

Cultures of Digital Gamers: Practices of Appropriation.

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ABSTRACT

This essay will attempt to show that Anglo-American culture research can make a significant contribution to a better understanding of digital games, their production contexts and acquisition processes. A close examination of a game's production context will shed light on structures, processes and ideologies which influence the development of a game on a conscious or unconscious level. The analysis of the game itself can reveal models of society presented in the game, intrinsic identification potentials and creative acquisition potentials. But the way the game is eventually adopted by the player can only be made clear by a close examination of its acquisition and the various forms of reception and enjoyment it induces.

Author Keywords

Culture, Player, Gender

CULTURAL STUDIES AND DIGITAL GAMES

This essay will attempt to show that Anglo-American culture research can make a significant contribution to a better understanding of digital games, their production contexts and acquisition processes.¹ The essay is based upon the theories and methods in the tradition of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) which has concentrated on the social role of popular media products for a long time. What are the advantages of the proposed approach compared to the other paradigms of the social sciences and the humanities, as for example linguistics, film studies or educational science? Three features of Cultural Studies seem to be especially promising. First of all a Cultural Studies project is dealt with in a multi-disciplinary approach, i.e. theories and methods from other faculties can simply be integrated if

¹ The compound noun "digital games" is used for all sorts of electronic games, irrespective of the platform on which they are played. This does not imply that it is not significant, whether a game is installed on a PC, a console, an arcade cabinet, a mobile phone or another terminal equipment, because usually this will have consequences on the target group. The rules of the game and the form of the representation will be adjusted to the platform and the reception situation will vary considerably.

they contribute to the epistemological interest. Secondly, the multi-perspective approach provides the opportunity to analyze games on various levels. Thirdly, the declared goal of Cultural Studies is to enable the recipient to deal with media products in a discerning and competent way. In particular the multi-perspective approach will lead to better results than an isolated approach. A close examination of a game's production context will shed light on structures, processes and ideologies which influence the development of a game on a conscious or unconscious level. The analysis of the game itself can reveal models of society presented in the game, intrinsic identification potentials and creative acquisition potentials. But the way the game is eventually adopted by the player can only be made clear by a close examination of its acquisition and the various forms of reception and enjoyment it induces.

CONTEXTS OF PRODUCTION

One aspect that is often neglected is that when a game is developed and released, conditions which are not directly related to the development process may play a significant role – as for example, processes of concentration in an increasingly globalized game industry, commercialization tendencies, as for example the placement of advertisements in games, and the development studios' increasing dependency on the companies responsible for the releases. These basic parameters are decisive factors whether a game will be produced in the end, whether companies monitor player activities, the way games are advertised, and, crucially, which social practices and ideologies influence a game. One important example for the analysis of production contexts is the discussion about the game series *America's Army*. It shows that the question, why a game was produced at a specific time and by a specific organization or institution, can be crucial. *America's Army: Operations* (developed by MOVES Institute of the US Navy) was released in 2002, one year after the 9/11 attacks, by the US Army. The game is provided free of charge on the internet and as a CD-ROM version in US recruitment offices.

The game's story line is similar to strategical "First-Person Shooters"² like *Counter Strike* (developed by Valve Software 1999). The game's objective is first of all to complete a military training offline and then to re-enact various military deployments online in the multi-player modus. According to official statements, the game series was developed to convey a realistic impression of the US army.³ But it seems much more probable that within the framework of the campaign "An Army of One" support for military deployments should be created and in particular new soldiers should be recruited. This campaign, which has become the most successful recruitment campaign in the entire US history, according to Power (2006), was made possible by the recording and analysis of all player activities. All players registering at an official recruitment office were recommended a customized military career based upon their hits, losses, breaches of rules, game duration and game frequency. Even if this form of propaganda seems to be new, one must not forget that there has been a close connection between the military and the (electronic) entertainment industry for a long time. So it only seems consistent that the US army works closely together with film companies, that it finances the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of South California and that it more and more utilizes engines of popular games to train its soldiers.⁴

GAME TEXT: IDEOLOGY, REPRESENTATION AND RULES

These contextual conditions, social practices and ideologies can often be identified in the game itself. There are various approaches to analyze the actual game text, but the one method prevalent in Cultural Studies is ideology criticism (cf. Kellner 1995). The term "ideology" refers here to a set of convictions, ideas or philosophies claiming to be valid and true and at the same time serving the interests of a social group. Ideology can both influence the level of representation of the game's characters and society models and the "ludic" structure, i.e. the rules and objectives of a game (on distinguishing representation and ludic structure: cf. Buckingham 2006, 9, 183). The ideologically critical discourse centered on the game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (developed by Rockstar North 2004) for a while. The focus of the criticism was the game's latent racism,

² In a first-person or ego shooter, the player sees the actions found in the game through the eyes of his/her character

³ As was to be expected, the "unsavoury" and "boring" aspects of a real war are omitted.

⁴ A game engine is the core of a computer or video game, responsible for the real time rendering of the graphics. *America's Army* uses the engine of *Unreal* (developed by Epic Games 1998), *Marine Doom* is based upon *Doom II* (developed by id Software 1993) and also *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear* is used in a modified version for training purposes.

because people from South and Central America are primarily represented as thieves, drug dealers, prostitutes or pimps. The presentation of the characters may possibly be racist, but the analysis of the ludic structure does not reveal any racist game objectives. The players are to a large extent free to decide whether they accept missions like bank robberies or contract murders or choose their own game objective, as for example just exploring the city. Such a discrepancy between representation and rules is not found in mere propaganda games, as *Ethnic Cleansing* (developed by Resistance Records 2002) or *Special Force* (developed by Hisbollah: 2003). Most of these games bluntly try to convey ideological convictions, e.g. the player in *Ethnic Cleansing* has the task to "cleanse the ghetto from Blacks, Latinos, and Jews"⁵ and in the first person shooter *Special Force* the player is a member of the "Islamic resistance" preventing an Israeli invasion of Lebanon⁶. Even a game which has won several awards and is classified as "pedagogically valuable" like *The Sims* (developed by Maxis 2000) can be the focus of an ideologically-critical discussion. The main point of criticism was the glorification of consumption and capitalism, because the easiest way to make one's Sims happy is to purchase products of any kind. But Will Wright, the developer of the game, considers *The Sims* to be a parody of the "American Way of Life" – purchased appliances break down, purchases have to be looked after and maintained. In the long run the player will find that consumption costs time and labour, but does not necessarily lead to happiness (cf. Pearce 2002, Laurel 2004). This example clarifies that a conclusion from an analysis of the game text to the player's reception or the integration into their daily lives is not always possible. The game text might be the basis of the acquisition process, but different interpretations and diverse forms of joy remain possible.

PRACTICES OF APPROPRIATION: JOY, CREATIVE ADAPTATION AND COMMUNITISATION

"There is also no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement." (Callois 2006 [1958], 125)

⁵ The player can choose between two characters, a skinhead and a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The blatant racism also is obvious in the way the game is advertised, claiming that you can hear "realistic negro sounds recorded on the spot with REAL niggers" (the sounds are in reality ape and monkey cries).

⁶ According to Hisbollah the reason for developing the game was the statement of an Arab child while playing an American video game – he wished he could be a Muslim freedom fighter playing against Jews.

The different forms of joy players experience during the acquisition of digital games are a fascinating topic for Cultural Studies. This joy is not necessarily triggered by the game text, nor does it have to coincide with the joy intended by the developer. It fluctuates, depending on the genre and in particular on individual, psychological factors. The type and intensity of joy might also vary during the game, and obviously a strategy game will provide a different kind of joy potential to a car racing game. In the end the player's expectations, his/her mood, competence, experience and taste will be decisive factors for the game experience (cf. amongst others Carr 2006, 52, 177) The involvement of joy is often initiated by various practices, as the creative adaptation of digital games or the membership in virtual communities, which exceed the actual game process.

The creative adaptation of digital games, regardless of whether it is carried out individually or collectively, can take various forms. Some players modify their games by the integration of characters, settings or music from films and TV series like *Star Wars* or *The Simpsons*⁷ Others design clothes, accessories, weapons, new levels, maps and characters.⁸ They write poetry and song lyrics, develop stories (fan fiction), draw scenes, comic strips and game characters (fan art) or elaborate aids which allow players to reach the game's objective (cheats, FAQs or walkthroughs), they make animated films with the help of game engines (machinima) or transform themselves into their favourite character in real life (cos play); (cf. amongst other Newman 2004:148). The adaptation process goes through various levels. The first step is that the players lose the aesthetic distance to the game, question the developer's authority and start to transcend the boundaries of the game text. (cf. Newman 2004: 148). The second step is the extension and adaptation of the game - the player becomes an author (cf. Bruns 2006, 100, 88). The aim of this semiotic transformation is the filling of gaps in the text. Circumstances, which are only hinted at in the game are developed further and completed, implicit relations are made explicit, game characters are placed in new situations or sexual preferences are modified. This kind of "intertextual game" (Fiske 1989, 1991) is more moulded by the player's motivations and interpretations than by the game actually played. A special case of modification is the

⁷ Especially ego shooters and "Massively Multi Player Online Role Playing Games" (MMORPG) are modified in the style of popular movies or series like *Aliens* or *The X-Files*. The most popular of all modifications developed by players is probably *Counter Strike* (developed by Valve Software 1999) based upon the game *Half-Life* (developed by Valve Software 1998).

⁸ Characters are often modified to achieve better identification potentials – a practise popular among homosexual player communities.

practice of playing a game "against the rules" (cf. Everett 2005, 318).⁹ This means, the players do not follow the game's objective but look for goals, which mirror their personal wishes and motivations. These objectives range from speed running – completing a game level as quickly as possible; and bug hunting – trying to find mistakes in the software; to re-programming - attempting to interfere with the game's intended course of action and the intended objective. These "refractory interpretations and practices" (Fiske 1989, 1991) show that components which play an inferior role or are irrelevant in the game itself, may become the decisive generator of the joy of playing. Thus the game is a resource for expressive and social activities (cf. Burn 2006, 88), a chance to act out wishes and visions and to articulate the interests of one's online and offline community. (cf. Pearce 2002, 11-12).¹⁰

The more time players spend with the dissemination of game specific information or the creative adaptation of games, the more probable is it that they are members of virtual computer game communities engaging themselves in individual games, genres or specific aspects of games. These (often temporary) communities range from loose alliances to sophisticated and well organised fan cultures featuring a fixed set of rules and norms, a common language and history, shared patterns of behaviour and their own institutions. (cf. amongst others De Mul 2005, 264). Normally a player will only be accepted in these communities, if he/she can document his/her motivation by the existence of competence and/or knowledge (cf. Newman 2004: 157, Winter 1995, Wiemker 1998). This competence which is usually focused upon the specific social world, serves on the one hand to affirm membership to the scene, on the other hand to define oneself within the "game culture" and to set oneself apart from other members. Depending on the degree of involvement various player types are distinguished. The level of the "newbie" is first and foremost characterized by curiosity; he/she hardly knows the specialized culture and does not spend a lot of time in this culture. If his/her interest increases and he/she engages more intensely in this hobby, he/she will become a "tourist". The status of a "freak" can only be achieved if competence and knowledge are large enough and a lasting stabilization sets in (cf. Winter 1995). Needless to say, these fan activities consume a considerable amount of time; nevertheless membership of these communities is very satisfying for many players, since they can gain social prestige, self-affirmation and a wide range of social contacts there. Besides, most of the virtual cultures provide

⁹ So-called cheats are not used for "playing against the rules" by most players, but considered a kind of "short cut".

¹⁰ Thus production and reception processes are not necessarily diametrically opposed (cf. on this also Buckingham 2006, 13, Fiske 1989, 1991, Jenkins 1992, Winter 1995, Wiemker 1998, Newman 2004: 145).

different kinds of assets. For example, players can benefit from the collective or specialized knowledge of the community (knowledge assets), fall back upon a large, sophisticated network (network assets) and benefit from the solidarity within the community (social assets). In doing so, virtual communities sometimes become so significant to players that they seek and (apparently also) find moral support in them. This goes to show that even though these communities exist merely virtually, “real“ social functions are assumed. These new forms of (media) “communitisation“ (Weber 1922) refute the widespread claim that the mediatization of contemporary life inevitably leads to atomization and dissolution of social relationships.¹¹ Instead, these communities are the prototype of a new form of collectivity, a collectivity organizing itself, supporting socialization, and providing the opportunity of looking deeply into the construction of one’s own identity.¹²

REPRESENTATION AND ACQUISITION OF GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS

Processes of individual development are often initiated by the representation of identity markers in digital games. The parameters of these identity markers are the representation of class, race, ethnic group, age, sexual orientation, biological sex and social gender. The grappling with one’s identity can be carried out in various ways: first of all, by the choice and modification of game characters, secondly, by the actual game process, thirdly by the simultaneous or later reflection on the game, and fourthly, by communication with other players. Needless to say, not every game or every genre will induce identity constructions to the same extent. Genres like society simulations and role-playing games (RPGs) provide an extraordinarily large potential in the manifold choice-, modification- and development potentialities. As one example, the representation and the handling of biological sex and social gender representation in games will be discussed.

Biological sex and social gender cannot be equated, even if social gender corresponds to biological sex, it emphasizes the social construct and the cultural conveyance of gender roles. (cf. amongst others Bryce & Rutter 2005, 302). The social function of gender attributions is the regulation of the behaviour of the both sexes between each other. Thus socially accepted norms, expectations, roles, the way

¹¹ According to Max Weber, the term “communitisations“ refers to a social relationship which is based upon its members’ subjective (affectionate or traditional) feeling of belonging together.

¹² The vast popularity of (fantasy) online role games like *Everquest* (developed by Sony Online Entertainment 1999) or *World of Warcraft* (developed by Blizzard Entertainment 2004) also seems to suggest an increased interest in virtual communities.

individuals conceive the world and themselves and how they present themselves are determined. In accordance with these considerations, gender constructs are community and time specific, and therefore generally changeable. The representation of game characters are identification proposals, which might be used by the players to develop their gender role identity. (cf. Schindler 1996). In this sense, games function as socialisation agents operating rhetorically, which means that, depending on objectives (or specific power structures) they confirm, accentuate, reverse, reject or present gender roles in an ironic light. In doing so, they play a double role: during the process of socialization they can contribute to the formation of gender identity, similar to other media. This does not mean that the player’s personality is inevitably changed, but it is possible that social conceptions, values and norms the player has already internalized are confirmed and reinforced. On the other hand they might have an emancipatory effect by encouraging the adoption of others perspectives (cf. Gee 2006, 259) and sensitize the player to the construction of gender roles, gender specific problems and social marginalizations.

As a basic principle, when carrying out an analysis of gender identity markers, the following questions should be asked:¹³ First of all, are there male and female game characters available at all? On the one hand, not every game requires human game characters, for example a player might steer a vehicle or an abstract object, on the other hand, it could be the case that due to the game’s perspective, the character’s clothes or disguises no clear statement concerning the character’s sex can be made. Secondly, is the ratio between female and male game characters balanced, i.e. are they represented according to their appropriate ratio in society? Thirdly, are the characters playable or so-called non-player characters (NPCs)? Often female characters are present in the game, but only in form of the (non-playable) princess, who either has to be saved or is waiting for the player as a „reward“. Fourthly, do male and female characters have the same action options and do they have the same chances of winning, or does the choice of the sex change the game’s objective? Fifthly, in which way are the characters designed aesthetically, are stereotypical or sexist representations dominant (e.g. sexually provocative clothes, emphasis on physical attributes)? In order to answer this question, it is necessary

¹³ Even if the gender concept is often only associated with the representation of female game characters, it is just as valid for the representation and acquisition of masculinity. For example Bryce and Rutter (2005, 308) emphasize this fact, when they claim “It is also possible to consider the resistance of dominant conceptualizations of masculinity by male gamers. It is also possible that male gamers may construct an alternative masculine role that challenges the traditional masculine emphasis on physical strength and competition.“

to examine avatars outside the actual game situation. How are the characters represented in cut scenes¹⁴ and full motion videos (FMVs), in the manual and in reviews, on the game's package and on advertisement posters? Sixthly, are new discourses on femininity and masculinity present in the game or are traditional gender stereotypes maintained? Seventhly, which characters lend themselves to individual reflection and the empowerment of players, by enabling processes like virtual cross-dressing, gender customizing or gender swapping?

Not many universal tendencies can be determined when trying to draw conclusions on the representation of gender categories in digital games. On the one hand, the once clear, quantitative predominance of male game characters, keeps diminishing, most notably in the playable characters or the central NPCs (cf. Schindler 1996). On the other hand, when representing gender categories, especially in the case of female avatars, usually sexualized stereotypes are retained. The image stereotypes resemble those that can be found in other media, however a stronger polarisation and an exaggeration of sexual characteristics is prevalent.

"Nearly all virtual protagonists display huge breasts, extreme wasp waists, and ultra-long legs" (Richard; Zaremba 2005, 294). In particular the depiction of Lara Croft has been criticized as sexist due to her being scarcely clad and her "anatomically impossible" waist-breast ratio.¹⁵ According to this view, the female star of the *Tomb Raider*-series (developed by Core Design, as of 1996) is an object of voyeuristic satisfaction and a means of triggering the joy of power and control over the main game character (cf. amongst others Berger 2002, Bryce & Rutter 2005, 303). The circulation of the "nude patch" which makes Lara Croft's clothing disappear, seems to substantiate the suspicion of sexism. But there also exists an oppositional interpretation, which considers the application of a strong, female heroine in the game revolutionary and emancipatory. In using a female game character, a positive role model is provided and female, but also male players are given the opportunity to assume a female game perspective.

While *Tomb Raider* only allows the steering of a female game character, other games provide the opportunity to create an individual avatar, regardless of sex. But little is known about how and for what reason players experiment with gender constructions by choosing a game character of

the opposite sex (cf. Carr 2006, 167).¹⁶ The choice might not be motivated by the intention to reflect one's own gender identity; advantages in the game or simply the enjoyment of the (sexualized) aesthetic of the game character might be more decisive factors.

Even though most games tend to reproduce and affirm traditional gender roles and stereotypes (cf. Bryce & Rutter 2005, 301, 302), in future more female and generally more differentiated and more variable role options with corresponding interaction possibilities can be expected in digital games. Thus players ideally can discern the social construct of gender and identity concepts and try to deal with it in a more conscious way in their "real" lives. (cf. amongst others Richard; Zaremba 2005: 292, 293).

MEDIA LITERACY AND DIGITAL GAMES

The application of the theories and the methods of Cultural Studies shows, that it is necessary to examine digital games in their contexts. A survey of production contexts reveals general conditions, social practices and ideologies influencing the development of a game. The analysis of game texts, of representations and rule structures illuminates how society models propagandized by the developer, preferred lifestyles, role models, implicit moral concepts, values and norms manifest themselves in the game. The examination of the acquisition of digital games clarifies the variability of interpretations and productive practices and the various forms of creating significance and joy.¹⁷

Since digital games play such an important role in the lives of many adolescents and adults, one cannot help asking oneself, whether players can learn something "positive" by playing and whether playing supports the acquisition of media literacy. According to Gee (2006) learning is always a part of the game, as occupation with digital games initiates critical learning processes, which allow the player to experience the world in a new way, to get to know new communities with various social practices and to acquire resources for future learning and problem solving. (cf. Gee 2006, 228, 238). "When people learn to play video games, they are learning a new *literacy*." (cf. Gee 2006, 229). Thus players acquire a new form of media competence which enables them to discern media critically, to use them in a selective way and to produce media products themselves. They acquire the ability to grasp media social processes in an analytical way according to ethical and socially

¹⁴ Because it is the cut scenes which are especially telling on how the personality of a game's character was intended by the developer (cf. Richard; Zaremba 2005, 296).

¹⁵ According to Toby Gard, the developer of Lara Croft, her unnaturally big bust size was originally a mistake. When he wanted to undo his error, his colleagues encouraged him to leave the program parameter for the bust size at 150%.

¹⁶ Additionally we do not know, which significance a player ascribes to his/her game character, whether this significance is static or variable, affirmative, oppositional or negotiated (cf. Everett 2005, 312).

¹⁷ Here I would like to remind that without an analysis of the actual acquisition of the game by the players, the examination of the game text can only be a reflection on potentials.

responsible aspects and to use them in a reflexive way for their own actions. In order to do so, they use their knowledge of the correlations in the media system and they learn to use technical equipment for receptive and interactive purposes, as well as for producing innovative and creative media concepts (cf. Mikos 2004). It is the autonomous creation of media products, such as the modification and adaptation of games, which is a first step to the acquisition of media competence. But since currently the autonomous creation of complex games still requires much expertise, in future hopefully more tools and engines will be developed which allow players to develop their own versions of community, society and identity, to disseminate them and, of course, to play them.

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List of Games

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Counter-Strike (developed by: Valve Software 1999)

Doom (developed by id Software 1993)

Doom II: Hell on Earth (developed by: id Software 1994)

Ethnic Cleansing (developed by: Resistance Records 2002)

Everquest (developed by: Sony Online Entertainment 1999)

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (developed by: Rockstar North 2004)

Half-Life (developed by: Valve Software 1998)

Special Force (developed by: Hisbollah 2003)

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Rogue Spear (developed by: Red Storm Entertainment 1999)

The Sims (developed by: Maxis 2000)

Tomb Raider (developed by: Core Design 1996)

Unreal (developed by: Epic Games 1998)

World of Warcraft (developed by: Blizzard Entertainment 2004)