemplation.

Finally, Matthew Wysocki and Matthew Schandler consider the "Would You Kindly?" scene from *BioShock* and what it reveals about the question of free will in video games. In a crucial point of the game *BioShock*, a cut scene occurs and the player watches while their avatar performs a vicious action while under the control of the game, not the player. The player is at that moment encouraged to consider something most other games would never dream of contemplating: "Why am I doing this?" And the answer is because the game asked you nicely and there is nothing you can do about it. But we can take this to the next logical step. The game is instructing us to question authority, all authority. Yet in essence the game itself is an authority. Thus, the game raises questions about the very nature of free will and identity in gaming. Within the structure of a game, we accept that actions must be undertaken because they are required to complete the game. But if we are willing to accept that we must perform certain actions because "the game requires it" what other actions might we consider acceptable? The "Would you kindly?" scene can cause us to question all of our motivation and activity in gaming up to this point, revealing how little control over the game experience the player truly has.

As video games increasingly become a major force in the media landscape, it becomes progressively more valuable to consider their impact upon society. This collection seeks to provide a framework for understanding games within the various ways we may conceptualize and situate control in them. Interactivity and agency are primary issues for game designers and players. Making sense of these issues, locating and defining control, is a crucial element of game studies. The various essays contained here provided numerous ways for the reader to do so. Provided, of course, that they can put down the controller long enough to read them.

Work Cited

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Section 1: Theories and Definitions of Control

Criticism and Control: Gameplay in the Space of Possibility

Gerald Voorhees

Discussing a lecture given by Jesper Juul at the Georgia Institute of Technology, Bogost notes that the field of game studies has moved beyond the narratology and ludology debate over the nature of the medium and entered a new conversation about the

> proper object of study: is it the game, or is it the player? Critical approaches, no matter their method, tend to focus on games, seeking to understand and document their meaning along with the cultural relevance of that meaning. Social scientific approaches, again no matter their method, focus on players, seeking to understand and document what they do with games and how they do it ["Phenomenology" 25–26].

This disciplinary metaconversation, which Bogost (again channeling Juul) called in his 2009 DiGRA keynote the "game/player problem," is a methodological, or perspectival, disagreement. It is also, on two registers, ultimately a question of control.

In one sense, the game/player problem is, like the narratology and ludology debate that both did and did not take place (Frasca), an effort to define and thereby control the nature of the field. What is at stake is not only the "proper object of study," but also the acceptable methods of inquiry, the appropriate epistemological and ontological assumptions to undergird the theories generating inquiry, and the very purpose of scholarly inquiry. Even

without straying far from its intended path, this essay cannot help but touch on some of the methodological, theoretical and practical entailments of the various modes of player- and game-centered game studies. However, I do not actively pursue these implications. If game studies is still an immature discipline, it has practitioners learned enough to recognize and make a space for the productive tensions generated by competing, even contradictory approaches.

More significantly, the game/player problem is about the false dilemma framing the question in terms of an *either/or*. One can just as well study games without accounting for the play they enable as theatre or film can be understood by reading scripts. And one can study play without accounting for the games that structure it only to the same extent that a ritual can be understood without any knowledge of the culture that enacts it. But if game studies aims for more than a catalog of play practices divorced from or only tenuously linked to the psychological and social contexts of the activity, or a repertoire of professional design techniques for achieving someone's ideal of the perfectly crafted game, then we need to examine the mutually constitutive meeting of player and game in the process of gameplay. In this light, the game/player problem is an extension of the very problem the field has supposedly moved beyond; it is about the polarizing rhetorics that give shape to and thus control the formation of the questions that continue to structure the discipline.

I argue that the real game/player problem is that the most prominent modes of game studies either center the game at the expense of the player or the player at the expense of the game — just as the narratology and ludology debate presented the false dilemma of *either* story *or* game. In other words, at issue is not determining whether the player or the game lies at the heart of the field, but rather that most game scholarship is premised upon the assumption that either one or the other concept must define the discipline. As an alternative, I put forward the notion that the meaning and significance of games is controlled by neither players nor games but rather lies in the gameplay enacted where player and game interface.

This essay first examines how gamers and players are alternatively centered and marginalized in different approaches to game studies. However, to facilitate this discussion, I substitute Juul and Bogost's distinction between social scientific and critical research with two separate but overlapping categories, distinguishing camps based on how the object of study is understood and to what ends the scholarship is aimed. And though certain approaches do tend to center players they nonetheless have much to say about games, just as those that center games and game rules tend to make some very specific claims about players. While this discussion points to a number of shortcomings with the *status quo*, the next section endeavors to make a positive case

for why gameplay should be the primary object of inquiry in game studies. While this is based in an explication of gameplay it turns on an examination of the space of possibility in which gameplay is negotiated and concludes with a brief discussion of the potential merits of game studies organized around the concept of gameplay.

Locating Control in Games

The game/player debate is not pushed in a productive direction by overlooking the different aims and research paradigms that distinguish the different camps arrayed in the field of game studies. Nor can its lessons be taken to heart when we attempt to build bridges between these modes of research without first taking care to discover into what grounds the foundations of such a structure must be planted. In this section, I endeavor to tease out some of the assumptions that distinguish the multiple, different approaches to player-oriented and game-centered research.

However, I want to first clarify the language I will use to identify these camps. I find Bogost's pitting of social scientific against critical scholarship problematic because it mixes the domain of inquiry with the attitude or aims of the inquirer. What distinguishes the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and industrial arts is the domain of study: physical reality, social reality, the human condition and professional practices, respectively. While all of these domains can be approached from a critical perspective, which most media scholars understand as an offshoot of Marxist theory dedicated to critiquing social disparity and injustice, the humanities and social sciences are typical targets of critical studies. Aside from the eristic pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the emancipatory agenda of critical studies, scholarship also aims to further the liberal arts by producing knowledge that better enables one to live a good life, and the vocational arts, which facilitate a productive if not profitable life. By distinguishing between both the purpose and the domain of inquiry, I hope to quickly and coherently map the distinct camps of game- and player-centric game studies.

One form of game scholarship that centers on players— though it is often dismissed as "not game studies"—consists of a large and prolific body of positivist, social scientific games research that follows in the tradition of media effects research. Here, the focus is on players because players (and their attitudes and behaviors) can be viewed as an index of the social impact of games. This research, more often than not behaviorist in orientation and expressed quantitatively, is premised on a subject-object relationship that figures the player as both the object of study and the object acted upon by the game. The great majority of this work, most often found in psychology and sociology