

Plug & Play: The Intersections of Television Studies and Game Studies

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It can be tempting to overlook the reliance that video games have on television and display technologies; indeed, the “games” aspect of video games is almost uniformly emphasized, while the “video” in video games is often rarely acknowledged. That is to say: the ludic aspects of video games have remained the primary focus of much scholarship—so it is unsurprising that the field is most often called “games studies” rather than “*video* games studies.” The field foregrounds its scholarly predisposition through its own name. This emphasis of game studies is a familiar one within the history of media studies. Just as in the development of television and film studies and other disciplines before them, the arrival of “new” media is often accompanied by attendant cultural theories which celebrate the specificities of an emergent medium and how these “unique” qualities differentiate the form from earlier ones. Raymond Williams, for example, distinguished television from existing forms through television’s incessant “flow,” its distinctive distribution and exhibition, and its social, cultural, and economic practices. Games scholars have similarly sought to identify that which differentiates games from other media. The reliance of such strategies on medium specificity is unsurprising, as the cultural “justification” for the valuation of a given medium is often rooted in the rhetorics of aesthetics: can television be critically assessed? Are games art? And so forth.

But the academy’s apparent desire to separate one medium or media practice from another is not without its pitfalls. While the ways in which we “use” our television may differ, depending on what we are doing with it—be it watching live content or a DVD/Blu-ray, streaming content, or playing a game on a system connected to it, there can be as many resemblances between the experiences as there are differences. For example, both the viewer or the player tend to be facing the television, just as they both are likely to cognitively engaged in at least a minimal capacity in the screen and its content regardless of whether they are “watching television” or “playing a game.” It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that television studies and game studies share some core theoretical concepts and even terms; and while these terms may carry different valences in each discipline, their congruities point to the dirty secret that both may share more than they might otherwise acknowledge. Television studies, for example, continues to privilege Williams’s term “flow,” as clearly evinced by the name of this conference and journal. “Flow” is a term also privileged in game studies; it was a popularized by psychology researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi to describe a person’s state of concentration and immersion in an engrossing activity such as painting a picture, dancing in a ballet performance, or playing a game. While each field uses “flow” differently, similarities abound for this term and others: consider the valuation of “immediacy” in televisual liveness and its centrality to immersive agency within a video game. To be certain, each of these terms carries its own

unique meanings and implications in both individual fields, but I find the commonalities of these concepts to be striking—especially as what constitute “television” and “video games” are undergoing dramatic and ongoing changes in the wake of streaming services and consumer-grade virtual reality platforms such as the Oculus Rift.

From the Magnavox Odyssey to the Xbox One, video game consoles have relied on television sets for their display but have also sought to re-purpose “television” and radically re-configure its role in the home. Game studies has also occasionally borrowed from television studies (as well as film and media studies), but only in piecemeal and limited fashion. I would propose reconsidering the bifurcation of these fields, and instead contemplate the ways in which the two disciplines might find more common ground and shift their relationship from a parasitic mode to symbiotic one—perhaps by starting with the commonalities of each field’s lexicons. How might re-examining these terms and their multiple implications help us better understand contemporary and emergent television and game practices through the lenses of identity, temporality, and lived experience?