
FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Review: Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson, eds. (2008)
*The Pleasures of Computer Gaming:
Essays on Cultural History, Theory and Aesthetics*
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Digital games – once just the domain of video arcades – are now a substantial part of modern culture and Western existence. Even discounting all the dedicated consoles (mainly PlayStations and Xboxes) and the game-software available for PCs, gaming is currently so widespread that almost all cellular phones have the capacity, albeit in a miniaturised form, and the television – instead of just broadcasting shows and old movies – has been transfigured into an interactive toy box. Some cinemas even offer private session where, if you so wish, you can plug in your favourite playable media and shoot-em-up (or explore, or punch, or double jump) on the once-silver screen.

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Major connections between film and gaming are becoming increasingly blurred and crisscrossed, especially in the use of CGI, and the general hybridisation of mass multi-media. Perhaps less obvious (for a medium often labelled as brain-numbing) are the implications it has for philosophy and how we think and conceive of culture, and yet, computer gaming has become so inextricable from life (or from *Second Life*, as one playable online virtual world is called) that it does intersect significantly with all levels of the humanities.

It is only fitting to begin a review of Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson's edited collection *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming* in the same way it starts, namely with a topical computer game as an example – in this case a very pleasurable game called *Braid* (2008), which is currently gaining a lot of attention (both in the media and the gaming public). Jonathan Blow's *Braid* is the sort of ontological labyrinth that Jorge Luis Borges might have made. Embedded in the simple gameplay design are genuinely huge concepts. *Braid* was acclaimed in *Eurogamer* for 'crafting puzzles that stretch your mind and force you to re-evaluate every assumption you ever held about how games can work' (2008).

In the game, the player's configurative acts can be rewound. This malleable time is *in lieu* of losing lives, however the cancelled operations still remain onscreen. This mechanism strikes through earlier runs and rewinds the gamer's actions while they play, like a bifurcating hypertext, in order to solve brainteasers caused by the forking paths. The contemplative tone of *Braid*, its Zen-like sense of playing a mind-bending game of *Solitaire*, is an experience. It is not so much a game to which philosophy can be applied, but a take on philosophy turned into a playable commodity.

In Swalwell and Wilson's new collection of essays, the politics of play are similarly seen as philosophical commodities. Gameplay (and all its attendant pleasures) constitutes much more than just games themselves. Additionally, the editors confirm the position of gaming culture in a much larger historical and critical context of visual media. This approach combines to make the topic interesting to readers in the joint fields of film and philosophy, and not solely to ludologists (purists in the study of games).

Indeed, the editors are acerbic (although acid-tongues are held firmly in cheek) towards the outspoken ludologist, Jesper Juul, who prefers to locate playable media within the history of games, in contrast to visual cultures (see *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, 2005). Swalwell and Wilson tout the cinematic conceits of computer games, especially through the example of non-playable cut-scenes. Maybe this overshoots a more obvious point in defending the commonalities between gaming and cinema: namely, that the player's avatar is always present in a complex *mise-en-scène*.

After addressing these cinematic arguments in the introduction, the editors inform us that the intellectual concepts invoked by computer games are relevant to a 'Who's Who' of philosophers. Computer games call upon the abiding philosophical notions of experience, subjectivity, representation and – most saliently – ideas of simulation. Swalwell and Wilson conceive of computer games as the culmination of a sweeping arc of technological and artistic developments in mass media. Like it or not, the children of Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony are here to stay. *Pleasures* would seem to suggest that this is not a brave new world, but the realisation of philosophies pullulating from Plato's cave onwards.

The explicit critical significance of this collection is to clear the playing field – so to speak – on the capture-the-flag game going on between ludologists and media theorists (although the editors still fire many Parthian shots at ludopurists and their more prescriptive approach to 'gameness'). The editors admit 'both the continuities and discontinuities' (4) between videogame culture and the broader visual cultures surrounding it, but seek to move onwards and away from the dispute. This can be seen in the volume's appeal to the practices of pleasure, and its emphasis on entertainment as something both camps can agree upon: the common ground of fun. Appropriately enough, this is exactly what this collection tries to be: as enjoyable, engaging, and cognitively rewarding as games are presented to be.

Correspondingly, the organisation of essays in *Pleasures* can be imagined as analogous to a well-crafted game, with the papers being eight different virtual levels. While the collection does not feature juggernauts in the field (like

Janet H. Murray, Maurie-Laure Ryan and Lev Manovich) all the essays are complex and intelligent; some are even breakthroughs. *Pleasures* begins with the lightest and most light-hearted piece as an entry point, and then works towards placing increasing demands on the reader, drawing us deeper into the gamers' world. Fittingly, the first essay comments on a similar incrementality (which is known as '*ludus*') in games.

Centred around the populist, relatively easy game *Lego Star Wars*, the chapter 'Little Jesuses and *@?-off Robots' by Seth Giddings and Helen W. Kennedy primarily concerns 'gameplay' itself, the two-way dynamic exchange between player and game. The authors argue that the pleasures of play-experience are found not in the artificial sense of mastery – in 'clocking' games – but in decoding what it needs the player to do next, in being played *with*. Success is not couched in terms of winning and losing, but in learning the codes. Basically, the game is seen as software that programmes our minds. To quote the creator (Jennifer Jason Leigh) of a Matrix-like videogame in Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999): 'You don't [just] play the game, the game plays you'.

Where 'Little Jesuses' missteps is that the chosen game (*Lego Star Wars*) is an extraordinary forgiving title, especially designed to be playful, simplistic and encouraging of trial-and-error. There is no possible way to 'lose' as the lives are infinite and there are no stakes. This does not represent the vast majority of games, where mastery is king. The dialogic back-and-forth between the player and the technology could perhaps be better demonstrated by more adaptive digital games like Peter Molyneux's *Fable* (2004) which responds and alters in tandem with players' behaviours (even down to whether they crush flowers or not) rather than to clear-cut win/lose scenarios.

Regardless, the work is of critical interest in how it manages (via film) to innovatively investigate the experiential dimensions of gameplay. Giddings and Kennedy overcome the essentialist problems implicit in both direct observation and self-report by using camcorders to record the behaviours of players and the computerised actions at the same time, and combine this with self-report. This reflexive gaze should work well for reader-response studies, as it allows the researchers a somatic purchase on the play-experience, without all the

drawbacks of distraction (i.e. becoming too deeply involved in the game to notice something about it).

The next essay is 'Gaming/Gambling: Addiction and the Videogame Experience' by Joyce Goggin. Her perspective on gaming addiction is one of safe distance, comparing games to Sartre's smoking habits. The increasing difficulty levels in well-designed gameplay is exposed as a ratchet system of rewards and repetition, making gaming a hard addiction to beat (or to 'clock'). Any player who has spent hours searching an already completed level trying slavishly to find every last 'bonus point' knows this state of mind all too well, and Goggin captures it perfectly.

In an insightful move, Goggin ties the evanescent lures of points and bonuses (not dissimilar to gambling) back to a history of addictive consumerism in entertainment, namely as the modern equivalent of commodities tracing back to the Industrial Age. Especially showcased is the serial format in fiction, where the buying public were always left wanting *more*. Indeed, computer games are loaded with such cliff-hangers and instalments (levels/quests); none of which is more addictive than the ability to undo 'Game Over' by obsessively hitting 'Reload'.

Goggin argues that gameplay (and its potential to be highly addictive for some) stems from our culturally 'serialised mind-set' (38). She views this as another form of the assembly line, but one of consumption: gearing our reception of popular media, and in this case, popular and *playable* media. Goggin sees the symptomatic 'seriality' of human experience as now irreversible, and inherently simpatico with gameplay.

Goggin presents our susceptibility to become game-obsessed drones as the result of psychological preconditioning as well, and not just predilections to addictive seriality. According to Freud's principles, humans do in fact seek fundamentally seductive economies of pleasure (the 'conversion rate' of effort to rewards). In gameplay this economy is automatically geared towards the 'easy' and 'immediate'. Added to the ways that pleasure is dictated and delivered by the game, the economy is inherently an expenditure of self (both in terms of loss and cost). As in gambling, the sacrifices of identity, labour and time mean that

the player must interpret the game subjectively as somehow 'worth it'. The lure of vague dissatisfaction – the artificial incentive of constant, partial reinforcement – keeps everything going. Gaming, this intriguing chapter argues, is founded upon an interactive dynamic of human dissonance and the anticipation of pleasure.

Goggin uses computer games as a cutting critique of modernism, mechanisation and popular culture. She unravels the entangled braids of gambling, addiction and computer gaming by putting it in terms of their shared commoditisation of chance-versus-perceived-skill. This is the gateway into Julian Kücklich's chapter: 'Forbidden Pleasures: Cheating in Computer Games', which shows how gamers try to stack the odds and see 'cheats' (separate to cheating) as an integral part of the experience. Perhaps the justification for this lies in how cheats alter the economies of pleasure; making a game more enjoyable by reducing the otherwise time-consuming expense, and subverting the internal rules.

Kücklich provides a descriptive typology of something both celebrated and taboo, namely cheats, which are often avoided in critical analyses of games as literal 'exceptions to the rule'. However, cheats are inextricably a facet of gaming culture, as are the fascinating challenges they present to gameplay. Cheats change the experience: circumventing the addictions discussed earlier (except perhaps addiction to cheating) and reinforcing the paradigm of mastery. In multiplayer games, cheats turn into a Red Queen scenario, where everyone must use them to keep up, in effect becoming the new rules of the game.

Rather than being censorious, Kücklich wisely decides to approach cheats as evolutionary, emergent gameplay: where players' actual behaviours exceed the manufacturer's intentions. It is something akin to renegade art, or culture jamming: an intrinsically subversive act against contemporary consumerist culture. The critical difference – where cheats are unique – is that they are created socially, i.e. by a community of fans and hardcore gamers. This moves away from the assembly-line/chain-gang of non-artisan and depersonalised gameplay (i.e. playing within conventions), and makes cheats a thoroughly social aesthetic.

'Forbidden Pleasures' could be slightly more radical, riskier. Kücklich's typology concentrates on how cheats change the *sensory* perception of games (rather than in how they skew the *cultural* perceptions of gameplay): altering how things look, and what can be accessed in 'game space'. However, this connects well with the fourth chapter, Swalwell's own 'Movement and Kinaesthetic Responsiveness', which sees gameplay as giving a whole new meaning to 'moving pictures'. In games, the *mise-en-scène* is a perceptual space that players navigate through. What Swalwell is discussing here is essentially an aesthetic of proprioceptive coherence – which is central to philosophical issues to do with the hybridisation of game worlds and reality.

Unlike Giddings and Kennedy, Swalwell's research methods are purely observational, which has advantages and disadvantages. For instance, Swalwell discusses the time it takes her to adjust to the 'mobile gaze' in games. However, this is not just a matter of acquiring cultural literacies – rather, it is necessarily disjunctive to an onlooker, who is not in first-person control of the manoeuvres. Additionally, bodily movements in reaction to games (leaning, swerving, jolting etc.) are not always inadvertent or hypnagogic, but can constitute a conscious getting into the swing of things, embracing the experience (akin to waving your arms while on a rollercoaster). There are also games that capitalise on these kinaesthetic coordinations with onscreen actions, such as *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998) the new Wii Fit platform (2008), and the perennial shoot-and-dodge, *Time Crisis* (1995).

In the next chapter – "'Participation TV": Video Game Archaeology and New Media Art' – Jason Wilson walks us through an artistic retrospective of the history of this two-way digital interaction. He takes the unconventional (but compelling) stance that the origins of video gaming lie not just in military training simulations and pre-existing non-digital aleatory entertainments (funfair games and the like) but also converge with much more conceptual, creative artistic movements. Video games are perceived as being new media artworks, and *vice versa*.

Wilson traces this from artist Nam June Paik's early magnetic interference of TV sets (crossing audio visual inputs/outputs) in the titular art piece,

'Participation Television' (1963). Again, we see a convergence of games and co-creative art (as with cheats). Gaming is discussed as having a dialectical relationship to the 'post-objective' art in the 1960s and 1970s that tried to hijack television (and commercial culture) and make it more playful and dynamic. This makes home consoles (starting with *Pong*) a move away from the unilateral mass communication of television broadcasts.

Bernadette Flynn revisits the matters of game space, representational logic and perception in the sixth essay 'The Navigator's Experience'. Game space binds together theories of spatialised narratives (externalised onto perceptual space, and progressing through said space as furthering the narrative) and ways of thinking about what Foucault calls 'placeless places'. Flynn approaches the spatial dimensions of games through the broader cultural histories of film, photographs, paintings, landscaped gardens and architecture, and their attendant aesthetics of positioning and perspectives. This scope is ambitious, but every high expectation is met wonderfully.

Flynn addresses the phenomenological experience of virtual space (*à la* Merleau-Ponty), as well as discussing the optical principles of *costruzione legittima* that translates so readily to mathematically plotting geometric space in computer games (i.e. Euclidian landscapes designed to disperse outwards into horizons, vanishing points and lines of perspective as the player moves forward). More significantly, Flynn also considers alternative, less-Eurocentric conceptions of space, in particular Asian traditions. This is apt, as gaming – due to the distributive, decentralised nature of electronic content, and the non-language specificity of its technology – is an especially international popular culture (more so than, say, television or even film).

Flynn deconstructs how gameplay prioritises movement through space over confinement, where the player's viewpoint is not the trapped subjectivity of the eye, but a mobile, roving gaze. This privileges agency and exploration, making gameplay a social act, where the subject's implied body is outside of the frame and they are not just 'looking through a window'. Interestingly, Flynn refers to 18th century walking guides written to instruct the 'amateur ambler' in

the social skills of how to appreciate garden design, which is exactly what this essay does for computer game space.

Directly contrasting with walking gardens is the God's-eye-view of military-themed strategy games, the topic of Patrick Crogan's penultimate chapter. 'Wargaming and Computer Games: Fun with the Future' could as easily be subtitled 'How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Play *Command and Conquer*'. Crogan views games as stemming from military-industrial influences in the R&D of computing; a fair assumption bulwarked by the focuses on realistic models, rule-governed behaviours and winning.

This techno-scientific narrative of capital and conquest is at odds with Wilson's 'renegade art' take on gaming, opening up areas for discussion and critical engagement. While Wilson's is perhaps the more favourable outlook, we must not overlook the actual equipment or *das Zeug*, namely that computers are machines: inherently industrial (as in Goggin's essay) gears of war. Regardless, this chapter is still of philosophical interest as Crogan finds the roots of simulated warfare in Heideggerian calculations. However, Crogan's simple dismissal of war films, and his offhand uncoupling of games and films, is unsatisfying from a Film Studies perspective (although it does offer a change in contributors' perspectives).

In the final chapter, *Pleasures* achieves transcendence. The last level is Brett Nicholls and Simon Ryan's 'Game as Thirdspace'. Although echoing the PlayStation 3 creed, this 'thirdspace' is to do with Henri Lefebvre's redefinition of space in a digital culture, as a 'trialectic'. In an attempt to do away with neo-imperialism, Lefebvre avoids the binary oppositions of space as perceived or conceived, and finds a third way ('lived space') that is perpendicular to both, adding a three dimensional 'Z' to the axis of 'X' and 'Y': becoming perceived (1st), conceived (2nd) and lived (3rd).

In videogames, this thirdspace that Nicholls and Ryan present is gameplay. This concept is the final 'boss' level of playing *Pleasures*, where the virtual and the physical – the representational and the empirical – intersect. This concluding essay braids together everything so far: the digital space issue, the techno-capitalist conquest of same, graphic realism, addiction, repetition, the

compulsive accumulation of fetish objects, kinaesthetic appeal, phenomenological exploration, the interpretation of images and symbols, and the cognizance of hidden rules and structures (whether via cheats or incremental learning). Through the notion of thirdspace, Nicholls and Ryan show how gaming is irreducible from social practices in a mass media system, beating the assumption that games are merely the cinema for those of us who cannot sit still.

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