

Oppositional Play

Gathering Negative Evidence for Computer Game Values

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ABSTRACT

Computer games constantly promote particular values to be adopted by their players during gameplay, but there has been little research into how this takes place. Understanding value promotion in computer games is of importance for a variety of reasons, ranging from game design to criticism. This paper presents an initial method for assessing value promotion in computer games by examining what happens when we play against the promoted values, using the semiotic square to generate oppositional playings. By analysing computer games in this way we are able to gather negative evidence for the values promoted and to examine how games do or do not facilitate oppositional play.

Keywords

computer game, value, interactivity, semiotics

1. INTRODUCTION

Computer games are almost certainly the most popular type of software in existence today. They are played by large numbers of people, in many countries, and generate almost unbelievable amounts of money for their successful producers. In 2004, game sales in the United States topped seven billion dollars, indicating that vast numbers of people play computer games [7]. With this huge audience comes a great deal of cultural influence, however, and computer games must, therefore, be closely examined.

Furthermore, computer games are increasingly being used for more than “just” entertainment. Software such as *Haz-Mat*, a training simulation for specialist firefighters based on videogame technology [4], and the New Zealand-based *Hubba Hubba Challenge* which aims to teach teens to practise safe sex via a game-like simulation [19], is continuing to demonstrate that computer games can be leveraged for serious purposes. Additionally, massively multiplayer online

games are now used by some players to make considerable amounts of money. Norrath, the world of *EverQuest*, has been estimated by one researcher to have the 77th largest economy in the *real* world [5].

Despite the existence of these more serious uses, computer games remain better known for their portrayal of violence and other types of behaviour that carry negative connotations in the real world. Of particular concern to some is the idea that computer games desensitise their players to such behaviour, or even drive them to it [25].

Whether it is through points totals, narrative events, the possibilities for action, or any of a multitude of other means, playing a computer game always involves being exposed to particular values. Understanding how computer games promote and assume values, and how their players react to this, is of key importance both from the technical standpoint of game design, and from a more general cultural perspective made obligatory by the far-reaching nature of games.

This paper provides an initial tool for the study of values in computer games based on value theory, narrative semiotics, and considerations of the user-interface. First, we provide background information to support the assertion that value is already considered of importance in game research, but that it is rarely directly addressed. We then outline how value theory applies straightforwardly to the values present in games. With this base understanding in place, we introduce the semiotic square as an analytic tool specifically aimed at illuminating oppositions between concepts. The “oppositional play” approach emerges directly from this and is discussed along with several examples showing how placing values on the semiotic square generates revealing playings of computer games. These playings are then demonstrated to provide negative evidence that strengthens claims concerning the values promoted by a game and also to help explore the limits of interactivity in the gameplay. We conclude the paper by discussing further applications of this approach along with more general directions possible in the study of value in computer game play.

2. BACKGROUND

The concept of value is ever-present in computer game research. The area of game studies, or ludology, which attempts, among other things, to provide *definitions* of the

concept “game” is a good example of this. Almost all definitions involve some acknowledgement of the centrality of value, from the “disequilibrium outcome” required by Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith in *The Study of Games* [1], to Jesper Juul’s explicit statement that “the different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values” [14]. When the concept of value does not appear directly in a definition, it is almost certainly being assumed.

Despite value’s fundamental importance, there is a lack of research that specifically examines the concept and its implications. Research into the motivations of the players of games such as Nick Yee’s *Daedalus Project* [26] is a rare example of explicit investigation of the role of values in gameplay. Richard Bartle’s classic paper *Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs* provides a similar value-oriented discussion of players [3], but this type of value-centric work is infrequent and, as can be seen, focuses more on the values players are motivated by, rather than those presented by the game itself. Most research, instead, tends to include value obliquely in discussions such as the role of narrative [13] or simulation [8] which implicitly involve considerations of value in games.

The place to begin when exploring the concept of value is value theory, or axiology. Milton Rokeach, a value theorist whose work remains one of the most respected attempts to tackle the concept, defines value as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” [23, p.5]. Using this definition of value, we can make considerable progress in developing an understanding of its role in gameplay.

The definition allows the identification of two distinct forms of values: those that concern modes of behaviour are known as *instrumental*, and those that concern end-states are known as *terminal* [23, p.7]. In fact, as indicated by Shalom Schwartz and others, this distinction exists more in theory than in practise because it is possible to phrase one in terms of the other: a mode of conduct is effectively valued because of its outcomes [24]. The crucial point to take away, then, is that values inform our behaviour: the actions we choose to take. Furthermore, value theorists working within disciplines such as sociology and psychology have made progress in identifying sets of basic human values including those such as SOCIAL RECOGNITION and WEALTH¹ [24], or more general value-oriented typologies such as the classic individualist/collectivist distinction of Geert Hofstede [12]. These typologies of value allow us to begin to understand what *kinds* of things constitute a value, and which values seem to be universally acknowledged by humans.

Another key point raised in Rokeach’s definition of value is that a value is a *belief*. When considering computer games this means that it is the *players* of games who hold values, rather than the games themselves. It is, however, desirable to be able to speak of values being “in” games in some sense, and so some clarifying terminology is in order. We suggest that players of games *subscribe* to values, or believe them, while the game itself may either explicitly or implicitly *pro-*

¹Names for values appear in small-caps to make them more visible in the text.

mote particular values as being desirable in that game. The additional concept of values that are *assumed* by games is also important. Thus, if we consider a simple game such as *Tetris*, we can suggest that the game promotes a value of CLEANLINESS by assigning point values to the activity of clearing space on the screen: the more blocks you tidy away, the higher your score. This assumes, of course, that points are of value to a player, presumably through their relationship to basic human values such as WEALTH and ACHIEVEMENT. In playing *Tetris* the expectation is that the player will subscribe to these values, thus believing that modes of conduct such as “fitting blocks neatly into gaps” are preferable. This is the basic mechanism of value in games: promotion and assumption followed, generally, by subscription.

Simply being aware that values exist and are promoted in computer games is not sufficient for useful analysis, however. Rather, tools are needed to reveal the workings of value better. A clue to one such tool can be found, again, in Rokeach’s definition of value: “A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an *opposite* or *converse* mode of conduct or end-state of existence” [23, p.5, emphasis added]. In the definition, Rokeach explicitly states that values involve the comparison of a mode of behaviour or end-state with its *opposite*. This suggests that structuralist thinking is a place to seek tools for analysis.

A tenet of structuralism is that the meaning of concepts derives from their *differences* or *oppositions* to other concepts in the same system [11]. This thinking is based around *binary* oppositions, however, and is somewhat limited because of this. Extending on the idea of opposition from a narrative semiotics standpoint, Algirdas Greimas developed the analytic tool known as the semiotic square [10]. The square allows analysis of a chosen concept by explicitly considering the key concepts which are defined in opposition to it: the contrary, and the two ensuing negations. As an example, consider the semiotic square in figure 1 in which the concept of “success” is opposed directly by the contrary concept of “failure.” The square also provides two further ideas which are the negations of the above two concepts: “not-success” and “not-failure.” The point here is that there can be a distinction between not succeeding and actual failure: if we do not score as high as we would like in a test we have not succeeded by our definition, but this does not automatically mean we have failed. The square aids in moving away from completely binary understandings of concepts and thus helps to more deeply understand what a concept such as “success” actually *means*. The semiotic square has proved a popular and useful tool in the analysis of film [15], and even in technology domains such as augmented reality [20].

Given that computer games are exemplars of what semioticians call “sign systems,” it is clear that semiotic approaches to their study are in order. Such work would focus especially on the user-interface, which is the hub of the transfer of signs between the computer game and player in both directions. Despite this neat fit between semiotics and computer game research, little work has actually been attempted. Only David Myers has explored the possibilities of semiotics in game studies deeply, culminating in his book *The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis*

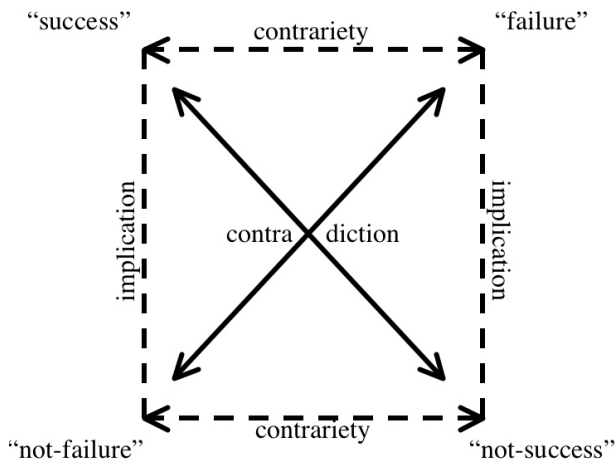


Figure 1: A semiotic square on the concept of “success.”

[18]. Myers has also performed some work with the semiotic square, using it to model the underlying mechanics of games [17]. Others, such as Ted Friedman [9] and Steven Poole [21], have used semiotics with some success, but the area remains under-developed.

In the following section, we present a tool for analysing value in computer games according to the semiotic square of Greimas. We suggest that it allows for much deeper consideration of the values in play, and also provides an initial systematising of that consideration.

3. OPPOSITIONAL PLAY ANALYSIS

The previous discussion implies that values can be placed on the semiotic square. Thus, as well as analysing the concept of “success” with the square, we can also use it to assess the meanings of values such as BENEVOLENCE or ACHIEVEMENT.

In order to demonstrate how this works we use the example of the popular game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* [22]. One of the central values of the game would seem to be that of CRIMINALITY, which is interestingly in conflict with certain of the basic human values identified by Schwartz such as BENEVOLENCE and especially SOCIAL JUSTICE [24]. In order to better understand how the value of CRIMINALITY is promoted in *San Andreas*, we place the concept on a semiotic square, as in figure 2. This allows us to consider three opposing values: LAW ENFORCEMENT, the contrary to CRIMINALITY, concerns attempts to uphold the law in the world of *San Andreas*; NOT-CRIMINALITY suggests the negation of a criminal: a law-abiding citizen of the city; finally, NOT-LAW ENFORCEMENT involves a passive attitude to matters of law, neither enforcing it, nor attempting to break it. These three values illuminate aspects of the ways CRIMINALITY is valued that might not have been immediately apparent by bringing opposing concepts to the fore.

Simply placing the value on the square and discovering the three oppositional values is not of immediate use, however, and is a rather static means of analysis. In order to fully investigate the values presented by the square it is important to see that, just as the value of CRIMINALITY is a guiding

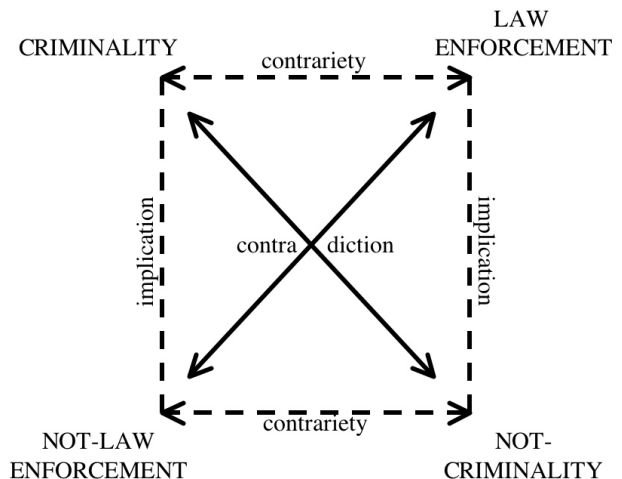


Figure 2: A semiotic square on CRIMINALITY from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*

factor in the play of *San Andreas*, so too might be the other values identified on the square. This leads to *oppositional play*: playing a computer game by opposing what are perceived as its centrally promoted values.

The reason for doing this is twofold. First, by playing a game in opposition to its values we gather negative evidence for its promotion of those values insofar as the game *resists* alternative playings. Furthermore, playing a game according to oppositional values allows us a deeper insight into the *interactivity* of the game: if one *can* play according to other values, this suggests the game accounts for multiple approaches to interaction. In today’s game industry, which promotes highly permissive gameworlds, the ability to subscribe to various values in a game is highly desirable, and this method is a means of investigating this permissiveness or interactivity quite specifically.

The approach is best demonstrated by considering what happens when we play *San Andreas* according to the values identified above and shown in figure 2. Of central importance in this analysis is the consideration of the user-interface, and exactly what *can* be done in the game from a technical standpoint: what are the actions available. It is through these actions that we can express our values in the world, in keeping with the concept of *instrumental* value. In *San Andreas* the available actions are more or less reducible to movement of various kinds, attacking other people, and stealing vehicles. There are further opportunities for action, such as playing pool or buying clothes, but the above represent the basic capacity for interaction.

When performing such an analysis it is perhaps best to start with the positive approach of examining how the game functions according to the value we have identified. We can then proceed from this to the oppositional playings. Acting according to a value of CRIMINALITY in *San Andreas* is very straightforward and is instinctively the favoured mode of playing. From the fact that a single button (the triangle button) allows us to steal the nearest car, to the missions which involve carrying out criminal behaviours such as theft, mur-

der, and gang-war, everything about *San Andreas* appears to push us toward subscribing to this particular value. The back-story of the game tells us that our avatar, Carl, is already a convicted criminal, and Carl's family, especially his brother, encourage him to restart that lifestyle as soon as he returns home. Statistics such as "number of gang members killed" and "helicopters destroyed" validate our criminal actions by quantifying them.

The argument put forward in this paper, however, is that of equal interest is to ask what happens when we pursue values that are in opposition to the dominant values. Therefore, we now present the results of playing according to the three oppositional values identified above on the semiotic square.

LAW ENFORCEMENT in the world of *San Andreas* does initially seem to be a possible value to subscribe to. After all, we can drive down the streets in a police car looking for criminals in an apparent complete contradiction of the assumed underlying value of CRIMINALITY. All is not, however, as it seems. The first clue, perhaps, is that to get to this position of hunting down criminals and enforcing the law we must first *steal* the police car, potentially killing the one or two police officers who were previously driving it. This is a bad start to enforcing the law and, even if we overlooked it, the name given to this mode of play in the game is "vigilante mode," marking our actions as being *outside* the law. If there were any doubt at this point that true law enforcement is impossible, we need look no further than the fact that the way to successfully bring criminals to justice in the mode is to kill them. A value of LAW ENFORCEMENT is actually impossible to hold in *San Andreas* because it is impossible to act according to it. There is no "arrest" button or "highway patrol" mission or any other part of the interface to the game that facilitates expression of this value.

NOT-CRIMINALITY as a value means that we don't need to try and *enforce* the law, as above, but only to live by it. This is indeed possible in the world of *San Andreas*. At the beginning of the game, providing we avoid the various available missions which require criminal acts for success, we cannot be forced to do anything unlawful. We have some money in our pocket, and we can walk the streets and live in the city, but that is more or less the beginning and end of things. The fact is that there simply is not very much to *do* in the game if we abide by the law. The only controls we have that do not involve something illegal are those that allow us to move from place to place on foot. In fact, if we do not find a way to make money, our character, Carl, slowly starves to death. Worse, because he cannot ever die in a final sense, he is doomed to starve to death over and over again, resolved never to turn to a life of crime. In fact, we *can* legally make money in certain ways, such as playing pool for a living, but these are very limited. The law-abiding player of *San Andreas* will find that they simply have nothing much to do other than stay at home playing videogames (which can be done inside the game), and walking the streets. A bleak existence in reality, let alone in a virtual world built to entertain. The value of NOT-CRIMINALITY, while possible to

follow, is dull at best, and repetitively fatal at worst.

NOT-LAW ENFORCEMENT is a difficult concept to grasp immediately, but is perhaps best thought of as an extreme passivity as regards matters of law. If one were to adhere to such a value, it would seem to mean ignoring the law, and others' breaches of it, but not going out of the way to actually *break* it, as this would be the more explicit value of CRIMINALITY. Thus, we play with a kind of ambivalence foremost in mind, walking the streets as in the previous example, but this time not particularly obeying *or* breaking the law. If some other, virtual criminal from the world were to run past us, pursued by a police officer, or if a fellow citizen were run over on the street in front of us, it would be a matter of "not my problem." It should be readily apparent that this is not going to provide an enjoyable experience of playing the game. Passivity and computer games, which are, after all, *interactive* software, simply do not provide a successful mixture. Thus, once again, this value *can* be subscribed to, but the question is, again, who ever would?

We have now seen an example of examining one of a game's underlying values by specifically considering a set of values which oppose it. These opposing values were generated by using the semiotic square. In considering the alternative values we have been able to discuss elements of the game that are not readily apparent if one simply "plays by the rules" or, in this case, "abides by the promoted values." Without seriously attempting to enforce the law in *San Andreas* it is not immediately apparent that it is completely impossible, despite appearances. Similarly, by attempting to play the game as a law-abiding citizen we learn that, though possible, it is certainly not encouraged. The three oppositional playings, then, generate *negative* evidence that strongly reinforces the claim that a value of CRIMINALITY fundamentally underlies the play of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. These playings do so without any appeal to this being "obvious" or by relying on aspects of the game such as the narrative or the other positive exemplars of value, and therefore provide a useful complement to a more straightforward approach of identifying ways that the game *does* promote such a value.

It became apparent in pursuing these oppositional playings that an absolutely key element of each playing was the availability of actions that made sense in the context of that value. Thus, the problem with the law-abiding approach was that there simply was not much to *do*, amply reflected in the basic controls of the game. The key problem to a playing such as this, then, was that it enforced a kind of passivity on the play, which is in direct contradiction of the interactive nature of computer games. It seems, therefore, that there are fundamental values that we can appeal to in claiming whether a playing is successful or not, and thus whether it provides negative evidence. Controverting the central importance of interactivity is clearly an example of an unsuccessful mode of play. Another candidate for this is whether a playing is "entertaining" or not, though this is necessarily far more subjective.

In pursuing oppositional playings we are also able to uncover less overt ways in which the game promotes its underlying

values. Again, a “correct” or at least straightforward playing of the game will likely uncover only the more direct methods of value promotion in a game: the narrative tells us we are a criminal, the missions tell us to perform criminal actions, and the statistics gleefully quantify just how criminally we have behaved, for example. Instead we are able to see the ways that a game *resists* other, oppositional playings, and this is just as interesting. Once again, the lack of actions permissible for the law-abiding player of *San Andreas* handily demonstrates a more subtle means of resisting oppositional playings of the game, funnelling the player back toward the core value of CRIMINALITY.

Although in the example above we used a value of CRIMINALITY which we *knew* to be present in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, it is equally possible to use oppositional play in a more exploratory manner. In this case we would need to experiment with the game for some time to get a sense for what the centrally promoted values are. We would particularly focus on the interface to the game, and even more particularly on the *actions* or *commands* available to the player. It cannot be overemphasised that the promotion of value begins in the answer to the question “what can I do?” This, as has been noted, is directly connected to the concept of instrumental values and the generally acknowledged fact that values are fundamentally connected with the actions one takes. Once we have a set of hypothesised values, oppositional playings can be used to test them and to strengthen our case for claiming they are present in the game.

4. FURTHER EXAMPLES

In order to demonstrate more fully the applicability and general nature of the oppositional play approach, we now provide three further examples. In this section we present oppositional analyses of computer games ranging from the very simple and restricted *Space Invaders* [2], to the sports-game *Madden 2005* [6], to the popular and value-laden *Fable* [16]. Naturally, there are a great many different kinds of games available for consideration, but these games are considered to be varied enough to demonstrate the applicability of oppositional play analysis for the purposes of this paper. In each case we will provide an analysis based on a single value, with the understanding that any particular game tends to have multiple values at work and that each would need to be analysed separately using oppositional play.

4.1 Space Invaders

Space Invaders provides an extremely restricted world to examine in terms of values, but values are certainly present. A useful point of departure in analysing the game’s values is the quantification provided by the score. The score is increased by shooting the alien invaders which advance in rows down the screen. It is not hard to deduce that a value promoted in the game is that of DESTROYING ALIENS, a kind of ANTI-BENEVOLENCE. This serves as our basis for oppositional play, and yields the three opposing values of PROTECTING ALIENS, NOT-DESTROYING ALIENS, and NOT-PROTECTING ALIENS. The available actions in *Space Invaders* are limited to “move left,” “move right,” and “fire missile.” This is our palette to use in expressing the oppositional values identified.

PROTECTING ALIENS is an easy enough value to adhere to by simply taking a benevolent attitude to the space invaders above. In the game we sit patiently at the bottom of the screen, waiting for the invaders to come down. We simply allow them to capture the earth we have been assigned by the game to defend: there is nothing to protect them from but ourselves. Perhaps the most active thing we might do is to throw ourselves in front of their missiles to be destroyed, just in case we were to accidentally fire our own weapon and injure an alien. Following this value ends with the classic “Game Over” screen as fast as the aliens can reach the bottom of the screen or we can destroy our own base.

NOT-DESTROYING ALIENS is, once again, fairly straightforward. In fact, adhering to this value yields identical play to the above. In this case we can simply move our cannon back and forth at the bottom of the screen, making sure either to not fire any missiles, or at least to miss if we do. Once again, however, the game ends fairly rapidly with the aliens reaching the bottom of the screen. “Game Over.”

NOT-PROTECTING ALIENS is similar to the previous two approaches in terms of behaviour. As has already been stated, the only thing the aliens might have needed protection from is the very missiles that we control. Because this value is intended to be distinct from the central value of DESTROYING ALIENS, however, we do not purposefully fire our missiles at the aliens. If we were to accidentally do so, that would be permissible in this playing, but by and large this is another passive approach. Short of accidentally destroying all the invaders, an incredibly unlikely feat, it is, again, “Game Over” and a score of zero.

As we can see from this example, each oppositional playing is very passive. In fact, most of the players are more or less reducible to one another: do nothing. At best, as we saw in the PROTECTING ALIENS playing, we could purposefully destroy ourselves. It is important to note, however, that the playings are only *technically* the same in terms of the commands they permit. The motivations behind the actions (or inaction) differs in each case, as was shown in the reasoning behind each example playing. Thus, although we do nothing in each case, it is the reason for this that is revealing about the values of *Space Invaders*.

Additionally, the fact that each playing leads to inaction reflects very strongly on the capability for action in the game. With only the abilities of horizontal movement and firing missiles it is impossible to express any of the oppositional values actively, leading to a game in which the player simply waits for it to end. The controls available in conjunction with the overall setup of the game only allow for a single playing, and a single value. We can be extremely confident, therefore, that the value of DESTROYING ALIENS is central and, in fact, incontrovertible in the game.

4.2 Madden 2005

The game *Madden 2005* is a sophisticated simulation of the sport of American football and is one of the more popular sports games. A classic area of value in the game of

American football, and hence in *Madden 2005*, is that of CAPTURING TERRITORY. When we have the ball on offence we attempt to capture as much of the field as possible, ultimately scoring points because of this. On defence the objective is to prevent one's opponent capturing territory themselves. The game is therefore zero-sum as regards the field position: territory gained by one team is territory lost by their opponent. The primary means of capturing territory is to take the ball and to run forward, or to throw the ball down-field to another player on the same team. On defence one simply attempts to tackle the opposition player with the ball. The available actions are roughly limited to movement with or without the ball, throwing the ball, and tackling an opponent. Interpreting the value of CAPTURING TERRITORY using the semiotic square yields a contrary value of CEDING TERRITORY or giving space away, and the two negations of NOT-CAPTURING TERRITORY and NOT-CEDING TERRITORY.

CEDING TERRITORY is perfectly possible in *Madden 2005*, particularly on defence. To adhere to this value we must attempt to facilitate our opponent's march down the field as best we can. To do this we must make sure that the players we control never tackle the opponent's player by having them run or dive out of the way, leading to an extremely comical game. In fact, this is not at all easy because the players on our team who are *not* immediately controlling have artificial intelligence that tells them quite specifically to tackle the opponent with the ball. A frenzy of button presses ensues as we switch from player to player, trying to prevent them from making a tackle, essentially playing against the AI of our own team. On offence it is much easier to abide by the value: we simply take the ball with each opportunity and run backward as far as possible before being tackled. The ultimate assessment of value in a game of *Madden 2005*, as with most sports games, comes in the final score which quantifies who won and who lost. Playing the game according to a value of CEDING TERRITORY will lead to huge margins of loss except in the most unusual of circumstances, such as if *both* players play by the same contrary value. It is interesting to note that playing this way does still present *some* challenge on defence and a corresponding amount of enjoyment, but it is not overly successful.

NOT-CAPTURING TERRITORY is a passive approach to play, as with *Space Invaders* above. In this case, we may do whatever we wish to on defence, because the value dictates little regarding the *opponent's* capturing of territory other than that we must not drive the opponent backward. On offence, however, it amounts to attempting to play as neutrally as possible. There is an efficient way to do this: we take the ball and throw it away when we have it, ultimately turning it over to the opponent. This leads to a game of standard defensive play briefly interspersed with repeatedly throwing the ball away. Once again, this value makes it impossible to win, though a tie now becomes possible if we pursue the good defensive play permitted within the parameters of the value. Most important is that the game is not especially enjoyable played this way, becoming a completely one-sided game of defence.

NOT-CEDING TERRITORY is a value that makes obligatory the good defence discussed above and in fact makes up the other part of the zero-sum game discussed above: we wish to gain territory and never to cede it. The key to this playing is to not allow the opponent to gain any ground, and equates to the philosophy of real American football, a "proper" playing. Again, this value does not apply particularly to the offensive side of the game, and so the player may do more or less as they wish in that regard apart from avoiding losing any ground. Playing according to this value can, then, yield successful games.

Because American football is divided into distinct passages of "offence" and "defence" the oppositional play here worked out somewhat differently to the previous examples. In particular, the offence and defence of a team have values which are the negative of one another: the offence values the capture of territory and the defence values not ceding any territory. The oppositional play makes this clear by separating the two values out. It is interesting to note that the expression of values is not so directly apparent in the controls of the game, but is more heavily related to the outcomes of passages of play: whether they resulted in the gain or loss of territory. As such, the analysis seems to rest more on the concept of *terminal* values. Finally, the complete absurdity of playing under a value of CEDING TERRITORY demonstrates handily that CAPTURING TERRITORY is central to the game.

4.3 Fable

The world of the game *Fable* turns quite forcibly around a value of SOCIAL RECOGNITION. This is most plainly demonstrated by the keeping of a particular statistic called "renown." In fact the game goes so far as to assert in its menu system that "without Renown a Hero is nothing" [16]. Certain kinds of actions earn the player a number of renown points which contribute to how well they are known in the world of the game. Placing this value on a semiotic square to generate oppositional playings yields the contrary of ANONYMITY, and the negations of NOT-SOCIAL RECOGNITION and NOT-ANONYMITY. Because the game is, like *San Andreas*, attempting to simulate a world, the possibilities for action are considerable. The basic controls of the interface, however, boil down to variations of "move," "attack," limited forms of communication with other characters, and the using of certain items such as spades or potions.

ANONYMITY is completely impossible to maintain in the world of *Fable*. From the very beginning of the game, people recognise our avatar, a small, and ironically nameless, boy in a village. The guards of the village are aware of every bad deed we do and are quick to comment on it and lecture us. Word gets around fast, and this only gets worse as the game progresses, with every single character apparently having something to say about us. The best we can do in terms of taking a value of ANONYMITY to heart is to find somewhere to hide where we cannot be seen. This will at least ensure we do not hear anyone talking about us, and do not do anything they can hear about. This, of course, places us in an extreme position of having nothing to do at

all, running completely counter to the interactive intentions of the game.

NOT-SOCIAL RECOGNITION as a value corresponds to behaving in such a way as to shy out of the lime-light, and not to pursue recognition. This is possible in the game, particularly if we do not attempt any of the missions which further the storyline. Attempts to advance the game result in ever-increasing fame, and ever more people being aware of our existence, either deeply impressed or horrified. We can instead participate in any activities which do not increase our “renown” statistic, and there are a few of these. In fact, we can build up a quiet life for ourselves, fishing and selling our catches to make money, trading goods from village to village, perhaps even eventually buying a house and finding a woman to marry and settle down with. This approach will not increase our renown, but will allow us to continue playing with at least *something* to do. As with the path of obeying the law in *San Andreas*, however, this gets old fast because nothing exciting happens. The *action* in the interaction is missing.

NOT-ANONYMITY is a difficult value to comprehend, indicating that we do wish to be socially recognised, but “not too much.” This yields a playing that involves minor efforts toward the heroic, but shying away from any truly great or terrible deeds that will make us known across the land. We become, in effect, a mediocre hero, doing just enough to keep our name known, but not so much that we are applauded in every town, or covered from by small children. Once again, such a playing seems to defeat the purpose of the game: “renown” is quantified quite specifically, and to show any aversion to building it up is ultimately unproductive. The game is marginally more entertaining this way than it is with a value of NOT-SOCIAL RECOGNITION because we can at least engage in the combat side of things, gaining small amounts of renown, but we must always pull back in the end. Furthermore, our renown will never *decrease*, the people will never forget us, and so we must be careful not to let it incrementally reach great heights: at some point we must stop doing anything that increases our renown and lapse into a life of NOT-SOCIAL RECOGNITION instead.

The oppositional playings of *Fable* described here help to emphasise that SOCIAL RECOGNITION is of central importance to the game inasmuch as they show that playings in opposition to this value are ultimately quite unproductive. Once again pursuit of these oppositional values lead to fairly passive playings. As with *Space Invaders*, this is in no small part because the limitations in terms of the interface are reflected quite starkly in the ways in which values can be expressed and followed. It is interesting, however, that all the playings, except, perhaps for complete ANONYMITY were actually possible to pursue, as were those in *San Andreas*. This is in keeping with the increasingly permissive game worlds that are being developed to go along with the main narrative or goal-oriented stream of games. In such games it is often possible to do more in the world than simply use the basic game mechanics necessary to advance the game toward some conclusion. It is important to note, and is revealed quite clearly in the pursuit of oppositional playings,

that despite the availability of such options, they are hardly encouraged or facilitated in any real depth. The final arbiter is, of course, enjoyment, and each of the oppositional playings seems to fail at this ultimately. Just because an oppositional playing is *technically* possible does not guarantee it is a particularly enjoyable path to follow.

5. FUTURE WORK

There is much work to be undertaken in order to understand the role of value in computer games more deeply. Of primary importance is a more general explanation of the place of value in games, situating it in the context of play both from the perspectives of the game itself, and that of the player external to the game. This leads particularly to an emphasis on the movement of values between the player and the game in both directions and implicates the user interface as being of specific interest during analysis.

Analysing computer games in this way will provide a better understanding of the *kinds* of values that are promoted by computer games, perhaps resulting in a typology. This typology could then be compared to existing typologies of human values such as that of Schwartz [24] to assess the ways in which games reflect and potentially distort our understandings of values in the real world. Furthermore, it may well be that there are common values in computer games that are relatively unique to that domain. Some of these values may be less obvious than overt values such as CRIMINALITY or DESTROYING ALIENS, and analyses which probe the more subtle values present games are in order.

Of key importance in the pursuit of understanding of computer game values is coming to grips with *how* they are promoted, again leading to a focus on the interface to the game and the interactions that are made possible by it. Although the analysis presented here is fairly informal in terms of identifying promotions of values, it shows that such work is certainly possible and that a more rigorous approach to this should be developed. It would certainly be useful to develop a typology of promotion or persuasion strategies commonly used in computer games to make analysis of computer game value that much more systematic.

Finally, it may prove possible to use oppositional play in the design process of games when attempting to more firmly establish the value messages being put across by the game, and to indicate potential alternative forms of play that might not otherwise be considered.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have shown how values are ubiquitously present in computer games, but that researchers generally do not address them either because the concept is too abstract or because it simply seems too fundamental to attempt explanation. We then developed the concept of *oppositional play*, combining key concepts from value theory and narrative semiotics. This approach provides a better understanding of the promotion of values in computer game play, and allows investigation of the permissiveness of a gameworld.

As was shown in the above examples, oppositional play is a useful tool which can be applied to a variety of games quite straightforwardly. None of the examples were difficult

to construct because the semiotic square quickly identifies the kinds of play that are most likely to reveal negative evidence. Playing according to the values is largely a matter of translating the value in question into actions which can be taken in the game world, and is therefore heavily defined by the user-interface. The analyses presented showed how games actively and passively resist playings which are opposed to their core values, contradicting the industry claims of highly interactive and permissive gameworlds. Instead, these worlds are highly interactive only *within certain value systems*. The concept of freedom of values in play remains more or less absent in today's games. Furthermore, the oppositional play approach could be used by both game designers and testers as a means to more thoroughly explore the kinds of interactions made possible by a game or game design as well as to suggest alternative interactions that might be a desirable complement to the main form of gameplay.

Oppositional play is an important analytic tool in analysing computer game values because it specifically addresses the need for negative evidence when pursuing any theory or understanding. It also provides a first step in developing a larger body of analytic tools aimed at more generally coming to grips with the concept of value promotion in computer games and the relationship of this to actual gameplay.

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