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Publication date:
2016

Document version
Peer reviewed version

Document license:
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Citation for published version (APA):
Gregersen, A. L. (2016). *Enter the disagreement matrix or “let’s talk ontology, game studies”*. Abstract from DIGRA-FDG 2016, Dundee, United Kingdom.

Enter the disagreement matrix or “let’s talk ontology, game studies”

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Keywords

Inter-disciplinarity, field, discipline, ontology, theoretical frameworks, meta-theory.

INTRODUCTION

This extended abstract is yet another attempt to grapple with the foundational issues of the study of digital games. It asks not “*What is a game?*” (Aarseth and Calleja 2015), nor “*What is in a game?*” (Zagal et. al 2007) but rather “*What types of enquiry are we performing and what are the assumptions underlying these activities?*” These questions dovetail directly with the survey of game studies reported in Quandt et. al. (2015). The central issue here is whether the field has a unitary or fragmented academic identity across disciplines – a question relevant to anyone studying games. My proposal is to recast this issue as a matrix of possible disciplinary disagreements and offer a way to proceed from the matrix.

MAPPING A FIELD AND ITS DISCIPLINES: THE MATRIX MODEL

Craig (1999) offers a seminal contribution to the field/discipline debate in communication studies by offering both a mapping procedure and a resulting map. Each discipline is defined by its answers to the question “What is communication and why study it?” and the initial output is seven different disciplines. Craig then proceeds with an elegant and simple question: How will each discipline disagree with the other discipline on this central question? The result is elegant but far from simple: A disciplinary disagreement matrix where the field of communication studies can get tangled up in no less than 7 x 7 distinct disagreements (since every discipline sees a debate from its own vantage point and has internal conflicts to boot). We could apply a similar matrix procedure to game studies: As proof of concept, the DIGRA/FDG conference tracks could serve as input. The disciplines Humanities, Social Sciences, Design, and Computer programming seem to be readily identifiable, but which discipline does “Game production” belong to? Skipping this problem, the next step is to deal with the possible disagreements. By numbers alone, a DIGRA/FDG 5 x 5 matrix would be preferable to the 11 sub-disciplines found in Quandt et. al, since the latter would yield 121 more or less distinct inter-disciplinary disagreement cells. Several points are worth noting here. First, both matrices mask considerable intra- and inter-disciplinary disagreement and agreement: Humanities and the social sciences both nurture many schools of thought, including formalist, philosophical, qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods – and we haven’t even touched design and computer sciences. Second, there are increasingly permeable boundaries between humanities, psychology, sociology, anthropology and engineering; one example would be discussions about the roles of cognition in culture (DiMaggio 1997). Finally,

Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG

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certain issues, e.g. gender, arguably cut across all these disciplines and their sub-divisions in disciplinary cells. How do we deal with this plethora of possible agreement and disagreement?

ONTOLOGICAL DECLARATION AS THE INITIAL REMEDY

One way to reduce the matrix complexity is to focus on what one could call disciplinary ontology: Which concepts and relationships (see Merton 1945) are acknowledged as real and relevant by the discipline? Such ontological inventory is the real backbone of a discipline and its practitioners. Following this, the sub-disciplines of game studies arguably all need to prioritise enquiry into and succinct communication of disciplinary ontologies in order to foster critical and constructive debate in the field as a whole. Ontology understood this way is thus not reserved for ludologists or game formalists: Instead, every scientific discipline has ontological commitments, and as game scholars of various stripes, we should be able to explicate and justify these commitments to each other. Such ontological declaration is arguably the necessary cost of entry into a healthy multi- and inter-disciplinary academic community. Not only is this necessary for crosstalk between scholars tending towards mono-disciplinarity, but much of game studies is explicitly based in more than one disciplinary ontology. We need better tools to enquire into how an analysis of game design may be committed to particular conceptions of players, how a study of player community may be conducted with specific notions of game design structure in mind, or how cognitive approaches to games and players may be wedded to specific conceptions of cognition and emotion, to give just a few examples. One way to scaffold such enquiries would be to prioritise issues of ontology within game studies *en bloc*.

It should be emphasized, however, that ontological declaration would merely be the necessary stage-setting for looking further into our agreements and disagreements, parallels, continuities and discontinuities – out of structured disagreement often comes new fruitful ideas. And that, obviously, is where the real action is.

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