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Review

Garry Crawford, Victoria K. Gosling, and Ben Light (eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The Social and Cultural Significance of Online Games*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011. ISBN 978-0415556194. 298 pp.

In 2009, giving a keynote speech at the annual DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) conference, Ian Bogost observed that the core question 'what is a game?' probably continues to 'draw our attention away from more important matters of meaning, reception, and use' (Bogost, 2009), as it certainly did when contemporary game studies began establishing itself as an independent, academic field, 10-15 years ago. Work on *gaming* was carried out somewhat in the shadow of work on *games* understood as objects of analysis and a category in need of definition. Game studies has grown and diversified since then, and the book under review here is primarily a book about online gaming - or: the meaning, reception and use of online games. *Online Gaming in Context: The Social and Cultural Significance of Online Games* draws together original research on a wide range of topics approached with a wide range of methods.

The majority of the seventeen chapters (counting introduction and conclusion) are on Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs or MMOs for short). The fantasy-themed *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) has held a uniquely dominant position in the MMORPG market, and has had important impact on the design of subsequent online games. Readers unfamiliar with *World of Warcraft*, and with MMORPGs in general, will benefit from Christopher A. Paul and Jeffrey Philcott's 'The Rise and Fall of 'Cardboard Tube Samurai': Kenneth Burke Identifying with the *World of Warcraft'*, a chapter which introduces basic concepts such as *raid* and *guild*, and from Douglas Brown's 'The Only (End)game in Town: Designing for Retention in *World of Warcraft*'. Brown's chapter is based on personal experience and conveys a sense of the extremely time-consuming and sometimes psychologically intense nature this kind of gaming can have. Impressively, Brown has the personal experience needed for detailed comparisons with the endgames of other MMORPGs, and the chapter demonstrates how personal engagement and an analytical stance do not necessarily contradict each other. Esther MacCallum-Stewart's 'Conflict, Thought Communities and Textual Appropriation in MMORPGs' also takes its key examples from *World of Warcraft* but aims at providing a general framework for understanding how social interaction is framed by online game design. Refreshingly, MacCallum-Stewart focuses on conflict amongst players rather than the joys of participatory culture and the potential of peer-to-peer learning (arguably a tendency in earlier research on online gaming).

World of Warcraft is not the only MMORPG dealt with in *Online Gaming in Context*. Astrid Ennslin touches on *Wizard101* (KingsIsle, 2008) in 'Recallin' Fagin: Linguistic Accents, Intertextuality and Othering in Narrative Offline and Online Video Games', a chapter which sharpens the reader's analytical attention towards accents. Ensslin draws on earlier research on the reception of spoken English – ranging from British Received Pronunciation to Standard North American – in a globalised context, and analyses the role of accent in game character design. The chapter takes a very bleak view of seemingly defenceless 'players [...] programmed into subscribing to a particular moral in-game world picture' (p. 225). Someone playing a game is thought of as part of a closed system (the 'players concentration [is channelled] onto motoric and cybernetic interaction with the game, p. 223), leaving the hypothesised player no room for negotiating the meaning of the game (perhaps as part of a community). A very bleak view indeed, echoing public distrust of the emerging mass media in the first decades of the 20th century. In contrast, Keith Massie sets a critical yet more constructive, perhaps cultural studies-inflected tone in 'Representations of Race and Gender Within the Gamespace of the MMO *EverQuest'*. Massie aims at raising awareness in two groups. Firstly, female as well as black and minority ethnic players of *EverQuest* (SOE, 1999-) ought to be made aware of stereotypical representations of themselves. Secondly, game scholars ought to pay attention to how these representations develop in various games over time.

In 'Identity-as-Place: The Construction of Game Refugees and Fictive Ethnicities' Celia Pearce tells the extraordinary story of an MMORPG 'diaspora' trying to maintain its sense of identity after the closure of *Uru* (Cyan World, 2003-2004). *Uru* was the beta version of an MMORPG which never were to be. Based, however, on the atmospheric world of classic game *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), its 'inhabitants' quickly built strong emotional connections with the game. The chapter is a methodologically sound piece of engagingly written 'multi-sited cyberethnography' (p. 174), a methodology related to the 'virtual ethnography' associated with Christine Hine (2000). The notion of *place* is theoretically and methodologically important for Pearce. As Tom Boellstorff has pointed out, an ethnographic approach to 'virtual worlds' rests on the presupposition that 'virtual worlds are *places*' (2008: 91, my emphasis), but in what sense exactly can a virtual world be called a 'place'? Vast, theoretical resources stand ready to aid ethnographers and other researchers towards answering that question, for example the concept of *third place* used in Fern M. Delamere's chapter, *'Second Life'* as a Digitally Mediated Third Space', which reports on a still ongoing ethnography of online disability and health groups in *Second Life* (Linden, 2003-). Concepts related to place, such as *immersion*, *worldness* and *magic circle* are introduced in 'The Whereabouts of Play, or How the Magic Circle Helps Create Social Identities in Virtual Worlds' by Thiago Falcão and José Carlos Ribeiro.

The concept of the magic circle - referring to the results, both physical and mental, of delimitating play from everyday life - is taken from one of game study's foundational texts, Johan Huizinga's 'Homo Ludens' (1949). The concept has featured strongly, and come under heavy criticism, during many of the scholarly 'what is a game?' debates to which Bogost alluded. Erving Goffman's *frame* has recently been tried out as an alternative to the magic circle. Broadly speaking, the notion of frame modifies the circle's function of delimitation to a much more fluid

framing, and the circle's geographical-physical associations are avoided. René Glas, Kristine Jørgensen, Torill Mortensen and Luca Rossi's 'Framing the Game: Four Game-Related Approaches to Goffman's Frames' is a big step forward towards making Goffman's frame useful for understanding (online) gaming. In their model, the game text becomes an oddly unfocused focus of attention, which nevertheless holds together overlapping frames of social, fictional and game contexts. The core trope is that of overlapping circles. Perhaps, with the necessary modifications, the games of the model could be replaced with other digital artefacts such as smartphones or online videos. Online viewership could be said to take place within at least two frames – social and fictional – and others could be added, for example a production frame.

One of the phenomena Glas et al. examines is player contribution to online game design: 'Every new version of the game *[World of Warcraft]* could be described in terms of a partially user-generated version' (p. 153). This is the main theme of Aphra Kerr's 'Player Production and Innovation in Online Games: Time for New Rules?'. Kerr gives a solid overview of the topic, critically framing it within '[c]apitalism's relentless search for innovation and creativity' (p. 25), and calls for empirical studies - she refers to ongoing, interview-based research on the MMORPG *Tibia* (CibSoft, 1997-), which has since been published (De Paoli and Kerr, 2010). Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun's 'Thrift Players in a Twisted Game World: A Study of Private Online Game Servers' is based on interviews with players who use 'unauthorized MMORPGs video game servers that operate in parallel to official game servers' (p. 60). The study shows strong emotional ties to MMORPGs, dispelling any notion that unauthorised game servers are all about gleeful hacking and subversion.

Based on *protocol analysis*, Anders Drachen's 'Analyzing Player Communication in Multi-Player Games', stands out from the rest of the chapters in terms of method. Drachen researches communication in the sense of verbal utterances open for statistical analysis, and his quantitative method allows him to produce results, which the reader will either find very modest or refreshingly firm and commonsensical. Protocol analysis shows, for example, that 'communication intensity [measured in Words Per Minutes, BL] was the most intense during periods of low stress in the game play, gradually dropping as the games became more intensive and stressful' (p. 220). In other words, players talk less to each other, when the computer game demands more of their attention.

Three of the chapters do not mention MMORPGs. Neil Randall's 'The Boardgame Online: Simulating the Experience of Physical Games' contains a useful review of board game literature. Kate E. Taylor's *'Wordslinger:* Visualising Physical Abuse in a Virtual Environment' presents a case study which makes one believe in the potential of games to facilitate positive change, even under very serious and tragic circumstances, and Frans Mäyrä's 'Games in the Mobile Internet: Understanding Contextual Play in *Flickr* and *Facebook'* usefully maps the early development of Flickr and Facebook with special attention to games. Mäyrä approaches casual gaming in social networks through the notion of *playfulness*, effectively blurring the lines separating the categories play and interactivity. This approach seems very promising.

It is perhaps not easy for the editors, Garry Crawford, Victoria K. Gosling and Ben Light, to introduce such a diverse collection of chapters, and they seem somewhat out of their

comfort zone when introducing the field of game studies in 'The Social and Cultural Significance of Online Gaming'. Jesper Juul's (2005) 'classic game model' – very explicitly produced as a universal model of games - is misrepresented as a 'video game [definition]' (p. 8), and it is odd for a 2013 publication to support the claim '[g]lobal video games sales are now at levels comparable to box-office cinema receipts' (p. 6) with a 2006 source referring to data from 2002. The editors seem much more at home in the concluding chapter, 'It's Not Just a Game: Contemporary Challenges for Games Research and the Internet', a helpful intervention which points game studies towards the study of technology in general and Science and Technology Studies in particular.

The book's presentation is flawed. Every chapter, except Ennslin's (as far as I can tell), is marked by errors in spelling, grammar and formatting. Buyers of a book from a serious publisher should not have to read sentences such as '[t]he three perspectives are not be mutually exclusive' (p. 204) or see *World of Warcraft* spelled *world of warcraft* (p. 185). There are (at least) two factual errors in the book: Roger Caillois did not '[build] upon Bartle's research' (p. 84) - Bartle was eighteen when Caillois died - and Tim Berners-Lee is not a 'Swiss physicist' (p. 4).

Online Gaming in Context contains strong case studies and a couple of solid literature reviews. Several of the chapters are innovative in their theoretical and methodological approaches. The book can be of use for readers who need an introduction to online gaming, but also for readers familiar with ongoing debates in contemporary game studies. Readers more broadly interested in the uses of social and mobile media will probably find inspiration in *Online Gaming in Context* as well, for example in Glas et al.'s chapter on framing or Mäyrä's chapter on playfulness.

Bjarke Liboriussen
University of Nottingham, Ningbo, China

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