

# Between “Games as Media” and “Interactive Games”

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Ambitious, well-scoped, and dealing with a too-infrequently discussed subject-matter, Paul Booth's *Game Play* is an important book. It sets an academic record straight by proving wrong the contempt and disregard of much scholarly writing on licensed board games (Booth 2015, 6-7). It offers discussions and comparisons between board games based on *Star Trek*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *The Walking Dead*, *Doctor Who*, *The Hunger Games*, *Game of Thrones*, as well as writings of Tolkien and Lovecraft. If you are a media scholar with an interest in pop culture or a board-game fan with an interest in engaged and knowledgeable discussions of a well-chosen selection of contemporary examples, this book is for you; from your vantage points, *Game Play* is simply essential, filling a gap in the existing research and nicely connecting fandom and scholarship in a textbook example of Jenkins' idea of the Aca-Fan. However, if you are a game scholar, things may get a little more complicated, especially if you are a stickler for terminology and argumentative stringency, you might have a more ambivalent impression of the book.

It is an impressive volume by all accounts, not because of its overall length, but because it offers (in addition to 187 pages of main text) 23 black-and-white illustrations, a seven-page glossary, 41 pages of referenced games, movies, etc., over 250 secondary sources on 15 pages, and 25 pages of endnotes. The book is neatly divided into two parts, respectively entitled "Understanding Games" (3 chapters) and "Understanding Media" (5 chapters), constructed along a trajectory beginning with a narrower discussion of rules over acts of play to ever more encompassing engagements with culture at large. The book reflects well on its methods and scope. There is a short discussion on the author's use of autoethnography on himself and his player group, and on how it is combined with a textual analysis of the game materials. Booth's delimitation of the field of research is equally succinct and convincing, when he argues for why he excludes themed versions of traditional mass-market games such as *Monopoly* or *Scrabble* and trivia games (Booth 2015, 9-10). Moreover, there is a pronounced interest in systematizing the findings expressed in including the 15 "principles of paratextual games" in the final portion of the introduction as a way of subsuming common aspects of individual analyses.

Booth doubtlessly knows his pop culture. His discussions of the subject matter of the various franchises he engages in his texts, as well as the games they have brought forth, are precise and neutral, and refreshingly devoid of value judgments. The central idea of the book is that contemporary board games, especially the ones thematically connected to "cult fiction" (Booth 2015, 3), are reflective of culture in general and media culture in particular: "Board games have always reflected the culture in which they developed. Contemporary board games are not different in today's highly mediated and digital society" (Booth 2015, 7). The book explores this hypothesis in great detail and is most successful when it gives concrete and compelling examples, such as the reading of different *Lord of the Rings* games' cooperative game mechanics as a divergent reaction to neoliberalist politics (Booth 2015, 51). In general, the book's strength lies in showcasing the author's sensibility for interpretation of specifics, such as the beautifully observed expression of Lovecraftian unknowability in the clue tokens in *Arkham Horror* being intentionally left blank (Booth 2015, 36).

My issues with the book concern other matters, such as the choice of publisher, the author's use of sources and terminology, and a certain lack of argumentative stringency.

My first gripe with the book thus concerns formatting rather than content; all references are given in endnotes. I interpret this as Bloomsbury wanting to address a non-academic audience. However, this compromises the level of precision with which theory is being treated. It also becomes highly inconvenient for the reader, because Booth frequently uses endnotes not only for referencing, but also for their *actual* purpose, namely commenting. This means that an attentive reader is constantly forced to check the endnotes to ensure that they not miss no valuable details. Why a publishing house in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would insist on endnotes is simply beyond me.

The second and most grave issue is the puzzling use of terminology. The book does by no means treat terminology carelessly; it gives a commendably early (Booth 2015, 2) and succinct definition of key terms (transmedia, adaptation, franchise). However, these definitions are very short and never revisited in real depth. The otherwise exemplary discussion of Marvel's *Avengers* as all of the above unfortunately also illustrates that the book is not geared towards nuanced discussions of theory. This is indeed systemic, with the great many sources being referenced in a piecemeal and a-historical fashion, juxtaposing positions often reduced to juicy sound bites, as if the goal was to signal expertise through the sheer number of referenced texts. Accordingly, only a few sources are dealt with at some length, while the rest forms an assemblage of ideas about play and games that are rarely put into their bigger context or retain significance for more than one chapter.

At times, the book seems to prioritize rhetoric and style over clarity, and a number of formulations leave me confused, especially in the opening chapters. It remains unclear to me how "board games perform" (Booth 2015, 3), if they are meant to do it through the actions of their players, by scripting fixed processes, or if they are conceived of as performing objects. Similarly, I do not understand why Lucasfilm's authorial control over the canon is termed "artificial" (Booth 2015, 25), although I assume that this is supposed to express a disregard of the fan input that characterizes convergence culture. In other places, the use of terminology deviates from (what I consider to be) common usage, such as "franchise," which Booth uses to refer to a series of books or films or shows, that is, the manifestations of an intellectual property in one specific medium, and not the IP as a whole (Booth 2015, 15).

This last-mentioned tendency to re-appropriate terminology or use it in rather unusual ways is symptomatic for the book as a whole. Even when discussing extremely influential authors and their concepts — Henry Jenkins, to name just one — Booth often seems to go out of his way not to adopt widespread terminology. Chapter 2 deals mainly with Jenkins' concept of convergence culture, yet does not employ the terminology of transmedia. When a term like "cross-media" is used, it is done in an unusual way: "Each different text has spawned a different board game, and through cross-game comparison, I reveal the cross-media relationships for these cult franchises" (Booth 2015, 11). Booth's use of the term thus does not describe consolidated campaigns spanning multiple publication media, but a comparative view of different media that I would have expected to be conceptualized as transmedial (when stressing shared content) or intermedial (when focusing on formal parallels and differences). Even a term like "eurogames," used by board game players and academics alike, is shunned. Conversely, Booth over-uses his own terminology, from "paratextual game" to "unstructure," even though it often means, as I will show, ignoring more nuanced distinctions, for example, with his argument for using "licensing" as a core concept for board games based on narratives. The earliest example Booth gives is John Tenniel's board game adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* (Booth 2015, 2), which seems an odd choice when stressing the (commercial) dimension of licensing instead of creative practices of transmedia. Tenniel was, as even Carroll admitted, rather a co-author and (if such labels can be applied to 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas of copyright) co-owner of the intellectual property in question, so while this might be the first case of a board game adaptation of a contemporary narrative, it makes the choice of "licensing" as a bracket term even more questionable than the more recent examples in the rest of the book.

All these terminological issues converge in what consequently becomes a problematic title of the book. Before reading the book, I expected "Game Play" to be an involved metaphor of sorts, yet that does not seem to be the case. Alternately spelled as one word or two, without any apparent system, the concept crops up throughout the book in the sense established in game design, that is, "the formalized interaction that occurs when players follow the rules of a game and experience its system through play" (Salen/Zimmerman 2004, 3). This indicates that the title's universalist connotations are intentional, and what seems to be a study of a particular kind of board game actually claims to be something much more general. The second half of the title introduces the idea of "paratextual boardgames," arguably the central term of the book. I know that some scholars will disagree with me in this, but using "paratextual" as the highest-level category of relationships between texts is simply wrong, historically as well as logically. Booth acknowledges Genette as the originator of the term and even, if ever-so-briefly, discusses the existence of Genette's other categories (Booth 2015, 5). Therefore, we have to assume that Booth is aware that the overarching concept is that of "transtextuality," within which the different categories (no matter how blurry they sometimes are) address distinct types of relationships between texts. The theoretical distinctions made by Genette reoccur in Booth's analyses, and it is almost painful to see the book express them as different kinds of paratextuality instead of simply following the

theory the term stems from. It does not help that paratext is maybe the only clearly pejorative of Genette's categories, something that is auxiliary to the text, clearly of lesser worth, usually used for advertising and attention-grabbing. This connotative baggage of the term does not gel with Booth's argument for the cultural importance of board games. Obviously, this book is not alone in its use of the term, and this review is not the place to trace the usage of "paratextual" as a top-tier category for inter-text relationships. The fact that others (like Jonathan Gray (2010), who Booth centrally relies on) have been similarly "creative" with their terminology does not make Booth's use of Genettian transtextual categories any less wrong.

The issues with the concept of "paratextual board games" go further, though. On the one hand, the book points out that these "licensed games are *paratexts* in a commercial sense" (Booth 2015, 10), stressing that the phenomenon has a pronounced mercantile dimension and is connected with a concerted planning effort (usually identified as cross- or maybe transmedia). While this dimension is indubitable, Booth acknowledges that, unlike the *conception*, the *perception* of games in this fashion is dependent on the players: "Some players may approach the game as a paratext, a subsidiary of the 'main' text. Others may play the game before (or even instead of) viewing the 'original' text" (Booth 2015, 5). A similar moment of hesitation is found slightly further into the book: "Paratextual games rely on audience foreknowledge (although audiences do not always need that knowledge to enjoy the game)" (Booth 2015, 29). So, what is it then? If the games *relied* on foreknowledge, they should be hard or impossible to play without it, yet this is (as the book points out) not the case. What Booth's text struggles with is the distinction between appreciating a game as a player (which is independent from its connection to a franchise) and appreciating it as a part of a greater system of cultural products (i.e. as a part of a franchise). That the book implicitly always gravitates towards the latter is evidenced by the wording of the quote, where the players are tellingly identified as "audience."

This view of games as auxiliary elements in transmedia constellations informs the book as a whole, even if it is never explicitly identified as such. When the book promises to show that the games under scrutiny "adapt, reflect, problematize, and exemplify characteristics of contemporary media culture" and "reflect cultural concerns that map onto the media landscape in unique and informative ways" (Booth 2015, 3), it does so by prioritizing "games as media" over engagement with games in their own right.

An effect of this (from a media studies perspective completely valid) vantage point is that the text stresses the playfulness of non-playable media: "Cult media offer this same sense of play, enacting a 'philosophy of playfulness' within the media fan" (Booth 2015, 48). Following Manovich, the book distinguishes between rules of games and "the algorithmic rules that govern new media" (Booth 2015, 23) as well as the "rules of the cult franchise that govern the player's understanding of the larger world of the game" (Booth 2015, 22-23), yet by consequently treating them as equivalent rules, differences between playful media, digital technologies, and strategies of transmedia narrative are leveled. At the same time, the inherent re-ontologizing power of play described already by Huizinga and Caillois (*make-believe/in-lusio*) is explored less than commonplaces about the incompatibility of play and narrative (Booth 2015, 22).

These are admittedly very fine points that would not be made by every game scholar, and I don't fault the book for some simplifications. Neither do I take issue with the theoretical positioning of the book or its media-oriented slant, which are both completely legitimate. What I feel the need to point out is that the author either is not fully aware of them or takes them to be the standard practice, because he never makes them explicit. The opposite is true with regard to the discussed examples, which is my third major issue with the book: in many cases, the book describes widespread phenomena as innovative and unique features of "paratextual board games."

Maybe the clearest example of this tendency is found in the first analysis, dealing with the *Arkham Horror* board games inspired by the writings of H. P. Lovecraft. Booth's hypothesis in this chapter is that the rules of the game are commensurate with the core ideas in Lovecraft's fictional cosmos, particularly the impossibility to comprehend the appearance and actions of his pre-historic aliens. Booth suggests that *Arkham Horror* finds expression for this in "randomness and player action [which] create *unstructure*" (Booth 2015, 23, his italics). He explains this not as an absence of structure, but "as the inability to define or recognize the underlying basis for a structure within a system. Unstructure exists when elements appear random, but we simply do not know enough about a system to see the organizational patterns" (Booth 2015, 23).

I would argue that Booth mis-interprets the example by mistaking an initially hard-to-learn, highly complex game for an inherently obscure system. Granted, *Arkham Horror's* rules are of an initially overwhelming scope and a byzantine level of intricacy. Yet, as Booth himself stresses, players need to "know and understand every rule" to be able to play the game (Booth 2015, 28). He emphasizes the need to "know and understand" the rules by retelling how he and his play group would look up, discuss and interpret them, and fails to see that this negotiation of rules and game system is a learning process that renders the game increasingly less obscure. Of course, Booth is right to say that "[w]hen we do not understand something, it can appear random" (Booth 2015, 23), yet a major part of *every* game is getting to understand its rule system, and the same is true for *Arkham Horror*. That the game's rules include an unusually high number of mechanics for creating insecurity and unpredictability is not recognized or formulated by Booth as such. Instead, he advocates the term "unstructure" for a phenomenon which does not seem to be specific to *Arkham Horror*, but rather a reformulation of *emergence* or *ergodicity*, or merely the need for not completely foreseeable sequences of events in games. I do not reject the sentiment expressed (which might be rephrased as "*Arkham Horror* is extremely complex and thus unpredictable to the novice player"), but the conclusion that this constitutes a new phenomenon of "unstructure," which is specific to this game or games like it. Booth, again only implicitly, indicates as much when he puts his term "unstructure" into Mary Flanagan's mouth: "As Flanagan notes, even play itself is a type of unstructural 'subversion,' as it can be a 'transgressive and subversive' action" (Booth 2015, 33). Flanagan, of course, does not speak of "unstructure," but quotes Sutton-Smith on play negotiating and even breaking codified rules or games — a basic property of play for which we hardly need a new term that emerges from an analysis of a particular example.

This tendency to coin original terminology haunts the book as a whole. On the one hand, new terms are introduced in each chapter, and while comparisons are drawn between the chapters, the concrete applicability of terms for other examples than the ones they have been coined for remains unclear. When he discusses his term "ludic productivity" in the conclusion as the practice in which "players must negotiate their own activity within the larger boundaries encompassing the game and the original text" (Booth 2015, 179), he explicitly relates this *only* to the example in this last chapter (*Doctor Who*), although it seems to be exactly what chapter two describes as well, yet without applying the term. Chapter four introduces a core term, "spimatic" — pertaining to "both the digital and the tangible moments of an object's life" (Booth 2015, 102) — then only applies it to *Battlestar Galactica*, and chapter five toys with redefining the magic circle, yet only with regard to *Star Trek* games (Booth 2015, 133), and so on.

This is not only a terminological, but a structural problem, of course. It goes without saying that focusing the individual chapters on different dimensions of the underlying issues is a valid, even necessary practice. The book tends to overstate the significance of the individual games as prime examples for the theoretical phenomena. *The Lord of the Rings* is e.g. singled out as particularly important with regard to practices of convergence culture, yet I fail to see why it is more pertinent than any other example discussed in the book. I am aware that this is, for the greater part, a rhetorical gesture and an attempt at structuring an otherwise messy and unwieldy field of concepts, yet exactly this line of reasoning is not explored. It would be only a mild overstatement to say that the book instead offers a different approach in each chapter that is applied only to one example (resulting in the formulation of an equally exclusive neologism). This (and frequent repetitions of key concepts and even quotes) might make the book an easier read than a more demanding structure, but it leaves me to wonder how much else there would have been to say about each individual game if seen from one of the other theoretical vantage points, instead of only cross-referencing examples between chapters, or even from a solidified approach that collated and condensed sources.

The book's conclusion, executed as an additional example analysis of *Doctor Who*-themed games, encapsulates the underlying issues. Because the games analyzed in the chapter use battery-powered electronic accessories and advertise this by identifying them as "interactive," Booth gets carried away and declares them paradigmatic for a specific kind of "interactive games" that facilitate "ludic interaction" (Booth 2015, 175-180). With regard to the actual interest of the book, the specificities of board games based on entertainment franchises, he concludes: "Imaginative transformation identifies the core meaning of a text — the heart of what makes it *that* text — and ascribes onto it game mechanics" (Booth 2015, 185). How exactly this process of "ascribing game mechanics onto a core meaning" works or manifests remains unexplained. The final paragraph articulates

a hope that "[i]f anything, *Game Play* has shown how serious game playing can be. [...] But hopefully *Game Play* has also revealed how much fun game playing can be" (Booth 2015, 187).

Paul Booth's *Game Play* has many strengths, and it fills a topical gap in board game research, which makes it an important book. I find it sad, though, that it is also a book that, even in its very concluding statement, feels the need to stress that games are important (and fun) instead of offering insights into *how* they are.

## References

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