In defence of the n00b:

Game analysis, ludic literacy and the novice player.

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we share our experiences of teaching game (textual) analysis to classrooms with a mix of students considered expert players and large groups of novices. Rather than considering novice play as a problem to overcome, we consider the value of the novice point of view. We argue for embracing novice play within a classroom as a worthwhile, even essential, element of understanding games and play.

Within the field of game studies, the novice player has a difficult position. The novice is often seen as a methodological challenge to overcome in reaching a competent degree of "ludoliteracy" (Zagal 2010). In order for us to make any sound claims about our research subjects, we need to be "well-played" (as in "well-read") and we need to play well (Davidson 2009, 1). In many cases, it is also assumed game analysis is for students aiming for a career in games. As Bizzochi and Tanenbaum for instance point out in relation to close reading techniques, such in-depth approaches "reveal the poetics of the emergent medium to the students who will soon become the scholars and lead practitioners of the maturing medium" (2011, 312). However, as we've argued before ([anonymous]), such levels of mastery for a proper understanding of games is often difficult to achieve within an educational program not entirely dedicated to game studies/design - as is our case. As Zagal rightfully notes, novice players face issues of accessibility to the medium as well as "assumptions of prior gameplay experience on the part of course instructors" (2010, 58). Giving heed to Zagal's call for further research on dealing with expert and novice players, we explore the value of novice play to question and critique the "hegemony of play" in our classroom, the industry (Fron et al., 2007) and our academic field (Vossen 2018).

MAKING SENSE OF/WITH THE NOVICE

We argue for approaching the novice play experience not through the aforementioned often highly systematic approach, but rather as a form of explorative play, where experimentation and discovery, as well as confusion and frustration, are key within the interpretative process. From a methodological perspective, novice play can even be framed as an unorthodox, even transgressive form of play. As Kücklich points out in relation to play forms which deviate from the norm, they allow us to "reflect upon our presuppositions that we bring to games (...) and enable us to identify blind spots in our research perspectives" (2007, 357). By assuming a certain expertise, we are ignoring how many non-expert players actually experience games. In his "beginner's guide" on textual analysis from a post-structuralist cultural studies perspective, McKee even goes as far as to see close reading in media studies as "the province of academics and fans", which can lie far from the sense-making practices of people in general (2003, 60). From this perspective, non-expert perspectives might just lie closer to how games are experienced and made sense of than our often expertise-based/focused foundations.

In the classroom, explorative novice play can lead to a wider array of readings of a game, which can also question or refocus the readings of expert players after group discussion, opening the dialogic space of meaning making. We, for instance, discuss novice perspectives in relation to alternative approaches like surface reading (cf. Best and Marcus 2009), paratextual analysis (cf. Gray 2010), or analyses of metagaming (cf. Boluk and Lemieux 2017), which often focus more on the relation between text and context. Within a classroom setting, these can and should be considered *complementary,* and discussed *in relation to* more in-depth close-readings - the methodologic value lies, we argue, within this dialectic.

TOWARDS INCLUSIVE LUDIC LITERACIES

Emphasizing the value of novice perspectives also makes for a much more inclusive and productive classroom, research field, and broader socio-cultural discussions around games. Following Burke's (1969, 49-65) thoughts on identification, we argue that embracing these novice perspectives turns our classroom rhetoric away from the purely "agonistic" (trying to persuade students of the "right way" to play and/or understand games) to an alignment of perspectives and mutual understanding. As Hung has shown (2009), aside from learning from one another and further shaping and refining our understanding of gameplay actions, communicating situated meaning-making practices is important to make sure those with different skill levels don't become demotivated and abandon the discussion, and thereby the learning process, altogether.

When it comes to the inclusivity of our field, Vossen (2018) has also made it painfully clear how gendered expectations around gaming capital seep into the culture of game studies. We should aim to prevent this with the novice too. Removing the normativity in the distinction between expert and novice play and embracing the value of both, goes some way towards removing the barriers of our field for player-scholars who are, due to biases, not considered to have the right level of ludoliteracy, and/or do not necessarily have the opportunity, access, or the aim to attain that level.

To summarize, a more inclusive approach where novice perspectives are welcomed next to expert ones, opens up ludic literacies (and how and where to teach them) - which often have game mastery, repertoire knowledge and a deep understanding of game design as their goals - towards literacies that aim for a broader approach to meaning-making within and around games. Here, we focus specifically on game analysis as a classroom exercise, but the approach itself fits within a more general call within game studies to focus on a broader set of phenomena than just the traditional object of the game to "lower the perceived barrier for newcomers who do not see themselves as gamers or game scholars" (Gekker 2021, 79). It reminds us to step away from - or at

least be cautious for - a disciplinary stance of "l2p n00b" when it comes to ludic literacy and builds a groundwork for dealing with students of media and culture - independent of career ambitions - to understand larger processes and phenomena of ludification in culture and society.

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