The Metaphor-Simulation Paradox in the Study of Computer Games

Sebastian Möring, School of Creative Media, City University of Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the metaphor-simulation paradox in the study of computer games. It is derived from three observations. Firstly, often when authors use the concept of metaphor with regard to games they use it in conceptual and textual vicinity to the concept of simulation. Secondly, the concept of metaphor is often applied to signify seemingly abstract games in opposition to mimetic simulations. Both observations can be made within an artgame discourse of the study of computer games as well as within the more general discourse of the study of computer games. Thirdly, however, the definitions for simulation as well as for metaphor are strikingly similar which culminates in the metaphor-simulation paradox i.e. the notions of metaphor and simulation are not distinct enough in order to make the distinctions which are usually made with these notions with regard to computer games. In an attempt to reconcile both notions with regard to computer games this article will make three suggestions. Observing that simulations are often called metaphors with regard to their degree of reduction or abstraction the first suggestion argues that simulations are essentially synecdochic and hence metaphoric when following a broad notion of metaphor. Based on the assumption that simulation is not a matter of similarity the second suggestion proposes to distinguish between a first order simulation and a second order simulation which can then be considered metaphoric. As a third and final suggestion the author offers to consider simulation and metaphor as related via the notion of the model. Simulations are based on models and metaphors provide models such that one can speak of metaphor based simulations.

Keywords: Game, Metaphor, Metonymy, Simulation, Synecdoche

INTRODUCTION

In the literature from the field of game studies (as described by Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008; Mäyrä, 2008, pp. 1–12) the frequent use of the term “metaphor” or one of its tropical relatives such as “allegory” is noteworthy (e.g. Aarseth, 2001; Begy, 2010; Bogost, 2011; Crawford, 2003; Juul, 2005, 2007; Pearce, 2002; Rusch, 2009). This term is generally used to refer to semiotically abstract games. In other words, metaphorical games in this sense do rather feature abstract geometrical objects instead of graphically detailed anthropomorphic characters.

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Additionally, the notion of metaphor is used with regard to a game movement which contains the range of artgames (Jason Rohrer in Bogost, 2011, p. 11), newsgames (Bogost, Ferrari, & Schweizer, 2010), advergames (Frasca, 2003a, p. 225) and serious games (see e.g. Abt, 1987; Frasca, 2007) or, in short, games with an overt message or “an agenda.” “Games with an agenda” is an expression coined by Ian Bogost and Gonzalo Frasca. It describes “games that aim to communicate in addition than (sic!) entertaining” (Frasca, 2007, p. 26). In other words the goal of these games besides being enjoyable to play is to convey a certain message. Among the commonly mentioned games, particularly proceduralist artgames such as Braid (Blow, 2008), Passage (Rohrer, 2007), and The Marriage (Humble, 2006) (all examples from Bogost, 2011, pp. 12–13)) are labeled metaphoric (or allegorical). Accordingly, Braid is described to “take[…] the seemingly familiar genre of the platformer and turn[…] it into an allegorical exploration of the themes of time and regret” (Bogost, 2011, p. 12).

There are at least three problems with the notion of metaphor in this discourse:

1. The notion of metaphor (or allegory) is usually lacking a closer definition. Instead its meaning is being taken for granted;
2. Hence, one can suspect that the notion of metaphor itself is used with an agenda especially with regard to artgames. Its ideology is derived from an understanding of metaphor accounting for creativity within poetry in order to let the aforementioned artgames appear in the aura of art. In other words, calling artgames metaphoric nourishes the hope that they automatically appear more “artsy;”
3. Observing the broader discourse of game studies, one can see that the term metaphor is very often used in textual and conceptual proximity to the term simulation. This leads to the paradox that metaphor and simulation actually refer to the same phenomenon, which suggests that one of the two terms is superfluous with regard to games.

The goal of this paper must therefore be to analyze and understand the paradox and to find a rigorous way of allowing a better founded use of a notion of metaphor next to simulation with regard to games.

In the following, I will establish the paradox by briefly tracing a metamorphosis of terms in the younger history of game studies from the notion of simulation via procedural representation to proceduralist artgames which apply the concept of metaphor. I assume that the notion of metaphor is primarily used for ideological reasons, and argue that the described metamorphosis establishes a distinction of metaphor belonging to the games-as-art discourse as opposed to games as simulation belonging to a games-as-science discourse, although the described game objects are not ontologically different. The paradox is further nourished by the observation that even in the more general discourse of the study of computer games, the notions of simulation and metaphor are used almost interchangeably. The paradox will become most apparent when definitions of metaphor and definitions of simulation are being juxtaposed.

The contribution of this paper to the paradox will be three suggestions on how to deal with the paradox. The first suggestion takes into account the fact that games are often called metaphor when authors refer to their degree of abstraction. I will suggest considering simulation games as well as artgames as essentially synecdochic due to being representations. The second suggestion offers an analytical distinction between a first order and a second order simulation (metaphor) based on semiotics due to the difficulty to decide whether a game is a simulation or a metaphor based on its iconicity. Lastly and most fruitfully I suggest applying knowledge from the philosophy of science and metaphor theory, where a close relationship between metaphors and models was discovered,
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