Digital Cultures Research Centre
University of the West of England

On-Line Papers – Copyright

Just Gaming?

Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy
on studying games

The academic study of computer and video games is a rapidly growing multinational and multidisciplinary field. The first UK international conference on computer games in 2001, a UWE event organised by Helen Kennedy and Jon Dovey at the Watershed Media Centre, marked a key point in the development of 'game studies' from a loose network of researchers into a field with its own research association: DiGRA – the Digital Games Research Association.

Keynote speakers at that conference, such as Espen Aarseth and Henry Jenkins, have been instrumental in helping to establish game studies as an accepted discipline, which now has two peer-reviewed journals, regular international conferences and symposia and a growing presence in academic publishers' lists. Over 500 people attended the last two DiGRA events in Holland and Canada, with a third planned to take place in Tokyo in 2007. Smaller symposia in the UK have also helped to drive the research agenda. 'Power Up' in 2003, addressed questions of ideology in computer games and play, looking for example at the ideological content of simulation games, and whether game rules can be thought of in the same way as social rules. 'Playful Subjects' in 2005, concentrated on technology and players, tackling questions of human and non-human agency in videogame culture and play. Each symposium included contributions from international artists as well as academics.

The field that DiGRA seeks to represent now has a global reach, with researchers from across Europe, the Americas, Australasia and increasingly from Asia. It is characterised by a remarkable interdisciplinarity, with scholars from the social sciences, humanities, computer sciences, education, art and new media production industries. Most of these researchers study games within their own established disciplines, but some have argued that 'computer game studies' should be a discipline in its own right. The US and Scandinavia have to date led the way in the development and consolidation of the academic study of games. Internationally, there is a wide array of university courses which study games in relation to new media, digital culture, interactive narrative and cybercultures at places such as the Comparative Media department at MIT in the USA, the ITU in Denmark, Bergen University in Norway, the University of Maastricht in Holland, and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia.

There is also a growing number of undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses in the UK that specialise in computer game design and programming. This area has recently attracted the attention of Skillset, who have produced a set of accreditation standards for the vocational teaching of interactive media and computer games. Given the technical orientation of these initiatives it is important to highlight the parallel growth in attention given to computer games in cultural and media studies courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, often as part of a broader study of digital media. A significant number of these courses combine cultural theory with practical elements of production (at Newport and more recently Brunel, for example). Students, as consumers of games across a wide range of platforms and formats, are increasingly interested in having the chance to study these as an important aspect of their own cultural experience. Initially, the study of games culture was dominated by concerns around violence and behavioural 'effects', this being indicative of the kind of moral panic that has accompanied all popular media when they are new. The Columbine massacre and associated condemnation of games in the US was a galvanizing event in the

generation of a more rigorous academic response to games. The pattern of the development of media forms suggests that moral panic is eventually followed by cultural acceptance. The Barbican's 'Game On' exhibition in 2002 perhaps exemplifies this process – it is symptomatic of the way that games have 'come of age' culturally (www.gameonweb.co.uk). Their appearance in the gallery signifies the way that they have now moved from subculture to mainstream. This process includes, of course, the attention they are receiving in the academy.

The study of these previously marginalised or overlooked forms and practices also promises to challenge the theoretical and methodological assumptions of cultural and media studies. For instance, whilst the methods of textual analysis developed in media studies are very useful in the study of video and computer games (drawn as they often are from the images, scenarios and dynamics of television and cinema), these interactive media offer their own analytical puzzles. Established narrative theories, for example, cannot easily be applied to a multilinear and interactive media 'text'. The notion of representation is fundamental to cultural and media studies, yet computer games can also be productively thought of as simulations, dynamic spatio-temporal models of existing or fictional worlds and processes. Play itself proves an elusive object of study, both conceptually and practically, challenging dichotomous accounts of 'passive' consumption and 'active' production. Videogame play – so often characterised by rapt and near immobile attention on the part of the player when at their most productive – is particularly difficult to study ethnographically. An international seminar will take place in Sweden this Spring with invited speakers from UWE and the Institute of Education with a particular interest in the use of video for participant observation and micro-ethnographic studies of gameplaying, to share their insights and to develop new conceptual frameworks. These developments in theory and research methods may offer new ways to study 'old' media as they become increasingly integrated into interactive digital platforms.

Useful Resources
Books:
Atkins, Barry (2003) More than a Game: the computer game as fictional form, Manchester: Manchester University Press
Dovey and Kennedy (forthcoming May 2006) Game Cultures, Open University Press
King and Krzywinska (eds) (2002) ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces, London: Wallflower
Lister et al (2003) New Media: a critical introduction, London: Routledge
Rutter and Bryce (eds.) (in press) Understanding Digital Games, London: Sage
Wolf, J.P. and Perron, B (eds.) (2003) The Video Game Theory Reader, London: Routledge
Journals:
Games and Culture (Sage: first issue – 2006)
Game Studies http://www.gamestudies.org

Web sites:
http://powerup.motime.com
http://www.playfulsubjects.org
http://www.digra.org

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