

Guest editorial: Video games

Simulation & Gaming has dealt with popular video games and gaming previously—often in game review articles, less often however in research articles (although see VanDeventer & White, 2002). This is the first issue of the journal devoted to video games as a special topic.

Theory and research concerning video games has seen a dramatic increase in recent years. A number of scholarly associations beyond those directly associated with *S&G* now actively support the presentation and publication of video game research. A new Sage journal, *Games and Culture*, has just begun to supplement others, *S&G* among them, whose contents increasingly reflect the growing popularity of the video game as a mass entertainment and potentially educational form.

Our first intent with the special issue was to document current theoretical and conceptual divisions in video game research that are particular—and perhaps peculiar—to the study of video games. However, upon review, we have gathered video game research as pertinent to preexisting issues and theories as it is to any newly created ones. For, although video game theory and research—like any new field—may display some rather narrowly circumscribed dueling paradigms (e.g., the importance of narrative vs. play and/or the importance of game forms vs. game experiences), the field is most fundamentally marked by the same issues, methods, and theoretical conceptualizations as more traditional and established fields. The readers of *S&G* for instance are likely to be very familiar with those learning-related topics covered by the articles in this issue.

A topic long discussed in mass media research contexts—particularly regarding the effects of television violence—is the degree to which qualitative and contextual analysis aids and informs quantitative measurements of media effects. Video game research is now adapting efforts and techniques—applied widely to the study of television during the early 1970s—to understand the uses and effects of video games through player surveys and experimental tests of specific game content. Simultaneously, a significant portion of video game research has applied anthropological and ethnographic methods to focus on the cultural and communal characteristics of dedicated player groups (i.e., as exemplified by ubiquitous massively multiplayer online role-playing game player guilds).

Dmitri Williams reviews and contextualizes these two often contentious video game research approaches in “Bridging the Methodological Divide in Game Research.” Using examples drawn from current and hypothetical video game research, Williams’s article demonstrates the relevance of contemporary video game research methods and assumptions within well-trodden areas of previous media studies. Although video game research does not offer any immediate or unique solution to

entrenched divisions within the study of mass media, it does, as Williams concludes, offer an accessible and intriguing context for experimentation with and adaptation of existing media research techniques.

Traditionally—and perhaps stereotypically—we associate differences in media uses and outcomes with differences in gender. Diane Carr’s article, “Context, Gaming Pleasure, and Gendered Preferences,” engages gender studies issues in the observation and analysis of video game play and preferences among teenage girls. Carr’s research, first presented in a slightly different format as one of the top papers at the recent 2005 Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference, is a good example of video game research designed to be of interest both to the video game industry and to a more scholarly research community.

Much practical video game research has over the past decade been concerned with identifying, understanding, and appealing to a female market through the design and promotion of so-called pink games (i.e., games appealing as strongly to young girls as the current majority crop of video games seems to appeal to young boys). Yet, this attempt to broaden the video game marketplace has not often dealt rigorously with fundamental theoretical questions: Are pink games in fact preferred by girls? That is, do young girls prefer “different” games than do young boys—and if so, what is the mechanism and origin of that difference?

Carr’s findings indicate, at least in part (e.g., in female players’ disinterest in selecting female avatars), that those characteristics normally associated with gender identity and role in nongame contexts may be disassociated from their culturally determined functions during video game play—and that this disassociation may collapse certain commonly assumed gender-related preferences.

Jacob Habgood, S. E. Ainsworth, and S. Benson explore a similar theme—concerning the mechanisms and origins of video game appeals and preferences—in their article, “Endogenous Fantasy and Learning in Games.” Most significant, this article distinguishes between endogenous fantasies and the core mechanics of video games, with important implications for practical video game design as well as burgeoning video game theory. Referring often to Thomas Malone’s (1980, 1981) early research on game player motivations, these three authors conclude that much video game play is not aided but rather interrupted by the imposition of endogenous fantasies (e.g., narrative templates) and that players are engaged more often and effectively by “flow, representations, and game mechanics.” These latter characteristics then may or may not be integral to the video game’s use of fantasy—with *fantasy* here including narratives and perhaps also (as Carr’s article emphasizes) gender-based characterizations.

Separating fantasy settings and templates from the rules-based mechanics of game play has considerable relevance within ongoing debates over the appropriateness of literary and narrative analysis to an understanding of video game aesthetics. *Simulation & Gaming* has traditionally published research dealing with the educational outcomes of games but only infrequently or indirectly considered the aesthetic pleasures of those games. However, implicit in any endeavor such as *S&G*, which promotes games and gaming, is the notion that these activities are fun. Although effects-based research is of indisputable value in isolating game design components associated with

learning and enjoyment, the human experience of play retains undeniably subjective pleasures associated with its aesthetic components and value.

Thomas Apperley's article, "Genre and Game Studies: Towards a Critical Approach in Video Game Genres," acknowledges and examines the aesthetic components of video game play. Apperley's approach contrasts market-driven genres of video games with more critically determined genres derived not from visual representations within games but from, as Apperley puts it, "non-representational" (or perhaps, *experiential*) characteristics of games and play. In his analysis, Apperley reviews much of the current conceptual canon of video game criticism—interactivity, remediation, "ergodicity," and the like. His conclusions, like those of the other authors in this issue, point to the disassociation of video game play, content, and analysis from previously embedded conventions of market, culture, and critique.

Finally, Jose Zagal and Siobhan Thomas present articles that are closely linked in their emphasis of group and social play. Whereas the public image of video game play may be of an individual and isolating experience, video game research has demonstrated over the past several years—particularly as video games become enmeshed with increasingly sophisticated telecommunication networks—a strong relationship between online community and online play. To some extent—no doubt motivated by the economic successes of online multiplayer games (e.g., the *Everquest* series and *World of Warcraft*)—video game research more and more often includes multimethod analyses of the taxonomies, structures, rules, and often blatantly political mechanisms of game player social relationships (including prominently economic relationships).

Social interactions during video game play are precisely the focus of Jose Zagal's discussion of "collaborative" games, which he offers as a category separate from (perhaps more usual) competitive and cooperative games. Within the Zagal article, "Collaborative Games: Lessons Learned From Board Games," it quickly becomes clear how the study of collaborative social gaming fundamentally involves longstanding issues of social community, information distribution, and the most basic human distinctions between self and other. Zagal demonstrates not only how video games extend the socialization processes associated with games in other media but also the degree to which individual interests may be sublimated—for good or for ill—within game rules and forms.

Siobhan Thomas's article, "Pervasive Learning Games: Explorations of a Hybrid Educational Gamescapes," also broadly considers the implications of contextual frames and overlays within video game design. Inevitably, it seems, pervasiveness of the sort that Thomas describes most often takes place within (and in fact may well require) the construction and maintenance of some reinforcing social context. This context may then be embedded within the game itself (echoing the earlier discussion of endogenous and exogenous fantasies), or it may be embedded within a particular social milieu that the pervasive game shares and recalls during its play.

Sometimes referred to as "stealth" learning, the objectives of pervasive games may be educational—as Thomas emphasizes—or recreational. For, as digital communications technologies become increasingly widespread and pervasive, so too do those

forms and contents with which the pleasures of those technologies are most closely associated. Video games and their play are chief among those pleasures.

As all of the articles in this special issue demonstrate, video game play reveals core elements of the human experience. The difficulty with which these core elements are teased into the open air of scholarship, rules-based discussion, and objective analysis is every indication that they are important elements indeed. Video game research continues to struggle in part against formidable barriers of triviality, which would dismiss game research out of hand, and superficiality, which would dismiss the video game as an inconsequential pastime unless or until it is incorporated within some broader and more serious allotment of time and resources.

However, current video game research is strongly motivated, even driven, by its capacity to deal rigorously with the superficial and the trivial as aesthetic and experiential revelations. For this reason—for their ability to reveal aspects of video games and play that are simultaneously rigorously constructed and experientially validated—I am quite pleased with the articles gathered for this special issue. All these articles in one way or another ring true.

The phenomenological component of play is especially important at this time (at the beginning of formal video game studies) to access and use as a guide to understanding the significance and relevance of video game play. As playful forms of technology more closely reference—and therein model—basic human motivations and behavior, we become, during play and its reflection, increasingly capable of observing and perhaps understanding otherwise guarded mechanisms of human cognition, interpretation, and self-awareness. It would be a shame to allow research methods and paradigms from peripheral fields to filter and distort the experience of video game play before its most basic phenomenological components have been explored and articulated by those who are most engaged with them. As Williams comments in “Bridging the Methodological Divide in Game Research,” “This leads to a point which should be obvious, but is not—especially to established social scientists. Researchers of games should play games.”

Although the articles in this issue are certainly not a comprehensive survey of the growing video game research field (I doubt if any such small number could suffice), they are a representative sample of the quality and integrity of video game studies as it is now practiced by a new generation of theorists and researchers. Each of the articles in this special issue demonstrates the degree to which ongoing research issues and fundamental theoretical concerns in other fields—such as those within learning theory—so easily and integrally arise during the study (and unfettered play) of video games.

Ensuring the quality of the articles and aiding John and me at most every turn have been a number of article reviewers beyond those normally involved in the editing and publishing of *S&G*. I would like to thank them as equally as possible here: Tom Buchanan, Tanya Krzywinska, Shawn Miklaucic, Siobhan Thomas, Sonja Utz, Susan Wyche, and Jose Zagal.

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