

When does a game lose its identity? A critical analysis of the notion of a "game port"

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INTRODUCTION

Is Halo (Bungie 2001) played with keyboard and mouse still Halo, or is it a different game? Did World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-present) turn into another game with the Burning Crusade expansion in 2006? Is Mirror's Edge (Digital Illusions 2008) on the iPad the same game as Mirror's Edge on the Xbox360? If different, in which sense is it a different game? Mirror's Edge's Wikipedia entry seems of two minds on this issue: it lists the iOS version as just one more platform, but also mentions it as a separate game in the article itself. Separate, but not separate enough to warrant a separate article? Version, conversion, port or adaptation? Remake, or remaster? Update? Patch? Or a new game?

We believe that, even though the task of defining the notion of game port (conversion, translation, adaptation) is highly specific, it may, nonetheless prove to be useful to different branches of game studies. First of all, the difference between ports and different versions of the same game has to be (most of the time implicitly) built into any formal framework used for games classification. On the one hand, we do not want every game bearing the same name to be treated as a port, or a conversion. On the other hand we do not want every existing conversion of a game to be treated as a separate game. The same problem can be easily found in game studies. Some classifications seem to be too coarse grained (Fukuda, Inoue, Hosoi 2016), some much too fine grained to differentiate between different ports and different games. So, this is a highly practical problem, currently without a good solution: As pointed out by Kaltman et al. (2015:1) there is as yet no "unified approach to the preservation of computer game documentation." Can game ports be treated as a form of software preservation or is it only viable through emulation (Swalwell 2009). Which port of a classic game should we chose to represent it in a museum? The best looking one, or the one that is fondly remembered by most users? (Stucky 2014). As pointed out by (Newman 2012) we cannot decide on how should we represent history of games if we do not agree on what properties of games are most important. In other philological domains, such as book and film catalogues or archives, only content revisions will occasionally force a new work to be listed along the old one,

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but never technological media conversions, which is abundantly the case with games. This is related to, but different from, the problem of cataloguing file versions and version control in software and even game software (Kaltman et al. 2015), because the notion of a game's identity cannot be defined by a version of its software code alone, but on community perceptions of the distributed product. At the same time a critical evaluation of the notion of a game's identity is needed because we cannot count on the common usage of the terms "conversion" or "port" (as it is highly determined by the marketing narrative of game companies).

Lastly, analysis of the concept of game identity may help with finding at least partial criteria for the notion of a "game" as notions of "game conversion" or "port" seem to be introduced into popular discourse specifically in order to pinpoint the opposition between "the same" and "different" game (for example a port of an original game vs a new version of the game).

Initially it may seem as if a common sense distinction might suffice: couldn't we say that a given game can be classified as "a port" as long as it does not stray from the original in a significant way? But how could we explain what "significant" means here? It does not help that the notion of a "port" changed during the years. For example - it is easy to see that terms such as "port", "conversion" or "translation" have been used in a much more liberal way in the past than they are used today. In the 1980s many arcade games ported to the home systems differed vastly from how they originally looked and played. Think of Space Invaders (Taito 1978) for Atari 2600 or Missile Command (Atari 1980) with its completely changed control method.

And what about the contemporary phenomenon of "demakes" (Lemon 2016)? Should they be considered "ports" only when they are made for a different platform, or should we catalog them as completely different games or as unofficial ports (think of Soundless Mountain II (Superflat Games 2008) a demake of Silent Hill 2 (Team Silent 2001) created for the NES as an example of this).

Using a newly developed model of meta-game-ontology [N.N.&M.M forthcoming], we disambiguate the notion of a game port (game conversion or translation). The method consists of evaluating a given notion on several levels which the model differentiates and seeing if it results in producing different meanings of the term. The model we use differentiates between four main types of properties (or levels) of games: physical, structural (game mechanics), communicational (narration, interfaces) and player related mental level (for example behavior of the player). The model helps us to define the notion of an implied port, that is a version of a game which preserves structural and mental aspects of the game (but not necessarily physical and communicational aspects). We argue that the farther a given game version is from this implied ideal, the less likely are users to agree on classifying it as a "port". Using historical case studies (classic arcade adaptations, early handheld versions of 3d games and mobile ports) we show that the identity criteria of ports are ultimately tied to the structural and mental aspects of games and that all of the other aspects become significant only when they indirectly influence any of these planes.

The paper will thus contribute methodologically to the relatively recent fields of game preservation and ludo-philology, and to critical game studies in general.

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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