

Welcome to our Spring 2011 issue of Loading...!

Key concepts for this issue are presence; genre; rhizomes; history; craft; and monstrosity, and the key theme across this set of papers is finding—or making—pathways and linkages between and across seemingly incommensurable imperatives, perspectives and experiences.

Gackenbach and Bown offer an innovative analysis of social presence nuanced by careful attention to game genres. Even as they flag the theoretical territory of genre classification as necessarily ‘troubled waters’, they argue that an understanding of, and a means of assessing, presence significantly informs playability and can serve as a useful indicator of prospective successes for the games industry. Recent ‘casual games’, though, offer a resistant case for traditional concepts and criteria of ‘social presence’.

The troubled question of genre is taken up very differently in David Clearwater’s discussion of “What Defines Video Game Genre?” and genre study “after the Great Divide”, which not only reviews several notable attempts to come to terms with videogame genre, but considers ways in which videogames cross boundaries and borders into other, clearly related media forms. As he reminds us “while a ludological approach is correct in insisting that videogames represent a unique medium with its own inherent possibilities, it is misleading to deny any similarity with other media.” Genre, he points out, is a tool, and it refers to a practice of classification that cannot be an end in itself but rather serves other purposes. To understand how meanings are made and conveyed and experienced, genre’s purpose, following Frye, is not so much to classify as to clarify, and Clearwater concludes with a reminder that much can be learned from, as well as shared with, genre studies in film and televisual media. This paper deftly argues and illustrates that genre study offers a rich a productive analytical tool set for digital game studies.

Adolescent videogaming is the focus of Sanford, Merkel and Madill’s paper, which adopts and applies Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘rhizomatic’ models and metaphors in order to better understand the complex learning systems and patterns in play that they have observed over a 4-year study of 11 young videogamers. There is, as one participant advised them “no fixed course”. Using that rhizomatic metaphor, they explain, “helps examine the process of how these youth belong to a digital culture that creates knowledge layered with a range of meaning-making tools and experiences, enabling postmodern relationships between ideas and concepts, and critical and creative thinking to develop”. In their work we are shown how adolescent gamers are building connections to a larger digital landscape: onewhich doesn’t always knit up very cleanly with the “official knowledges” of the education system.

In another “small scale study”, Stephanie Fisher describes her work with high schoolers asking about whether and how digital games help them to learn history, specifically to learn about World War 2. Games offer a particularly promising medium for history

education, Fisher explains, because “while school-based history is considered to be the most boring subject amongst today’s young people (Loewen, 1995), history-themed video games continue to be best-sellers.” Building on James Wertsch’s theorization of ‘appropriation’ as a basis for analyzing what and how players are learning about history when it is encoded in the form of games like *Medal of Honor*, *Call of Duty*, or *Brothers in Arms*, Fisher demonstrates that “playing a WWII FPS game affords the player the chance to potentially learn “how to be” a WWII game player, a FPS game player, and...a WWII history enthusiast.”

Emma Westecott’s study of *Little Big Planet* takes up tensions “between global homogeneity and the potential of technology to support multiple voices, histories and viewpoints”. An example of the unlikely convergence of DIY ‘crafting’ cultures with market-driven internet technologies, LBP’s success very much depends upon user generated content, content that, moreover, evokes the methods and materials of a ‘hand-made’ aesthetic. Both within and beyond the game, ‘modding’ is supported through the provision of a set of construction tools that support player-customized ‘sackpeople’, environments, and functions. As she explains the trend from games as products to games as services, she connects these neatly to “play as creative practice”, something which greatly expands the game’s demographic and reduces its financial risk. How the ‘handmade’ finds its highly localized place within the global space of networked play demonstrates how digital game culture is making new connections across places and spaces that have until recently seemed both distant and, indeed, worlds apart.

This issue concludes with a bit of a ‘manifesto’: Tamer Thabet’s “Monstrous Textuality: Game Fiction between Postmodernism and Structuralism”. Game texts, this paper argues, are tellingly seen as ‘monstrous’—often considered resistant to traditional narratological methods or classifications. However he goes on to demonstrate that despite the various ‘aberrant’ features of game texts, the temptation to consider game texts as unstructured is worth reconsideration. Using the FPS genre as paradigmatic, Thabet argues that much valuable analytical work can be carried out with the analytical resources provided by narratological language and structures, making it premature and unwise to jettison structuralist schemas, however unmanageably ‘monstrous’ game texts might appear. Rather, the task at hand is to further develop, extend, modify and apply these analytical tools (as his analysis of FPS games demonstrates) as to both illuminate the ‘monstrous’ complexity of game texts, and produce of new ways of understanding how their meanings and experiences are dynamically co-produced through narrative and interactivity.

We are confident all readers of *Loading...* will find in this issue much that is of interest and importance for their own work, as well as new papers to share with our students and colleagues. Enjoy!

-Suzanne de Castell & Jennifer Jenson

Journal Announcements:

Loading ... is inviting new members to its Editorial Board. To ensure informed, helpful and timely reviews of submitted work, which will include research, scholarship, programming, art, product reviews, industry updates and discussion. The journal requires a multi-disciplinary editorial board with strengths across the spectrum of fields within games studies. The term for editorial board members is two years, and duties include soliciting and reviewing manuscripts, guiding the development of the journal, and helping define a vision for each issue.

(Also required is a large pool of capable and willing reviewers, if editorial board duties are too daunting).

For those interested in either of the posts above, please contact decaste (at) sfu.ca.