Ludogabble

Some Nonsense About Video Games

Video Games Exceptionalism vs. Media Specificity

Yesterday, I watched Heather Alexandra's video "Video Games are Not Special." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6L77mOBtyVo) In it, she argues against proclamations that video games as an artistic medium are special, unique, or better than any other artistic medium. To declare as much, she says, would be to overlook the histories and qualities of other artistic media. For instance, to insist that video games are defined by their interactivity would be to ignore the ways that all other art forms are also, in fact, interactive. Thus, video games are neither special nor unique, and we should stop saying that they are.

Her sentiment is one with which I'm familiar. Earlier this year, Brendan Keogh arrived at a similar conclusion in his blog post "Video games aren't special. Video games aren't unique." (http://brkeogh.com/2015/04/30/videogames-arent-special-videogames-arent-unique/) Both authors share concerns with the lack of critical thought behind these gushing exclamations of "Video games are special! They do things that only video games do. These things better than other media. They make us better prepared to live in a world increasingly dominated by procedures and computation."

But both of these pieces—and other claims similar to them—have left me feeling dissatisfied, unsettled by their conclusions. I think there is more to be said on the matter. So I want to talk a little bit about the difference between video games exceptionalism and media specificity.

I think that there is a danger underlying both of these assertions that "video games aren't special." That danger is the possibility of ignoring the ways that video games are *different* from other media forms—and therefore, yes, special. Acknowledging this difference is not uncritical. Rather, it is critical and it is *necessary* if we are to ever even begin to approach a sense of what video games do and how they do it. We need ways to be able to talk about video games, to study them, to critique them. And if we abruptly dismiss them as being "not special," then I fear that we'll simply wind up using the same vocabularies, methods, and theories that have already been developed for other media forms and their own specific qualities. When we do that, we end up entirely missing potential insights into concerns, qualities, and engagements that are unique to video games. We end up, yes, ignoring the ways that video games actually are different and special.

Let me say upfront, though: I do believe that any claims that video games are "better" than other media are dangerous. I do agree that this is uncritical. But when I've seen critics tearing apart the "games are special" idea, I mostly tend to see them accusingly pointing to early games scholarship. That early games

scholarship comes from what I understand to be the old-guard of academic game studies. Alexandra, for instance, pulls out Eric Zimmerman to prod at and disparage. And while I don't want to make excuses for those games scholars and the mistakes that they may have made, I do want to highlight why it was that that may have happened in a lot of previous areas of game studies.

Many of these scholars were writing in university settings that had absolutely no interest in or value for conversations about video games (and for many of us in academia, that is still the case). To scholars in these traditional disciplines, video games were childish and silly and just a waste of time. They were things that their children played, and therefore, they must be frivolous. Consequently, many of these early writers in game studies were desperately trying to carve out a space for video games, to define them as being unique against other media forms, to justify them as valid a subject of research and as being worthy of consideration in the face of much sneering and skepticism. And yes, yes, many of us game critics see ourselves as being way past those discussions. But to some of us in academia, many of our colleagues still aren't there yet, and we're still having to bend over backwards to support why video games merit scholarly consideration at all. When this happens, we sometimes wind up saying things that look ridiculous to other games thinkers. I don't mean this to make excuses for the mistakes that scholars have made or that they continue to make. I completely don't mean that we shouldn't critique these scholars for their work, or shouldn't call them out on their bullshit when they do bad scholarship. We absolutely should (and I wish we junior scholars could do so more openly without running the risk of career suicide just for critiquing established scholars). …But I do think that a little contextualization can't hurt. And moreover, I *do* think that there is an importance for carving out a space for video games.

But speaking of bad scholarship, unfortunately these endeavors to carve out a space for game studies have sometimes ended us up with some pretty gross situations that evolved from this initial effort to make game studies its own area of scholarly consideration. We have the now-unhelpful and cringe-worthy neologisms that Keogh points out (such as immersion, interactivity, gameplay, and replayability), at which many of us wrinkle our noses in disgust. Lately I've had a good sense of what he means as I've been reading Tanya Krzywinska and Geoff King's book, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (2006), which takes a formalist approach to understanding gameplay. It feels outdated, obvious. Talking about gameplay using their approach doesn't really get me anywhere. But that's because, since the writing of this book, we've started developing other ways to talk about gameplay that do make the book appear outdated and obvious. At the time of its writing, scholars like Krzywinska and King were striving to come up with ways to talk about video games, to identify their specific and unique qualities (we'll come back to this in a minute). But some of these terms and ideas haven't stood the test of time as later scholars have come to examine them more closely. Over the years, we've started squinting skeptically at these neologisms. We've had debates about concepts like interactivity, gameplay, immersion, and so on that are still ongoing. In some cases, we've realized that these concepts that were once thought to be defining qualities of video games aren't really at all. And that's fantastic—because that's precisely the point of scholarship. That's how scholarship works. (And that also doesn't mean that these concepts may not still be useful in certain ways, in certain contexts, in certain theories. We don't need to just write them all off upfront).

Worse, though, are the problems that came—and that still exist—from efforts to mobilize these attempts to identify game-specific qualities for the purposes of defining *precisely what a video game is*. One of these has been a sweeping effort on the part of a number of game scholars—and from many game-players that aren't scholars—to establish a purity of game form. Keogh talked about this at length in his essay "Across Worlds and Bodies (http://gamescriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1)." One of the main issues with this pursuit of game purity is the resulting exclusion of certain kinds of games. Some media artifacts get the label of "game" and others do not. The trend has had a damaging effect on a great deal of games

scholarship, and some scholars still seem stuck on trying to create some kind of strict, conclusive definition. I think that this has gotten us nowhere. Admittedly, it's a little hard to advocate moving away from efforts to define video games while also supporting game specificity—but we'll return to this later.

Past this, we also get another unpleasant situation: video games exceptionalism. When I think of exceptionalism, I can't help but think of Jane McGonigal: the naïve optimism, the rosy "video games can fix everything!" attitude, the lack of reflexivity that winds up actually becoming kind of violent and brutal in all its gleeful hope. Exceptionalism doesn't always sit at that extreme, but it definitely is an outlook that warrants the distaste that both Alexandra and Keogh level at it. Video games exceptionalism assumes that not only are video games different, but that they're somehow *better* than other media. They are cooler, they involve players more, they are more powerful, they are more effective at communication messages, they produce more valuable literacies in us to better survive a world of menus and systems. They are somehow superior. Hence the "exceptional." All of these assumptions definitely need to have a critical eye cast their way.

But while we should be wary of the celebratory blinders that are racing the games exceptionalists off a cliff, we can't just make blanket declarations that "video games aren't special," wash our hands of the past mistakes of other scholars, pat ourselves on the backs for being better scholars, and stop there. We still have work to do.

In his blog post, Keogh describes neologisms as "crutches" that we use to talk about video games. He notes that the effort to point to the specificity of video games "hasn't given us a critical vocabulary to unpack the creative works of the medium." I disagree. While *neologism* is, I think, typically a fairly loaded term that we throw out in a demeaning way, I believe that what game scholars and critics should be striving for is a *vocabulary*. And just because previous attempts at forming a new lexicon have fallen short of "unpack[ing] the creative works of the medium" doesn't mean that we just quit trying and announce that video games are not special. It means that there's still a task at hand: to work towards the development of a specifically-adapted lexicon. That task is *always* at hand. It doesn't go away.*

Why is this vocabulary necessary? Because video games are different. They have specific qualities, elements, components, characteristics that make them different from film, television, books, paintings, sculptures, so on. Video games do different things. They do what they do in different ways. They have different ways of communicating and different experiences to offer. To acknowledge this is to acknowledge media specificity. It is not saying that video games are *better* as a media form. It is to say that video games are a unique form that require different considerations than those specific to other media forms. We need a vocabulary suited to them so that we can talk about them critically, to discover what they do and how and why.

Not only do we need a vocabulary that is unique to video games—that takes into account the specificity of video games as a medium (or as a messy assortment of various media)—but we also need different methods and approaches of analysis with which to study them. Both Alexandra and Keogh express concerns that to insist upon a special status of video games would be to ignore thousands of years of development of other artforms, of the theories that countless thinkers developed to explain and analyze and critique and understand them.

But to say that video games are special, that they are unique, does not simply result in a dismissal of these other art forms. Far from it. It is to respect and uphold what makes each art form special and unique in its own right as well. These other artforms have their own vocabularies, methods, and theories for their study that have been crafted and modified and reexamined over time. These vocabularies, methods, and theories acknowledge their own respective media form as special and specific, requiring

particular tools to study and interpret and understand them. To simply announce that video games aren't special means running the risk of simply continuing to use the vocabularies, methods, and approaches that have been adapted to the specifics of other media, which does justice to neither games nor those other media forms for which those theories were developed. We wind up not only failing to uncover how video games operate, but we end up failing to understand what makes other media specific and unique with what they do as well.

But let me be clear: this *absolutely* does not mean that we can or should ignore, overlook, or otherwise fail to employ these previous methods from other media. Video games are a messy mishmash of media forms, and to fail to recognize this would be irresponsible and would also be to fail to understand what makes video games what they are. We absolutely should use these previous vocabularies, theories, and methods. But not exclusively. And in the case of video games, some of these past theories for non-game media need updating in light of the specifics of video game media. That work is being undertaken at present—work that recognizes the specificity of video games, the specialness of them, and that draws upon the histories of other art forms and theorizing about them to arrive at new conclusions specifically adapted for video games. Take, for instance, Ben Triana's piece (http://gamescriticism.org/articles/triana-2-2) in the latest issue of the Journal of Games Criticism. Triana adapts Burke's theory of terministic screens, an approach for rhetorical criticism, to considerations of video games. We can and should situate video games within the development of other media forms and other theories—but not at the cost of recognizing what sets video games apart from them, what requires special consideration.

But we also do need brand new methods and terms. Even if many neologisms to this point (like interactivity) have failed to provide us with an effective critical vocabulary does not mean that we stop trying. While terms like "interactivity" may have failed to account for what makes video games special and to provide us with a critical toolkit with which to talk about games, it does not mean that we simply stop trying to develop that vocabulary.

Although Keogh offers up the idea that video games are "particular" rather than "special," I don't think this goes quite far enough. We need theories specifically developed for video games. We need methods created expressly for their analysis. We need tools that enable us to speak critically and precisely about video games. Without these, we'll only ever be getting at *part* of what games are, of what they're capable of, of how we could understand them, of what they are and could become. Again, this does not mean that we should engage in an unreflective celebration of the wonders of gaming. But it does mean that saying that "video games are special" isn't as uncritical as it may seem.

I want to conclude by returning to a point I made earlier: the problematic nature of defining video games, despite my advocacy of identifying games' specificity. I've been saying all along that specificity will help us understand what video games are and how they do what they do. Wouldn't this mean, then, that we need a definition that precisely clarifies what is a video game and what is not?

I don't think it does.

I don't think that developing vocabularies and theories adapted specifically for video games requires some universalizing definition of what video games are and are not. I don't think that any pursuit of purity of form or drawing of firm boundaries will aid us in better understanding video games. Part of that is because—at least in my mind—video games are this uneven, muddled amalgamation of a bunch of different qualities, including qualities from other media forms. They are very, very different from one game to the next. Recognizing qualities that set them apart from other media doesn't mean that we need

to have some conclusive definition that pins down a specific game form and excludes other forms. We can certainly have definitions that are conditional or provisional in certain situations for methodological reasons—but a sweeping definitive definition of **video game** isn't going to do much for us.

The other reason for this is that—again, it's my opinion, and it is an opinion that is behind most of this post—scholarship itself isn't definitive, universalizing, or conclusive. We should certainly situate ourselves in previously-developed theories, but we should never just continue sitting there. Either a rigid definition or a denial of the uniqueness of video games would stall that process, undermining new voices and perspectives and objects of study in the process. Scholarship is and should be always adapting, reflecting, changing, revising. Our theories need to be constantly updated and reconsidered. Knowledge production is never final or universal or beyond questioning. That especially applies to a medium (or media) like video games that are perpetually, rapidly evolving. Scholarship and criticism need to be open and adaptable and flexible, so that they can dive into these developments and specific characteristics, interrogate them, find ways of interpreting and understanding them.

If we simply conclude that video games are not special, we limit ourselves. We risk missing opportunities to learn something new. We risk missing new insights and new understandings. So while we should be cautious of the "Video games are awesome and do things better than everything else!" of video games exceptionalism, we should not ignore media specificity.

*On a side note, returning back to the demeaning-ness of the word "neologism" rather than more neutral words like "term" or "vocabulary": I think that there are politics behind the development of neologisms that have a lot to do with the way academia works (and that also explain why "neologism" is used negatively, at least in my experience). Namely, I think, it has to do with academics' efforts to make ourselves more attractive on the job market, to get cited, to launch ourselves towards greater name recognition. I think these pressures lead to messy scholarship when academics come up with catchy new terms in the hopes that they'll get cited more. But again, that doesn't mean that we should just stop trying to develop a new vocabulary specifically suited for video games. Sometimes what we come up with is going to be bad, for whatever reason—poor scholarship or trying to get cited or even a genuine effort that just has inevitable oversights. But again, that's the job of scholarship: to leave ourselves open to critiques, modifications, retrospective corrections, new developments, new ideas.

Posted in Uncategorized and tagged academia, game studies, games criticism, media specificity, video games exceptionalism on August 30, 2015 by ludogabble. 1 Comment

One comment

1. brendankeogh says:
   August 30, 2015 at 11:29 pm
   Hello! I am going to try really hard to not let this comment be a "Well actually what I actually meant to say was…" kinda response from one of the original authors (I hate those kind of comments) and if it comes out like that at all please just delete it.

   Ultimately, yes, I completely agree with you. Media-specificity for videogames is hugely important and crucial and urgently required. But that media-specificity would also need to appreciate that videogames do not sit in a vacuum but are in constant conversation with film/theatre/non-digital games/other digital media/etc. It would need to be a specificity that is not hermetic, ultimately, And

that kind of specificity is really difficult (if not impossible) if our language is laced with a vocabulary that puts videogames on a pedestal while downplay the long history of 'interactive' engagements people have had with art going back centuries.

So without wanting to speak for Heather at all, that is kind of the point I hoped to make when I made the caveat at the beginning of my post that 'Videogames aren't special' is an indefensible position. Because of course they are special! Of course they can and should be differentiated from other media forms. But i think that differentiation should be in terms of what form of embodied engagement they demand, not in terms of what they can do that No Previous Artform Could Possibly Achieve.

I think you also make a very good point about the academic context within which most of those 'videogames are special' rhetorical positions are made. That is absolutely worth acknowledging and appreciating. Though, at the same time, I don't think it renders those positions immune to criticism. Indeed, I think it makes it all the more important to be dubious of their claims.

But yes. I agree with all your points! I think 'Videogames aren't special' and 'videogames aren't unique' are important rhetorical polemic statements to push back against pervasive videogame exceptionalism that itself serves marketers and investors more than critics and scholars (and indeed players). But no, they are not a useful starting point for a nuanced media-specific analysis of videogames. I kind of see them as wiping the slate clean and making way for the media-specific criticism that you describe here.

REPLY