Workshop "Time and Space in Interactive Media for Children" – A Field of Its Own: To Study Computer Games as an Independent Genre

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No. 21 – 22.01.2002

Abstract

Today, "literacy" can no longer refer to the printed word alone. The spread of the computer and the internet causes a need for new skills: in decoding multimedia, understanding hypertext, evaluating online sources, ... The German Department of Zürich University and the Swiss Institute for Children's Literature (Schweizerisches Jugendbuch-Institut / Johanna Spyri-Stiftung - SJI) have responded to this development and established a new program focussing on interactive media for children (Schwerpunktprogramm "Interaktive Kinder- und Jugendmedien"). The program will enable scholars to study "interactive narrative media" in the broadest definition of the term, concentrating primarily on the theory and conception of interactivity, audience-analysis and cultural geography or interculturality. The first Explorative Workshop, Zeit und Raum in interaktiven Kinder- und Jugendmedien ("Time and Space in Interactive Media for Children"), took place in Zürich, Nov. 23-25 2001.

As outlined in the position-paper for the workshop, the project-team (Prof. Dr. Michael Böhler, Zürich University; Dr. Verena Rutschmann, SJI; and graduate students Manuela Kocher and Judith Mathez) have isolated Time and Space as a key-aspect in the study of computer games (time) and its hitherto neglected twin (space). The program aimed to bring different and divergent scholars from fields related to computer game-studies (still a youthful discipline lacking a solid line-up of dedicated departments especially in German-speaking countries) under one guiding theme that was nonetheless wide enough to allow for diversity in the

contributions and vigor in the discussion. This a priori limitation of "interactive media for children" to computer games is (and indeed was) up for discussion, but the main aim of the workshop can only be welcomed: to bring together people with an academic outlook on computer games as a literary (or art-)genre and to foster approaches and discussions that take computer games as independent phenomena, not, as so much theory has done lately, as paradigms for and metaphors of phenomona in other disciplines.

The workshop was loosely structured into three sections with concise presentations and ardent discussions that ran over into the coffee-breaks and through the evening. Section one contained three presentations that were concerned with issues closely related to the position-paper with the key-topics of temporality, spatiality, and narrativity: Traudl Bünger on temporal and narrative coherency in interactive adaptations of three books for children; Kai Thompson on spatiality and immersion; and Klaus Walter on narrative pacing.

Section two comprized three presentations on space and one on temporal anomalities in computer games: Randi Gunzenhäuser on endangered bodies in digital spaces; Beat Suter on the creation and appropriation of space in *Unreal Tournament*; Karin Wenz on the creation and appropriation of space in *Wiggles*; and Anja Rau on media-specific temporal anomalies in games.

The presentations in section three were centered on children as "audience" for games: Petra Wieler compared school-children's reactions to narrated stories to their reactions to computer games; Cornelia Rosebrock talked about the phantastic in printed versus digital fiction; and Ingrid Tomkowiak presented an info-fiction CD-ROM on the second World War.

Section 1

Traudl Bünger (Universität Köln, Arbeitsstelle für Leseforschung und Kinder- und Jugendmedien ALEKI) introduced an adaptation of Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking* novels that combines game- and story-sections in an open temporal structure. The absence of navigation guides in this piece leads to temporal and narrative inconsistencies which Bünger regards as typical of computer games. According to Bünger, the "game"-concept is inherently exclusive of an overall temporal structure that can fulfill a reader's desire for coherence and narrative plausibility - the interactive freedom characteristic of games has to be sacrificed for the sake of an acceptable time-structure.

The ensuing discussion already brought up two main foci of the workshop: media-adequacy and the quality-debate. On the one hand, it is questionable whether

interactive texts can be approached on a background of standards and expectations created by the print-format, such as temporal consecutiveness or narrative coherence. On the other hand, a CD-ROM that dates back to 1995 with all the technical limitations implied by this date, seems to say more about the technological development the digital medium has undergone since then than about the medium's general capacities. Modern, "intelligent" software can easily avoid temporal glitches (e.g. that a game does not "realize" you have solved a riddle and asks you to try again).

Kai Thomson (SMS Demag AG, Düsseldorf) spoke from the position of the game-designer and made a case for entirely immersive and life-like gaming-environments. In a computer game, "space" serves as carrier and atmosphere of a world that should aim at surrounding the player in a close-to-natural way as well as at anticipating and adapting to the player's every move. While technology is evolving towards fully immersive environments of this kind, the participants of the workshop voiced doubts whether this vision should be the only vista for the future of games (and the only vista to be wished for). This adds another aspect to the quality-debate, namely the normativity of technological feasibility.

Klaus Walter (Deutscher Multimedia Verband, Düsseldorf) presented an analysis of the different narrative sectors of computer games. In games, claims Walter, narrative and ludic parts alternate to create a symbiosis of interdependent elements. Walter shades the ludic parts as necessary acts of decision that serve to further the (more dominant) narration and trigger a cut scene with the filmic rendering of the next part of the story. This strict differentiation between sectors that require player-activity and sectors that tell a story started a discussion about the narrative quality of games in general: While most discussants accepted narrativity as a valid concept in the analysis of games, the group was split between those who seek an a priori narrative quality in games and those who see narrative as emergent or even created by the reader in the act of playing a game.

Section 2

Randi Gunzenhäuser (TU Chemnitz, DFG-Forschungsprojekt "Interaktion mit fiktionalen Hypertexten") started the second section with a presentation of the ego-shooter *Max Payne*, a game that uses "bullet-time", a concept borrowed from the movie *The Matrix*, not as a dramaturgic element but as a game-function. Similar to the weapons a player collects and uses during a shooter, "bullet-time" can be turned on or off at will. Gunzenhäuser also showed how computer games and especially shooters negotiate a threat to the body in a realistic yet clearly virtual environment -

a representation of the endangered body that can be read as subversive strategy in a wider sociopsychological context.

Beat Suter (Update, Zürich) demonstrated a strategy for the appropriation of space that is specific to computer games. While a classic adventure like the *Myst*-series offers a richly detailed gamescape for the reader to explore, the engine of *Unreal Tournament* asks the player to first carve rooms and landscapes from a darkened (and therefore "filled") screen, thus creating a space for the game to take place in. Space is created by taking away from a state of entropy instead of by installing structures in empty space. Turning real-life activities inside-out, games (or virtual environments in general) create a new spatiality and with it a new corporeality that is reminiscent of Gibson's cyberspace and tangibly adequate to the carrier-medium, the computer.

In her presentation of the *Wiggles*, Karin Wenz (Universität Kassel) seemed to pull together the previous two presentations: In the *Wiggles*, as in *Unreal*, space is created by digging away from a more or less solid mass. But as in *Max Payne*, the space not yet conquered holds danger in the shape, not of heavily armed killers, but of monsters that have to be slain for the darkness to be filled with light and the "unsafe space" made safe. In a second step, Wenz identifies time in *Wiggles* as cyclical, inspired by the clock-metaphor of the controls and the fact that the diggers regularly return to a central meeting place before setting out for their adventures underground again. Recursion (or recurrence), according to Wenz, is a, if not *the* basic principle of comptuer games as it determines both their programmed and their temporal structure.

Anja Rau (Blue Mars, Frankfurt) is looking for time-stuctures in computer games that are medium-specific and create temporal effects that can occur only in digital literature. Unlike Walter, she regards narrative and ludic elements of a game as layered horizontally (as opposed to vertically, one after the other), both present simultaneously but differently emphasized at different points in the game. *Discworld I* and *Maniac Mansion II* are both games that establish a unidirectional time-line (pointing from past to present) in their narrative and then require the player to reason back in time in order to solve the riddles. According to Rau, the clash of the actively immersive (ludic) with the narrative layers creates a clash in their player's conception of the game's time-line in a way that cannot be achieved by a printed text.

Section 3

Petra Wieler (FU Berlin) showed material documenting the reaction of second-year school children to narrated stories and computer games respectively. The narrative seemed to offer itself up for an in-class discussion didactically structured in a way that would lead the children to verbalize emotions and develop empathy. Faced with a computer game, on the other hand, and grouped in teams of three, the children discussed mainly problem-solving strategies and their personal reactions to the game rather than its contents. The ensuing discussion questioned Wieler's interpretation that computer games do not foster verbalization or the development of emotional eloquence and that on top of this school-children today lacked the media-proficiency needed to cope with computer games. On the one hand, the two situations portrayed differed structurally (a guided in-class discussion versus an unguided, teamed, hands-on encounter) and were therefore hard to compare. In addition, there are other studies (like Sherry Turkle's in the US) that come to the opposite conclusion, namely that the computer in general and especially problem-solving tasks like those found in computer games further verbal and communicative skills.

Cornelia Rosebrock (Universität Frankfurt/Main, Institut für deutsche Sprache und Literatur) outlined Todorow's concept of the Phantastic which she regards as a central boon of literature when it comes to a child's development of symbolic skills. The Phantastic is to be found as a supernatural occurence in an otherwise realist context - therefore not in fairy tales and not in computer games, either, as the latter are established as inherently unrealistic and unreal environments. For Rosebrock, this is one of many instances where the computer game fails as a narrative genre for children - always provided that literature for children should aim at developing their verbal, communicative and emotional capabilities. Rosebrock's presentation rekindled the debate on quality. It is (sadly) easy to find outdated or plain bad computer games to prove any negative presumption at all. However, in this continually diversifying genre, it has become equally possible to play "good" games that are both technically up to date and able to tackle issues traditionally associated with literature. It was not until the final discussion that this constant measuring of computer games up against the paradigm of the pre-postmodern novel was being questioned.

Ingrid Tomkowiak (Kuratorium Volksliteratur, Zürich), finally, presented a CD-ROM project that is very obviously not a game, the French production *Operation Teddybär* which combines an interactive cartoon with background information about the Second World War. While the cartoon uses interactive features to expand its movement- and time-depicting facilities, the informational part has ingenious navigation aids that help the reader to find her way through story and materials and to better relate both to each other. Tomkowiak raised the question whether this

work could be included among "interactive media for children", as well and thus broadened the scope of the workshop beyond games, at the same time making it obvious that computer games form an atonomous genre with genre-specific properties and need to be studied as a field of their own.

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The workshop ended in a plenary discussion that took up the central issues of the past day: narration and/or game; space and time as functional elements of games and movement as central modality; the visual aesthetics of space in games; and the question of "quality": can an apparent flaw be attributed to the entire genre or put down to the failures of individual specimen of a young and developing genre. The plenum also noted the marked absence of gender-issues from the discussion (apart from Randi Gunzenhäuser's presentation.)

The weekend was framed by Melanie Kocher's presentation of *Myst III - Exile* and Judith Mathez' presentation of *Wiggles* and by Susanne Berkenheger's performance of two of her recent hypertexts, *Hilfe!* and a work in progress set in a swimming pool which is not yet online.

The organizers had made a point of inviting researchers with backgrounds in gamestudies, game-programming and in literature for children which meant that, even among the presenters, there were people present who did not a priori agree that computer games are among the most exciting representatives of digital literature - or even that by putting "literature" on a computer and creating works that are adequate to the medium, it is possible to create "good" literature at all. This made for a very lively as well as inspiring discussion and I think everybody present came, at more than one occasion, to the point where they had to start to reconsider their presumptions. It's good to see that the German-speaking literary / cultural theory-community has recognized computer games as a specimen of digital literature to be reckoned with and that this recognition takes place in a debating-culture that thrives on healthy controversies.