The Affinity Space of *Heavy Rain*: An Analysis of a Critical Video Game Review versus a Player's Experience

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Abstract

Critics' views of games often leave out foundational elements of player experiences and isolate the world of gaming by subliminally impacting how people interact with video games. This project aims to underline the players' experiences being "left out" by critics and analyze the impact a player's perspective has on how they acknowledge and play video games. Focusing on the game Heavy Rain *and using academic works from Zagal and Gee, as well as Burke's pentad, this project analyzes Neil Bolt's critical review of the game in comparison to my experience as a player in order to compare the patterns and glaring differences within these affinity spaces. This project seeks to demonstrate genre conventions used by video game critics that sway what or how individuals play and how my experience as a player indicates the gap between critic and player spaces in the overall video game affinity space.*

Introduction

Video games and their mainstream critiques are contemporary topics that are not often taken seriously in the academic world. More specifically, studies on video games and their critiques often glance over the large issues with critics' views of games: they frequently leave out fundamental pieces of player experiences and alienate gamers by subconsciously impacting how people think about/play video games. One such example of this can be seen with the game *Heavy Rain*. Developed by Quantic Dream and originally released for the PlayStation 3 in 2010, the game was regarded as one of the first ground-breaking story-driven video games of its time that helped to shape the way narrative storytelling in games operates. After fifteen years and a re-release on PlayStation 4 (2016) and Steam (2019), critics are much less astounded by the game. While perusing the reviews, I noticed that many failed to consider the player and discussed the game mechanics/story in negatively persuasive ways. With this project, I aimed to highlight the players' experiences being "left out" by critics and analyze the critical impact a player's perspective has on how they understand and play video games. By doing this, my analysis extends the discussion on and broad applicability of affinity spaces

(environments where individuals share a common interest or experience) to better understand the situatedness of video games, as well as highlight where these spaces overlap and impact us subconsciously.

Method

My method for this project stemmed from my unique perspective as a player with an English major background and how that significantly impacted my experience playing *Heavy Rain*, differing from how many critics approached it themselves. Modern game reviews are a predictable genre and often fall into overlapping discussions on gameplay, media/game contexts, and gaming systems, commonly disregarding individual gaming experiences in order to be more generic and professional (Zagal et al., 2009). To compare my experience to a critical review, I used Kenneth Burke's pentad (a tool for point of view analysis in dramatism that includes agent, act, scene, purpose, and agency), ultimately deciding that applying agent as the unit of analysis would be the most effective approach because who the player is impacts all other elements of the experiences (Foss, 2004). Using these academic approaches to structure my analysis, I compared my unique perspective as an English major player to the game critic's, drawing on James Paul Gee's (2017) study around affinity spaces in video games and the idea that players are an affinity space in the overall gaming space.

Analysis

For my analysis, I chose to examine and compare my experience to Neil Bolt's (2019) review of *Heavy Rain*, published on *Bloody Disgusting*. As a seasoned game reviewer with a horror background, Bolt approached his review from the critic affinity space, focusing more on the overall experience/pieces of the game rather than the details. Throughout his review, he praises the game for its nostalgic charm while also ridiculing it for numerous flaws (game mechanics), particularly with the characters/plot (negative story). He provides a brief overview of each character's role in the game and how, to him, each seemed to fall flat, lack clarity, and make the overarching story messy (Bolt, 2019, July 29). His "highest" praises went to the visuals and soundtrack of the game due to their nostalgic and gritty aesthetic (media/game contexts), leading him to indicate that the game is worth experiencing if one can look past its unfocused plot and lackluster characters (negative story) (Bolt, 2019, July 29). By having his review rooted in the critic affinity space, Bolt's voice carries a more substantial weight in the gaming world and adds to the lack of unique perspectives being highlighted in game reviews, as well as focuses less on the experience of playing the game and more on a generic overview and rating.

Compared to Bolt's review, my approach to and experience with *Heavy Rain* was glaringly different because I approached the game from an everyday player affinity space with the unique perspective of an English major background. When playing the game, I focused on character development, dynamics, and story structure (narrative), gearing my choices during my playthrough around developing each character based on what I wanted each one to become or accomplish (play experience). My overall view of the game centered around the subtle nuances and foreshadowing within the story (narrative), as well as the overall dynamics of the characters throughout, instead of the gameplay structure or overarching plot (play experience of narrative). I was more "ignorant" of the logical loopholes and messiness of the plot because I focused on the experience of the narrative rather than the believability (player experience). Unlike Bolt, my experience and view of the game

carry less weight in the gaming affinity space yet express more of the actual gaming world and individualized experience games provide by highlighting my distinctive perspective and how it allowed me to embody and make choices for each character while playing.

Discussion of Findings

Based on my analysis, it became quite clear that video game critics utilize genre conventions within the gaming affinity space to sway what or how people play by specifically targeting basic overview categories such as gameplay, media contexts, and aesthetics in their reviews. This, in turn, underlined how my individual experience as a player demonstrated the blatant gap between critic and player affinity spaces for not only the *Heavy Rain* space but the entire video game affinity space as a whole.

References

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