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## Introduction to the Special Issue

### The Game is the Message, Selected Articles from the 2018 International DIGRA Conference

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### The Game is the Message

The 2018 Digital Games Research Association International Conference (DIGRA 2018), *The Game is the Message* was held at the Campus Luigi Einaudi of Turin University, Italy, 25-28 July 2018. Since it was first held in 2003, the DiGRA International Conference series provides a venue for the presentation and discussion of games-related research from multiple and diverse research disciplines.

DIGRA 2018 sought to explore the role of games within the wider media ecosystem. The call for papers for the conference was titled *The Game is the Message*, in an overt attempt to create a dialogue between the methods and findings of game studies and the wider context of media studies. In this sense, the reference to the work of Marshall McLuhan and, in particular, to a phrase that has now reached the status of a veritable truism in media studies, should be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the invitation to analyze the game *as* the message aimed at encouraging scholars to discuss digital games beyond their immediate representative and/or narrative content. In other words, we wanted to invite our peers in the game studies community to analyze the features of games as media, as devices that can transmit, record, archive, store content in ways that are specific to games and that depend on a number of technological, social, economic, and historical factors. One of the main questions we asked with the call for papers was, then, what is the language of games? How do they speak. On the other hand, the McLuhanian reference that constituted the title of the call for papers had a second, arguably more political, intent. That is, encouraging game scholars to think about games as part of a larger and more complex ecosystem of media, whose relations rather than specificities are the engines of complex and often contradictory cultural, communicative, and social phenomena. In this sense, we think that video games can be thought of in terms of their trajectories as media objects – which include, for example, labor-related issues, cultural interpretations vis-à-vis other media forms, issues of sustainability, archival practices, and disposal – rather than merely as ways to build narrative worlds.

The call for papers was thus articulated in seven tracks that offered a model of the curators' intent in designing the conference. More specifically, the **platforms** track solicited proposals dealing with technological issues and their relation to different power structures. The **users** track invited proposals from scholars working at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences dealing with the ways in which humans and machines work together or challenge each other in digital games. The **meaning-**

**making** track focused on the modes of signification and aesthetic devices employed by digital games in dealing with specific themes or content. The **meta-play** track invited scholars to reflect on the nature of play *beyond* the act of gameplay. Digital games are not merely played, but often viewed, modified, hacked, pirated, studied, analyzed. The **context** track focused on the contexts in which digital games are produced, distributed, and played, asking authors to tackle issues of labor, technological tools, and economic contingencies. Finally the **poetics** track invited authors to reflect on the specific language of games, on the ways in which digital play has created its own figures of speech, its poetic punctuations, and its rhetorics.

DiGRA 2018 received 315 submissions, including full papers, extended abstracts, panel proposals and applications for the doctoral consortium. Sixty seven full paper submissions were received. From these full paper submissions 40 full papers were selected for publication in the DiGRA 2018 conference proceedings and to be presented at the conference. All submitted full papers were subjected to double blind peer review by an independent international reviewing committee. All full papers were reviewed in their entirety by at least three reviewers. DiGRA 2018 received 216 extended abstract submissions. From these submissions 106 extended abstracts were selected for presentation at the conference. All extended abstracts were peer reviewed by an independent international reviewing committee. All extended abstracts were reviewed by at least three reviewers. Overall, DiGRA2018 had a 52% acceptance rate for full papers and extended abstract submissions.

DiGRA 2018 received 20 panel proposals. From these proposals 19 panels were selected for participation in the conference. All panel proposals were peer reviewed by an independent international reviewing committee of at least three reviewers. Panels were selected by the Conference and Program chairs based on the reviews and interest to the DiGRA audience.

From the 146 accepted full paper and extended abstract submissions to DIGRA 2018, ten submissions were invited to participate in this special issue. Papers were selected from the conference submissions that were given the highest rating by reviewers in each track. Track chairs were also asked to recommend the best submissions from each track. Effort was made to select submissions from across all tracks in the conference to reflect the diversity of submissions to the conference in the special issue. Papers for the special issue were each reviewed by two reviewers and a meta-reviewer. Feedback from reviewers was used by authors to revise and rework the 8 papers in this special issue.

In the first paper in this collection, **Gabriela T. Richard, Zachary A. McKinley and Robert William Ashley** report on a study of communication and collaboration between team members during competition in a major (US) MOBA (League of Legends) collegiate esports tournament. Applying concepts from theories of situated learning and community of practice, they show that negotiation and discussion between team members leads to individual and collective learning, which leads to improved decision-making, domain knowledge mastery, and proficiency.

**Miia Siutila and Ellinoora Havaste** examined the perception of women competitors in esports through an analysis of the responses on Reddit to the announcements of all-female teams in League of Legends and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive. They found that commenters on Reddit typically adhered to the view that esports was a meritocracy and the lack of female players at top level competitions was due to lack of individual skill and dedication to esports, rather than social, identity or biological factors. They argue that these negative stereotypes are an ongoing hindrance to gender equality in esports.

**Gege Gao and Patrick C. Shih** investigated female participation in MOBA games, comparing two games across a variety of dimension to understand why one game, Kings of Glory, has had relatively high female participation compared with other MOBA

games such as League of Legends. Based on their analysis of 20 interviews with experienced MOBA players they conclude that increased female participation in Kings of Glory was promoted by: a lower barrier to entry; mobility; sociability; and, avatar perception.

In her paper, *Playing Whiteness in Crisis in The Last of Us and Tomb Raider*, **Soraya Murray** examines how the politics of “whiteness” is depicted and played out in two video games and argues that whiteness is construed as both normative yet under duress.

Through a consideration of the game mechanics and reward structures of *Hearth Stone*, **Kenton Taylor Howard** considers how the monetization of free-to-play games through micro-transactions can lead “casual” players to adopt more “hardcore” playing styles. Ironically, while a “hardcore” playing style is often associated with spending money in free-to-play games, Howard notes that in order to remain competitive so-called “casual” players who do not spend money on the game need to invest more time and effort on the game – to be more “hardcore” in their approach to play – compared to those who engage in microtransactions, who can afford to be more “casual” in their approach to play.

Responding to current anxieties around potentially exploitative forms of monetization in games, **Rune Kristian Lundedal Nielsen** and **Paweł Grabarczyk** pose the question, are loot boxes gambling? To address this question, they develop a framework for understanding loot boxes as “random reward mechanism” (RRM). They identify four categories of RRM based on how embedded or isolated they are from real world economies. They suggest that all RRM have gambling-like features but that RRM with rewards that can be purchased and sold should be considered as genuine forms of gambling.

**Stefan Brückner** and his co-authors examine the reception of Japanese role-playing games (JRPG) in Germany and Japan

through a content analysis of reviews and user comments on video game websites, Amazon and Steam. In their analysis they compare professional media reviews with user reviews as well as comparing the reception of JRPGs in Germany and Japan, noting many cultural differences in the ways these games are received.

Finally, **Isaac Karth's** paper presents elements of a new vocabulary developed to describe, conceptualise and critiquing procedurally generated game content. The "poetics" of procedural generation presented in the paper emphasises the importance of understanding the effect on players and games of different strategies for procedurally generated content.

The papers in this special issue highlight the breadth and strength of research and scholarship at the 2018 DIGRA International Conference and in the game studies discipline more broadly. We hope that you find this special issue interesting and thought-provoking. Finally, we would like to thank the other program chair, Torill Mortensen for her assistance with the DIGRA 2018 program.

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