Interview

Interview with Doris C. Rusch

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[0.1]   *Abstract*—An interview with Doris C. Rusch, postdoctoral researcher at the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab, conducted by Clara Fernández-Vara.

[0.2]   *Keywords*—Academia; Art games; Game studies; Metaphor; Video game

1. Introduction

[1.1]   The following is an e-mail interview with Doris C. Rusch, postdoctoral researcher at the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab. Last summer, Rusch worked with an international team of college students on a video game prototype, *Akrasia* (http://gambit.mit.edu/loadgame/akrasia.php/), as a proof of concept based on her research on metaphors in video games (http://gambit.mit.edu/readme/papers/metaphors_in_game_design.pdf). As she has explained elsewhere (http://gambit.mit.edu/updates/2008/09/akrasia_-_a_game_based_on_an_a_1.php/), the game was based on the abstract concept of addiction, in an attempt to push the boundaries of game design.

[1.2]   Rusch's background is widely varied, including studies in German literature, philosophy, English, and comparative literature at the University of Vienna, where she also received her PhD in applied linguistics. Her work in computer game studies is part of a larger interest in narrative worlds that also spans books, comics, and films.

[1.3]   Before joining GAMBIT, Rusch did postdoctoral work at the Institute for Design and Assessment of Technology at Vienna University of Technology. Her research focuses on the medium-specific characteristics of digital games and their potential to produce a wide range of emotionally satisfying and deeply meaningful experiences. Although her work is theory driven, she aims at applicability of her research to actual game design, with the goal of pushing the boundaries of games as media.

2. Video game research as a path for innovation

[2.1] **Q:** Could you explain what your area of research is?

[2.2] **DR:** Generally, I have a huge interest in finding ways to systematically expand the thematic and experiential range of digital games. I want games that challenge players emotionally, meaning not just in a sensorimotor or cognitive way—I want games that are about something and change something inside you.

[2.3] Together with Nikolaus König, I did some work on identifying aspects of a fictional world that are usually not simulated in games. Most games provide an outside view to events—this happens, then that—very action oriented. It's rare that games provide an inside view to the events; mood, atmosphere, ideology, and mental states of avatars are rarely represented in a procedural way. To create game play experiences that teach us something about ourselves, we cannot shy away from these subtler and less plot-oriented aspects of fictional worlds.

[2.4] My work on metaphors in games relates to this wish for more complex, multilayered game play experiences. Most games are based on physical concepts—running, fighting, object manipulation, cooking, waitressing. They are *about* these things, and thus they tend to be pretty shallow. There's no need to interpret something that is obvious. If a rose is a rose is a rose, you do not have to ask a lot of questions—it's just a rose! But if it's a rose as well as a symbol for love, beauty, or pain (and sometimes all of these concepts are woven into one), it's getting more interesting.

[2.5] One of the questions I ask myself in my research is this: how can we make profound games? It starts with basing games on abstract concepts instead of physical ones. To make abstract concepts tangible, we need metaphors. Simply put, metaphors are physical concepts that represent abstract concepts—love as a journey, rising anger as an avalanche. Metaphors provide the physical surface that is needed in every game, but now there is something underneath that surface, namely that which the metaphor represents.

[2.6] In a more general sense, I'm fascinated by the mediated nature of digital games —the gap between game and player, and the creative ways it can be dealt with. Of course, this requires metaphors too. At the moment, I'm most intrigued by what I call experiential metaphors. Through a clever design of challenges in the game, you try to evoke a specific emotional reaction in the player. Through the specific fictional context in the game, this emotional reaction takes on a specific meaning. It's all about false attribution, but it's pretty powerful. With the use of a handful of game emotions, you can simulate a much wider variety of fictional emotions. Simple stress evoked through a game play challenge is turned into claustrophobia in players who are not

claustrophobic, because the challenge takes place in an underground labyrinth and their avatar has a problem with confined spaces.

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3. Metaphors in video games

[3.1]   **Q:** Metaphors are a literary trope that has also been adopted by visual arts like painting and film. How do metaphors apply to video game design? How can they help transform video game design, as well as the way we play games?

[3.2]   **DR:** Metaphors are everywhere. To quote George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, we live by metaphors; they structure our everyday experiences and help us to grasp abstract thoughts and ideas. See? That was a metaphor. An idea couldn't be grasped if we didn't think of it as an object.

[3.3]   The most basic definition for a metaphor is understanding one thing in terms of another thing. Video games have a natural affinity for metaphors because games are mediated experiences. There is a gap between game and player that can only be bridged by way of metaphors. Pain cannot be felt directly (luckily!); our sensory perception of the game world is limited. We also cannot manipulate the game world directly: Shrinking health bars represent physical harm, a button push stands for opening a door or stealing a car. Of course, these are not terribly interesting interface metaphors. I'm more fascinated by those that aim at representing complex processes on a higher level of detail and in a more procedural way—for example, chemical experiments, cooking (for some people the same thing in real life), sucking blood in *Mr. Mosquito.* Those are the highlights.

[3.4]   Designing interesting and suitable interface metaphors is an art in itself. Finding new interface metaphors in games has become one of my main incentives to play. Seeing what a designer has identified as salient elements of an experience or action, and how she translated them into a metaphor, can make you see those actions or experiences in a completely different light, and also show you how subjective and ideological metaphor design is. I'm especially fond of conversation metaphors that emphasize the strategic elements of persuasion. There's an interesting example of such a game in the MMORPG [massively multiplayer online role-playing game] *Vanguard.*

[3.5]   Of course, metaphors in games can have a range of different functions; interface metaphors are simply one of the most obvious ones. On the larger scale, there are games based on abstract concepts. There are also camouflage metaphors, which deal directly with the mediated nature of games and try to provide plausible explanations for them—for example, the simulation metaphor in *Assassin's Creed,* or the controller metaphor in *Robot Alchemic Drive.* These metaphors show us that

mapping the game and the fiction part of a game in a convincing way is still a design challenge.

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4. Applying theory to game design

[4.1]   **Q:** What is *Akrasia?* What type of experience were you trying to create? How did it contribute to advancing your research?

[4.2]   **DR:** *Akrasia* is a game based on the abstract concept of addiction. At first, we just wanted to see if we could procedurally represent (our interpretation of) the addiction gestalt and get players to understand what we were trying to model. We soon realized that if we used metaphors, procedural representation alone was not enough to create that "aha" moment we were aiming for. We needed to leverage the experiential component too, to foster game comprehension. Why? Because the physical surface was very obscure—there's a whalelike creature floating around, and when you catch it, the world changes and…whoops! What's that? Now there's a monster chasing you. Weird!

[4.3]   Players didn't realize that the glowing orb they collected before they entered the game world represented a pill, and now they are junkies, which is the reason for the psychedelic environment. Of course, not knowing that made it hard to decipher the rest. We had to find a way to model junkie behavior in the player in order to bridge the gap between player and avatar. People needed to experience what we had identified as the stages of addiction—dependency, temptation, perseverance to quit cold turkey—in order to understand what the game was about. Conveying these experiences then became our primary goal. As long as players interpreted the game in a way that showed us they had at least structurally similar experiences to addiction—some said the game is about love, revenge, or consumerism—I was satisfied. Love can feel like addiction, and so can consumerism. I like the interpretative richness of *Akrasia.* And I also love the name, which we borrowed from the ancient Greek goddess of distraction.

[4.4]   Working on *Akrasia* provided me with a number of important insights. For one, I realized that procedural rhetoric that does not take the experiential level into account is only half the rent. It is not just about the rules and the fiction, but also about performance (Gonzalo Frasca wrote a great dissertation on that). Of course, there are certain systems that can be fully understood on a purely cognitive level, such as mechanical systems. But if the game is based on an abstract concept—and all emotional experiences are basically abstract—cognitive realization often follows the more immediate, visceral response to the game: how the game makes you feel when you play it. *Akrasia* also got me thinking about the player-avatar relationship. If you want to make an abstract concept tangible, you've got to align the player's goals with the avatar's goals. If the game is about trust and the avatar assumedly experiences trust and betrayal, but the player is oblivious of that because she just wants to win the

game, the chance for a profoundly moving "aha" moment is wasted. How do you get the player in the right mind-set? I'm currently working on a game about attachment and emancipation where the gap between player and avatar will again be one of the biggest design challenges.

[4.5]   In *Akrasia* I wanted to test a design approach described in a paper I coauthored with my colleague Matthew Weise. In the paper, I quite confidently wrote about how to identify the various dimensions of complex, structural metaphors. *Akrasia* taught me that there is a big, yawning gap between having all the elements and turning them into a suitable design. So this is another thing I'm working on now. I am trying to come up with some sort of design grammar that facilitates testing different designs for a specific metaphor, in order to find one that represents the system procedurally and also takes player performance into account. The goal is to come up with methods to facilitate purposeful game design. All in all, *Akrasia* raised more questions than it answered, but for me that was hugely productive.

5. Vision and authorship in video games

[5.1]   **Q:** How does the role of the author fit with the collaborative process of making a game? Where does the vision of the game come from? Can there be such a thing as a "game auteur"?

[5.2]   **DR:** *Akrasia* was made by a team of students, and that caused some problems that game auteurs, such as Jason Rohrer, don't have to deal with. I was really lucky with my team, don't get me wrong. But if you use a game to express something deep and profound, you need to have a clear perspective; you need to feel strongly about it and have a vision of what you want to convey. It's hard for a team of people to agree on one interpretation of an abstract concept.

[5.3]   We had a long brainstorming phase where we tried to identify the idea on which the game should be based. Love came up frequently. We had four very different interpretations of love, ranging from sacrifice to pain to a walk in a field. How do you reconcile these different perspectives and get everybody to be passionate about them? For the kinds of games I'm interested in, compromise in the conceptual phase is a trap. So if the game is made by a team, it really helps to have a vision guy—one person who knows what she wants to express. It's great if everybody on the team understands that vision, but chances are that at some point, people will lose sight of it.

[5.4]   An element of the game might work really well in the sense that players like it; it's fun and it seems to do the right thing. But this can be very misleading, and it's crucial to keep things coherent, to always ask, "Does it make sense? Does it really work that way?" For example, players thought that catching the cute demon that

represents the ultimate high restores their health because it caused the world to change state from psychedelic to normal, and in normal state, health generation set in. On the one hand that was a good thing, because it gave players an incentive to catch the cute demon, which was what we wanted, because that modeled junkie behavior. But on the other hand, they did it for the wrong reasons! That a high gives you health doesn't make sense at all; this is not how it works.

[5.5]   Also, metaphors tend to develop a life of their own. The scary demon that represents the craving has a literal as well as a symbolic meaning. He's the craving, but also a scary monster. The team considered the idea that it should reduce health to make players more afraid of it. It seemed logical since a scary monster should be capable of physically harming the avatar. However, this was incompatible with its metaphorical meaning because craving a drug is not unhealthy—only taking it is. It's the task of the vision guy to prevent mistakes like these from happening. The vision guy doesn't need to be the same person who had the original idea, but she needs to understand the concept and its interpretation so fully that she is able to ensure a coherent procedural representation of it.

6. Facilitating creativity through tools

[6.1]   **Q:** How did the development tools help in achieving the type of innovative game that you were aiming for? How can these tools constrain the design of a video game?

[6.2]   **DR:** We used Gamemaker for *Akrasia,* and it provided the flexibility we needed. The emphasis was on design and art, not so much on fancy technology. *Akrasia* is actually a really simple game. There weren't any features we wanted to include but couldn't, so I wouldn't say Gamemaker constrained our design choices.

[6.3]   The constant call for new technology draws attention away from challenging our system literacy skills. There are so many ideas out there that are never or rarely tackled in games because they are just really hard to get a grip on. It's tough to identify the essential elements of faith, dignity, or love. It's extremely challenging to explore and finally understand your own experiences well enough so you can grasp their procedurality and turn them into game. What are the mechanics of your screwed-up relationship? How does it work? On the other hand, more and more game designers and players make sense of their everyday experiences by making games about them. They do that with very simple tools.

[6.4]   In my opinion, every tool that allows you to represent a complex system is good enough to start with, because the challenge first and foremost lies in having a long hard look at life and making sense of it. Technology can make it pretty, but the

designer has to make it *real* first, by figuring out what's going on, what the system is, how it works.

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7. Affordable tools, distribution channels, and art house games

[7.1]   **Q:** Making a video game and distributing it have become relatively easy. There are plenty of affordable, if not free, tools available; most of them have online tutorials along with development communities providing support. It is also easier to distribute video games to online communities, with video game portals such as Newgrounds or Kongregate, s well as Xbox Live Community games. How do you think this new ease of distribution may encourage (or discourage) innovative games? Do you think that the accessibility of production tools and distribution may foster the proliferation of art house games?

[7.2]   **DR:** I definitely think that easy access to such tools will significantly contribute to the development of new game ideas and genres. It will help the medium to mature. As people become more system literate, either through making games or playing and reflecting on them, making sense of everyday experiences by seeing the systems behind them becomes second nature. The diary might move from the literal to the procedural realm as people make games to structure their experiences. Discovering the nature of regret (Jason Rohrer just made a cool game based on that concept, called *Regret* [http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/editorials/gamedesignsketchbook/5037-Game-Design-Sketchbook-Regret]), embarrassment, or pride by making games with simple tools and sharing them with a community of peers will change how we think about games and will help us to tap more fully into their potential as expressive media. Maybe these games will have their flaws as games, and many of them will not be considered "art house" at all, but that doesn't matter. It will expand their thematic range and get people to see that games don't have to be about killing things.

[7.3]   I'm teaching game design workshops in Austria, and the participants are often people who haven't had a lot of exposure to games before. Some of them are a bit wary of games' capability to tackle and convey profound ideas. But once they are faced with the task of making a game about a socially relevant theme, their perception changes completely. They stop thinking about their ideas of what games are and start thinking about their potential, what they could be. Suddenly, they take games seriously as tools for expression. It all depends on what ideas you set out to deal with and how much you want the game—not just the fiction—to really get that idea across.

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