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Playing the field. Video games and American studies

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About two decades after the publication of Espen Aarseth's groundbreaking *Cybertext. Perspectives on ergodic literature* (1997) (which introduced ergodic literature in literary discourse) and the first publication of *Game studies* (the international journal of computer game research that helped the legitimization of a constantly growing body of digital studies work) video game scholars, researchers and students still have reasons to complain about the lack of institutional support and funding, as Sascha Pöhlmann, the editor of *Playing the field. Video games and American studies* reports. In response to such pressing needs and requests, this anthology of eighteen original essays grounds itself on scientific discussions of European experts on the role of video games in American studies in the twenty-first century. In their essays, these scholars investigate a wide range of topics (such as geography as cultural space relating to race, terrorism, horror, digital sports and gameplay, among others) at the intersection between cultural studies, video game studies and history.

The important contribution of *Playing the field. Video games and American studies* is its aim to reignite concerns about the future of research and methodological approaches in the field of American studies. It expresses a mainly European vision for North American digital culture and unanimously voices out the contributors' desire for the re-investigation of video games as cultural artifacts within the field of American studies. For video games do need the historicization and contextualization that scholarly discourse secures. While not hoping for an avant-gardish take on ludic multimodal experiences, the contributors certainly hope to expand the existing boundaries of video game studies. It is the urgent need "to find the communal in what now still seems individual" (p. 3) that this

edited collection expresses. And in order to succeed, Pöhlmann hopes to promote the dialogue between American and video game studies, insisting that the one continues to inform the other one. In the same train of thought, video game studies should rightly constitute an integral part of American studies in order to challenge its theories, methodologies and curricula in a systematic way.

For this reason, many of the essays are placed within a transnational background, suggesting a contextualized critical approach towards video games and the pervasiveness of the video game market. References to new media and video game scholars, such as Aarseth, Janet Murray, Marie-Laure Ryan, Lev Manovich and Jesper Juul revive the discussion about the narratological versus the ergodic nature of video games as both the code and the design of the fictional worlds attribute meaning to the gaming experience. Most essayists are careful not to fall into the trap of perpetuating the struggle between ludology and narratology. Yet, some essays emphasize the ludic elements of the games while others still cannot fully escape the need to underscore the narrative underpinnings of twenty-first gaming experiences. In locating the multimodal in fresh projects, like Mark Z. Danielewski's series *The familiar* (2015), his earlier *House of leaves* (2000), or the cinematic *Inception* (2010), the writers refresh the discussion about the creative exchanges between narratology and ludology within a broader transmedia culture. Specifically, Stefan Schubert's "Narrative and Play in American studies: ludic textuality in the video game *Alan Wake* and the TV series *Westworld*" makes a valuable contribution to the debate as he redirects the question by drawing on Manovich's conception of both narrative and play as "symbolic forms" in order to avoid prioritizing the one over the other. In choosing to explore two different media-yet "ludic" — textualities as he calls them (p. 114), he manages to explain how both video games and TV series display ludic elements and fuse narrative with play, attributing certain meanings to the experiences. Both *Alan Wake* and *Westworld* are ludic narratives that appear self-aware and self-conscious of their own textualities; and as such they employ a number of remediated narrative techniques within the wider context of convergence culture.

Particularly significant is the fact that the essays do not only revolve around video game studies, but they also draw on cultural studies and urban theories. Space is central in the investigations, be it the place of production or the place of

particular cultural and historical significance in the game world. At other times, references to space relate to both the game's narrative and its ludic potential. Regarding the game's mechanics, some essays shed light on the added value of space as architectural design that can influence the agency of the players as well as their freedom of movement and of decision making. The first essay "Video games and the American cultural context" attempts a brief but risky leap from 1880 into the present by providing the historical, technological and commercial context of the American video game industry. The writer tries to place the American video game industry within an international market pointing out influences from Japan and Germany, yet the essays that follow evade a comparative approach to other markets and epitomize their projects' emphasis on Americanness. Although Mark J.P. Wolf is right to accept the difficulty in tracing a national character within a transnational game industry, many essays that follow manage to highlight the American ideological, cultural and historical underpinnings in the video game narratives and in the game design that they undertake to examine.

The essays offer case studies of video games that take place at different periods of times (dystopian futures or troubled pasts) and places rich in symbolic associations. They employ different narrative modes, such as the trope of doom and apocalypse, of the road narratives and of westward movement. In "The end is nigh! Bring forth the shepard" the apocalyptic formula poses as the accepted trope that has been revived since Michael Wiggleworth's "The day of doom" (1662), utilizing the concept of America as an "unfinished country" (p. 35). The essay takes the video games trilogy *Mass effect* as an example of the role of apocalyptic narratives in the twenty-first century. In their essay, Michael Fuchs, Michael Philips and Stefan Rabitsch offer insights into the ways the game's narrative and gameplay are influenced by the American national creed. America stands out as the chosen, the divine nation, its narrative deeply rooted in the American imagination of exceptionalism.

Westward expansion and the frontier myth are prevalent in both the *Mass effect* trilogy and in the video game *The last of us*. According to David Callahan, geography assigns further meanings in the cultural and historical reading of the game. Playing the game acts as reading, actually allowing the deciphering of the historical cultural subtexts. Additionally, spatial movement towards the west

turns playing into writing, creatively reinscribing meaning in the gamer's meaningful choices. In the same vein, in her brief analysis of *Skyrim*, Patricia Maier uses as a springboard Juuls' idea that the game's rules are as important as the game's fictional world, adding that that subjective play equally contributes to the creation of the game meaning. In such contexts then, the road trip lends itself as a trope for celebrating Americanness. Mobility in the game poses as freedom to make choices related to movement in order to acquire a number of perspectives.

Agency, Murray's idea of interactivity and desire for participation in her seminal work *Hamlet on the holodeck* (1997), is translated in the anthology as having the freedom to make choices, recreate ideas about identity, race and gender and, ultimately, help the gamer attain individuation — yet, it is an element that could probably have been emphasized more or even monopolized the anthology. Because looking into agency means recognizing the priority of the player and of the gameplay in the ludic experience. The essay “Seasonal seriality, tele-realism, and the bio-politics of digital sports games” critically assesses the effects of challenging or reproducing racial and gender stereotypes through symbolic attributions of value via both narrative elements and mechanic emphasis on the materiality of the body. Sebastian Domsch does an excellent job in delineating how archetypal narrative structures are selected according to the affordances and limitations of the medium of the video game and affect agency, suggesting also that in “terrorist narrative” individual agency is emphasized. What is more, historical debt and personal agency are central issues in *BioShock infinite* as an example of commemorative culture celebrating white supremacy, as Manuel Franz and Henning Jansen analyze. They draw attention on how the ludic elements of the game reinforce the narrative or diverge from it. Most importantly, they address the main question posed in this anthology and illustrate how gameplay and personal agency can reconnect the game history with U.S. historical memory.

In starting from the Lefebvrian idea about the social production of space and in rewriting Michel de Certeau's idea of “scripting” lived urban spaces, Dietmar Meinel indicates the importance of the player's interaction with and within space. In *Mirror's edge* he beautifully showcases how “culturally coded gamespace” helps inscribe the gamer in the game world as well as reinscribe ideas about culture (p. 70). In particular, he concedes that movement and laws of Parkour are trans-

forming the environment and redefining the urban experience, subverting ideas about accepted and non accepted “sites of urban spectacle” (p. 81). Thus the video game architectural structure promotes a new idea of womanhood as contrasted to the white male narrative in other video game genres like shooter games, adventure games, MMRPGs and digital sports games.

Immersion as an intrinsic element of the gaming experience is explored by Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu. They address the immersive potential of AAA videogames by drawing on the distinction David J. Bolter and Richard Grusin have made between immediacy (the tendency to create media that closely reflect and represent reality) and hypermediacy (the foregrounding of the medium with a fragmentary effect on the game’s narrative). They exemplify how fragmentation, digression and metatextuality enhance immersive experiences and explain that narration tries to make up for the game’s fragmentary mechanics. Therefore, they return to the narrative potential of ludic games by trying to demonstrate the way in which the materiality of horror video games resembles that of eighteenth century novels, which seek to attain realism through epistolary and other factual elements, like maps, diaries and enhance the immersion of the recipients.

Along the same line, “Time travelling to American revolution” explores the possibility of immersive media like theme parks and video games with a view to reconnecting with American past. Sabrina Mittermeier explores how “theming” that is ‘narrative placemaking’ — in the form of disneyfied storytelling” (relying on Alan Bryman’s “Disneyization”) in theme parks as well as the use of certain elements like iconography, source material and authentic language in video games give an air of authenticity to the experience and claim a share of American history and culture for the participants of the experience. Although she fails to stress the negative connotations of disneyization enough, she calls for the immersive reclaiming of the past. In a similar plea to the editor’s, she insists that American studies be “done right” by means of stepping in and assisting in understanding immersive media through a study of the cultural context of production.

Ludic literature poses as a curious convergence of the gaming and reading experience. The didactic role of both these experiences, with special interest in neoliberal subjectivities and “capitalist narratives” (p. 178) — which teach the players that more is better through accumulation — is analyzed by Doug Stark

and Domsch. Stark draws our attention to the *Ready player one* novel and its ludic potential due to the different media, like online forums and wikis which enhance the reading experience. Extremely valuable is the idea of “gaming capital” (p. 154) — coined by Maria Consavo — assumed to convert in-game money into real-world monetary value. The novel cultivates a certain game ethic in a society where the gamers’ subculture makes them appear as saviors. The essay brings in many theories about neoliberalism in the twenty-first digital century and informs Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the “cultural capital” (p. 160-161).

Last but certainly not least, game designers are regarded as similar to “narrative architects” who build on the game’s narrative design, its architectural structure that has its inner meaning. The final essays in the anthology do justice to the aesthetic pleasures derived from the configuration of such elements when playing videogames. They stress the importance of visibility and the incorporation of music and sounds in the creation of the gameworlds. They see “visual design [...] as the extension of simple storytelling. Even the placement of simple objects can tell microstories” (p. 235). Music also assists in “accumulating multiple layers of meaning” (p. 250) and affects interactivity and the diegetic character of the game.

For all the reasons spelled out above and in the anthology, video games have a place in American studies and deserve to be integrated as cultural products and as objects of aesthetic and ludic pleasure per se since the suggested interactions can have a beneficial effect on the theoretical and methodological research of American studies. They can certainly arm us with the acuteness to appreciate new media forms and textualities that enter the cultural production scene. Yet, what has not been emphasized enough is the need to study the time and space in tandem with the conditions of the production of the given video games as cultural products. All contributions willingly — though quite unwittingly — evade the issue of the tensions deriving from a ruling entertainment industry. Under such pressures and demands can video games offer new and unbiased perspectives and understandings of America’s historical and cultural inheritance or do they perpetuate a culture of amnesia by purposefully allowing deviations from historical precision and facts? Who is to judge the value and integrity of these commercial products of an insatiable entertainment industry? These questions can stay with us and allow us to contemplate about societal, economic and technological parameters; they can

haunt video game researchers, students and fans until we all get the pleasure of gobbling down a new collection of ludic experiences in another volume.

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