

Production pipelines as Actor-Networks: Rethinking the game studio as a technological platform

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Keywords

Production Studies, Actor-Network-Theory, Development Pipelines, Creative Industries

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper answers a call for the urgent need of a production studies approach in game studies, put forth at a DiGRA 2016 panel (J. Banks et al. 2016), and continues a growing interest in what has been termed a ‘material turn’ in game studies research (Apperley and Jayeman, 2012). In doing so it aims to converge two strands of the DiGRA 2018 conference: by treating the industrial production context in which games are made (the context strand) as an example of a technological platform (the platform strand), I seek to address some of the ways in which material production realities, industry structures and their embedded values, impinge upon development. This is in line with the latest developments in the Platform Studies series, where Dominic Arsenault (2017) argues for an expansion of the term ‘platform’ to account for structures such as publicity regimes and company culture affording and constraining the types of game that can be made every bit as much as the programming logic of game engines or the technological architecture of game consoles (Montfort and Bogost 2009).

Utilising a production cultures methodology based on the ethnographic field work of John Caldwell (2008) and Sherry Ortner (2009), developed within film studies but recently applied to the games industry by Casey O’Donnell (2014), the paper draws on case studies and interviews with designers in both triple A and independent game production sectors to illustrate not only how these two seemingly divergent sectors operate, but how they can crucially be seen as interdependent, a condition that writers such as Mark Banks (2007) and David Hesmondhalgh (2013) have noted in other creative industries. The particular focus will be on *Alien Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014) and *Everybody’s Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015).

Complementing this data, I use Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), adopted from the sociological study of technology spear-headed by Bruno Latour (2005), to explore how the metaphor of the development pipeline, a crucial structuring entity to any game studio (O’Donnell 2014: 72), can be productively rethought as an Actor-Network. In so doing I make a case for the relevance of ANT to the study of game industry practices. According

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2018

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to Latour a network is an entity made up of active mediators that have a transformative effect on the data flowing through them, rather than intermediaries that merely pass inputs on without affecting them (Latour 2005). The pipeline incorporates both human and technological mediators, through which the traces of ideas and assets can be followed and observed as they flow into the text, as well as the organisational systems and apparatus that underpin the pipeline. Following Latour such apparatus, which include third party engines and middleware solutions as well as management paradigms like Lean (Womack, Jones, and Roos 2007), act as “inscription devices” (Latour and Woolgar 1986), compiling sometimes decades of iteration and residual code into sealed black boxes. Such black boxes carry the assumptions and value systems of their formation, and inevitably have an influence upon the production at hand, reinforcing the notion of the studio as a platform.

The study of production cultures is a new and fruitful area in game studies that provides a tool set for the critically engaged analysis of industry, simultaneously challenging the overt formalism of prevailing ludological and narratological approaches; the potential technological determinism of code and platform studies; and finally avoiding a simplistic auteur led analysis of the industry common in journalistic insights into production contexts. Although some writers (Joseph 2013; Taylor 2009) have already taken up the assemblage theory developed by Deleuze and Guattari (2013; Delanda 2016), outside of O'Donnell's writing Latour has largely been ignored, even though I would argue his focus on technoscientific structures is more relevant to game studios since they operate very much like the laboratories he explores (Latour and Woolgar 1986). Meanings and ideas circulate within material industrial practices, and, as the development of the independent scene has demonstrated in recent years, can modify those practices in turn. Using the tools provided by ANT the traces these transformations leave will be analysed and placed within wider discourses of reception and promotion that act as a vital interface between industry and consumer (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003), as well as giving a deeper understanding of the game text as a complex cultural artefact.

BIO

Dean Bowman is a PhD candidate studying the function of narrative in videogames within production contexts at the University of East Anglia. He also teaches games studies and cultural studies at Norwich University of the Arts, and edits for *Intensities: Journal of Cult Media*. He is an avid board game player and has a forthcoming book chapter in the edited collection *Rerolling Board Games* from McFarland Press and on the gamer persona of Jason Statham from Manchester University Press.

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