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Playful Identities,
or the Ludification of Culture

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One of the main aims of game studies is to investigate to what extent and in what ways computer games are currently transforming the understanding of and the actual construction of personal and cultural identities. Computer games and other digital technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet seem to stimulate playful goals and to facilitate the construction of playful identities. This transformation advances the ludification of today's culture in the spirit of Johan Huizinga's *homo ludens*.

Keywords: *play; identity; narratology; ludology*

In 2001, the first academic, peer-reviewed (online) journal dedicated to computer game research, *Game Studies*, came out. According to editor in chief Espen Aarseth, this was "Year One of Computer Game Studies" as an international, academic field.[1] This claim was based on the success of the first international scholarly conference on computer games, Computer Games and Digital Textualities, organized by the IT University of Copenhagen in March of the same year.[2] The year before, the MIT Program in Comparative Media Studies, directed by Henry Jenkins, had organized a national conference, Computer and Video Games Come of Age, in cooperation with the International Digital Software Association.[3] These two theorists, Aarseth and Jenkins, both of them crucial to the emergence of game studies, faced each other in a debate held in Sweden in 2005.[4] This debate will serve as a point of reference for my discussion of the current state of game studies in this article. In answering the question, why game studies now, I will also refer to the academic work in game studies that I have been involved in since my appointment to the Faculty of the Humanities, Utrecht University, the Netherlands, in 1998.

Why Game Studies *Now*?

It is important to study computer games (including arcade games, console, and handheld video games) now because like television and music, they have become a phenomenon of great cultural importance. As Jenkins stated in the debate, games are technologically, economically, aesthetically, socially, and culturally important: "This is a medium that anyone who wants to understand where our culture is at, has to look

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at." The computer game industry has a large impact on our culture, and as statistics show, it is the fastest growing entertainment industry, rivaling the film industry in revenues. Worldwide turnover is estimated at around $20 billion. As children spend more and more time on computer games, we witness a struggle of what attention-economists call "eyeball hours." Research done by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office shows that in 2004, young people spent roughly the same amount of time on media as in the 1970s. Every week, they have 45 hours at their disposal for leisure activities, 19 hours of which they spend on media. This means that the time spent on playing computer games is no longer spent on say, reading books, magazines, and newspapers.[5]

As Robert Edward Davis (1976) showed, "new" media such as motion pictures, radio, and television have always been promoted and attacked in popular argument since their introduction but only studied academically in detail much later. One of the main aims of our University Program, New Media and Digital Culture, is to investigate to what extent and in what ways computer games are currently transforming our understanding of as well as the actual construction of personal and cultural identities. We study the impact of massive multiplayer online role-playing games, such as World of Warcraft; historical simulation games, such as Civilization and Age of Empire; and first-person shooter games, such as America's Army and investigate whether these games offer an opportunity for a renaissance shift in today's culture (Rushkoff, 2005). In September 2005, Valerie Frissen, Jos de Mul (both from the Faculty of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands), and I started Playful Identities, a research program funded by the Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). Because digital technologies seem to stimulate "playful goals" (Vattimo, 1998) or "the play element in culture" (Huizinga, 1955), we investigate the ways in which mobile phones, the Internet, and computer games not only facilitate the construction of these playful identities but also advance the ludification of culture in the spirit of Johan Huizinga's (1955) *homo ludens*.[6]

Why Game *Studies Now*?

In the Aarseth-Jenkins debate, Jenkins linked the difficulties inherent to a definition of game studies to the question of what the priority of research should be: "Should we focus on what is most gamelike, or most medialike, or most storylike, or more spatial, more character driven, or gender driven, or more ideological?" What both debaters agreed on is that the definition of games studies as a discussion between (mostly Scandinavian) ludologists and (mostly American) narratologists is an oversimplification and a reduction of the field. What threatens game studies is this false dilemma fallacy. Game studies is a multifaceted field, and as members of an academic community we will only be able to deal with the complexity of computer games as hybrid texts if we take all these facets into account. Therefore, at the inaugural Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference Level Up (at Utrecht in 2003) and in its proceedings (Copier & Raessens, 2003), as well as in the *Handbook of Computer*

Game Studies (Raessens & Goldstein, 2005), we distinguished (at least) six different points of view or approaches from which computer games may be studied, namely, history, design and reception of computer games, and computer games as an aesthetic, cultural, and social phenomenon.[7]

Although the subtitle of our Playful Identities Project (From Narrative to Ludic Self-Construction) seems to refer to an overall transformation of our postmodern culture from a predominantly narrative to a predominantly ludic ontology, in today's media culture however, it is to be expected that narrative and game elements will continue to coexist in hybrid forms (Juul, 2005). To be able to study this complex situation, our interdisciplinary program combines a conceptual-philosophical, media-theoretical, and qualitative-empirical approach. First, it contains a theory of ludic identity that critically elaborates on the work on narrative identity by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (de Mul, 2005). Second, we focus on concrete media practices made possible by the principles of new media (Jenkins, 2002; Manovich, 2001) in which users are not only caught in the system but also appropriate and domesticate these technologies (Frissen & Van Lieshout, in press). Third, we transgress the somewhat simplified opposition Jenkins refers to in the debate, between European game studies as "an intellectual top-down perspective" that privileges "definitional arguments" and American game studies based on "a bottom-up dialogue with game designers, the game industry and fans." Our qualitative-empirical investigation consists, among other things, of participatory observation, in depth-interviews, discourse analysis, textual analysis, and 7-day media use diaries.

Why *Game Studies Now*?

According to both Aarseth and Jenkins, the word *game* is not a well-defined academic term. General statements that define what "all games are" are not very useful. We have to be more precise, for example by distinguishing between genres, between games you play for fun and so-called serious games, and between games in general (Aarseth's object of study) and mediated games (that of Jenkins). In my own contribution to the *Handbook*, I argued against the claim that all computer games are deconstructing the hidden, naturalized, ideologically presupposed rules of the medium. This process of deconstruction takes place in early computer games and in genres such as simulation games in particular (Raessens, 2005). In the expert meeting New Theories and Methods in Media Violence Research, which took place at the Free University of Amsterdam in April 2005, Dolf Zillmann defined this need for precision as "stratification." By this he means that instead of sweeping generalizations, we need differentiation, for example more elaborate research on "the different forms of media violence itself, the psychological make-up of its audience, and the behavior commonly subsumed under aggression."

In our Playful Identities project, we distinguish between three different kinds of games and play, respectively, related to mobile phones, the Internet, and computer games. We investigate how and to what extent the medium-specific characteristics of

these media reconfigure the construction of personal and cultural identities. In the first project, we differentiate between mobile phone games one can play on a single mobile phone, so-called location-based or mixed reality games (e.g., BotFighters), and communication patterns that are augmented with play elements, such as the romantic play of flirting and the playful use of short message service, multimedia messaging system, and digital photography. In the second project, we investigate the Internet playground (Seiter, 2004): Internet-based games and playful Internet use, such as browsing the Web, meeting up with friends on sites such as Habbo Hotel, and instant messaging. In the third project, we investigate how computer games enable and/or disable gamers to participate in a ludic way in the reconstruction and deconstruction of pregiven identities and the construction of new playful identities (Raessens, 2005).

Why Game Studies Now?

The acceptance and proliferation of competing frameworks of interpretation seem to be the major characteristics of game studies within the humanities. This begs the question whether there are objective rules and standards for determining which interpretations are best (Eco, 1992, 1994). An interesting difference of opinion on this subject emerged in the Aarseth-Jenkins debate. According to Jenkins, new empirical evidence can force game researchers in general to modify or refine their research programs: "If they are smart, they change the tool to fit what they are looking at, if they are bad, it is a cookie cutter that only sees those things that their tool allows them to look at to begin with." Aarseth on the other hand argued that new empirical evidence predominantly proves narratology to be "not really a good model for studying and understanding" computer games and that we are witnessing "a transitional phase, a paradigm shift." In "Computer Game Studies, Year One," Aarseth already stated that "The debate about narratives and narratology's relevance to game studies . . . shows the very early stage we are still in" (see Note 1). Referring to "the struggle of controlling and shaping the theoretical paradigms," Aarseth defended the idea that computer games should be studied as a new discipline instead of within existing fields such as cinema and literature who are only "colonising" games.

What interests me most in this debate are the following methodological questions. Do we as an academic community of game researchers accept the coexistence of competing frameworks of interpretation, in accordance with the tradition of the humanities? This seems to be Jenkins's position, and it is one I agree with, when he states that both narratology and ludology can be equally productive. Or, do we adhere to the paradigmatic character of academic progress following Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science? This seems to be Aarseth's position when he rules out narratology as an outdated paradigm. If we want game studies to really come of age academically, we should not only further develop different theories and methods but also make the latter the object of our research and discussion.

Notes

1. See www.gamestudies.org. In October 1993, the computer game magazine *Edge* was published for the first time. Although very informative, *Edge* is not an academic journal. See www.edge-online.co.uk.

2. See diac.itu.dk/cgdt. In 2003, the Center for Computer Games Research was founded at the IT University of Copenhagen, see game.itu.dk. Principal researcher is Espen Aarseth.

3. See mit.edu/cms/games. International Digital Software Association's name has been changed to Entertainment Software Association; see www.theesa.com.

4. This debate took place on January 18, 2005, and was organized by the University of Umeå, Sweden. The debate is available as a real media stream; see rtsp://www2.humlab.umu.se:7070/archive/humlabseminariet/20050118_speldebatt.rm.

5. For these statistics, see www.theesa.com, www.game-research.com, and www.scp.nl. *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds, A Kaiser Family Foundation Study* (see www.kff.org) shows in more detail that the most avid users of computer games are the same kids who most watch television and listen to music. One of the other key findings is that there are important demographic differences in media use, not only based on age but also on gender and race.

6. For more information about our research program, see www.playful-identities.nl.

7. For information about the Digital Games Research Association, see www.digra.org. For their conferences, see www.gamesconference.org. The term *ludology* in this context was first used by Gonzala Frasca; see ludology.org.

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