

Resisting Meritocracy and Reappropriating Games: Rhetorically Rethinking Game Design

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Abstract

Using tools derived primarily from rhetorical analysis and criticism, this project analyzes the impact of the overwhelming focus on balance in video game design. Balance is a central ordering principle of games that is established by designers, praised by gamers, and particularly sought after in multiplayer games. A focus on balance limits games and establishes them as meritocratic spaces, where the ‘best’ players should be the most successful. By establishing a connection between balance and meritocracies it is possible to identify possible locations for resistance to existing norms. Drawing from sociological critiques of meritocracies and current dynamics in game culture, game studies can help reappropriate elements of game design and contribute to a more positive, inclusive game culture.

Keywords

Game studies; rhetoric; game design; meritocracy; game balance

Video Games, Meritocracy, and Resistance

One of the foundational principles of video games is that they should be balanced (Paul, 2012). Balance was at the heart of the progenitor of online games, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle’s *MUD* (Alexander, 2010), and games of various genres have extended a similar approach. Multiplayer video games are most commonly based on a balanced design where multiple approaches can be equally successful when attempted by similarly skilled players (Sirlin, 2008) and many games endure ongoing efforts to become more balanced after launch as designers add and subtract components to respond to the emergent playing patterns of their users. This process of balancing has become a self-referential loop, as gamers now expect ‘proper’ games to be balanced, which encourages designers to continue to develop seemingly balanced games.

The assumed role of balance and its prominence in discussions about games is rooted in the complex relationships between social practices and technologies that help construct video games as cultural products. A pursuit of balance has an outsized impact on what games are made, played, and appreciated by consumers of games, which consequently structures who is likely to be found playing games. As an ordering principle, balance encourages a certain set of assumptions while disregarding others, largely circulating around what things should be balanced (gameplay, various characters, and other technical design elements) and what dynamics are not discussed (access to technology, basic facility with computers and controllers, and other social design elements). In an attempt to account for the prominence of balance as a rhetorical trope in video game discourse, this project discusses the implications of balance in video games and explores the impacts of centering design choices around a framework of balance in an effort to reappropriate a key trope of game design and foment resistance to broaden what is considered as a ‘good’ game.

The desire to balance video games is inextricably and uncomfortably tied to the intent to craft video games as meritocratic modes of interaction where the most skilled players achieve the best result. A natural extension of this system is the development of level progression as one of the key measures of success in many video games. The level of a character is an indicator, a marker of effort and achievement that connotes how much a player has accomplished in a game world. Originally dominant in role-playing games, like *MUD*, Bartle contends that leveling systems were valuable because “that led you out of the class system,” as “there was nothing stopping you from going up a

level because you were a girl, or because you were slightly socially inept, or because you are from the North of England. It was a kind of meritocracy where everybody could succeed” (Alexander, 2010).

Leveling systems are now built into games that stretch far beyond the genres of historical fantasy and traditional role-playing games. Perhaps the most frequently appropriated role-playing game concept, leveling systems are now fully integrated into games ranging from first-person shooters, like *Borderlands*, to sports games, like *FIFA Soccer*. Under a presumption of proper balance, leveling systems work as an alibi for video games and the inequality that can be wrought in their meritocratic spaces by making abstract effort result in concrete, visible results. Leveling is a seemingly objective marker, one where all players are subject to the same ostensibly equivalent measures of evaluation.

To understand the stakes of relying on balance and leveling as foundational cogs for video games, it is necessary to look at the history and implications of meritocracies as ordering systems. Originally coined as a term in a satirical account for what the United Kingdom could become if it continued upon its path, Michael Young wrote in 1958 about how inequality is built into meritocratic systems (Young, 1994). In a more recent reflection on his work, Young argued that the book was meant to be a warning to change how we went about governance and structuring of society (Young, 2001). Christopher Hayes updated the critique to contend that structural inequality increasingly renders contemporary meritocracies nonfunctional (Hayes, 2012). As the balance of resources tilt, society is based less on merit and more on the inheritance of structural advantages that let one short circuit measures of ability or skill. In the end, those most able to rally against the prevailing order are cognitively captured by it, as they gather benefits from a system that render them less interested in fighting against its inherent imbalances. Meritocracies are designed to seem balanced and fair, even as structural inequality stifles any semblance of a level playing field.

This project unites the complex relationships between the social practices and technologies of gaming with a critique of meritocracy to construct a narrative about the stakes for how games are designed, built, played, and integrated into contemporary practices. In the case of video games, the focus on balance and leveling constructs an environment where certain factors are ignored, like the ability to navigate in a 3D world, norms about game genres and how they work, and even the ability to find out information about what games to buy or how to solve a particularly difficult segment of a game. Focusing on the balanced spaces where players can be evaluated based on their progress within a game forecloses questions about the advantages, skills, and base knowledge necessary to get to that point. This also creates a platform upon which those who benefit from the system can decry those who are left behind or left out, as they ‘simply were not good enough,’ which can become fuel for a toxic game culture. These kinds of systems tend to be light on critical reflection and self-examination, which is precisely why accounting for the history of balance and meritocracies in video games is so crucial.

By critically examining the structures and systems that support contemporary gaming practices and culture we can better understand how game culture has gotten to this point and what can be done to change it. Recent social and technical innovations, from the growth of an independent gaming scene to the development of additional platforms for gaming, offer opportunities to rethink what games are and how they work. However, those changes need to be informed by careful, critical study of key elements of game design. A comprehensive critique of balance, leveling and how they combine to form a meritocratic framework for video games is a foundational part of how to resist and reappropriate video game structures and systems.

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