

Protocolar Power and the Texts of Game Cultures

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In this theory project I argue that the concept of protocol is central in textual analyses of player communities. I understand protocol narrowly, as *texts of letters or logograms that prescribe behaviour*. Such an emphasis on textuality is especially useful in distinguishing written from unwritten rules, where written rules become signified in reproducible texts but interpreting unwritten rules involves an appeal to the unreproducible.

One notion of protocol has already been explicated by Alexander Galloway in his book of the same title (Galloway 2004), as a starting point for his *Allegories of Control* trilogy (Galloway 2012) and recent work on the history of computation (Galloway 2021). However, Galloway uses the term to open a wide-ranging exploration of digital cybernetics, an exploration that moves away from colloquial definitions, making speed bumps into an example of protocol, where speed limits are not (Galloway 2004, 241). Protocol, there, refers to devices of control within a network society, as a historical period distinguished from the preceding control society and disciplinary society.

Here however, I argue that game studies benefit from a category for rules encoded literally in text, and that the best word for this category is *protocol*. A protocol¹ can be defined as a text that governs the actions of a body, a body that may, as in Galloway's account, include any combination of software, machines, and human agents. This theory may seem prescriptive, demanding an ignorance of the non-literal, or an artificial privileging of letters. However, I argue that special attention to textualized rules is rather descriptive, reflecting the extant centrality of text as the medium of computing code, community guidelines, and peer-reviewed academic analyses—all “Books upon Books” (Montaigne [1580] 1743, 342), a corpus of artefacts bound within one medium. The defining feature of text, here, is its composition from reproducible symbols whose meaning is digital, invariant relative to continuous variance in parameters made decorative, like calligraphy or kerning. Text is a technique for high-fidelity replication, protocol perpetually attempts to prescribe culture, and the discourse of protocol is already a convergence and reduction of cultures for the sake of fidelity.

In contrast, unwritten rules can never become fully written. Pierre Bourdieu famously theorized that rules are strategies, for achieving distinction and accruing capital (Bourdieu 1979), and strategies are inherently misrecognized or misknown (*méconnues*) by their users and therefore not fully explicated (Bourdieu and Passeron 1970, 11). So participation in the unwritten is subject to special ethics and strategies of

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obfuscation, whereas participation in the textual is another special ethic, one privileged in game studies as in other scholarly areas. At every moment, the relationship between the finite corpus of a set of protocols and the ephemeral diversity of player behavior is the zone of procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007, ix), a capacity of protocols to inculcate transferrable habits, as shown most spectacularly when player communities migrate between protocol sets, transferring values and images beyond underlying protocol structures (see Pearce and Artemesia 2009). A more thorough attention to literal protocol stands to clarify ancient and irresolvable tensions between protocol and cultural value—between the letter and spirit of the law—as protocols inculcate habits that conflict with protocol.

This description also suggests that collections of protocol like the internet protocol stack (Frystyk 1994) extend beyond machine-machine texts into the protocols of human users. A roleplay community that writes numerous protocols for itself, and defines strata of participants in its protocols (e.g., Horrigan 2022), adds layers of criteria for participation such that the position of a participant in a hierarchical online community may be measured by the layers of protocol, machine-to-machine, human-to-human, and human-to-machine, on which their participation is contingent. This notion is partially consistent with Galloway’s argument that protocols control decentralized societies, but can alternately support an argument that decentralization was a short-lived period in which old bureaucracy recouped new technology.

ENDNOTES

1. Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) traces the term’s etyma to the Greek *proto-* (*πρωτο-*), “first,” and *colla* (*κόλλα*) “glue,” referring to the “first leaf of a papyrus roll.”

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