Digital Humanities and Games Research Across the Disciplines

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Abstract

The effect of violent computer games on individuals and on society has been the object of a great number of studies reaching across different disciplines, including traditional Humanities, International Relations Studies, and Psychology. Unfortunately, studies conducted within one discipline pay very limited attention to research conducted in other fields. Thus, important research data is rarely shared. The reasons for this lack of cross-disciplinary consideration can be attributed to many different factors. Humanities oriented research is often published in journals other than IR studies, or psychological studies. The various fields engaged in this type of research also employ different methodologies that highlight different aspect while obscuring others. Finally, the research is funded by different agencies, with different agendas.

This presentation first describes the current situation through studies belonging to the Humanities, International Relations Studies and Psychology. These studies share an interest in the computer game genre commonly known as the First Person Shooter (FPS), a violent game genre where the gamer controls an armed avatar and observes the game world through a first-person perspective. The presentation discusses how the general research context (funding body, audience, problem formulation), the theoretical framework, and the methodologies of the different studies inform the research. Here, it is noted that Humanities research is often state-sponsored and conducted within Humanities departments or by one of few DH research centres that exist globally. Since the late 1990s, Humanities research has either focussed on discussing how participatory digital games function differently from other forms of culture such as literature or film (see Juul 2005, Malliet 2007), or it has conducted an often Foucauldian or Baudrillardian interrogation of the games, discussing them as deeply ideological spaces (Wark 2007). The methodological tools employed by this research are virtually always qualitative and hermeneutic. International Relations research also comes out of state-sponsored or private universities, but is sometimes connected to organisations such as the Institute of World Politics. Following the cultural turn of IR during the last two decades (Van Veeren 2009), this research has become increasingly attentive to the way that military games engage with global politics and future military conflict. The focus of game studies conducted within the confines of IR studies is thus the way in which the FPS imagines future global conflict. This research is often qualitative and does discuss the narratives and discourses of the games, but it also employs interviews and quantitative methods to investigate how gamers's ideas about global relations are affected by the games (Zamaróczy 2016). Finally, psychological research into violent games comes from a large number of funding bodies, from state-run universities to private foundations, the health care sector, and the US Department of Defence (DoD) (Höglund 2008). The research produced by these various agencies focuses primarily on to what extent violent games produce violent behaviour or not (Anderson et al., 2002), but it also includes studies on how games can train soldiers before combat or help treat veterans suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (Rizzo et al 2006). The link between violent computer games and aggressive behaviour is notoriously difficult to study in laboratory experiments, and a few alternative ways of assessing the relationship have been suggested (Sauer and Nova 2015). Even so, this research is firmly quantitative and often disregards the qualitative aspect.

The question that the presentation will address in relation to these studies is how these different fields may benefit from cross-disciplinary exchange. The presentation suggests that by considering results gained in psychological studies, and by making some use of the quantitative and laboratory methods common in this discipline, the humanities or IR researcher would be in a considerably better position to discuss the effect that the FPS has on the individual. In other words, broadening the disciplinary perspective would make it possible to consider not only the ideological, political and aesthetic content of the material, but also how gamers actually respond to the material. Similarly, humanities and IR related research could help researchers working in the field of psychology to ask more relevant and precise questions that take into consideration the qualitative content of a particular game before examining its effects in a laboratory setting. In other words, by considering humanities and IR research, the simple question if games encourage aggression in gamers may be rephrased into the more

complex question if games encourage aggression against particular groups in society, or support state aggression against certain nationalities. This discussion may be of interest to scholars conducting research on digital games, but it may also be of general interest to Digital Humanities since the formation of games research takes place in the crossroads of several different disciplines.

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