

Chapter 1

Toward Broader Definitions of “Video Games”: Shifts in Narrative, Player Goals, Subject Matter, and Digital Play Environments

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ABSTRACT

As video games grow in popularity, ambition, scope, and technological prowess, they also mature as an art form, shedding old definitions tethered to video games as simple, competitive exercises. Greater technological capabilities, in addition to years of experimentation and maturation, have expanded the ability of games to tell different kinds of stories, offering branching paths. The question of “what makes a game a game?” looms larger than ever in this era of video game storytelling. As plots and characters grow, branch, and develop, so, too, do the boundaries of what a game actually is. In traditional definitions of gaming, a set of rules and a victory condition were essential elements to a game. As game narratives and game mechanics grow in increasingly complex and experimental directions, new player goals have emerged. Now, gamers socialize, customize, nurture, kill, build, destroy, break, glitch, and explore as much as they work to win and accrue points. This chapter surveys the current landscape of video games, highlighting examples and trends that challenge more traditional notions and definitions of what it means to be a “video game.” The broader definition presented here takes into account play, narrative, digital environments, and more, acknowledging the expanse of the video game experience.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0261-6.ch001

INTRODUCTION

As video games grow in popularity, ambition, scope, and technological prowess, they also mature as an art form, shedding old definitions tethered to video games as simple, competitive exercises. Over the last four decades, video games have made great narrative strides from the simpler days at the beginning of video gaming. In fact, those who view video games as an art form often point to game narrative and storytelling as a place where video games have not only matured, but have offered something different than other narrative experiences like literature or film. Video games can provide players with “a great deal of control over the pacing and sequence of events” (Schell, 2015, p. 12). Greater technological capabilities, in addition to years of experimentation and maturation, have expanded the ability of games to tell different kinds of stories, offering branching paths, fragmented narratives, experimental stories, and even the opportunity to create their own goals and games.

The question of “what makes a game a game?”—or “what makes a video game a video game?”—looms larger than ever in this era of expanded video game storytelling options. The word “game” as a part of the phrase “video games” is a complicating factor in defining video games, to be sure. In traditional definitions of games and gaming, a set of rules and a victory condition/win scenario were essential elements to a game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Schell, 2015). Because of this, many definitions of video games proffered by designers, developers, and academics still focus on the “game-y” aspects of it: rules, victories, systems, choices, and game mechanics (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004).

Game designer and writer Raph Koster (2013) finds fun to be crucial to gaming of any kind, but throughout this chapter, we will come across a number of video games, such as *Oases* (Gibson & Dziff, 2016), *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) and *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios, 2014), that push against the notion of an inextricable link between play, games, and fun. These video games are not fun in a traditional sense (unless the idea of a child dying of cancer seems fun to you!), but they still offer players the opportunity to play and inhabit different spaces, perspectives, and worlds, while using the affordances of video games, such as mechanics, gameplay, and systems.

In the short time since the publication of *Rules of Play* (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), video game narratives and game mechanics have grown in increasingly complex and experimental directions. The ostensible central goal of games—to win—has been subsumed or complemented by a variety of new player goals (Bateman, 2015; Juul, 2011; Karlsen, 2007). In today’s video game landscape, video gamers socialize, customize, nurture, kill, build, destroy, break, glitch, and explore as much as they work to win and accrue points (Juul, 2011; McGonigal, 2011). Even traditional game-y aspects of video games—victory conditions, rules—have spurred off into new, often unexpected, directions, as evidenced by the rise in emergent gaming in sandbox games, in competitive video gaming activities like speedrunning and e-sports, and in the broadcasting of video game playing via outlets like Twitch, YouTube, and Let’s Play’s.

So-called “sandbox” and “open world” games often eschew narrative in favor of player-generated goals. The phenomenally popular Lego-esque sandbox game, *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011) has a nominal ending wherein players defeat the Ender Dragon, but most players are participating to see what they can create with their infinite blocks and complex crafting system, not to see if they can “win.” Nor are they playing a game like *Minecraft* to see any sort of story through to completion. These kinds of sandbox experiences, while not necessarily new, represent emergent gaming experiences, wherein the player pursues goals that are not necessarily the intended goal of the game programmers or the game itself, often created by the intersection of different game systems (Juul, 2011). *Grand Theft Auto* play-

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