Chapter 6
Co-Creation and the Distributed Authorship of Video Games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reconceptualizes the authorship of video games through the development of a theory of distributed authorship. It defines distributed authorship as the interplay of negotiated capacities of a number of actors (including but not limited to developers, publishers, and players) to create the content, structures, form, and affordances of video game works. However, the theory does not assume that these actors always work together collaboratively or that capacities for authorship are shared equally among them. Rather, distributed authorship understands the authorship of video games as a relationship of power—the power to create, shape, and influence video game works.

INTRODUCTION

Who Are the Authors of a Video Game?

Traditional notions of authorship would give a straightforward answer: a game's authors must be its developers, the designers and artists and writers who create its content, rules, and form. But video games have posed incessant challenges to this view; their creation is not restricted to their developers alone. Countless developments in recent years have proven longstanding perceptions of authorship inadequate to explain the processes of video game creation.

Thus, to fully answer the first question, we need to explore a few others: How do video games necessitate transformations in concepts of authorship? What are the qualities of video games that have prompted this shift? How does authorship function for video games in ways that it may not in other media forms? And ultimately—why are questions of authorship significant, meaningful, and in need of answering in the first place?

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Defining authorship in any manner is a political act. Author is a culturally constructed category, fiercely contested and deeply ideological, fraught with issues of power. The authorship of video games can be a guarded platform for hegemonic, capitalist authority or an empowering channel for marginalized voices. Yet it can also be uncertain and shifting, perpetually fracturing and reforming amid struggles over the power to create. Nevertheless, even as we recognize authorship as a socially formulated concept—and even as we resist an all-controlling authorial intent in our interpretations and analyses—the considerations of who is creating a video game, how they are creating it, and *why* have major implications for how we play, receive, and understand games. Authorship remains a conflicted realm in which battles over meaning-making and the power to create are fought.

For video games, authorship spans across a vast range of spaces, encompasses manifold activities, and is conducted by many diverse actors that occupy different positions at different times. These spaces, activities, and actors are not always mutually supportive of or in cooperation with one another; often they conflict, clash, and compete. The collaborations and the tensions—the dynamics of power—between prospective authors throughout the creation of video games all point to upheavals in ideas of authorial intent and artistic integrity.

However, it is not sufficient to focus on authorship pertaining to games-as-art alone. Embedded within the contested spaces and activities of game authorship are video games' identities as technologies. Games are authored as technologies. And as technologies, they afford and shape authorship in specific ways, in ways much unlike previous media forms. Thus, the authorship of video games cannot be understood without acknowledging that video games are both works of art and technological artifacts.

In this chapter, I reconceptualize the authorship of video games through the development of a theory of distributed authorship. I define distributed authorship as the interplay of negotiated capacities of a number of actors (including but not limited to developers, publishers, and players) to create the content, structures, form, and affordances of video game works. To be clear, though, this theory does not assume that these actors always work together collaboratively or that capacities for authorship are shared equally among them. Rather, distributed authorship understands the authorship of video games as a relationship of power—the power to create, shape, and influence video game works. That power is constantly contested and negotiated among various and differently positioned actors, an intricate and ever-mutating tug-of-war.

Before we go further, however, I have a point of clarification with regard to my method:

As I have done above, I will be using the term works rather than texts in my discussions of the authorship of video games. I am basing this distinction on that in Roland Barthes's 1977 essay "From Work to Text." According to Barthes, the difference between these two terms is the presence, significance, and involvement of the author against the presence, significance, and involvement of the reader. Text implies the act of interpretation, and thus implies the presence of an interpreter. The text is a process, "a methodological field," and it "only exists in the movement of a discourse" (p. 157). A work, on the other hand, is that which has been authored; it is material, tangible, and "can be held in the hand" (p. 157). It is the static container of the authored contents, while the text is the ever-flowing plurality of interpretive potentialities.

I use the term work because my purpose is to expound upon the authorship of games and not necessarily on strategies of interpretation. However, as I will explain more later in the chapter, I also wish to make this distinction in order to ultimately call attention to the ways that video games muddy what might be understood to separate these two terms. Video games have caused the line between authorship and interpretation to grow quite fuzzy. Ultimately, they manage to convert works into processes, transforming the materiality of what we might otherwise conceive as a rigid, unchanging whole.