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Comparative Video Game Criticism

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This article explores comparative criticism and video game software development through the figure of the *bricoleur*, the handyman who assembles units of preexisting meaning to form new structures. An intersection of these two domains—what the author calls comparative video game criticism—suggests a more intimate interrelation between criticism and production. The author offers a critique of functionalist approaches to video game analysis and argues instead for a comparative analysis of the expressive capacity of games and how they relate to other forms of human production.

Keywords: *video game criticism; comparative criticism; comparative media; ludology*

In *The Savage Mind*, structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968) characterized two modes of thought, the mythical and the scientific. Mythical thought is grounded in observation of the sensible world, whereas scientific thought is grounded in the imperceptible (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Lévi-Strauss drew an analogy between mythical thought and *bricolage*, a French word with no precise English equivalent but similar to our notion of tinkering, of dabbling. The *bricoleur* is a skillful handyman, a jack-of-all-trades who uses convenient implements and ad hoc strategies to achieve his ends. Unlike the engineer, the scientific thinker who strives to construct holistic, totalizing systems from the ground up, the *bricoleur* performs his tasks from spare parts, from odds and ends. The scientist strives to create events by means of structures, and the *bricoleur* seeks to create structures through events.

In his critique of Lévi-Strauss's (1968) reliance on scientific thought as a production of universalism, Jacques Derrida (1967/1980) showed that even the engineer is a *bricoleur* himself, a myth.

A subject who would supposedly be the absolute origin of his own discourse and would supposedly construct it "out of nothing," "out of whole cloth," would be the creator of the verbe, the verbe itself. The notion of the engineer who had supposedly broken with all forms of *bricolage* is therefore a theological idea; and since Lévi-Strauss tells us elsewhere that *bricolage* is mythopoetic, the odds are that the engineer is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*. (p. 285)

As Derrida reminded us, Gerard Genette (1965/1982) drew a direct correlation between bricolage and literary criticism; it is a process of borrowing concepts and putting them to use. This metaphor of bricolage as analysis continues into the present; Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994) took it up as a metaphor for social scientific research in their popular collection, *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. For Denzin and Lincoln, the contemporary researcher is a kind of bricoleur, a “flexible and responsive” agent willing “to deploy whatever research strategies, methods or empirical materials are at hand, to get the job done” (p. 2). This *chercheur bricolant* is also “technically curious” and “reflexive,” his research an “interactive process shaped by . . . personal history” (p. 3). I am sympathetic to such a “personalization” of analysis, yet I cannot help but see a more literal connection between the notions of criticism and bricolage.

On one hand, my formal training is in comparative literature, a field known for exploring “the interactions between literature and other forms of human activity” through a wide variety of critical study.¹ This phrase *and other forms of human activity* comes from the mission statement of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), and it stands as a great et cetera on the end of literature, implying a kind of bottomless toolbox of possible sources for further analysis.

On the other hand, my professional background is in Internet technology and video games, domains known for their rapid and unconventional approaches to development. Although not always mated to sound business principles, ardent inventiveness characterized the technology industry between 1995 and 2000. The very creation of the World Wide Web was borne out of Tim Berners-Lee’s (2000) determined dabbling on the NextStep development environment, itself widely regarded for its proclivity toward rapid software assembly. Likewise, video game developers typically push the computational boundaries of everyday devices, often requiring developers to work outside the safe boundaries of customary application programming interfaces (McShaffry, 2003). This bricoleur is more *MacGyver* or *A-Team*, less mere handyman.

Together, comparative criticism and video game software development entail the bricoleur, the deft handyman who assembles units of preexisting meaning to form new structures of meaning. An intersection of these two domains—what I want to call comparative video game criticism—suggests a more intimate interrelation of two spaces of bricolage, that of criticism and that of production.

One way of articulating this intersection is through functionalism. Video game functionalisms understand criticism as an interrogation of the pure and abstract operation of video games as such. Espen Aarseth’s (1997) notion of cybertext is such a one, a configurative approach to texts “where the functional differences among the mechanical parts play a defining role in determining this aesthetic process” (p. 22). Video games and hypertexts are some of the artifacts Aarseth had in mind, but he carefully extended the notion of cybertext to include artifacts outside the realm of the digital, including configurative texts such as the *I Ching* and Raymond Queneau’s *Cent Mille Milliards de Poèmes*. Such an approach is clearly comparative, and perhaps it comes as no surprise that Aarseth’s background is in comparative literature.

Although Aarseth (1997) carefully argued that cybertext is an extension of current forms of literary studies and not a break from it, he was primarily concerned with the functional rather than the “material or historical” aspects of such artifacts (pp. 16-17). Said Aarseth,

My main effort is . . . to show what the functional differences and similarities among the various textual media imply about the theories and practices of literature. . . . My final aim is to produce a framework for a theory of cybertext or ergodic literature and to identify key elements for this perspective. (p. 17)

For Aarseth, video games and related technologies offer a window onto a broader, perhaps unexplored functional tradition; they “should be studied for what they can tell us about the principles and evolution of human communication” (p. 17). These principles rely principally on configuration—the arrangement of an *I Ching* hexagram or the progression through an arbitrary virtual space in *Zork* (Blank & Lebling, 1980).

Despite Aarseth’s (1997) ontogeny and despite the entailment of several literatures in his concept of cybertext, he made a clear break from literary studies. “Especially,” wrote Aarseth, “I wish to challenge the recurrent practice of applying the theories of literary criticism to a new empirical field, seemingly without any reassessment of the terms and concepts involved” (p. 14). For Aarseth, such an obsession with the ideal of literature underscores an ideology at work in fields such as comparative literature—for the ACLA, after all, the “other forms of human activity” seem subordinate to the primary object of study, literature. Aarseth was unequivocal about this problem, calling the use of terms like *interactive fiction* an “unfocused fantasy rather than a concept of any analytical substance” (p. 51).

Granted, since the industrial revolution, literature and criticism about technology has focused especially on the uncanny ligatures between humanity and machinery. The movements casually grouped under postmodernism provided special theoretical avenue into recombinant literary-technological texts, as postmodernism in general valued amalgamations of cultural objects such as pastiche and self-reflexivity (Hutcheon, 1989; Jameson, 1991). When microcomputer technologies began to change the face of writing on a mass scale in the 1980s and 1990s, theorists such as Jay David Bolter (1991) and George Landow (1991) latched onto the potential for a computational praxis of contemporary critical theory, especially that of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. These works advanced the assumption that software instantiations of theoretical methodologies uncovered a new way to read and write. And although books like these must be praised for helping to welcome technology applications in literary studies, they proved unable to grow and evolve with the technologies they purported to celebrate. Even today, projects in the “digital humanities” are almost entirely instrumental, providing instructional and research tools for traditional humanistic research.² Part of Aarseth’s (1997) unequivocal reaction against literary studies was fueled by these early theoretical missteps. Even as Aarseth drew a fundamental connection between video games, hypertexts, poetry, and literature, he dis-

tanced this new domain of cybertext from traditional forms of artistic expression, and especially from literature.

Today, just short of 10 years after the first publication of *Cybertext*, video game studies reap what they sowed—functionalist separatism. In 2004, the Digital Game Research Association (DiGRA)³, our fledgling field's international research organization, launched a column series called Hard Core, "a forum within which academics are invited to debate what constitutes as central [*sic*] to digital games research."⁴ Whereas the epithet *hard core* is usually reserved for explicit pornography, it is frequently used in the video game industry and press to refer to its most active and committed audience. As the most devoted group of video game consumers, we might also think of hard-core gamers as the most unrelentingly myopic of players, in the worst cases those who forego all other cultural, social, or even hygienic activities in favor of video games. This is an unfair reductionism, but it sets up an evocative comparison when transferred from video game consumption to video game studies: Are the hard core comprised of those researchers who forego all other critical activities in favor of video games?

Such an attitude is subtly different even than that of Aarseth (1997), who privileged cybertextual functionalism, not media centrism. Whereas the DiGRA Hard Core editorial board gives lip service to the potential openness of the hard core ("core might not necessarily mean a centralised approach to digital games research"), its published articles tell a different story.

In a recent Hard Core column, DiGRA president Frans Mäyrä (2005) offered an especially unambiguous vision for game studies. Mäyrä offered "three theses" for game studies:

Thesis one: There needs to be a dedicated academic discipline for the study of games.

Thesis two: This new discipline needs to have an active dialogue with, and be building on of existing ones, as well as having its own core identity.

Thesis three: Both the educational and research practices applied in game studies need to remain true to the core playful or ludic qualities of its subject matter.

The first thesis—one that "should be obvious" according to Mäyrä—erases all progress Aarseth made in attempting to connect games to other cultural forms. "Games," said Mäyrä, "have their own distinctive features and fundamental character or ontology, which are not shared as such by other cultural forms." Mäyrä's second thesis appears to open the door to critical overlap, but his intentions are quickly revealed to focus not on comparatist approaches but on potential acquisitions for the dedicated academic discipline of Thesis 1:

There are many ways in which games overlap with other areas, such as various forms of storytelling, audio-visual media and arts, science and the art of programming, or various fields in business and marketing. There is therefore no need to reinvent the wheel. . . . There is already some existing research to learn and profit from.

The third thesis acts as a kind of normative moral support for the first two; it is a pragmatic call to “coordinat[e] the research work and coursework in ways that will keep the qualitative core of games and playing visible.”

“Hard Core” game studies is thus revealed to be essentialist and doctrinaire, its theorists hoping to reinvent a different kind of isolationist techno-textual criticism that privileges the ludic over the literary. For better or worse, this fanaticism has its origin in Aarseth’s (1997) approach, an approach that even if “eclectic” still privileges the material at the cost of the expressive.

I want to turn away from this kind of pure functionalism while still retaining Aarseth’s (1997) otherwise useful analysis. Instead of focusing on how games work, I suggest that we turn to what they do—how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity, to borrow the ACLA’s terse word for it. Such a comparative video game criticism would focus principally on the expressive capacity of games and true to its grounding in the humanities, would seek to understand how video games reveal what it means to be human.

Comparative literature in the traditional sense seeks to consolidate a coherent Western tradition; as first conceived in the 19th century, it sought principally to establish the overarching whole that united the various (European) languages and literatures. Although such Euro-centric universalism has certainly waned, the comparatist’s core commitment to multiple literary and cultural traditions has not. In a more contemporary model, the comparatist critic invokes a theoretical framework to construct a more specified critical analysis across several domains of human activity. Some works avoid a theoretical superstructure, directly applying close readings of one tradition to those of another. In many cases, the critic invokes an intervening third term, either literary or theoretical, to intervene between a stalemate of the other two terms.

Each of the three models of comparative criticism is successful because it maintains a single focus of importance. In the traditional model, the conveyance of Western culture is at stake. In the contemporary model, the validity or desirability of a comparatist theory is at stake, followed closely by the importance of applying that theory to elucidate specific set of texts. In the third term model, the elucidation of two traditions is at stake, along with the elucidation of value from the mediating tradition.

Put otherwise, such a criticism would focus on the aesthetic meaning that a cybertext’s parts reveal. Comparative video game criticism would not turn its back on functionalist approaches but rather would recognize the utility of functionalist approaches to games as a useful lever for further comparative criticism. Functionalist questions about video games—what they are or how they function—are not invalid or even uninteresting. But equally or dare I say, more important questions exist: What do video games do, what happens when players interact with them, and how do they relate to, participate in, extend, and revise the cultural expression at work in other cultural artifacts?

In the figure of the bricoleur, the critic and the video game share the same processes of selection and configuration. The ad hoc, even hackneyed process of comparative criticism should include those artifacts left out by Aarseth’s (1997) cybertext: Poetry, film, literature that are not obviously made configurative by the reader may likewise

be done so by the critic. This process is what Derrida (1967/1980) called “play”—and perhaps it is no accident that we give the same word to the role of the game actor.

Notes

1. See <http://www.acla.org>.
2. For example, the Center for Digital Humanities at the University of California, Los Angeles (<http://www.cdih.ucla.edu/mission.html>) lists as its primary goal “the development of innovative technological solutions for research and instruction.” No mention is made of digital artifacts as objects of humanistic inquiry. Electronic text sourcing tools like Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org>) belong in the domain of information science more than humanities.
3. See <http://www.digra.org>.
4. See <http://www.digra.org/article.php?story=20041209090133828>.

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