

Interact

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RESEARCH – GAMES AND SIMULATIONS (p.17)

SimAcademy Seth Giddings

The School of Cultural Studies at the University of the West of England has been at the forefront of the academic study of computer and videogames both nationally and internationally. The first UK national conference on computer games was organised in 2001 by Helen Kennedy and Jon Dovey (Jon is now Reader in Screen Media in the Department of Drama at Bristol University). The event 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), two peer-reviewed journals, a growing presence on academic publishers' lists, and international conferences attracting over 500 delegates.

The field 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. There are now a number of undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses in the UK that specialise in computer game design and programming.

The School of Cultural Studies' Play Research Group draws on the conceptual frameworks and research approaches of cultural studies, media studies and film studies in the study of play and games in general (not only videogames) as media and cultural forms and activities. Game studies informs our teaching at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Production modules in Interactive Media and a level 3 module on Digital Cinema draw on the analysis of videogames. Helen Kennedy and I run a module called 'Game Culture' as an integral part of our MA in New Media.

However we also find that the study of these previously marginalised or overlooked forms and practices challenges the assumptions of established 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 objects 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 spatiotemporal models of existing or fictional worlds and processes.

Play itself proves an elusive object of study, both conceptually and practically. Videogame play - so often characterised by rapt and near immobile attention on the part of the player - is particularly difficult to study ethnographically. Members of the Play Research Group have developed the use of video in participant observation and micro-ethnographic studies of gameplaying.

Since the Game Cultures event we have organised two smaller, focussed symposia. The first of these, Power Up in 2003, addressed questions of ideology in computer games and play. Here, for example, questions were raised about the theorisation of the ideological content of a simulation game, or whether game rules can be thought of in the same way as social rules. The second of these events, Playful Subjects, in May this year, concentrated on technology and players. Discussions here tackled questions of human and nonhuman agency in videogame culture and play. Each symposium included contributions from artists as well as academics and the debates are continued on the Power Up weblog - to which anyone interested in this research is welcome to contribute (<http://powerup.motime.com>).

The academic study of computer and video games is a rapidly growing field. This article surveys its global - and local - development, and some of the conceptual issues it raises.

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