

Game Analysis Guidelines

This is a list of general guidelines to analyze a videogame or a specific segment of it. It can also be helpful to compare different games. This is not a template, but rather a list of aspects that can be part of your analysis. Every section relates to all the others; they are listed in an order that would facilitate building up the argument, but can be rearranged depending on the goal of your analysis. Which sections you should expand on depends on the focus of your discussion. Whether you're analyzing a whole game and its context, or your experience of playing the game, or one specific game mechanic, are all factors that will shape your analysis.

A game analysis should be a critique, rather than a review. A critique breaks down the object of study, using theoretical concepts systematically to structure and support it. Critiques are based on argumentation and supported by evidence. Reviews evaluate the quality of the game reviewed, and even though they also have to be supported by argumentation, they tend to be more subjective. The goal of a game analysis is not to establish how good or bad a game is, but highlight and rationalize the aspects that make the game worth studying and contribute to understanding videogames better. Thus, you will be expected to write a critique, which is very different from a review for a blog.

1. Before you start writing: play the game

Play the game extensively

Try to complete the game, or at least familiarize yourself with all the modes. You should master the game as much as you can. If you've played it before, play it again, to have the game fresh in your mind—replay always helps achieving new insights about the game. The time you should be playing the game varies from game to game. In your analysis, be explicit about how you played the game, if there are different options (e.g. level of difficulty, character that you used.)

Take notes while you play

It's good to keep track of things you come across in the game. What do you like? What don't you like? Is there something that you did not expect? Does a specific part of the game remind you of something else (another game, or a movie, or some other event)? Taking notes of potential examples for your paper is also a good habit. If you can have a corresponding savegame for reference, even better.

Use walkthroughs wisely

Anyone can get stuck and might need help, especially if it prevents them from getting far enough in the game (and therefore from playing it extensively). Cheat codes, watching walkthrough videos, or having a friend play for you are ways to help you know more about the game, but they should not be the predominant mode in which you experience it. If you just follow a walkthrough from the start, you will be reproducing someone else's experience of the game, not your own. It would be like reading Cliff's Notes instead of the actual book; in the end, your first paper will show that your knowledge of the game is shallow.

Using a walkthrough can also circumvent some of the problems the game may have, since people who write walkthroughs often instruct players how to avoid bugs and broken design. You should also have first-hand experience of the problems that come across while playing the game. Use walkthroughs as a way to learn more about the game, but do not let the walkthrough dictate your

experience. If you use walkthroughs or cheats, be explicit about it, and note how that may have changed your experience and knowledge of the game.

Read what other people have written about the game

In order to know more about your game, read about it: reviews, academic articles, press releases, newspaper articles, developer diaries, postmortems, etc. It will help you get an idea of what other people think about the game, its production history, and know more about the context of the game. The game box and manuals can also be sources of relevant information; if your copy of the game does not have its original box, some websites have repositories of them.

2. Types of Analysis

Once you've played the game, you should decide what you want to focus on. What makes this game worth analyzing? What are you going to discuss? The analysis is an essay, so the main argument of your analysis should be expressed as a thesis statement. For example: "The morality system in this game is usually hailed as unique and complex; however, I will prove that, in closer examination, it is merely a binary system, and does not allow for complex moral choices." Another example: "Although Ernest Adams argues that the design of Metal Gear Solid 2 is faulty because it breaks the "fourth wall", my argument is that it does not break the immersion in the game because it actually extends the space of the game into the player's space."

You probably cannot write something very long, so choose early on what aspects of the game you want to highlight. Rather than covering a lot of aspects, select one or two important ones, and analyze them in depth, using other sections of the analysis as support for your main point. Are you going to talk about the whole game, or just a few sections? Are you going to base it on your own experience or other people's? Are you going to discuss other people's takes on the game? Are you going to discuss how the game exemplifies a particular cultural stance or trend?

A brief summary of what the discussion is about should constitute the thesis statement of your analysis, and it should appear in the introduction to your game. Be clear and concise about what you will be analyzing and how.

Throughout the paper, you must apply the readings covered in class. The theory will provide you with conceptual tools to analyze the game, by applying them, or by proving that the game you are dealing with is an exception to them, or by finding an area that the theory does not account for that is exemplified in your game. Try to start with the theory and how it is relevant to the game, rather than writing an argument and then pasting in the relevant vocabulary or references. Different types of textual analysis will elaborate more on certain sections. Some analyses can expand and compare more than one aspect; however, beware of wanting to cover too much and losing focus. The following are just a few examples of different types of textual analysis depending on their focus, but you can come up with your own depending on what you want to highlight from the game. Browse the analyses in the different issues of Game Studies <http://gamestudies.org> to find a range of different academic analyses of games.

Comparative Analysis:

A game can be compared to other media, which entails elaborating on that section of the analysis. This means it is a double analysis, of both the game and the other media it is being compared to. This approach makes it necessary to define very well what the terms of the comparison are, so you can build a strong argument.

Two games can be compared to each other, which will require expanding on the specific aspects being compared (e.g. aesthetics or different elements in the formal analysis). Talking about two games in the same paper does not constitute a comparative analysis: you must select the aspects that allow the comparison. For example, comparing World of Warcraft with Passage is a big leap, since they seem to have so little in common. Choose a set of aspects that allows the comparison, either by highlighting the contrast, or by drawing similarities where there may appear to be none.

For instance, A comparative analysis can deal with how different games implement a similar fictional universe or premise (Cooking Mama vs Diner Dash; Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic vs Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire). It is important to be selective about the number of aspects being compared, since it is very easy to make it into a double analysis instead of a comparison.

Reading / Interpretation

This type of analysis understands what happens in the game as a representation of something else, e.g. Tetris as a metaphor for American consumerism, as Janet Murray argued. It can also be a symbolic reading encouraged by the game itself, such as a psychological reading of Silent Hill 2 (see Rusch in Well Played 1.0). Interpretations usually draw heavily on pre-existing interpretive theories and analytical methods, from Freudian / Jungian approaches to deconstruction. Interpretations are subjective, so the key to provide a convincing reading is to ground it on evidence, and follow a systematic approach based on pre-existing methods. You can also analyze the game from the standpoint of the theories and methods of a field, from education to sociology or film studies. Game studies is an interdisciplinary field, as you will see through the course. That does not mean that other disciplines cannot analyze games and see how they relate to their knowledge domain.

Historical analysis:

A historical analysis can deal, for example, with the production history of a game, its reception, or how it marked a specific milestone in videogame history. Historical analyses expand on the socio-historical context of the game, although depending on what historical aspect is highlighted, other sections may also have to be strengthened. The historical innovations of a game, for example, will probably require expanding on its formal qualities. For example, Drew Davison, in his analysis in Well Played 1.0 accounts for his experience as a player of World of Goo throughout his development. Given that he was part of the process, he can provide a unique perspective in his analysis.

Case study:

The "case study" format can be used as a way to prove or disprove a set of theoretical assumptions, by applying them in depth to a particular game. The game becomes the reference example of a specific theory or approach. For instance, the analysis of Ultima Underworld in Well Played 1.0 explores specific methods to integrate gameplay and storytelling. Metal Gear Solid 2 could be

approached as a case study of using self-reference and breaking the "fourth wall" as a way of making a commentary on the player's behaviour.

These are just a few examples of what you may do. For the purposes of this class, try to marry the game to the theory, and try to get an idea of what you want to say early on.

3. Contextualize

Providing a frame of reference to understand your analysis is basic to make it accessible to your reader, particularly if they are not familiar with the game. Games, like any other media artifacts, are not produced in a void. They are the product of their times: the technology available at the moment, the people who made them, or other socio-cultural trends that marked that historical moment. Unless your analysis focuses specifically on any of these areas (e.g. a historical analysis or a comparison with other media), this should be a brief section. Your contextualization should include at least three of these aspects.

Game Developer/Studio; Artists, Designers, Programmers, Writers (or whoever is relevant).

The creative team of a game is important, particularly in the case where it connects to other relevant games they worked on before or after this game. Some development studios or designers have certain trademarks, or specialize on a particular genre (e.g. Valve, Square Enix or Will Wright), so choosing one of their games can mark a specific time in the evolution of their games, which might be important to the context of your analysis.

Game genre and related games

A game genre usually has a set of established conventions behind it, such as First Person Shooters, adventure games, real-time strategy games or Role-Playing Games. Establishing the game within a genre can help determine, for instance, why it is like other games of the same type, or what is innovative about it. If the game partakes of conventions from different genres, that can also be a way of explaining what sets it apart from other games. The relations to other game genres do not have to be exclusively digital--board and card games, as well as 4 other traditional games, can be the origins of certain mechanics.

The game of your choice can relate to other games by any of the elements listed on these guidelines: developer, genre, publisher, by being released at the same time, similar mechanics, similar themes (e.g. space flight simulators), being part of a franchise (e.g. Star Wars or Mario), using similar controls, games that it has influenced or that later tried to copy it, etc.

Technological context

What platform(s) was the game developed for? It is important to note which version of the game you are playing, e.g. Assassin's Creed for the DS is a different game from the PS3 version. The technology will determine, for instance, the length of the game or whether there is an ending (think of arcade games in the early 80s, where games typically did not end). In other cases, such as the Virtual Boy or the Wii, the technology can also shape the way the way the game is played.

Socio-historical context

When was the game made? It's different to analyze a game from the 70s, when videogames were almost exclusively played in arcades, than a recent game, now that videogames start to enjoy a more general acceptance in cultural terms. Where was it released? A game released in the US in the mid 80s (after the so-called videogame crash) may not have had the same influence as a game released in Europe (where videogames were played almost exclusively in home computers).

Audience

Who is the game intended for? Games can create communities around them, at times fostered by the developers themselves. The fans of a particular game can be a phenomenon worth studying in itself, for example, as creators of content for it, as critics/reviewers, or as assistants to other players by providing walkthroughs or strategy guides. Studying the game community in depth can veer away from the textual analysis provided here, so be aware that if you study the community you may not be analyzing the game itself. It is a perfectly valid analysis, but different from the one proposed here.

Relations to other media

Is the game part of a franchise, a tie-in with a work in another medium (e.g. Lost - Via Domus, Wall-E)? Is it an adaptation of the work in another medium, or is it only using the same characters and settings? Is it inspired by a situation or premise of another medium (e.g. Dead Rising taking the zombies-in-a-mall premise of Dawn of the Dead)? Does it incorporate and re-work pre-existing stories (e.g. Too Human using Norse mythology as the basis for its story, but transposing it to a high-tech world) Does it use other works as documentation, background or inspiration (e.g. the writings of Ann Rynd as background reference to Bioshock)?

If you are analyzing a game segment, how does the segment relate to the rest of the game? What happened before and after? Are the mechanics different in this part of the game? Does this section need a different strategy from the rest of the 5 game?

4. Game Overview

It is always good to explain briefly what you do in the game to someone who has not played it or is not familiar with it. Do not always take your audience's knowledge for granted, explain the game to them, so that they are aware of how you understand it. Give your reader an idea of what gameplay is like.

No. of Players (single player/multi-player/MMO)

Can you choose the number of players? Does it have different modes depending on the number of players? If there is more than one player, do they play simultaneously or do they take turns?

Rules and goals of the game

Make a summary of the basic rules of the game, a summarized version of the instructions, as it were. If the game has an end / a win state, what is it? If it does not, it's also worth explaining whether it is an endless game, or whether there are multiple goals, or whether the player is able to

set their own goals/win state (e.g. The Sims). Does the game have different modes, where the rules change slightly?

Description of Gameplay: what do you do in the game?

Focus on the core mechanics: what are the most recurring actions in the game? You can think of this in terms of verbs: what are the main verbs of the game? For example, in Super Mario Bros. the verbs would be run, jump, pick up, slide down, stomp. In Tetris, the verbs would be rotate, drop, clear.

Spaces of the game

Where does the game take place? How does the player navigate the space? How does the game encourage exploration of the space, if at all? Are there different types of spaces, corresponding to different levels? Does the space or navigation do anything that is not possible in the real world? How does the space of the game relate to the space of the player?

Aesthetics: general gameplay experience

This section is a tricky one, since your experience will probably be different from other people's. Your skills or game knowledge affect the way you play the game. You can contrast your own gameplay with that of other players by reading walkthroughs or reviews. You can also compare how you played with the experience intended by the developers, if you find interviews or postmortems where they express that intention. Do not try to generalize your opinion--your experience is valid as long as it is qualified. Do not guess what the intentions of the game makers are from what you see in the game, you should have factual evidence, so use concrete examples.

Rules and Fiction

How is the setting presented outside and in the game? How does the game live up to it? How does it establish the fictional world of the game? How does it relate to the rules and goals of the game? If the game has a strong story component, you may summarize its premise; however, you should avoid turning your analysis into a retelling of the story of the game.

5. Formal Elements

In this section, you have to identify the different game elements that make up the game system, and establish the relationships between them.

Gameworld rules

What model is the game trying to simulate? How does the gameworld work, outside of the rules of the game? For instance, San Andreas in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas is a city where pedestrians walk on the side walk, cars run at normal speed on the road and follow traffic rules, and the day/night cycle changes every 20 minutes. This could be called a simulation of the real world, within certain limits. Other examples can refer to the difference between what is possible in the gameworld and what the player is allowed to do. For example, in the main mode of Halo characters talk to each other in cut-scenes, but the player cannot choose when to talk or what to say. What is possible or

impossible in a game is the direct result of decisions made in the design of the game, and you have to be aware of those choices.

Simulation and Levels of Abstraction

What level of abstraction is the game using? How nuanced is the simulation in the game? For example, Diner Dash simulates the strategic aspects of waitressing, where the key is to optimize your path to do the most things the least amount of time, but does not include taking down people's orders and memorized who ordered what. How complex is the simulation, depending on that level of abstraction.

Game mechanics and resulting dynamics

From the rules of the game described above, What are the main strategies? What is their range (i.e. are there just a couple of strategies or is there a wide variety)? Are there any emergent strategies that are possible but may not have been predicted by the developers? Does the game accommodate different play styles? Can the player save the game? If so, can the game be saved at any point, or does the game regulate when to save the game?

The gap between the game and the player: Player character, mediation, interface design

How does the player have agency in the gameworld? How is the information displayed on the screen? Is the interaction menu-based (as in Sim City)? Is there a player character who represents the player in the world? Is it a given character or is it customizable? Can the player character die or not? Does the player manipulate the objects directly, without a player character or avatar (e.g. in puzzle games like Bejeweled)? Can the player select different entities in the world at a time (as in real-time strategy games)? How is gameplay information conveyed through the visuals / audio?

Difficulty levels and game balancing.

Are there different difficulty levels? How is the level of difficulty increased? Is it well-balanced, i.e. the game becomes difficult at reasonable increases? What proficiency does the game expect from the player? Is it easy to pick up, difficult to master? How does the game teach you how to play it, if at all? Is there a tutorial, or does the game introduce one new element on each level?

Control schemes; control peripherals

Does the player have to type the commands of the game? Does it use the mouse/a game controller/a special peripheral? Does the game allow different ways to configure your controls? Does the game allow voice input (e.g. voice chat in an MMO, or voice controls)? How do the controls affect and shape gameplay?

Audiovisuals: visual design, sound design, music

What is the audiovisual style of the game? Does it evoke / imitate the style of other media (e.g. painting, photography, cinema, classical music)? Does it use other games as aesthetic reference (e.g. retro games)? What is the color scheme? How do these audiovisual elements contribute to the fiction of the game? How do they contribute to the mood of the game?

Progression vs Emergence

Does the game force the player to follow a specific sequence? How does the game guide the player to the correct action? Are there multiple paths? Are there emergent behaviors, or is there room for emergent gameplay? How does the game encourage players to experiment with it?

Mods / Modes / Cheats / Hacks

You may be interested in surveying different gameplay modes, that may not be the standard for most players, such as user-developed levels, or different modes of the game (such as the no-fail mode of *Rock Band 2*, or the crash mode of *Burnout*, or the multiplayer modes of *Diablo 2*). Cheats and game hacks have a great potential as texts to analyze, since they can become commentaries on the original game and reveal hidden or non-obvious aspects of the game.

6. Round up your discussion

Remember to finish off the paper with a conclusion. Reiterate the main points of your paper, what you want your reader to remember, the core of your paper in brief. This is an opportunity to ratify your thesis statement, re-stating it and summarizing how your evidence supports it. A conclusion can also address one of the following points, based on your discussion.

Why is this game relevant to the study of games? –

What is innovative about game? Can it be applied to other games?

Open up to further questions that need addressing, in videogame theory, game design, more game analysis, etc.

Notes:

A couple of good example of game analysis of the type encouraged here are
<http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/montfort>

Juul, Jesper. "A Certain Level of Abstraction." *Situated Play: DiGRA 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo, 2007. <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/acertainlevel>

Hunicke et al. MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research
<http://www.cs.northwestern.edu/~hunicke/MDA.pdf>