

Discourse Analysis of Game Mechanics: A Methodological Proposition

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ABSTRACT

This extended abstract proposes the method of Discourse Analysis of Game Mechanics to identify discourses embedded in digital game mechanics. In this approach, mechanics are understood as defining players' ideal actions, while discourse is framed as a communicative event that links language and action. Examining game mechanics methodologically highlights that they are designed, developed, and implemented within specific contexts and for particular purposes. The method is analytical, descriptive, and qualitative, with a focus on the semantics of action through the mechanics-action-verb triad. The procedure is organized into three stages: pre-analysis, analysis, and results.

Keywords

discourse analysis, game mechanics, method, digital games.

INTRODUCTION

Focused on the relationship between game mechanics and discourse, this article proposes a method to analytically and qualitatively identify the types of discourses embedded in game mechanics. By considering the intrinsic connection between language and action, we argue that analyzing mechanics allows access to the semantics of action and reveals possible meanings within their discourses.

Approaching game mechanics methodologically reminds us that they are designed, developed, and implemented within specific contexts and purposes. According to Bogost (2006), even when tacit, game designers' intentions are embedded in the system and manifest through unit operations, such as rules that structure players' activity. These operations establish complex relationships between the game, the player, the artifact, and its worlds.

For Bogost (2007), who views games as both representational and simulative, there is a persistent tension between the player's subjectivity and the system's programmed rules. The scholar extends this concept to procedural rhetoric, where unit operations serve as procedures that communicate persuasive arguments to the player. While players may respond in ways that reinforce the game's arguments, the meaning of gameplay is not confined to the designer's intent. Gameplay opens up polysemic and symbolic interpretations, even as core mechanics impose an ideal way of playing—a discourse that persists despite glitches, bugs, or player-driven modifications.

ACTION AND MECHANIC

To analyze actions, we consider three key aspects of analytical philosophy: intention, motive, and agent (Davidson, 2001; Anscombe, 2000; Von Wright, 1963). Actions can be described using questions such as: What is being done? Why? How? With what intention? And by whom? (Ricoeur, 1969, 1991, 1992). In game studies, actions are shaped by four agent perspectives: a) the game designer, b) the ideal player, c) the avatar, and d) the real player.

Within games, actions are defined by patterns of activity executed to achieve specific goals and alter the game's initial state (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Sicart, 2008; Hofmann, 2018). The literature presents various theoretical perspectives on game mechanics (Hunicke et al., 2004; Lundgren & Björk, 2003; Sicart, 2008; Mosca, 2011; Niedenthal, 2009). For this analysis, the concept of mechanics as programmed units of action (Järvinen, 2008) aligns with our approach.

Mechanics can be described as verbs of action— for example, move, collect, negotiate, jump, stop, or choose. These verbs articulate the actions required of players, connecting mechanics to specific in-game goals and objectives. As Järvinen (2008) argues, the semantic nature of mechanics emerges through the actions they prescribe. Observing mechanics as verbal actions allows us to identify their underlying statements, exposing the discourses they communicate.

METHOD STAGES

Our proposed methodology, Discourse Analysis of Game Mechanics, explores the articulation between language and action— a connection central to pragmatic discourse analysis (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). The method is qualitative and descriptive, emphasizing the semantics of action (Ricoeur, 1991) to uncover the discursive potential of mechanics—that is, to focus on what the game communicates through its own structure. It is divided into three stages: pre-analysis, analysis, and results.

Pre-Analytical Stage

The first step is to select the game for analysis. Even if the analyst is familiar with it, playing the game is crucial for recording observations about formal elements, mechanics, and changes in game states. Key tasks include a) listing the game's mechanics and goals, b) identifying actions associated with these mechanics, c) describing actions using verbs (e.g., to jump, to negotiate, to move), and d) identifying components directly or indirectly tied to mechanics.

The guiding questions for the first stage are: a) What are the game's mechanics? b) When is a specific mechanic available? c) What actions are associated with the mechanics? d) What verbs best describe these actions? e) Which components directly or indirectly interact with the mechanics?

Analytical Stage

In this stage, relationships between mechanics, elements, and game states are systematically analyzed to derive statements— sentences that represent specific moments or actions within the game. The focus is on action semantics, guided by the

following questions: a) What is being done? b) Why is it being done? c) How is it done? d) With what intention? and e) Who is performing the action?

The answers to these questions reveal the purpose, method, and agency behind the actions, forming the basis for statements about the mechanics.

Results Stage

Based on the results obtained in the previous two stages, this step aims to outline what the statements derived from the analyzed mechanics reveal. The discourses of the mechanics emerge through statements tied to events observed within the game. By applying action semantics, we uncover the meanings embedded in the mechanics. The significance of the mechanics materializes within the discourse that surrounds them. It is crucial to identify the dynamics driven by these mechanics within the context of the game, examining their symbolic functions and aesthetic-affective potential.

CONCLUSION

The path taken in this article aimed to contextualize the methodological proposal of Discourse Analysis of Game Mechanics, grounded in action theory and the semantics of action. This qualitative, descriptive method seeks to aid in understanding the meanings and senses embedded within a game's mechanics.

Examining the discursivity of mechanics serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it helps identify the intentions of game designers and developers behind the choices implemented in the game, thereby introducing the concept of the ideal player. On the other hand, it provides a detailed description of the statements related to existing mechanics and the verbs that shape their actions. The semantics of action guides us in uncovering the meanings behind the game's internal discourses, which can be further analyzed for their multiple interpretations and layers of meaning.

Finally, it is important to note that the stages of this methodological proposal are not entirely fixed; they can be adapted based on the specific needs of the game under analysis. Furthermore, the method allows the incorporation of additional elements during the analysis— for example, examining relationships between mechanics and the game's narrative, exploring connections between mechanics and game genres, or expanding the scope to compare the discourses of mechanics across multiple games.

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