

Approaching the game/Observation/Instructions

Games are designed to be played, but many are not designed to be played by beginners – implicitly requiring both a dexterity and knowledge of interface/command conventions. Taken together with technological prerequisites (computers, tablets, consoles, phones), these qualities can make games challenging object for analysis. This gives rise to a practical question, to what extent do you need to play a game in order to productively analyze it?

Numerous scholars have described gameplay as an ongoing loop:

- 1) the machine renders information,
- 2) the player interprets that information and acts upon it,
- 3) the machine reacts to the player... and the cycle continues.

In that second movement, the player judges her surroundings and, based on her prior experience, selects one of many finite actions -- taken together, these finite actions create more complicated strategies (enacting plans and whims alike). As a researcher, there is great value in directly participating with the game in this manner, as it allows you try, fail, succeed, and experiment -- discovering the options you have in a given situation (e.g. killing the guards; sneaking around them; or abandoning the mission, going home, and playing with your dog).

What are the limits of observation without play? If I (silently) observe a game, it often limits what I can discover: I can see what another player did, the strategies they employed and so forth, but this doesn't allow me to explore the other possibilities the game might offer. To the contrary, observation without play could leave me with the impression that a situation had a single solution, or that the game must be played a certain way. (Of course, if I could sit in a room with the player, ask them to try certain approaches, or ask them why they're doing something, then I'd be able to extend that experience of observation by experimenting, trying, failing, playing the game---albeit through another's hands.)

Turning the previous question on its head, what are the limits of playing without observing?

If play a game casually, I usually settle on a strategy that works; although I arrive at this strategy through direct experimentation, I do not have with any final or complete understanding of the game. In a complex game, there will always be decisions I don't make and strategies I don't employ. Consequently, I can't base my analysis of the game solely on my own, subjective, experience of casually playing that game, but need to extend that experience by purposefully exploring the game, formulating critical questions that guide my play in order to answer specific questions about what the game is like and how it is designed to shape the way players engage with it.

Your tasks are:

- 1) Identify your expectations and assumptions prior to play (no word limit):
- 2) play the game alone (if possible), learn its mechanics, and immerse yourself in its world (no word limit):
- 3) watch a stranger play (online is easiest) and see how she handles it all (no word limit);
- 4) **Bring it all together through a 1000-word research synthesis/ analysis.**

Above all, be honest about the research you conducted and proportionate with the claims that you make.

Read before playing!

Use this online tool to record your experiences with the game you've chosen. This is an exercise in guided, reflective play: it is different from the kind of gaming you might do in your free time and has more in common with how you might study a novel or movie for other classes. The online form is structured to help you organize and reflect upon your experiences, making it easier for you curate and analyze these experiences later.

In the field notes you begin: i) highlighting key commonalities and differences between what you've noted throughout your play session/s; ii) honing in on certain details about the game (a scene, a mechanic, a character) that you want to focus on in your research synthesis; and iii) identifying specific concepts and readings from our course syllabus (or outside it) that will help support your analysis (where possible).

The end result of this exercise is a set of fieldnotes (with images) from each of the three sessions, and a summative synthesis of your analytical observations from all three sessions drawn together into a critical analysis of the game. The goal of this assignment is not a review of the game, or a statement about what you liked or did not like about it: it is an empirically-driven, theoretically-grounded analysis of the game based solidly on evidence documented in your fieldnotes, including, but not limited to, how that game represents gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, and/or violence, how it connects to course readings and if and where possible, what "learning" the game depends on and/or develops.

Session 1: Before Playing | 15-30 minutes

Each of these question aims to get at a general notion, "what expectations (about this game) am I coming in with?" The goal in this reflection is not to test the accuracy of your predictions; rather, the goal is to identify and reflect upon the assumptions and biases you, as an observer, are bringing into the experience, as catalyzed by the games' promotional material, introductory screen, any other descriptive or suggestive information.

Answer the Questions

With this in mind, respond to each of the following questions:

What will I like / dislike about it?

What will I find interesting about it/boring or tedious about it?

What will I need to do in it?

What will I need to learn within it?

What will it be like / similar to (other games I have played)?

Session Fieldnotes

At the end of your fieldnotes for session one, craft one or two sentences (no more) that, for you, summarize your expectations prior to playing, and what these expectations are based on. Include one image that catalyzed and/or supported your expectations.

Image 1

Session 2: Solo Playthrough | 45 to 60 minutes

Play the game on your own: familiarize yourself with the controls, mechanics and interface; get an initial understanding of the game's narrative and its aesthetic. Your goal is to "get a feel" for what it is asking from you, in terms of: inputs, emotion, and attention.

Note: If you use outside help at any point, make a note of that. The effort here is not to do anything "correctly", but to diligently record whatever you do as you try to get a 'handle' on the game.

a) Descriptive Notes

Just write as you play -- write anything descriptive, records of objectives, hints, fragments of ideas, anything. You may elect to write as you play (i.e. pausing the game) or right after you have completed a play session. Try to get at least 60 minutes of play time.

b) Analytic Notes

After playing, consider your experience more holistically -- What problems did it present me with? What options did it give me (to address those problems)? When and how does the game invoke gender, class, race, violence in ways that might be problematic? What about learning? Does anything stand out as a 'defining' or 'unique' feature of the game?

c) Affective Notes

Playing and analyzing games are subjective activities -- as you played, you were likely: engaged, irritated, startled, sympathetic, angry, bored, etc. Identify the affective responses you had while playing, and do your best to account for the in-game circumstances that gave rise to them (i.e. where, when, intensity, etc.) Don't worry about being exhaustive, just mention what you think matters.

Session Fieldnotes

At the end of your fieldnotes for session two, craft one or two sentences (no more) that, for you, summarize your experiences of learning this new game, and what specific elements/skills/etc., based on your experience of solo play, to be the most important in getting a 'handle' on the game. Include at least one image that demonstrated this/these crucial game elements/skills/characteristics.

Image 2

Session 3: Video observation | 45 to 60 minutes

Watch an online video of your game, either via live-streaming (Twitch.tv) or conventional video (YouTube). Get a sense of how an expert plays that game: see how they understand and react to the game and how that differs from YOUR playthrough; see what it is like to watch the game not just as a viewer, but as a mass media spectator. Again, organize your account into three kinds of notes.

a) Descriptive Notes

Document what the player is doing, paying attention to, ignoring, prioritizing, but also what they are talking about (i.e. what they verbally frame as important during the playthrough). Make notes of what the player is paying attention to, prioritizing, and/or ignoring and if and how that is different from your play.

b) Analytic Notes

Review your descriptive notes and consider the problems the player encountered and the strategies/solutions that they enacted. Furthermore, consider how the player navigated/commented on issues/structures of race, gender, class, and violence. What did you notice about the game when you watched, as opposed to when you played? Hold off on making any big conclusions for now.

c) Affective Notes

What affective responses did you observe the player having while playing? What evidence did you have of their affective response/s? What did they choose to focus on? How were they different from responses and focus/foci you had? Pay specific attention to instances where you were surprised by something the player said or did. And if possible, reflect on how affective responses impacted the 'learning' or 'engagement' you think can be recognized and documented from this observed play session.

Session Fieldnotes

At the end of your fieldnotes for session three, craft one or two sentences (no more) that, for you, summarize your observations of a more skilled player playing this game. Include one image that supports your conclusions.

Image 3

The final "bridge" is to put all that together in an analytical and summative "case study" of the game that should be no more than 1000 words. Make sure you make careful and direct connections to the course readings where possible and relevant.