AUTEUR THEORY IN GAMING: JONATHAN BLOW’S BRAID

The serious study of videogames has seen a massive influx of interest in the last decade,\(^1\) thanks in part to the commentators who have grown up with the technology and have begun to marry personal familiarity with a calcifying theoretical groundwork they are working to define further. On the other hand, the actual cultural positioning of gaming (and gamers) remains relatively unchanged. Like every now-familiar medium in its larval stages, videogames find themselves in the bitter Limbo between arrival and acceptance, riding swells of mainstream success that break just short of popular respect.

When published for the first time in April 1951, the French journal *Cahier du Cinéma* took as its subject another mainstream, for-profit entertainment that had as yet failed to ascend to the higher realms of artistic esteem: film. The *Cahier* crowd elevated film in the minds of the public by submitting the idea of a deliberate *auteur*, a capable authority with a purposeful message unique to his medium. In ideologically aligning films with the individuals behind them—individuals they personally sought to deify among the public—these critics were able to shift the popular conception of cinema from that of a soulless, self-serving media machine to a nuanced tool of modern expression, a truly powerful tool when in the hands of a talented, deliberate author.

The parallels with the modern state of gaming are numerous and thus a direct application of auteur theory might seem tempting, but here the word “deliberate” will begin to give us trouble. Within the video game industry the process of creation is

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\(^1\) Frasca, Gonzalo. "Simulation versus Narrative." *The Video Game Theory Reader*. 221.
radically decentralized (arguably more so than that of the film industry) so as to naturally resist the application or realization of personal vision. As noted by Jerry Holkins, coauthor of the seminal gaming webcomic Penny Arcade, “a game’s ‘writer’ has a task similar to a composer for film: they ‘score’ the game, a game that is already in various stages of completion, using language… Is he making a cake, or is he inscribing the functional, expected, more or less decreed birthday message in ebullient cursive?” Holkins highlights the confusion among game analysts who seek to trace the countless components of a game back to a single source: among diverse and expansive development teams, however, there is rarely a director/author analogue. This is problematic for any study of games as art, for in searching for calculated meaning, message, or purpose, we naturally gravitate towards the individual: it is natural to analyze (and legitimize) a game as a coherent text by identifying it as the product of a single mind. As Holkins puts it, there is “romance left for the sole operator; that person is welcome to embroider a personal mythology, and you’re welcome to buy in. As soon as you rely on any other person to create a work, buckle up.”

The difficulties inherent to such simplifications of the multifaceted gaming medium can be intimidating, even impractical, but they are by no means valueless: the Cahier du Cinéma and its contemporaries took on a number of the same issues, were forced to redefine art criticism with a handful of new, film-specific methods of interpretation, and emerged with a novel definition of authorship that expanded popular notions of art. Their definition of “true” authorship hinged on the satisfaction

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of a new standard of quality—the adept manipulation of *mise-en-scène*—that reflected an eminent technique capable of wrangling the colossal beast of industry into the service of an author’s imagination. In the end it was the establishment of a new metric of quality that defined auteur theory and dictated its influence, not the hero-worship and brand-pushing. Thus, while the positioning of the author-individual within gaming theory might be thorny (particularly within the narrativist/ludologist “debate”), auteur theory is nevertheless one possible avenue for game-as-art analysis that moves past previous scholarship—scholarship that has focused primarily on psychology, semiotics, and narrative-theory—because we, like the *Cahier* critics, have begun to establish a theoretical foundation upon which some scale of worth can be built. In other words, a more clear classification of the developer-author and the standards of technical excellence he is expected to satisfy will allow us to analyze individual games as expressive texts and attribute to them value judgments, which should, in the long run, open the minds of the public to what the medium has to say, not just how it works.

After classifying the auteur’s unique position in gaming this paper will, by way of example, examine the popular and critically acclaimed *Braid* (along with its creator, Jonathan Blow) as a work that makes a case for game-art in its unabashed manifestation of authoritative intention. Given that Blow’s work showcases metatextual commentary on the industry itself, *Braid* will be taken side by side with Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*, a classic example of an auteur’s self-aware investigation of the medium he operates in.

**The Author and Ludology**
The central debate in video game theory seems to arise when theorists discuss from which direction they can or should approach games. The traditional and, according to Gonzalo Frasca, most popular approach to game analysis is an extension of existing narrative theory that inevitably classifies videogames as an extension of drama and narrative. For those who subscribe to this approach he introduces the term “narrativists,” a gaming-specific title distinct from the “narratologist” of general scholarship and in quasi-opposition to his own ideological camp, the “ludologists.” Whereas narrativists interpret games as a continuation of the mimetic storytelling tradition, ludologists insist on more modern approach that puts a pronounced stress on the interactivity (and its concomitant formal deviations) of video games, a dynamic that represents a vital divergence from narrative structures of pure representation. Frasca is careful to note that narrative is nevertheless important to ludology, and simply asserts that a narrative-based approach to game studies is necessarily incomplete.

In this accusation, taken with his categorization of ludology as a “necessary step in video game studies,” Frasca’s philosophy sounds with the echoes of the French critics who revolutionized film theory with their unprecedented focus on the mise-en-scène. MacCabe writes in “Revenge of the Author”:

They [Cahier du Cinéma] saw the weakness of French cinema in terms of its over-valuation of the written element in film. And this over-valuation failed to take into account the mise-en-scène, the whole composition of the film, in which design, lighting, 

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shot sequences, acting, were articulated together to provide the very specific reality and pleasure of the cinema.\textsuperscript{6}

By the same token, the ludologist’s mise-en-scène, his “specific reality and pleasure” of gaming, is the interactivity of simulation. The “over-valuation” identified by ludologists is the preoccupation with representational narrative that is only marginally important to a revolutionary reconfiguration of audience participation, cognitive possibility and ideological depth. Frasca puts it bluntly:

This is what many supporters of the narrative paradigm fail to understand: their semiotic sequences might be identical, but simulation cannot be understood just through its output…the feeling of playing soccer cannot be compared to the one of watching a match.\textsuperscript{7}

Frasca defines simulation thusly: “to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system.” He seizes on the flight simulation as a demonstration, describing how a film of a plane might tell us its shape, color, even movement, but it cannot be manipulated, whereas a flight simulator “allows the player to perform actions that will modify the behavior of the system in a way that similar to the behavior of the actual plane.” The difference between the two experiences might seem obvious, even intuitive, but Frasca insists that this difference is not yet adequately represented in game studies.\textsuperscript{8}

In light of this definition it should be noted that the narrative/simulation divergence is a much more drastic development than the arrival of film. Not to play

\textsuperscript{7} Frasca. "Simulation versus Narrative." 224.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 223.
down the power of cinema: the lag between technological conception and academic appreciation alone is enough to convince anyone born too late to witness the advent of film that the impact of the medium was mindboggling. Even so, video games do represent a more fundamental ideological shift. Whereas film was a dramatic, unheard-of leap in narrative technique, video games represent a total departure from representational narrative itself, and consequently those who attempt to carve out new academic space for its study have a more complex assignment than the Cahier theorists who sought to acclimate the public to film's innovative methods of storytelling.

Qualifying the circumstances in this way is necessary to any attempt at transplanting auteur theory into game studies, for in the same way that the formal aspects of video games differ so completely from traditional media, so does the role of the author take on a perplexing new shape when the agency of storytelling is (at least partially) granted to the player. The role of the author is so altered as to be practically eliminated, according to critics like Rob Cover, who, in his article on “New Media Theory,” paints a grim picture of the author-audience relationship as a war-torn battlefield of creative control. He argues that “electronic gaming is merely one facet of evidence for the struggle for participation and co-creation of the media text in a longer history of contestation” that will “open the possibility for a variety of new mediums no longer predicated on the name of the author.”

Cover does not under-value the power of simulation, and he is certainly right to assert that “the interactive position” is totally

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9 Cover, Rob. "New Media Theory: Electronic Games, Democracy and Reconfiguring the Author-Audience Relationship." Social Semiotics. 179.
distinct from representational narrative in that it offers the capability and encourages the desire to “access and utilize text in ways more than just scavenging through interpretation.” However, Cover goes too far in thereby assuming the evaporation of authorial control. To return to Frasca, who plainly submits his support for “the concept of the video game designer as auteur,” the “simauthor” defines the systems within which the player moves; thus he will always be the ultimate creative authority, even when the particulars of narrative are left to the player.

Given that “author” and “storyteller” are popularly interchangeable, this distinction might be hard to grasp, and critics like Cover are not yet on board. As stated above, ludologists see Cover’s preoccupation with narrative (Cover posits the death of the author and cites his loss of narrative control as his cause of death) as an ideological crutch equivalent to the 20th century fixation on the written word, a crutch that should be abandoned if game studies (and games) are to fulfill their theoretical and formal potential. Critics must realize that the game-auteur has a distinctive arsenal of techniques at his disposal—choice and reward, spatial freedom/limitation, enforced/freeform pacing, etc.—all of which are based on the rules and behaviors of the simulation, the models that scaffold possible experiences. These models (the ludologist’s answer to the “design, lighting, shot sequences, acting” stressed by the Cahier) are built to allow a controlled if not finite number of possible experiences, and it is in this modeling of behavior that the author exercises his authority and depicts his

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10 Ibid., 180.
ideology—not, as traditional theorists maintain, in the particulars of narrative, which are of varying importance to games that may or may not even require the presence of story to embody authorial intent. In an excellent article for Rock Paper Shotgun, Jim Rossignoi asked what games would look like with no story at all, and found that their fundamental quality remained unchanged:

Well, you could still have most of the action and driving games... You would have Tetris, you would have Flight Simulators. Almost all multi-player games would spare us their incidental scene-setting twaddle... Portal wouldn’t be as funny, but it’d still be a fascinating puzzle game. You would have hundreds of different experiences, systems, visual themes, complex puzzles, strategic conundrums, ambient processes. Hell, you might end up having more originality and greater diversity if games weren’t pinned down somewhere in the space between Aliens and Lord Of The Rings and trying to bend their game mechanics to their lack of articulacy in fiction.12

His logic can be taken elsewhere, as well: consider that Bethesda’s *Elder Scrolls* series, a popular exemplar of the often plot-heavy role-playing genre, would be just as enjoyable should the main narrative be extracted, given that its main appeal lies in the expansive, organic and utterly interactive fantasy universe its lays before the player. On the other hand, Bioware’s RPG’s are criticized precisely because they are overdependent on clichéd narrative at the expense of innovative function—bending “game mechanics to [a] lack of articulacy in fiction” is an uninspired use of novel technology and a shortcoming visible not just to the game theorist, but to the consumer as well. Rossignoi’s thought experiment spells out what gamers already know: the games of true auteur-developers are expressive in what they let us do, not in how they

explain themselves.

Not to say that narrative/simulation cohesion is unheard of, as an analysis of *Braid* will make clear, and naturally, most games do contain coherent central narratives that sustain the importance of representation to expression within the interactive medium and often compliment the value of an author’s offering. The *Silent Hill* series, as Ewan Kirkland has demonstrated, explores a number of complex themes—gender, sexuality, race—while constituting a “specifically story-centered, distinctly filmic experience… sharing more in common with novels than with games.” Kirtkland admits that his narrativist approach is a reflection of the narrative-centric nature of his subject, but does go on to argue for “common ground between ludological and narratological perspectives.” Even if “story-centered” games do seem more easily assessed by traditional narratology, the game analyst cannot ignore the “ontological specificities of the video game medium,”\(^\text{13}\) and conversely, ludology cannot exclude an analysis of narrative: Frasca points out that “the idea that ludologists want to discard narrative from game studies seems to be totally inaccurate.”\(^\text{14}\)

If we can begin to see on what levels the game-author is and is capable of working on, namely the models and behaviors of systems, how do we begin to qualify that employment for our own use as critics? Frasca offers a basic legend for interpreting simulations, stating that simulations include four ideological levels “that can be manipulated in order to convey ideology.” The first is the familiar level of


\(^{14}\) Frasca. “Ludologists love stories, too.” 2
representation, the narrative specifics of who, where, when and why. The second level is of “manipulation rules,” or what the player is allowed to do within the game, and here Frasca differentiates between possibilities and goals, for the distinction is vital to authorial intent. Third are the prerequisites for victory, the goal rules that identify (supposedly) objective success—how does one “beat the game?” Finally we have the meta-rules, or what aspects of the model the author allows the player to tweak or change altogether, which “imply neither the death of the author nor the player’s freedom… they are present in the game because the author wanted them to be there.”\(^{15}\)

Conceivably, any author that can handle every level of the simulation with a technical dexterity comparable to multi-talented directors of Cahier fame could, within the framework we have built, be considered and respected as an auteur.

**Braid (and Rear Window)**

Game designer Jonathan Blow could be the poster child for the ludologist approach to game analysis. Blow ended an A.V. Club Blog interview with this admission of intent:

> I have gone on record as talking about game design as a practice, like a scientific study, or like a spiritual practice… I’m exploring the universe in a certain way… I believe that somehow, there is something more meaningful about creating a system. Because the universe is a system, of some kind. And writing is not a system.\(^{16}\)

If this excerpt makes nothing else clear, it does display Blow’s acute awareness of

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\(^{16}\) "Game Designer Jonathan Blow: What We All Missed About *Braid*." Interview by Chris Dahlen. *The A. V. Club.*
the game designers revolutionary position as a builder of systems necessarily distanced from the more traditional representational media. *Braid*, his one release to date (*The Witness*, a 3D puzzle game, should be released in 2012) is an apt embodiment of Blow’s sensibilities, and utilizes, as Hitchcock did in *Rear Window*, all the tools of his medium to create a fantastically engaging work that bubbles with metatextual commentary.

The narrative backbone of *Braid* is its protagonist, Tim, and his quest to save the princess. Already we have the subtle metatext of an overused trope: his quest is conveyed so plainly—in the text of the books that sit at the entrance to each world—that the player cannot help but find it a little ridiculous, but he keeps playing. In knowing that the player will continue to operate under hackneyed pretenses, and in demonstrating that he knows this, Blow implies the dispensability of narrative in games and pokes fun at the player for not asking for more (from the first level of representation or the second of agency). This technique can be compared to the murder mystery of *Rear Window*—the husband’s murder of his wife—and Jeff’s obsession with it. Restless in his boredom he longs for a narrative, and where others are quick to disregard Jeff’s thoughtless acceptance of the murder-mystery narrative Jeff jumps right in, and is, in the end, vindicated. And Blow does want to reward us, as well: *Braid* boasts a narrative depth unexpected under the clever guise of cliché. Both authors underline R. Barton. Palmer’s analysis: “Proper spectatorship thus involves a balance between dismissal and acceptance, and requires a distancing from, yet involvement in
the diegesis.”  

To skip to the end: Tim manipulates the flow of time to overcome obstacle and reach the princess. Throughout the game it has been in implied that their relationship is gone sour, and on entering the final world we see her in the arms of the villain. She escapes, and with cooperation Tim and his princess finally reunite. Suddenly, however, the flow of time reverses, we see that we had been traveling back in time all along, and that the princess was, in actuality, running from us and into the arms of the villain.

*Braid’s* ending is the most widely analyzed feature of the game, but analyses have so far been limited to narrative details of the first simulational level. (Is Tim the villain too? Does the princess represent the A-Bomb? Did he change anything after all?) More interesting, though, is Blow’s manipulation of the higher levels of simulation, particularly the third level of goal rules. The player has been driven to move through puzzles with the implied promise that “beating the game” will involve saving the princess: Blow “[funnels] through all the available scenarios and [encourages] some that will lead to the winning scenario,” but when we reach what we have taken to be the “winning scenario,” the archetypal “winning scenario” of saving the princess, Blow withdraws the “personal and social reward” by negating expectation with a narrative twist and further diffusing its pleasure with a baffling epilogue that implies more secrets and goals unknown to the player. The player is returned to the beginning of the game exactly as he began it, utterly lacking closure. Besides inviting further play—a

rare and admirable feat for a puzzle-platformer—this effect makes us question what we really expect from such base arrangements of challenge/reward. Blow has professed a personal disgust for games like *World of Warcraft*, games that, he argues, are based on mindless challenges for minimal reward: it would make sense that he would punish the player with confusion for relying on what he sees as tired, hollow relationship between player and game.

Our theoretical framework and Blow himself suggest that mechanics are readable as text. As such we should ask what Blow’s intentions were in having us travel backwards and forwards through time to solve puzzles, access alternate realities and change the past. The originality of these mechanics should be noted first: like Hitchcock’s focus on the entertainment and suspense value of his films, Blow makes sure that his game is appealing on the base level of satisfying curiosity. Once he has drawn us in with perplexing and rewarding mechanics, Blow slowly reveals that it is all reflective of a larger message—they appear immediately (if vaguely) connected to the themes of regret, wishes to change the past, the parallel worlds of forgotten choices, etc. If nothing else, they are expressive first and practical second, but they are indeed both.

It should be clear by now that the majority of Blow’s commentary is metafictional, a theme common to video games and, as Lupton and McDonald found, to 18th century novels—both media enjoy or enjoyed mainstream success lacking critical esteem. The two authors explore the less-studied nuances of metatext, attempting to distance their own analysis from the general conception of metafictional narratives as “self-conscious works of narration [that] encourage social criticism and action more
easily than realist narratives,” or in other words, metafiction as the leveraging instrument of an author’s grander thematic (and in extreme cases of Brechtian moralizing, didactic) purpose. Instead, Lupton and McDonald investigate in games and 18th century novels the more generalized and decentralized consciousness of “mediation” in texts that draws attention to the “physicality of narratives on printed paper or high resolution screen as well as their presentation as commodities and their reception as belittled forms of entertainment.”¹⁹

The distinction between metacommentary on the materialist dissemination of commodities and metatexts that “encourage social criticism” is vague at best. It seems that the two authors hope to distinguish tongue-in-cheek self-awareness “engaged with and able to trump critique” from “provocative and action-inducing… self-reflexivity,”²⁰ but the need for this delineation is unclear. Metafiction parades some sort of extratextual awareness that is necessarily premeditated: while the gravity of that observation might vary — observation of human nature, of marketing, or of the Oxford comma — and whether that is a call to action or a conspiratorial gag it is in every case a deliberate showcasing for a deliberate purpose. As such it is the intentionality of metafiction that is most important to this analysis, regardless of its intended function as either social or thematic commentary, for in both cases metafiction boasts a calculated interpretive utility that implies an author and can thus be analyzed as text — As R. Barton Palmer notes, metafiction is most generally defined as the “transformation of

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²⁰ Ibid. 159.
That being said, Lupton and McDonald’s examination of metatext as specifically concerned with the mediation of games is a revealing survey of the medium’s self-awareness, both of its own technical limitations (in *Monkey Island*) and its cultural positioning (in *Grand Theft Auto*). But *Braid*’s awareness of its own position within the mediation of gaming is largely portrayed by its handling of genre.

As Kirkland points out in his analysis of *Silent Hill*, “game types and categories are strongly evident in video game culture,” and aside from possessing unmistakable genre divisions—adventure, puzzle, sports, strategy, etc.—games are often remediations of older, more traditional media: the sports game remediates the televised arena event, first person games the video camera, adventure games the cinema. *Braid*, on the other hand, is a remediation of the Mario-era platformer, a gaming-specific experience that has no apparent real-world parallel. And that is just its aesthetic: the real kernel of *Braid* is its mind-bending time puzzles, its baffling paradoxes and labyrinths of logic. In this it is even farther removed from representational media: puzzle games are almost purely simulation; they hinge on cognitive action and require little narrative support. Blow’s success and *Braid*’s palpable character is thus a realization and demonstration of what gaming has to gain by embracing its simulative core.

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22 Kirkland. “Restless Dreams in *Silent Hill.*” 171
Game history plays an important part in Blow’s choice of genre, as well: as Sean Fenty observes, players of classic games from the pre-photorealism days enter into “a game world of symbolism, graphic minimalism, and ideal forms.” Early games lacked the computing power to serve as true representational media, and for some, that is exactly what made them great. Authors were left only the tools of symbolized simulation. Blow, in returning to the classic form of the platformer, expresses a desire to bring back the narrative-free purity of early games—if that is too strong, he is at least drawing the player’s attention to the intricacies possible within pure simulation by selecting a genre he trusts that the self-aware gamer will remember was originally introduced without the trappings of exhaustive story. Indeed, Super Mario’s narrative pretext can be summed up in one famous line: “Thank you Mario! But our Princess is in another castle!” Blow gently mocks this bookend approach to narrative by ending his own levels with mysterious dinosaurs who mean nothing to the story, parrot this line (“The princess is in another castle”), seem confused as to who the princess even is, and are eventually ignored by the protagonist as he tires of hearing their redundant mantra.

This analysis is clearly truncated, but should nevertheless serve as a model for game analysis that moves past narrativist approaches and begins to judge games based on scales nearer to objectivity.

The Idea of Auteur

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Auteurs are the authors capable of engaging a new medium on its own terms rather than applying old approaches to new technology, and as an analysis of metatext should prove, an author must be aware of the state of his medium to take advantage of it. But this is to say nothing of what the auteur can do for the medium. If nothing else, the implied presence of the adept author, as intangible and diffused as that presence may be, opens the player’s mind to the abstract expression and innovative production that is more difficult to accept when thought to have emerged solely as a byproduct of the faceless mechanisms of industry. Furthermore, players are more apt to find personality in games that showcase dexterous manipulation of all the levels of simulation—games that rely too heavily on tired narratives stink too much of Hollywood.

The most important work done by the Cahier critics was the association of recognizable names with objective (if embryonic) standards of quality: the fact that these were names of individuals is irrelevant. Analogues to auteur theory in game studies need not attach their value judgments—judgments, it must be noted, utterly reliant on the nascent discipline of ludology—to individuals, rather they should focus on the content-producers who are as progressive, as self-aware, and as defiant of the industry status quo as Hitchcock, no matter if they are singular artists like Blow or enlightened cadres of developers like Bethesda.
Bibliography


