

Review

Gerald Voorhees, Joshua Call, and Katie Whitlock (eds.), *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game (Approaches to Digital Game Studies)*, Continuum, London, 2012.
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As someone who has not played video games regularly since putting down the controller of his beloved N64, my interest in the recent collection *Dungeons, Dragons and Digital Denizens* (hereafter DDDD) and the wider subject of game studies comes primarily from a broader interest in fantasy as a cross-media genre rather than a fascination with the specifics of fantasy game-play, if such a thing can indeed be claimed to exist. For as much as a title like *DDDD* suggests towards that very idea, the notion that we might successfully integrate prevailing genre analyses in the respective fields of Film and Television Studies to understand the phenomenon of the online role-playing game must be balanced with an understandable weariness that ensures that a suitable amount of attention is given to the specificity of its own medium. It is with both a degree of admiration and trepidation, then, that I approached this new collection of essays designed to probe the theoretical, historical and social depths of this popular media source, and it is with a mixture of admiration and trepidation that I continue to assess the collection's implications on the respective fields of game, fantasy and audience studies. It is a compliment to editors Gerald A. Voorhees, Joshua Call and Katie Whitlock that the multifaceted essays within the collection successfully provoked, probed and inspired further contemplation on these matters long after the information presented had been absorbed, and contemplation is surely the name of the game in a collection so self-consciously aware of its own exploratory nature.

In their introduction to the interdisciplinary series *Approaches to Game Studies* – of which this book is the latest instalment – Voorhees, Call and Whitlock acknowledge the potentially “contentious” (1) nature by which they make the claim that existing genre theory within film, television and literary criticism can be utilised to both illuminate the similarities and key differences in which genre emerges as a key discourse in contemporary gaming culture. Yet, the introduction to this specific volume *DDDD* initially silences such doubts as it productively establishes a methodology which asks game studies to consider the popularity of Role-Playing Games (hereafter RPGs) such as *Final Fantasy* or *Zelda* not simply as an experience invested in traditional notions of character and narrative, but as gaming systems

that engage equally in the far more mechanical notions of configuration. As Voorhees, Call and Whitlock argue, RPGs require both a “dramatistic and mechanistic engagement” from their players and as such the human-machine interface of the game system manifests itself not only through a series of emotional traits and personalities, but through a series of numerical attributes which the player is invested in improving and fine-tuning in the manner of a car or tool (18). To that end, the subsequent essays in the collection are structured around the three themes of “The Game Master”, “In-Character” and “Out-of-Character” to reflect the polysemic manner in which games interact whilst simultaneously surpassing ideas of narrative. By proving this model, Voorhees, Call and Whitlock offer a fascinating analysis of the “ludic and narrative” expectations and conventions of the fantasy game franchise, and propose to explore the ramifications of such conventions throughout the collection (13).

Whether the collection then fulfils this theoretical project is a question that will plague the reader of its individual essays. In “Section One: The Game Master”, various arguments are included that seem designed to probe at the fundamental distinction between the position of the gamer, the spectator and the reader. In “The Pathways of Time”, Joshua Abboud argues that the ludic and narrative impulses of the RPG reveal “the instability of coherent and continuous gamespaces” as the consumer is positioned as both player and observer of the fictional circumstance (49). This analysis serves to progressively complicate notion of game-play world, and positions the RPG as a simultaneously autonomous fictional world of progressive, narrative structure and a world in which time and space are made disjointed and heterogeneous as they are constantly deconstructed by the process of game-play. Similarly, in “Game and Narrative in Dragon Age: Origins”, Alice Henton complicates binary understandings of the narrative as oppositional to the gaming experience. Both dependent on the “algorithmic logic that defines digital game media”, Henton argues that the cause-and-effect process of the game created a narrativised situation, an argument that draws progressively on the digital theory of Lee Manovich that has proved so useful to various attempts amongst scholars to address the impact of digital technology of across various Media Studies disciplines.¹ Through a different approach to a similar debate, Neil Randall’s and Kathleen Murphy’s “*The Lord of the Rings Online: Issues in the Adaptation of MMORPGs*” discusses the various game-play platforms adapted from Tolkien mythology through the typical processes and political concepts of adaptation studies, arguing that “fidelity” to the source novel is achieved through the RPG through a technique of “expansion” (119). The cross-chapter focus of this first section undoubtedly exposes and then interrogates the potential antagonism or mutuality of the ludic and narrative impulses of these franchises, and by complicating any assumptions one might have, a fascinating debate emerges between the pages of each individual contribution.

Yet, as the collection presents various discussions of other game-play franchises, other analyses – whilst no less sophisticated – do begin to muddy something which is only ever in its infancy, and risk dissipating any larger impact the collection might make as a whole rather than as a sum of its parts. In “Section Two: In Character”, various competing

political, social and technological analyses are presented that seek to complicate understandings of characterisation and the gamer-avatar relationship. Chapters such as Karen Zook's "In the Blood of *Dragon Age: Origins*: Metaphor and Identity in Digital RPGs" argue for an intersubjective quality of the RPG as the character of the game is manifested through the physical actions of the player. This argument taps into an important debate about world-creation and the role of character as a device that provides access to the fictional world ranging across various disciplines, and an explicit engagement with individuals such as Mark J.P. Wolf might have helped to bring the collection into the cross-media realm of fantasy which this section of the collection always hints towards but never fully engages with.² In "Epic Style: Re-compositional Performance in the BioWare Digital RPG", Roger Travis compares the particular style of game-play in the Bioware studio to the "epic style" of the oral, Homeric tradition, in which performance is purposely designed to engage in a grand theme (236). Arguing the two to be "highly analogous" systems, Travis argues the RPG function in the manner of the Homeric poetic: flexible, organic and yet performative in its engagement with ideas of theme and narrative (237). "'Simply Fighting to Preserve Their Way of Life' Multiculturalism in *World of Warcraft*" touches on a standard debate among literary and film scholars alike in Christopher Douglas's discussion of the supposedly racist overtones of fantasy worlds in which race defines identity. Promoting *World of Warcraft* as an online presentation of multiculturalism (as opposed to *The Lord of the Rings*), Douglas argues that the game reflects the "scandalous indistinction between race and culture" that characterises contemporary multiculturalism (295).³ Such fascinating new voices to a complex field of debate are welcome, and it is a slight lament that the various contributors do not engage directly with such a cross-media focus despite the provocative and insightful contributions such works could offer.

Overall, I found this collection a fascinating introduction to a topic of which I have certain degrees of knowledge and ignorance, affording a particular reading experience that I hope the editors of the collection would encourage given the exploratory tone of their introduction. My frustrations might indeed have a lot to do with my own prejudiced intellectual lens – a fact I freely admit – but the absence of a sustained discussion of genre as a cross-media force and the role of game-play within such a context does feel pertinent given the stated aims of the collection. Its willingness to discuss such issues as transmedia adaptation, the fantasy RPG and the interplay of ludic and narrative impulses within the experience of game-play provoke fascinating questions without really answering them, but the act of asking is to be admired and enjoyed by various readers interested in addressing the impact of online role-playing game on audiences. Stoking curiosity is not an unimportant act, and curiosities have certainly been stoked.

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Notes:

¹ Lee Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2001).

² Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (Routledge, 2012); James Walters, *Alternative Worlds in Hollywood Cinema* (Intellect, 2009).

³ See Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), Ernest Mathijs, *The Lord of the Rings: Popular Culture in Global Context* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006) & Martin Barker & Ernest Mathijs, *Watching the Lord of the Rings: Tolkien's World Audiences* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008).