GAMES AS ALLEGORY

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Resumo

Este artigo pretende relacionar uma técnica antiga e os meios mais novos: alegoria e ambientes digitais. Bases filosóficas para a compreensão do papel da alegoria na comunicação são discutidas brevemente, com uma combinação sendo proposta: aquela presente nas estratégias de Nelson Goodman e Walter Benjamin. Essa abordagem teórica é aplicada à discussão da procedimentalidade em ambientes digitais, destacando-se os jogos digitais entre eles. O uso dessa abordagem alegórica é defendido como caminho para comunicar mais completamente em ambientes digitais.

Palavras-chave: Alegoria. Filosofia da Linguagem. Jogos digitais.

Abstract

This paper aims at relating an ancient technique to the newest media: allegory and digital environments. Philosophical grounds for understanding the role of allegory in communication is briefly discussed, a combination of epistemological strategies being proposed: those presented by Nelson Goodman and Walter Benjamin. This theoretical take is then applied to the discussion of procedurality in digital environments, video games featuring as a particular form of them. The use of such an allegorical approach is championed as a way to communicate more fully in digital environments.

Keywords: Allegory. Philosophy of Language. Digital games.

Allegory as a communication strategy

Communication depends on symbolic systems. No matter how well-defined they are, contingency will bring errancy and novelty uses for names and signs in general. How accurate can a description of the facts be, in any medium? Ancient responses include disbelief in the rigidness of written form (as in Socrates' refusal to write down his teachings), Platonic idealism (imperfect symbolic systems refer to perfect ideas), and the Aristotelian effort to classify things (analytical work became a foundation for science).

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Analytical efforts in science, even before Aristotle, have produced a corpus of knowledge describing reality. Combinations of sounds, pictures, shapes et cetera are amassed into what is called culture. As civilization progresses, that corpus grows, and goes through processes of reformation, as Thomas Kuhn (2010) aptly describes. This is the way of the scientist.

Nevertheless, since Antiquity there is a parallel tendency to appeal to a different linguistic strategy: allegory. Instead of relying on literal reference as the source of knowledge, the allegorist uses discourse as a way to point to another realm (as the Greek word, from *allos*, "other" and *agoreuo*, "speak in the agora", implies: it is a discourse that refers to another thing).

Even though some will argue that all language is metaphorical, hence there would be no essential distinction between literal and allegorical communication, most people will recognize literality and allegory as distinct uses of language (further discussion can be found in Fernandez, 1987, especially in the papers by P. Friedrich and H. Alverson). In simple terms: there is the discourse about things and actions (literality), and there is something that goes beyond that (metaphor, allegory). Science has evolved to avoid metaphorical description as much as possible.

Philosophy and Art, on the other hand, sometimes embrace metaphor, and allegory as a metaphorical system, as a way of achieving what literality can't. From Plato's (1993) allegory of the cave in *The Republic* to Wittgenstein's (2001) "ladder" image in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, metaphorical practice pervades philosophical communication. In other words: instead of getting rid of metaphors, scientists and philosophers have learned to deal with metaphor and allegory.

Through art history, allegory takes many senses. Although frequently understood as the hermetic use of symbolic conventions, allegory (in a broader sense, as metaphorical system) is present as a rhetorical device in most literature. As Angus Fletcher (2012) shows in *Allegory—The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, allegory (not necessarily as hermeticism) plays a central role in the works of authors such as Shakespeare, Joyce, and

Kafka. That means: although plausibility is a cherished value from the reader or spectator's point of view, artists and audience both will recognize value in the message "buried" in the communicational structure.

Allegorical epistemology

Even authors who do not champion the allegoric mode, as Fletcher, recognize the allegorical approach as a suitable response to the methodological crisis that haunts the world for about a century, when modern rationality fell apart. In his afterword to the book, Fletcher (2012) explains that this rhetorical mode is well-suited for contemporary demands, in the form of "allegory without ideas".

While Fletcher's take can lead to the conclusion that "allegory without ideas" is a symptom of harsh Babelian times in contemporary culture, other ways of conceiving allegorical operations may be far more optimistic, even though all will share the premise that reference, in contemporary culture, is always subject to error.

This linguistic crisis is one side of the modern crisis. Paul Ricoeur (1965) has even coined the expression "masters of suspicion" for Charles Darwin, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud: thinkers who question the divinity of man, social and economic rules, and even how well we can know ourselves. Many others, especially in the 20th century, have deepened the fractures in the modern epistemological palace.

The struggles of logical positivism, World Wars, and Theory of Relativity have also shaken the epistemological grounds that held knowledge and communication together. As consequences, we have such examples as Wittgenstein's epistemological turn, the rise of phenomenology, relativism in the sciences, and the advent of modern art.

Thus, it is not by reciting conventions that communication will work at its best, in a world where values are not universally accepted, and words are ambiguous. Like travelers who meet aliens, scientists, philosophers and artists will have to create meaning as they communicate, that is, bring not only the signs, but also the semantic relations they mean

to carry. Two notable authors have responded to this matter in distinct ways, which can be contrasted to Fletcher's take on allegory: Walter Benjamin and Nelson Goodman. Elsewhere I have established deeper relations between their ideas and other contemporary thinkers' (GUIMARÃES NETO, 2012).

German critic Walter Benjamin (2011) worked on structural aspects of allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. In short, he defends 17th century German allegorical plays for their ability to present live concepts and ideas. Although he does not develop a full theory of allegory, his insights help us perceive that the workings of the "discourse about other things" lie not merely in symbols, but rather in the presentational structure of discourse. For anyone interested in the allegorical aspects of art, that means that what matters most is not what is said, but how things said relate to each other.

For the American philosopher of language Nelson Goodman (1998), relativism has to do with how things relate to each other. That is not to say "it is impossible to communicate" or "anything is true", but in turn to devise ways to speak of things even when opposing affirmations seem to hold true. For example, "the Sun travels across the sky" and "the Earth revolves around the Sun" can both be true, as long as we relate each affirmation to its value system (in this example, adapted from *Ways of Worldmaking*, the first sentence is true when applied to a viewer's impression, while the second relates to modern cosmology).

In his main work, Goodman (1998, pp. 94-95) calls for a "nominalistic relativism". That is, when we speak of things, we use names (whose significance will inevitably vary in use) and their relations. This name-relation structure conveys whatever people want to communicate. This is why Goodman is fruitful for a theory of allegory: his way of dealing with communication has the same "reference is flawed" premise (that is, the avoidance of universal classes), while structure (be it textual, plastic, musical), as well as convention (usage, habit), will form communication. He does not explicitly advocate the allegorical mode in reading art or philosophy, probably because his relativism effaces separation between literal and metaphorical levels.

Although seemingly hard to combine, Benjamin's and Goodman's approaches point clearly to the importance of structure over fact, especially in fiction. This is the lesson we could learn from them when thinking about art in the 21st century, and Fletcher's (2012) *Allegory* showed that over time. Originally published in 1964, *Allegory* was written before Benjamin received proper attention (his works were yet to be translated into English); although Goodman's discussion on the matter goes back to the 1940s, his major works were published after Fletcher's classic work. In the afterword to the new edition of *Allegory*, Fletcher (2012, p. 401) makes an effort in addressing both authors. In a world devoid of Platonic idealism, nominalism is all we can get: "roughly speaking, nominalism would have to be the epistemological and ontological discipline for subtending an allegory without ideas".

Fletcher (2012, p. 409) dismisses Benjamin's work ("we expect that Walter Benjamin would discern a new kind of allegory, though he could not quite place it in a clear category") and goes on to say that Benjamin's work on allegory and melancholy was anticipated by Freud's.

If one takes a more positive stance than Fletcher's regarding Benjamin or Goodman, it is possible to see allegory not as the unfortunately suitable rhetorical mode for an era of disarticulated concepts and no ideas, but as the ever functioning way of communicating in a polyphonic world. By means of a rhetoric mode that emphasizes structure over convention, speakers will convey their feelings and opinions in a much more universal way (let's not forget that even Plato, the model for idealism, favored allegory over convention).

Video games are interactive allegories

Therefore, we treat allegory as a system of metaphors, whose "meaning" is presented in the relation between parts of the system. The word "system", as a set of objects, related to each other, forming a functional role (LITTLEJOHN, 1988), is convenient for a broad approach on communication: whatever means you use when communicating (words on paper, board and dice, video and sound), you will build your discourse by relating parts.

As McLuhan (1978) points out in *Sight, Sound and Fury*, it is important to profit from each medium's potentiality. Writing spatialises thoughts; radio can bring back lost dialogical features from oral tradition and so forth. Hence, from the allegorist point of view, each medium has intrinsical relational potentialities, based on available aesthetical features. New media show new potentiality for relations: to describe a chair in written text can lead to interesting ambiguities not present in the painted depiction of the chair; to be able to sit on a virtual chair conveys a whole other experience.

Janet Murray (2003, p. 74) brings examples of how computer environments' intrinsic properties are yet to be explored: just like film was used to merely register staged drama before turning into the independent medium known as cinema, digital environments are still taken as media for digitalized books and newspapers, without proper use of computers' potentiality. Murray argues that procedurality is a quality to be properly explored in digital environments. That seems to connect well to the above theory of allegory: instead of representing ideas, the way to convey your argument is by presenting their structure. Game rules govern relations between objects in the system in such a way that the interactor can test the medium and experience values for his or her own (by means of the intrinsic freedom of action in play).

Ian Bogost (2007) develops the procedurality argument, coining the expression "procedural rhetoric". This theoretical model was developed to show how games can be used to convey complex emotions and meaningful educational experiences, as thoroughly exemplified in further works like *Newsgames* (BOGOST, 2010). Similarly, addressing games as allegory is a way of conceiving games as art works, but also as educational devices or political arguments, in the same way a book may be art or science, depending on structure and use.

Procedural rhetorics' success has raised concerns over the function of games, as voiced by Miguel Sicart (2011): "Proceduralism, with its call for systems at the core of the essence of games and its disregard for expressive or ineffective play, turns the act of playing a

game into a labor-like action". Sicart has a point: play will still be play. If it is not free, it is not a game, at least in the tradition of Huizinga (2001) or Caillois (2006).

However, to emphasize structure does not imply to abolish interactor freedom. While his intention seems to be protecting some of the best features in play (freedom and fun), Sicart risks ignoring that freedom of interpretation, subversion (as in the reader's power to use a science book as religion, or an art picture as science) and sheer noise have always been part of communicational relationships.

Again, Walter Benjamin can be helpful, this time with his notion of "storyteller". Benjamin (1985) argues that there is something special about telling stories: interaction between listener and storyteller makes the listener's experience central to the process. For instance, the storyteller will adapt his tale to the audience, and eventually someone in the audience will raise their hand and ask questions that will guide the narrator.

Unlike movies and books, electronic games can respond to many questions from the users, be it as replay ("what if I played a different strategy?"), be it as investigation ("what if I don't conclude this stage now and search the map for treasures?"), or even through hyperlinks to other planes in that game's world or elsewhere ("Where is the Help icon?").

Thus, while Sicart's concern that games are not only about rules is a valid one, it seems that their dialogical essence moves it far away from the totalitarian monologs he fears the proceduralists would produce.

Games as transmedia allegories

By its structural properties, electronic games lend themselves to allegorical interpretation, for much of game usage emphasizes relations (player actions) over representation (the importance of thematic features notwithstanding, symbols make sense within relations).

An allegorical approach to video games could be tested as a way of addressing present demands such as globally-available globally-available products: how can the same ideas (and fun activities) be deployed to different cultures? Allegories that rely on universal

relations, rather than on specific symbolic references, are more easily translatable than fiction based on singular experiences.

When Murray (2003, p. 113) asks for a mature digital medium, where writers have the ability to insert plausible virtual objects in a compelling story, an opportunity seems to arise, for the computational linguistics tradition since *Zork* (1980), to find relational, rather than individual rules that govern digital environments allegorically.

Another application for the allegorical theory is to approach different versions of the same game world –"transmedia storytelling", in Jenkins' (2009) words – not as individual literal iterations, but as arguments within a broader communicational system, focusing on ways of understanding that world rather than on continuity flaws and particularities.

In conclusion, the allegorical approach has a quality underrated by most contemporary fiction: allegory aims at universality.

In the 19th century, German composer Richard Wagner (1993) deplored the separation of arts as perceived in musical drama, the stage being a mere medium for a music show unrelated to the play. For him, opera should be thought as a "total artwork" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), where music, lyrics, and visual effects should unite. This paper's argument is that the allegorical take on digital techniques could lead us to a new kind of "total artwork": interactive, procedural, multimediatic, fun art.

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