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It Takes Two to Tandem: Tandem Analysis as a Novel Method for the Critical Analysis of Games

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Many players engage in ‘tandem play’ with others, usually close friends, who talk about what they play as they play it - particularly in cases of single player videogames where one player plays and the other observes. Begy et al. (2017, p.149) have studied ‘tandem play’ extensively, however, this practice of tandem play has not up until now been suggested as a formal method for analysis, directly carried out by the analysts themselves.

Proposed here is a novel form of critical analysis, tandem analysis, that makes use of a pair of analysts who engage in tandem play of a videogame together, recording live discussion of the play session and then conducting a thematic analysis of the recording for qualitatively different insights to those provided by other analytical methods. Observations may be more accurately expressed in-situ so that the analysis is more direct in its expression. While three or more researchers could theoretically conduct a tandem analysis, the focus for now is establishing a functioning method with a dyad.

Formal game analysis commonly privileges the perspective of a single player-analyst, frequently analysing a single player game as an artefact or text. Consalvo & Dutton (2006) and Carr (2019) have noted that game analysis often makes use of methods such as close textual analysis, content analysis, interviews, ethnographies, frame analysis, or studies that situate the content of a game in a specific cultural context for discussion e.g. gender representation. Many proposed methods or methodologies, specifically for game analysis, are actually theoretical models that list features, layers or strata of games that the analyst should generally consider as topics for discussion, in some cases exhaustively (Konzack, 2002; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Zagal et al., 2007). Aarseth (2003, 2015) bemoans the lack of methodological disclosure in game analysis papers, however, there are serious discussions of specific research methods that could be applied to games (Lankoski & Björk, 2015; Carr, 2019), and so a goal of this paper is to provide a ‘method-first’ approach.

Methodologically, a concern for the most common forms of game analysis is that they may primarily offer opportunities to reflect on the game *after* the analyst plays. In some cases, analysts may rely on recorded notes, video recordings of their own play sessions, or even their own memory of a game. They are unlikely to be expressing themselves at the moment of play except through written or dictated notes which distract from play. Even then, the discourse is one of internal reflection which is not challenged until the analyst later discusses the game with a friend or colleague or receives feedback on their written analysis from a peer-reviewer. Researchers such as Taylor (2006), Fine (1983), Kolos (2010), Begy et al. (2017) and Pearce (2009) have remarked on the benefit that breaking down the walls between participant and observer brings to ethnographic observation; tandem analysis proposes a similar methodological shift for critical game analysis.

Taking Suits' (2014) definition of a game which frames games as activities ("To play a game is to engage in activity directed towards..."(Suits, 2014, p.36)), the proposed analytical method doesn't necessarily privilege the game as the text for analysis but rather includes the game-as-text alongside the game-as-discursive-play that characterises so many analytical discussions of games between players - often friends or communities. This will inevitably lead to a methodology that is subjectively dependent on the people playing and their social context.

The main example that serves as an inspiration to the method is think aloud protocol, originally a testing method derived from usability testing (van Someren, Barnard & Sandberg, 1994; Nielsen, 2012; Knoll, 2018; Louvel, 2018). In the method, a tester encourages the user to think 'out loud' their thoughts as they use a product or service. Although time consuming, the benefit of the method is that deeper insight is acquired into the thought process of the user as they use a product. However, the method can be cognitively demanding of the user especially if the product requires a great deal of skill or concentration (as with a complex or difficult videogame). The cognitive load can be mitigated, and depth of insight be extended, through variations of the method such as retrospective think aloud (Knoll, 2018), retrospective verbalisation (Kumar, Yammiyavar & Nielsen, 2007), or the mind tape method (Nielsen & Christiansen, 2000) whereby a user session is recorded and then watched back with the user to discuss what decisions they made and why. However, although the cognitive demand is lessened, the live, moment to moment experience may not be as accurately captured with retrospective think aloud or mindtape method and neither method necessarily frames the findings as discursive in both the live and recorded cases (naturally because they are forms of usability testing, not game analysis). Thus, tandem analysis may derive a mixture of benefits (and drawbacks) by allowing for a multi-stage analysis where play-discourse is recorded, then thematised post-play and reflectively analysed again.

Although Begy et al.'s studies of tandem play are mainly ethnographic in nature, they raise relevant methodological considerations for analysing tandem play including game selection, recruitment, negotiating player roles and time limits. Tandem play is also challenging to study because of biases such as feeling the need to be entertaining or a general awareness of the social context of play (Begy et al., 2017; Consalvo, 2017; Scully-Blaker, et al., 2017). Yet the benefits of similar forms of pair practice show the potential promise of the method.

Pair programming, for example, is a technique used in software development where two programmers sit side-by-side on the same machine using intra-pair communication to reach their goals (Williams et al., 2000; Zarb, Hughes & Richards, 2013; Zarb, 2014). Other analogous practices exist elsewhere such as the practice of *chavrusa* (alternatively *hevruta*, *havruta* [Aramaic word meaning ‘friendship’]) learning within Jewish religious study as an activity involving the paired reading of a religious text (Gottlieb, 2015; Tedmon, 1991; Kent & Cook, 2012; Chung & Lee, 2019). Williams et al. (2000) have noted that “pairs consider many more possible solutions to a problem and converge more quickly on which solution to implement” a benefit widely understood to result from rapid collaborative peer-review of the problem at hand. Although critical analysis of a game is not a ‘problem’ as such, analysis may benefit from a pair since descriptive or analytical observations may be more quickly challenged or refined.

The method is proposed as follows:

Tandem analysis is a research method for pursuing textual analysis of videogames through the benefit of active discourse between a researcher pair. It is a mixed method made up of three stages that are, in essence: interpretation – organisation – interpretation.

In the first stage a pair of researchers record their verbal discourse as they analyse their playing a videogame, that is, a rally or extended exchange of interpretations about, and during, the tandem play of a videogame. The method should allow highly freeform discourse as long as it primarily concerns the game in play. The goal is to play until a pre-agreed ‘significant portion’ of the game has been played, or until completion if applicable and reasonable

In the second stage the recorded verbal exchange is subject to a thematic content analysis (TCA) whereby the exchange is scrutinised for common themes and points of interpretative difference between the two researcher’s observations and statements (Martin and Hanington, 2012, p.40; O’Sullivan et al., 1994, p.62). Thematic content analysis was chosen in large part due to its ability to descriptively distil the common threads across a large-scale multi-participant discourse.

This distilled set of themes from the TCA of tandem play is then subject to a third stage of reflective textual analysis for new insights into the chosen game. The method therefore analyses the play-discourse that arises from the game as well as the game-text itself.

Thus, tandem analysis can be epistemologically considered an organised interpretative method whereby paired engagement in textual analysis generates critical discourse to build new insights, which are then subject to thematic analysis and subsequently a second order textual analysis.

Although this abstract offers no practiced example so far, and it is yet unclear what counts as successfully using the method, potential weaknesses of the method should be considered:

- Tandem analysis is likely very time consuming.
- Researchers may need ‘matching’ to ensure significant discourse can be achieved.

- The method may only work (well) for certain types of games. Discourse may be prevented by dialogue or cutscene-heavy games or games which require particularly intense concentration.
- Being recorded may affect the quality of the analysis and there is a risk of the analysis being distorted by a pressure to perform (Begy et al, 2017)
- TCA should involve limited interpretation and so it is debatable whether a third-party should conduct the second stage of the analysis.

Despite the benefits raised by analogous paired practices, game analysis has not yet considered ways in which the game analyst(s) themselves might formally benefit from two (or more) people (specifically two researchers/coauthors) approaching the same analysis in tandem to derive insights from discourse during play. So far, some of the questions such a methodology may raise have been broached and the method outlined. However, the method must be practically carried out to demonstrate and interrogate its potential.

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