Terminological triage - a method for evaluating ludic terms

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INTRODUCTION
In any young field or discipline, and even more so in strongly interdisciplinary ones, terms are often confusingly unstable, and not only because they are new or used in different ways. Sometimes they are just not precise enough to carry conceptual meaning in a way useful for analysis, theory or criticism, and, instead of trying to save them by new and more rigid definitions, the properly academic thing to do is to discard them.

It is important to remember that this type of conceptual confusion is nothing new, as it has perpetrated many disciplines for decades. For example - philosophy of mind struggled with concept notions of "intention", "mind" or "thought" and this made some philosophers (P. M. Churchland, 1981; P.S. Churchland, 1986) declare that it is best to abolish these terms from scientific discourse. Even though such extreme measures have some advantages, eliminating all of the problematic terms from ludic discourse would probably have been even harder than it is in the case of cognitive studies. It is especially problematic once you realise that what "elimination" of the terms must boil down to is actually a replacement of these terms by their precise and scientific counterparts. But exactly how do you replace a vague notion with a precise one? If the meaning of the original term is problematic, then how can we ascertain whether the replacement will be successful or not?

This paper will present a method we call terminological triage, which tests the conceptual health of a concept, and can classify it in the three categories of a) healthy, b) savable but in need of intensive care, or c) beyond hope, best discarded. The value of this method is that it can substitute vague and ad hoc misgivings and concerns about game research terms and concepts with less subjective and more general evaluations of these terms, and thus contribute to the progress of our field into a more mature, productive stage where the words we employ do not let us down once we put them to a slightly different use. It

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builds on a fairly simple ontological model, and is therefore easy to apply, with no great learning curve.

In the paper we will briefly introduce the theoretical basis for the method, which is a general, metaontological model of games (NN&MM, forthcoming), then we will explain the test procedure, and then we will use it on a small sample of terms, including gamification, fun, playability, interactivity, gameworld, virtual, immersion, presence, gameplay, mechanics, affordances, rules, emergence and procedurality. Any relevant term can be tested in this way, but some terms may be more easily triaged than others.

In the second part of the paper we show how the process of triage should be carried out. The metaontological model, which describes the interrelated ontological levels of games (physical, structural, communicational, mental), helps to test problematic notions because it detects their inter-level ambiguities; that is, situations in which the same term is being used differently on the different levels specified by the model. We present our method by testing it on two examples.

The first example is the notion of “gameplay”. The model shows that it can be understood on the structural level as synonymous with “mechanics”, but on the mental level as a complex process of planning and executing game actions, and these are clearly very different. The relation between player's behavior and mechanics is a matter that needs further study. Conflating both senses of "gameplay" obfuscates this issue because it presumes “gameplay” to be a unified notion. As a preliminary conclusion, we find that ‘gameplay’ means very different things when applied to different aspects of a game’s ontology, and that, therefore, it is not valid term, and not one that can contribute usefully in analysis, but which constantly must be explained in different terms, depending on context. It should therefore be discarded. The second example we use is the notion of “virtual” (Fiore et al. 2009, Hall et al., 2012, Lister 2003)). We argue that it can be explained by the model in an unambiguous way that is compatible with the model in a sense that it does not create different understandings on different layers, but rather one that uses different layers to explain one complex idea.

In the third part of our talk we evaluate how the method we propose relates to existing efforts of disambiguation of ludic terms. Some of the specific examples we focus on are: the notion of “emergence” (as explicated by Fromm 2005), and the notion of mechanics (as explained by Sicart 2008).

OPTIONAL BIO

Espen Aarseth is professor of game studies and head of the Center for Computer Games Research at the IT University of Copenhagen. He is co-founding Editor-in-Chief of the journal Game Studies (2001-), and author of Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature (Johns Hopkins UP 1997).

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