“Level Up Conference” Boots Up the Heart of “Gameness”

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Where else would 500 people from more than 20 countries convene for the inaugural conference of the new Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) than the old Roman outpost of Utrecht in the Netherlands? The Netherlands is a quiet, sometimes overlooked, source of the model upon which disparate nation states, many of them former enemies, built the European Union. In the likeness of its national host, in years to come Level Up will be an overlooked—but nevertheless foundational—player in the union of disparate intellectual traditions interested in studying the medium of the computer game.

Utrecht University recently celebrated its 365th anniversary. It is home to over 30,000 students and staff and was the venue from 4th to 6th November for the Level Up conference: a frenetic combination of digital game scholarship, debate--and play--worth of a massively multiplayer online game.

The president of DiGRA, Frans Mäyrä, opened the conference highlighting the newness of game studies, the range of intellectual traditions represented by conference papers and attendees, and the need to reinvent or perhaps reject ideas belonging to other fields and traditions. He asked delegates to attend sessions outside their spheres of interest or knowledge to allow the birth of a distinctive field to, in the words of the closing keynote speaker, Jesper Juul, look for “a heart of gameness.” Mäyrä also asked participants to have fun in a field that should be the source of it.

The three days between the opening address and the closing address were stimulating, but not definitive. Perhaps a good conference is not so much one that answers questions or defines a field, rather it is one that begs more questions and inspires debate well beyond its temporal frame. In this way, Level Up was less definitive than it was generative. And whilst its constructive role was essential for the formalisation of the study of digital games, it wasn’t as legitimising as it might have been. No organisational structure or core concept emerged to define the scope of game studies.

Nevertheless, three keynotes centred the conference. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman engaged with Mäyrä’s call for fun by presenting three case studies and a raucous massively multi-player game of rock-paper-scissors with the 500-strong audience to demonstrate that many games transgress the boundaries between real and artificial worlds. They began the discussion oft heard at the conference about the unambiguous and fixed nature of rules that create a boundary within which games are normally played and by which play and “not play” are determined. The ideas were drawn from their new book, Rules of Play published by MIT Press.

Characteristically panoptic, Janet Murray pondered the future of digital games research: “We want money to do it, but” that the field needs legitimacy. To this end she called for an innovative rather than additive model of research. Whilst digital games have antecedents and related phenomena outside the text and reception of it, Murray argued old media research approaches are insufficient to understand the “essence of play” in games making reference to Brian Sutton-Smith’s The Ambiguity of Play and its central appetival qualities. Murray and her colleagues’ Game Morphology Project demonstrated the limitation of comparisons with film and other media that often are made for computer games.

Jesper Juul’s keynote was characteristically circumspect and comprehensive. He explored the relationship between the computer and the game in much the same way one would explore the relationship between books and storytelling. In doing so, Juul was able to define all games by understanding that they share only one thing: “a specific sort of immaterial support,
namely the upholding of the rules; the determination of what moves and actions are permissible and what they will lead to.”

Juul argued that the rule-bound nature of computing and the rule-bound nature of games makes computers perfectly suited to gaming and that digital games are the greatest contribution of computers to human culture.

The remaining presentation, panel and poster sessions were organised on the basis of six ontological dimensions rather than on an epistemological, complete phenomenological scheme or dynamic process: again demonstrating that the community was looking for the heart of gameness. Sessions were organised around (1) digital games themselves, (2) digital games as social objects, (3) reception of them, (4) design, (5) games as cultural objects, and (6) digital games research methods. If the collection of presentations at Level Up could be characterised by any adjective, it would be “exciting” because it was clear that attendees universally enjoyed being at the conference and sought to engage with presenters, regardless of frequent distinctions of academic tradition. The abstracts alone demonstrate the diversity of backgrounds present.

No digital games research conference would be credible without fun (to study, of course). On Wednesday night from 21:00 to 4:00 the mood was celebratory at Tivoli, the premier party den in Utrecht, where one of the conference presenters, Charles Kriel, was the DJ for the party heavies and where the Painstation 2 was on display to punish bad gaming with shocks, heat and whips! Less abusive fare was on display including several electronic and digital play concepts like light graffiti and interactive robots as well as a live hacking contest. Following the conference, LAN parties, big-screen gaming and other excursions were on offer.

Jonas Heide Smith wrote (in The forgotten medium, 1999), that ‘the computer game exists in an academic no-man’s land.’ But that was 1999. In 2003, the digital games research landscape, whilst primordial, is a (mainly young) woman’s and man’s land. Delegates were notably younger as a whole than any convention of cognitive psychologists or film formalists. On estimation, the gender mix was even. Nearly 200 papers were presented, about half in poster sessions, the other half in panels and presentations. The ideas about digital games and digital game research have suffered confinement in small panels in other conferences in the past and consequently the demand for a conference solely on gameness clearly caught the organisers unprepared. This was one frustrating weakness of the conference. As many as four panel sessions ran at one time. Sometimes these were run against a workshop AND a poster session. The organisers were trying to be inclusive and the quality of the posters and panels testify to their justification… however the poster sessions were impoverished by running against panels. Another weakness was the minimal presence of industry speakers. Only one panel, for example, featured representatives from the major distributors like Electronic Arts as well as Douglas Lowenstein, President of the American industry lobby, Entertainment Software Association (ESA). Demonstrating potentially narrow cultural scope was the delegate population. Notably absent were Asian, African and South American attendees and presenters. From each of these geo-cultural groups, only one or two papers were presented. Most surprising was the absence of presenters from heavy-gaming populations, Japan and Korea.

Overall, shortcomings did little to diminish the larger success of the digital games conference. The Netherlands is a place with a distinctive linguistic, cultural, architectural and topological aesthetic. Like its host nation, Level Up ran with a distinctive linguistic, cultural, architectural and design aesthetic. For example, it was held in the “Educatorium” in which, “structures and installations, walls, floors and facades, spaces and finishing materials have been reinvented,” according to conference organisers. Like so many elements of the conference, the building was emblematic of the novelty of digital game studies, which of course was the raison d’être of the conference. Like good digital game players, digital games researchers are trying to unlock the puzzle to get to the next level. Although the game dynamics are harder than perhaps they realised from the outset, they are hooked, and intent, on finishing what they started. The next conference will be in 2005.
Links

Games Conference Web
DiGRA
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