



Saturday, June 16, 2012

Played Meaning (Concerning the Spiritual in Games)

O

There has been talk recently about the word "game" and what it ought to mean. Some would like it to mean something very rigid, like Salen & Zimmerman's definition: "a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." They see a value in this tradition. Others would like the meaning to be more fluid. By comparing the above with even just one more definition, Roger Callois', "an activity which is essentially: Free (voluntary), separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, make-believe", we can get a sense for the amount of necessary "tradition" that's actually at stake here-- almost none. These meanings are fluid, generative, subjective.

Now: a *game* is something that we play. A *videogame* is a digital playspace.

Why can't we use another word to describe playspaces in general, and thus preserve *game*'s goal-oriented meaning? Because we are content with using the word "videogame" to define this form, at least for now. And videogames aren't even games in the "formal" sense of the word. They tend to be composite forms. Of what? Activities, toys, instruments, sandboxes, etc... ("games", too). Our intuitive understanding of what a videogame is and can be has eliminated the usefulness of *game*'s sanctified definition in our present circumstances (whether or not they qualify as "games" in the formal



sense, SimCity, Electropunkton, etc. certainly qualify as videogames). "Game" is also now used as a convenient shorthand for *videogame* or *computer game*, and other playspaces that resemble those. What we used to enjoy calling a game (i.e. Salen & Zimmerman's formal definition): Shawn McGrath's new term for this is "fucking game." "Math game," or "competition," or "school" are other possible alternatives.

A *game* is something that we play. A *videogame* is a digital playspace. This is the shape of games to come. To impose stricter definitions will only serve to stifle creativity and

unnecessarily celebrate past trends in favor of present and future possibilities-- this is already happening.

If these proposed definitions are so broad as to include everything, and now everything is thus a game, then let's play everything!

1

There's been talk about games and what they mean and ought to mean.

It's not possible to make a meaningful game. Likewise, it's not possible to make a meaningful song or picture or story. Meaning arises from our interactions with these forms, from how we play them. (It is possible to make a *good* game-- focus group testing is helpful here. Goodness is not great, though-- it's useful; it works rather than plays; this seems to describe the bulk of most design processes).

Games with a didactic quality like Jon Blow's *Braid* can fool us into thinking that meaning is a thing that is being created and then handed down to us-- the intensity of the implied value systems that come packaged in game designs are often mistaken for the meaning itself. Sometimes our perceived meanings line-up very neatly with what we're told are a game's intended meanings, and this can feel good, but such an effect is incidental rather than essential in any way.

It's not possible to make a meaningful game, but all *played* games are meaningful. Meaning can be generated but not located. It's a process rather than an object.

Certain boundaries in a playspace will encourage certain types of play, and from these, if they're played intuitively and honestly, we experience the intensity of this thing called meaning. We then sometimes attribute this meaning to the creators of the game, and this is wrong. We can thank the creators, but we need to respect our own subjectivity (though to then thank ourselves would be foolish-- can we learn to thank the play impulse that somehow exists both inside *and outside* of ourselves?)

2

The **relationship between music and videogames** is not a rhetorical one, it's not just an analogy-- the language describing it may be, but the various identities are a fact. Structurally, there's little the two forms don't have in common. This has design implications-- rhythmically, formally, texturally, etc. Most importantly, in practice, both music and games are *played*-- and can be played in very similar ways.

Musical instruments are games, as are compositions. They are possibility spaces with boundaries implicitly or explicitly inviting certain types of play.

Videogames are not competitions by necessity, they are play-spaces. Play is the subject and the source of meaning. How do we play? The kinds of meanings that exist in music are the same kinds of meanings that exist, fundamentally, (but lying latent), in games-- they don't point at anything but the experience itself, at the materials and interrelationships that form the binding structures of that process.

This kind of meaning, and how it doesn't point at anything (it just *is*), is the reason why some people call music abstract. But music isn't abstract. Meanings that point (signs -- > signifieds (words, narrative, realism)) are abstractions, divisions/boxings, of reality-- they necessarily leave a remainder. Musical meaning doesn't box anything and thus encompasses everything. Musical meaning is *concrete*. (The social/contextual meanings in music, what Adorno calls the "historical", point away from this toward a more linguistic system of signs. But this system, too, is fluid. **Remember:** we've all only ever experienced, and are continuing to experience, *one piece of music* (our own)).

There's a relationship between musical meaning and mathematical meaning-- at it's most basic, harmony (pitched and non-pitched) and its foundation in simple arithmetic. These identities become more vivid (in our minds, at least, if not our ears) when we study scores and consider those sets of instructions as the music itself-- this is how schools like to teach music, as a kind of math game. Computer programs are complex sets of instructions (scores), and it will be helpful to apply kinds of thinking gleaned from score analysis to game creation-- systemic approaches to harmony, rhythm, texture, etc. are useful tools. But the score is an abstraction, and when we try to live in it, almost all of music's essence is lost. From John Cage: "Mathematics enables us, it seems to me, to think about, say, water-- without jumping into it" ([video](#)). The experience of music, and its essential meaning, comes from our jumping into the water.

To explore these meanings-- forget narrative and forget "game design." We'll study music-- rhythm, harmony, contour, texture (and allow ourselves to freely identify these qualities-- to apply them to colors, motions, touch). We'll play music, listen to (play) music, and allow ourselves to question what music means in these contexts. We'll see music, and touch it, too, and *live* it when possible. Music is not a form-- it's an *ethic* of sorts, a way of being. It is a fluid answer to the question "how do we generate meaning in the play process?" How do we play? Competitive games have required the player's submission to an imposed set of values governing their ideal actions-- when we are no longer governed by such rules, how will we choose how to act? Again, John Cage (via some others): **music's ideal function** is "to quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influence."

3

Meaning-making in instrumental play (goal-oriented-- a value system forced on us by competitive games) is inherently and necessarily at odds with meaning-making in musical play. Though-- the two categories are not opposites. Instrumental play is goal-oriented; maybe the opposite of this is free play, which is something like an

unreachable utopian state (or a **Temporary Autonomous Zone?**). Musical play describes a way of being that seeks love and identity with the world and its boundaries (to push up against these boundaries, to know them, and try to break past them)-- its precondition is sensitivity, but nothing escapes its sense of possibility. (The most vicious sentiments might emerge from playing musically. Anything. Such attitudes might grow more intense or might be followed by a release of tension and subsequent transition into a state affirmation and tenderness-- the possible forms are endless).

Notated compositions (and *plans* for future music-making in general) are a series of instructions, boundaries that we then play in. They *are not music* in the truest sense. Musicality playfully emerges from these boundaries, in affirmation of and tension with them. And it's this emergent spirit that is the essence of musical play. This spirit has no bounds. The Fluxus scripts, happenings, and other participatory arts of the 60s took a radical kind of musicality and played with it in new boundaries-- physical space, conceptual space, etc. (these, as opposed to the kind of aural space that music creates). Musicality requires a kind of openness, a total presence in the world, being here now. This openness is the foundation of all musical play.

4

The boundaries of competitive structures exist in direct conflict with our impulse to play musically, and yet, through this tension, such forms can point toward unique musical value systems. They will be fierce. The "guerilla tactics" in Zorn's *Cobra* are a good example, an aggressive transfer of power and a rare example of competition emerging from musicality, instrumental play contextualized as an exception rather than a given.

Rich competitive structures are considered holy by many game designers and players. And, it's true, competitions can reveal amazing seemingly endless vistas to our senses of possibility. This openness points toward the divine. Then-- the feeling shuts off when we realize that the possibilities can be ranked by order of their usefulness. We will be more likely to succeed if we behave in certain ways. The problem here is that the conditions of success, and sometimes the methods for achieving success, are pre-determined by the game's design. The game imposes a value system on our experience. The divine impulse can remain intact only if we're always open to our inner sense of infinite possibility (which will mean entertaining the less "useful" possibilities). I've read about Go masters that maybe play like this, and Bobby Fischer searcher Joshua Waitzkin describes similar states of mind in his book "The Art of Learning"-- it seems that along with mastery of a rational craft comes the confidence and ability to let rational things go, and to live intuitively. In life, we can choose our craft, and this choice can constantly be renewed; in competitive games, not as freely (except insofar as our experience of choosing and living in the game is an extension of our played experience of life).

Competitive play channels creative force but to an end other than itself. If our love of a process (a craft, a game), compels us to move in a direction other than that in which the game points, we encounter a barrier, and since we have freely chosen to play, we will now choose to stop, and will have chosen suicide in the play space. Of course, we're not forced to choose this way, but to choose otherwise requires a respect for and love of the game (a respect for its imposed values and a love of the experiential aspects of the playspace).

A utopian state of play: all possibilities are ranked as highly as possible; each, when chosen, introduces an entirely new set of possibilities, each of which is also ranked as highly as possible. In this setting, the word "ranked" loses its meaning; infinities open and give way to new infinities, and so on. The life of the game is the life of the spirit.

5

If we're going to admit systems of ranking into our games, to construct goals, their design should come from an intimacy with the materials of the playspace *as a freely-played space*, meaning one explored through our own self-directed (and constantly dissolving?) goals; these goals should invite us to play with processes that direct us toward and help realize our vision of inner utopia. This is the end to which goals should be a means: a final played application outside the structures of competition. It's, in part, to a celebration of particular strong values like these that we can owe the creative triumphs of games like *Way*, which invites us to create simple languages and then destroy and recreate new ones in a final double-coda, *Minecraft*, which allows us to explore the conceptual wall between nature and culture, *Mario Galaxy*, which teaches us how to dance with all the world as our partner.. etc.

There is nothing inherently wrong with explicit goals and the instrumental play they call for. What is wrong is the widely-held assumption that these kinds of barriers and motivators are essential to the form of games.

The essential meanings in games (in play), function at a lower level. If we start from an understanding of games as musical objects/spaces, instruments for self-exploration, our intrinsic attraction to explicit goals (as boundaries that describe ways of playing) diminishes, and we see that we can (*must*, even) start from nothing, from chaos. From here, we search and listen, and if our love of a system compels us to teach others particular ways of playing via artificial boundaries (rules, which *can* be broken-- the more **fundamental boundaries** cannot, they can just be pushed), then we should act accordingly. These goals emerge from love.

6

The question of how games and play generate meaning and how they can be made more meaningful ultimately points in the direction that all such questions must point: toward truth, the divine, the world/universe, god, tao, the eternal, infinite, spiritual, whatever,

etc.-- absolutes (that, yet, may be anything but absolute-- impossible to place, constantly changing). The simple "how" question ultimately wants to ask, before it has become too useful and too realistic: "how can games and play be *the most* meaningful that they can be?" This is a question of values, and it can be answered only in action, only when it's truly *played*-- when it's a natural continuation of the divine impulse, that perpetual motion, unfiltered creativity.

How we choose to play and find meaning in what we play-- these are fundamental questions. We're on a search for particular (fluid) ways of playing-- tactics that might further our search, that might point us in the right direction (all directions?).

And *what* we play? (we are what?)

Competitive structures have had, and will continue to have, many things to teach us (at best-- about valued/loved play processes), but they lack a particular kind of *realism* that's wanting in our games right now-- playspaces that, as in life (though very differently), allow for the full flourishing of our creative faculties, the active exploration of shifting possibility spaces and the intimacy with the materials that form their boundaries.

Musicality as play-within-constraints can reveal for us ways of playing more fluidly, of opening ourselves to the world and to that infinite sense of possibility at every moment.

Now, as players, we'll need to learn to bear the burden of generating our own meanings. And as designers, we'll need to bear the burden of imposing implied values (if not meanings) on the player with our boundaries. We'll open these forms and gladly hand over certain variables to the player because we know that it's not particular values that establish meanings, but the dynamics of change that generate them.

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Posted by [David Kanaga](#) at [1:15 AM](#)

9 comments:



Brendan June 16, 2012 at 4:18 PM

Can you elaborate on what you meant by 'divine' in your essay? The word is very loaded, so it'd be good to hear your definition rather than making assumptions.

Reply

Replies



David Kanaga June 17, 2012 at 1:55 PM

Changed my mind, deleted last post. DIVINE = of or relating to GOD, like the dictionary says (yes the meaning is fluid, like all meaning, but this works for now). Ok! so what is god? well, it's not just a myth, though it's that, too.. it escapes science (though does this then mean it must be SUPERNatural?), but science can help reveal aspects of its nature (maybe just the interface of it? not the black box insides)-- maybe essential aspects, but of course we don't know.... Though it seems like it's wonders are maybe most SUBLIMELY manifested in our experience and comprehension of the billions of galaxies and complexity of the world around us, we would be right to look inside ourselves just as much as outside for the source of that wonder. Which is... There's a seed which is the source of all creative potential (material/psychological) and it lives in all things. Now, forget god, since that bit of the definition is irrelevant-- but focus on this seed, which is everywhere and EVERYTHING at all times, and deserves to be celebrated as the greatest good, I think. Now, the question I'm interested in-- what's the relationship between this seed and the play impulse?

Reply



Brendan Keogh June 17, 2012 at 5:59 PM

Hey David,

Really enjoyed the post. You've touched on a whole heap of themes and ideas close to my own research and writing.

Broadly, my own interests are in 'how games mean' (or, perhaps more accurately 'how we talk about how games mean') and in not trying to determine 'what games are'. Games criticism as its own written form is still pretty young and haphazard and hasn't really figured out yet just how to take a videogame and figure out just what meanings emerge from it. I mean, often we get it, but we don't have a real overall framework of criticism that we can use on the myriad videogame forms we have. Maybe we don't even actually need one! But yeah, how games mean is pretty central to what the PhD I just started this year is going to be looking at.

A large part of that is a commitment to not defining what videogames 'are'. I pretty passionately believe that any attempt to define what a videogame 'is' is only ever an

activity of exclusion. Different groups of game players/scholars/developers/etc have different motivations on believing in different definitions of videogames so that the the component of videogames they want to focus on is seen as the most important. Die-hard PC gamers sometimes are determined that only 'open' and 'complex' games are 'real' videogames and 'linear' or 'casual' games aren't, for instance. I'm much more a fan of starting with the assumption that if player's consider it is a videogame, that is enough, and it is far more constructive to try to figure out how that game with that player produces meaning through play.

I especially love: "If these proposed definitions are so broad as to include everything, and now everything is thus a game, then let's play everything!" Stubbornly not defining videogames, the attack I most often get is "But then everything could be a videogame!" So be it. If thinking of a certain activity as playing a videogame allows you to say something meaningful about the experience, then why not think of it as a videogame?

So similarly, I don't think even 'game' really needs a definition. That said, I do agree on the general videogame != game point. A videogame is not simply a digital version of a non-digital game. Many would like to think they do, that the 'main point' of a videogame is to have goals or focus on systems or to be winnable or whatever. But videogames aren't simply games. They are related to games and overlap a lot, certainly, but the same can be said for videogames and cinema, really.

I think I disagree with you point in '1', that is impossible to make a meaningful game. I get what you are trying to say, but I think this undermines the role of the developer in shaping the game-object the player engages with. Take Lantz's September 12, for instance. Now ultimately, of course it is the relationship between the player and the game that determines what meaning will emerge from its playing, but that meaning is greatly influenced by the meaning that Lantz intentionally put into the game through its name, audiovisual representations, and systems. Like, indeed, nothing is stopping the player from going "well the meaning here is that clearly I need a bigger bomb!" but more often than not, the meaning the player takes from it is going to be influenced by the developer's intentions.

So I'd agree that the developer doesn't 'produce' the game's meaning, but they do have a shape in the meaning that comes out during play. I prefer to think of the meaning as sitting somewhere in the middle. [Edit: having gotten to the bottom of your post now, i think where you say players generate meanings and designers impose values, you might actually be saying what I am trying to say, so never mind!]

Reply

Replies



Brendan Keogh June 17, 2012 at 6:00 PM

[Second half of comment:]

As for your games and music comparisons, I really have nothing to add other than that I really like everything about it.

In '4', I think I both kinda agree and disagree with your take on competitive games. I think a game can have a single optimal way to be played and still reach for the 'divine' even after that single optimal way has been mastered by the player. By this I am thinking of a game like Super Meat Boy where I don't even think about what I am doing and just watch my character move and feel my fingers twitch and am consciously totally detached from what I am doing. Like I am sitting outside of myself going "how is he doing that"? For me, that is a kind of divine, and one I only get from doing the same thing over and over and over again.

A similar thing perhaps happens in highly linear shooters for me, where I can just 'lose myself' in the motions that the game has told me to do. Perhaps this is problematic, but I would still consider it meaningful and, in a way, kind of divine. Sometimes doing what you are told to do can be enough

So going into '5', I agree that designing games as freely-placed spaces can create beautiful and meaningful games, but disagree with the tone that kind of suggests this is how games 'should' be made. That risks imposing a definition on videogames too tightly that doesn't let us 'play everything'. It is one, among many, excellent ways to make a meaningful videogame.

But yes, these disagreements are really just semantic. I think this is a stunning and beautiful post and, speaking solely as a writer for a moment, I love how it just sprawls and rambles and rolls on. It was really a pleasure to read. Thanks for writing it, and sorry for being so tardy with this response!

Brendan



David Kanaga June 18, 2012 at 5:36 PM

Ah, thanks for these thoughts Brendan! and of course no worries about any "tardiness", you've got no obligations to do anything-- hope I didn't make it seem on Twitter like I was impatiently waiting for a response. (I think I chose not to use an emoticon or "!" when I was writing at you, since I thought my feed was looking a little cheesy with all my faces I'd been putting on it (I always feel like my writing looks more vicious without these little bits of glitter to cheer things up-- ;)))

Your point about competitive games in section 4 is definitely right on point, and gets at the section that probably feels weakest to me, since I don't have much of an intimacy with the language of competitive games. But, right-- optimal paths: one of my favorite games that I always go back and think about in this sense is Mario Galaxy. There's very little choice in it, it's such a linear game, and yet playing it is such a beautiful thing, the (touched) music of moving through the tightly composed spaces. How meaning emerges in that-- would be an interesting study!

What I was saying in section 5 is sort of trying to reconcile my love of Mario Galaxy's tightness with this idea of valuing intimacy with materials in the free play space, because I totally recognize that some of the greatest things that games can do may be tightly composed in that way. So, I wasn't saying that all games SHOULD be free play spaces (though, admittedly, my own tastes lean in that direction, at least for now), but rather that if they're going to be directed play spaces, they'll be better able to access more of the possible meanings that emerge from specific properties of the space (the sensuous/aesthetic aspects of it) by designing in response to the space as a free play space. Basically-- if we're going to design a game of basketball, knowing the feel of the ball and the court and the energies and capacities of players involved, and really being INTIMATE with that information, will help us make a better game. That there's a play aspect in the design process which is essential, feeling these things out, rather than systematizing an elegant design from the top-down. The tone was probably too strong, maybe to cover up my weaknesses!

Basically, I'm interested in those aesthetic aspects, having to do with our senses (sight, sound, touch), and was trying to reconcile that approach with what often feels like an analytical/systems-dominant approach in competitive play.. dunno how well it worked.. but thanks again for the thoughts, it feels good to be prompted into re-exploring weaker bits of an argument! And again, I'm psyched to follow your work on the PhD-- how games mean,.. big, noble project!

Reply



Paul Andrew McGee June 30, 2012 at 12:05 PM

David!

Apologies for being awfully slow in finishing this. :P

Your thoughts echo a lot of things I've been considering over the last couple months. The essence of computer games is an abstract art and the analogy to playing music is very powerful. I particularly liked 3,5,6. There is an enormous amount here to chew on (some things I'm going to definitely pursue and learn more about that I have only cursory knowledge of, such as Fluxus etc), but I'm going to circle some simpler, slightly tangential points! ;)

Pt1:

To start, the idea that computer games must mean 'game' (that is rule based) is silly, much like all pop music must be popular or that all Popular music (as in roughly non-Classical or world / traditional) is pop. Language is a fluid thing, let's not restrict ourselves arbitrarily. I would like a new word for what we do, but it's not necessary. I just don't feel the need to engage in these kind of debates with people. What is necessary is to now create and design the experiences will make these debates a thing

of the past as the validity and strength of the experience will be self-evident. We must create the games that fully explore and realise what your piece talks about. There have been games that started to touch upon it historically and I definitely think in the last couple years there have been some interesting movements towards this. Is there any games that stand out to you as epitomising your thoughts?

To continue I think I may diverge slightly on a couple points. In section 1 you talk about games only acquiring meaning through play and not as an object that exists explicitly with meaning. Yes! Agreed. You acknowledge conscious work can obviously be done in laying the ground work for meaning expressed and in shaping a playspace that leans toward an intention (but will be shaped by the player's past experiences and directions they take while playing), but I think you undervalue the role of the creator and the considerations they must take into account. They guide what an experience feels like. I think the analogy of game design as a conversation between designer and audience is a good one, but perhaps it's more like original composer and improviser. The nature of improvisational music is such that it relies on both the structure of the music itself, although this can become entirely 'free', and to the player's own foundation of learned or inuited musical knowledge and vocabulary that they can unconsciously rely on and subvert. "There's no time to think of each individual note. They have to have some patterns in their toolbox" - Aaron Berkowitz . Where the designer's role ends and player's begins is joyously murky, but at the very least the designer gives the player the instrument to express themselves through and that can be powerful.

Reply



Paul Andrew McGee June 30, 2012 at 12:05 PM

This comment has been removed by the author.

Reply



Paul Andrew McGee June 30, 2012 at 2:25 PM

pt. 2:

Games definitely lean towards more abstract arts like music but I feel they can still shine as a mixed medium. One analogy that was floating around my head a couple days ago was song and particularly long form song popularized by artists like Joanna Newsom on Ys and farther back in the tradition of the sung epic poem, wherein the music is less structured and explores the material alongside the text. These can feature improvisation too and there is of course the practice of combining beat poetry and jazz. The lyrics provide counterpoint to the music and they both enrich and create new resonances in each other. Of course they may not be needed, but I believe this could serve as an interesting meeting ground and it's what I am most interested in right now. Most games have a few layers, but unfortunately they generally don't work in tandem to strengthen each other. Braid for example, has the explicit layer of the visuals and music, the gameplay playspace and feel and it has a counterpoint to all this in the text:

the underlying story & any silly references to the Manhattan Project! (As a sidenote they needn't be so self-consciously obtuse, there are a lot of possibilities just as there is seemingly endless variety to the forms of the written word). However none of these IS the meaning or point. Instead they both point toward the deeper themes at work. The text of my hypothetical song-games need not be dead like the text boxes of Braid, but rather interactive and reactive. Along with embedded narratives in the playspaces you uncover and the abstract beating heart of play itself I believe these can all resonate with each other (and without being explicitly imposed goal driven) to create something greater.

Really though, thanks for this. There is some great food for thought here.

One take away I have is the thought that some very very interesting things can definitely be done in collaborative exploratory, experimental experiences. Throughout history and culture music has been most often a group activity and right now group-based playspaces feel terribly untapped to me. A very simple game I'm making right now, although it is on the backburner unfortunately, started as a competitive experience but that completely ruined the intent of creating together. I would love to explore this deeper: two players affecting each other and creating a unique experience together.

I'm excited to see what the next few years can bring! Hope any of this post is coherent!

Paul :)

[Reply](#)



khusbhu July 11, 2012 at 5:54 AM

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