Multiple Approaches to Game Analysis Workshop (MAGAW)
3rd & 4th May 2016
Workshop Report

Attendees (in alphabetical order):

Espen Aarseth

Emmanuel Guardiola

Jussi Holopainen

Curtis Maughan

Delphine Soriano

Daniel Wiedemann

Report by Nicolay Mohammad-Hadi (CGL, Master's Candidate)

Summary:

The MAGAW was called into existence to determine answers to fundamental questions on game analysis, as this field is, at the time of the workshop, still widely unexplored, both in definitions of purpose and terminology. To achieve this goal, six scholars from various fields have congregated at the Cologne Game Lab in the beginning of May to discuss as many individual approaches to game analysis by the example of CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*.

Each member of the workshop presented their own approach on the small convention's first day, whereas the second day was spent discussing questions on the nature of game analysis as well as the first few steps towards a fully-formed conference (preliminarily titled the Interdisciplinary Game Analysis Conference).

This report aims to provide a short overview of the work done and insights gathered over these two days, giving very brief summaries of each attendee's propositions to analysis as well as a synopsis of key aspects of the subsequent discussions.

Day 1: Multiple Approaches to Game Analysis

With respect to the game's scale, each attendee described their initial thought on the task at hand (how to analyse *The Witcher 3*) as a variation of "Where to begin?" This led to each of the presented approaches being vastly different from the others, and they are going to be listed in the following segment in the order they were presented.

Espen Aarseth began by arguing that the most unique part of the *Witcher* game series was its relation to the other pieces of media in which the narrative's universes exist, such as (comic book) literature, film & TV, even board games, and foremost the varying iterations of the story's characters in each of these versions. The question here, he proposes, lies in the differences between those characters, for example in their ethical behaviours or visual deviations, and the reasons for those.

Daniel Weidemann proposed a self-reflective approach utilizing the CEGE (Core Elements of the Gaming Experience) questionnaire created by Eduardo H. Calvillo-Gámez as well as a meta analysis of public reception to determine the game's most influential or interesting components of the game's design.

Jussi Holopainen chose a structuralist/formalist method of analysis, stating that video games are not solely games, but a conglomerate of different media and suggested that, while superficially viewed *The Witcher 3* was similar to Bethesda's *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim,* for instance, they have big structural differences that ultimately lead to overwhelmingly different play experiences. These structural differences could be determined utilizing theories from literary studies, such as The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations by Georges Polti or Greimas's Semiotic Square and applying them directly to specific sequences in the game.

Delphine Soriano focussed on an analysis of the visual components of the game, dividing them into a Game Level and an Interface Level and analysing their diegetic relation to one another. Furthermore, she suggests that information related to the player can be divided into self-explanatory and learned ones, using theses from the scientific field of semiotics, for instance, to distinguish icons and symbols.

Curtis Maughan discussed the game designers' utilization of specific restrictive sequences in the game by the example of an early faux-choice in the game, that represents, in his argumentation, the power of game creators over the players. Although players are presented with the possibility to protest against a certain action, this objection has no effect on the outcome of the situation, a design decision atypical of the game series' reputation as an open experience whose player choices are less plentiful but more impactful compared to its competitors'.

Emmanuel Guardiola approached the analysis from a game designer's point of view, dissecting and analysing Gameplay Loops, distinguishable segments of varying actions that always return to the same initial situation. As the primary Gameplay Loop in *The Witcher 3* is difficult to ascertain due to the sheer number of possible activities, Guardiola chose to nominate combat as the most elemental, as it relies most heavily on player input to determine winning and losing states.

Day 2: Discussion and Organisation

The second day was started with the question of the value of analysis in general, which quickly evolved into the main discussion of the first part of the day, in which the attendees discussed the reasons for analysis from their respective points of view and whether there is a common core to be found in these. These thoughts were noted down and could be divided into three major fields as special interests of game designers, visual artists and scholars, containing topics such as the understanding of cultural influences, clinical effects, scientific validation, historical documentation, aesthetic modifications, critical analysis, ontology, a comparison to other media and many more.

This discussion led to the conclusion that there is not one common ground between all named points, but three major elements to at least one of which they all could fit, and in no particular order are defined as follows. Many points could be described as formal criticism, these are the points most derived from game studies. The second focusses on the players, any empirical approach to analysis belongs in this group. The third and last group of points could be defined as qualitative assessments, the game systems themselves are at the centre of these.

Despite this disparity, the attendees quickly agreed that a fragmentation of game criticism, as it has happened in other fields of scientific study, can still be avoided. To that end, the group sketched out many different terms and finally decided on the term Interdisciplinary Game Analysis, short IGA.

Facing the half-time of the workshop's second day, it returned to the question for the reasons for game analysis, which were summarized as follows:

- understand the (current) discussion about video games
- the phenomenology of games
- the phenomenology of play
- the creation of tools (i.e. theories) helpful for others, not limited to game studies scholars

To be found on the workshop's agenda was also the task to determine a method to evaluate game analysis. Quickly, it was decided that the best method would be the organization of a conference (IGA conference) and the establishment of an associated call for papers (CfP - link).

It was important from the onset to all attendees that the IGA conference be defined as open to as many interest groups as possible, including any academic field, industry members and policy-makers, owed to the finding that one of the goals of game criticism, as understood by the workshop, is the creation of tools for interdisciplinary use, disregarding the motivation for analysis at this point. To reinforce this mentality, the workshop has also created a diverse list of possible backgrounds of candidates for the CfP as well as conceivable topics, with special emphasis on the idea that not only game-specific topics be included.

The CfP's core content was determined, as well, with a clear definition of the workshop's understanding of the term analysis, information about the targeted broad nature of the conference and a few specifications concerning the papers, all of which will be disclosed in the CfP's official release. In addition, organizational discussions such as the date and place of the conference, the dates for launch, submission and notification of the CfP, the inclusion of panels and pre-conference workshops have been discussed and the panel agreed to meet again online a few weeks later with all attendees providing a list of suggested reviewers for the papers.