I don't want to like it, but I do!

Espen Aarseth

(Mathias Fuchs, an interview with Espen Aarseth, Potsdam 3rd December 2009 in Potsdam, Hotel Altstadt)

MF: It seems that ever since Huizinga coined the notion of "homo ludens" in 1938, the range of what is considered to be ludic has expanded at an incredible speed. Almost everything is labelled as being playful nowadays. Work is supposed to be play, sex is play, music is play, politics are playful, war is a game. May I start our conversation in asking: Is there anything that is definitely not a game?

EA: I think it has always been the case that games have been used as powerful metaphors for different activities that include uncertain outcomes, but I would say that any situation where you don't have a choice is not a game. That would include sleeping - if you do it well – as not being a game. I guess there has to be some kind of illusion of agency. I am very much with Wittgenstein when he says that a game is a phenomenon or an idea - or some kind of activity - that we can't really define. It is impossible to come up with a formal definition that can include all kinds of games, all the things we call games. But he also says that this is not a problem. Everyone can use words like "games" without actually having to define them. We still know what they mean except that we can't give a formal definition.

MF: A "Sprachspiel" type of situation then.

EA: Yes, we have a problem if we want to define it, but as soon as we realize that it's not possible to do so, we don't have a problem any more. We just have to accept that it's a vernacular word. It's a layman's term which wasn't supposed to be a scientific term. If we still want to define it, we may be commiting some kind of academic violence on ordinary language. I don't think it is a good idea to define what a game is, because you then turn a historical term into a theoretical term.

MF: Ex negativo you however suggest that there are certain features of an activity that point towards it not being a game.

EA: Yes, but that is not a definition. It would include a lot of things that are not games. So it would be a description - an over-productive description if you will. It would include going to the bank: How much money should I withdraw? Is that a game? No, it is not. You could say, if those conditions are not present then it is definitely not a game. I would say that a game is an activity where you have to make some choice that is maybe pre-structured. There is already a consensus about what the possible choices are supposed to be. Of course you can break the consensus and then maybe it's cheating, maybe it's inventing a new game. And games are always conceptualised in a way that they have a name. I don't know a single game that doesn't have a name. You can't be a player in

general. You have to be a player of this game or that game. That suggests to me that games are pretty structured - as opposed to free play where we can just do things when we move along, without breaking so many expectations.

MF: What is the role of art games then, with the apparent intention of the game artists to break expectations?

EA: By doing so they are questioning themselves as games. They suggest with this: Maybe I am not a game, maybe I am art. And this artyness - or artness - I should rather say, states that "we are not merely a game, we are something more important than games." We are art and we are using games. We are exposing them. We are doing something more important, which is for instance questioning what a game is.

MF: Does the meaning of a game tell us what a game is and what art is? What is the meaning of a game anyway?

EA: Well, if I am not qualified to tell you what the definition of a game is, then I am maybe even less qualified to answer that question. What is game meaning? What types of meaning can they have? Do games have messages? In that case, how do we determine what this message is? Is a game meaningful because we enjoy playing it? Maybe that's enough. A meaningless game is a game that is so uninteresting, that we are not going to play it. But on the other hand: as long as it is played there does not have to be meaning.

MF: Can we discuss this by picking an example: Let's take Grand Theft Auto or America's Army. What is the meaning of such type of game?

EA: America's Army is an interesting game because it is seen to be the best case in a cynical way of what a Serious game is - or a persuasive game, i.e. a game that conveys a a message whilst still being entertaining to play. America's Army conveys the ideology and still makes a positive statement about the US Army. You would expect that anyone who plays it becomes a follower of the army, but research shows that the game is also very poular in the Middle East, amongst young people in Damascus for example. So you have these PC cafes in Damascus where the young boys play a game where the enemy they are shooting at is basically themselves. The enemy is some type of Middle East "bandits". But these boys are not stupid. They know what the game is supposed to mean, but they are still playing it. They know what the game's meaning is, but the game mechanics, the visual effects and all of that is more than good enough to make that message disappear … maybe not disappear, but they will ignore it.

MF: Is this scenario easier to imagine in a computer game than in other media, say a written book? Would you read a fascist book, if you are an anarchist or a communist?

EA: That's an interesting question. If you start reading the book, and you didn't know about it and then after some 150 pages it turned out to be problematic in some way or another, what would you do? Maybe you would keep reading it. It is like people who go to Disneyland, they might not like Disneyland. They maybe got to Disneyland for other

reasons. Maybe their children like it. And then they find out, it is actually quite an amusing place. Surprise, surprise! It's actually quite a fun project. So they enjoy themselves by something they would never have thought they'd enjoy. Then you can ask, what is the most important aspect? Is it the connotation or is it the pleasure you get out of the object itself? For me it is like Coca Cola: I don't want to like it, but I do!

But, if you compare computer games, or games in virtual environments - as I prefer to call them - to novels and films, then they are composed of two layers: There is the mechanical layer, the mechanics, the engine, and then there is the surface, the skin, the semantic layer if you will, the sign layer. You can compare it to a car. You have a nice looking car, but who knows how good it is. We see it, but does it drive well? Does it have a good mileage? Would you actually enjoy driving this car as opposed to looking at it. You can have a shitty looking car, which is beautiful to drive. Or the other way around. Clearly there is a logical disconnect between the mechanical aspects of an object and the visual and auditory aspects of the object, which you do not have in novels or in films. There it is: What you see is what you get! But with a car that's not the case. With a tennis racket or a shoe that's not the case. And it is not like that with games. Tetris for example, is not a beautiful object to watch. But it is still a beautiful object to play. The meaning of Tetris is clearly not located in the visual aspects. The enjoyment of Tetris is related to the mechanical structure. And then you have games like Myst, where it is the opposite. You have a beautiful surface, but the inside is not very interesting. It is rather boring.

MF: Do you want to suggest that a good game does not necessarily have to encompass the full range of this polarity? It need not be beautiful from inside out?

EA: Yes, (…)

MF: So, according to you some games are more intense on the side of playability and others rather on aesthetics. Where is the place for emotions in games?

EA: It would be on both. You could clearly have emotions relating to both the visual aspects and the explorative aspects of seeing something for the first time for instance. And then the emotions of carrying out a successful strategy. Like maneuvering the critical piece in Tetris into the right spot, that solves your problems for the next 5 pieces to come down. What is different in games as opposed to films or books is this personal achievement that you don't get when watching a film or reading a novel. But in non-representational arts, say in works of Jackson Pollock you might watch a painting for 20 minutes and then suddenly you get the structure. There seems to be chaos but then finally you find the structure. That might be similar to inventing a new strategy in a game and then carrying it out successfully. You suddenly make sense of something or you are able to express something within the frame of the work.

MF: Is this what you called "a non-trivial effort to traverse the game" in your book on ergodic literature?

EA: Yes. It actually happened to me once in watching Jackson Pollock's "Autumn Rhythm" in the Tate Gallery.[1] I had to look at it, because I thought, I don't understand what's going on. And then – after 20 minutes – it made sense. At least I could see certain structures, certain representations, certain rhythms – as the title goes. You could argue that there are similar structures to playing games. The activity here is solving problems. You either make a problem or you get a problem - and then you solve it. And that requires a non-trivial effort. Of course, what is trivial for one person, might be non-trivial for another. You cannot generalize, but at least you have the surface layer and you have the mechanics. Maybe that's something to start with.

MF: Is there a third layer of narrative structures then?

EA: I think that would be the wrong way to approach it. One could suggest that the mechanics is the ludological layer and semiotics is the narrative layer. But I would rather say that narrative is something which you can mix into the semiotic layer. But semiotics is much more fundamental. How we perceive signs and how we make sense of the world is much more fundamental than the how we tell stories. Animals cannot tell stories but they can clearly recognize signs. Semiotics is much deeper and narrative is an advanced structure on top of semiotics. But you could also argue that one of the fundamentals of the narrative, which is story, is independent of a certain semiotic and is transsemiotic. But anyway, it is a higher function of human intelligence to tell stories.

> **Comment [EA1]:** The deleted sentences here didn't make sense.

MF: What does the average gamer refer to when playing? To the mechanics or the semiotic layer, to stories or to rules and fiction? Is there an ideal gamers' attitude?

EA: There certainly are gamer ideals. One of them would be the subversive gamer, as Jonas Heide Smith points out. The gamer that can fight the authoritative structure, and invent a new playing style, for instance mine-climbing, when you use proximity mines to climb up a wall, or rocket-jumping. Within game studies we have this highly idealised playing style, but that's not the typical way of playing a game.

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[1] Espen Aarseth refers to Jackson Pollocks "Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)" 1950. Enamel on canvas.
Dimensions 266.7 x 525.8 cm