Playing the Game: performance in digital game audiences

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introduction

Research into audiences and their engagement with cultural texts has often followed a trajectory established by Morley (1980), Hobson (1982), Radway (1984), Ang (1985) and Hermes (1995); namely, an emphasis on the consumption of routine – if not mundane – texts in everyday, often domestic, environments. Its sizable contribution to cultural studies has, in no small part, been the way this emphasis has opened up the study of the rich variety of practices, knowledge and discourses that audience members bring to their involvement with everyday cultural texts. Conversely, the research trope which appears to be developing around much of the study of digital games has emphasised the spectacular (*e.g.* King and Krzywinska 2002), the out-of-the-ordinary (*e.g.* Kennedy 2002), the place of digital games in a canon of 'art' (*e.g.* Jenkins 2005) or possible links to aggressive and violent behavior (see Bryce and Rutter IP 2006).

This chapter explores the validity of such assumptions by situating digital gaming within a broader socially situated context. We provide a brief introduction to the consideration of digital gaming and gamers as an audience and argue that the literature on media audiences and fans provides useful theoretical tools for understanding the use of digital gaming in patterns of everyday life. In particular it is argued that the concept of

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'performance' allows parallels to be drawn between the literature on gaming and fans/audiences and how game-related performances and interactions can extend beyond the game interface. Furthermore, we suggest that the inclusion of gaming within debates on audiences and fans can expand our understanding of audience engagement with 'texts'.

digital gaming

Though the origins of digital gaming can be traced back to the 1950s, it was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that digital gaming began to develop as a leisure industry. It was during this period that arcade games such as *Pong*, *Asteroids*, *Pac Man* and *Space Invaders* were first produced along with machines designed for the home such as the *Video Computer System* (VCS) from Atari, Nintendo's *Famicom*, the *Vic-20* and *Commodore 64* along with various (often unlicensed) clones of Atari's *Pong*. Today, entertainment software and digital gaming are a major international leisure industry worth in excess of $21billion (ELSPA 2005). The largest entertainment software market is the USA, where in 2003 continuing growth made the games industry worth in excess of $7billion (ESA 2004).

However, (contrary to popular belief) digital gaming is not restricted to male adolescents. The North American based Interactive Digital Software Association (2002) suggests that 55 percent of regular console gamers and 60 percent of computer gamers are over the age of 35. While digital gaming is by no means a level playing field when it comes to gender (Crawford and Gosling 2005, Bryce and Rutter 2003), Fromme's (2003) study of over a thousand German school children suggests almost a third of girls claimed

to 'regularly' play digital games (55.7 percent of boys) with only 2.2 percent of the children surveyed having never played a digital game.

Although access and experience related to digital gaming vary across demographics, when regarded broadly, it can be seen that digital gaming has developed into a common leisure practice for a wide range of individuals. Given the increased popularity of games it is reasonable to question what the everyday practices are that have become established and associated with being a digital game player.

digital gamers: players or audience?

The textual (often narratological) emphasis commonly evident in work on digital games along with a focus on the disruptive possibilities of games technologies has meant that rather than being understood as an 'audience' much of the literature on gaming continues to situate gamers as individual players. Despite notable contributions to the understanding of gaming as a social and situated practice (such as Yates and Littleton 2001, Schott and Horrel 2000) there remain often implicit assumptions about digital gaming and the engagement with a certain piece of technology. These are often encoded in a range of metaphors from 'immersion' (Murray 2001), 'being there' (Newman 2004) and 'relationship' (Aarseth 1997) to more, almost symbiotic, approaches. Within such frameworks there is little in the way of understanding elements of the gaming experience that are not limited to the actual playing of the game itself. Here, there are few tools for understanding gaming as consumption, as leisure, as social. The almost absolute emphasis on the (individual) player, means that there is a marginalization of the possibility or importance of a digital games audience. Moreover, where research has engaged with digital gaming across digital networks, ranging from the local physical

connection of game consoles to massively multi-player via the Internet, and more recently, gaming across mobile phone networks with portable devices (Moore and Rutter 2004) there has been a tendency to see these as technical innovations, rather than extensions of established social practice and routines.

However, both quantitative and more ethnographically orientated work is increasingly highlighting the limitations of a focus merely on the (individual) gamer and game. Research undertaken for the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (2005) suggests that 55 percent of gamers play with others, and similarly academic research by Wright *et al.* (2002), Crawford (2005a) and Jansz and Martens (2005) supports the idea of gaming as a social activity.

It is notable that even cultural orientated work on gaming has not yet fully engaged with possibilities for developing an understanding of audience as a frequent and important element of playing digital games. For example, though Kline *et al.* (2003) draw on the language and literature of 'active audiences', they use this merely to highlight how individual gamers can adopt 'oppositional' readings to games, and include no understanding of how these are located within the social interactions and everyday lives of gamers. There has been a lack of research on the meanings and motivations associated with gaming, the place of gaming within everyday routines, their relation to identity, their position as a nexus for a range of consumption practices, and their frequent extension into conversations, social interactions and performances away from the gaming environment.

The reluctance to align digital gaming discussions with those of other media users originates in the assumption that it constitutes a significant and marked departure in media forms and practices that cannot necessarily be understood using the same

theoretical tools or literature as 'older' media forms, such as television. For instance, Kerr *et al.* (2005) question whether digital games can be understood as a 'text' in the same way as analogue media forms (such as television, radio and cinema) as unlike these, digital game narratives are often dynamic and fluid.

However, Kerr *et al.* themselves recognize that the degree of fluidity (*i.e.* user determined choices) within a game should not be overemphasized. In particular, the level of 'user control' or degree of 'interactivity' a user has with, or over, digital games has been questioned by numerous authors (such as Gansing 2003, Palmer 2003). Palmer (2003: 160) suggests that new technologies are frequently introduced and sold to the market using the rhetoric of their increased 'user-control'. However, the user's level of control or interaction with the medium is still restricted by not only the limitations of technology but also the aims of the designers and manufacturers, and the ideologies behind these.

As the 'interactive' potential of games has often been overemphasized (and under conceptualized) so too has the linear nature of other texts. Numerous authors have suggested that older media forms, rather than being seen as static need to be understood as dynamic and fluid. De Certeau (1984) and his followers have highlighted how it is the reader of a text (be this a book, a film, or a television show) introduces a fluidity into their meanings and social significance through individual interpretations. Furthermore, Sandvoss (2005) suggests that the object of media fandom, be this even one film, cannot be understood as a singular static text; as what fans consume will involve not only their own reading of this but also that of others along with what has been written about it and further textual productions associated with this (such as fan fiction).

This separation and distinction of digital games and gamers as *significantly* different from other media forms and their users is paralleled in much of the literature on sport (and in particular soccer) fans in the UK. Writers such as Taylor (1992) and Redhead (1997) have suggested that soccer fans are different and distinct from consumer or other fan groups; often drawing on romanticized ideas of soccer fans as tied into a more 'authentic' and 'traditional' (read: masculine working class) culture, than consumers (read: female and/or middle class). However, both Sandvoss (2003) and Crawford (2004) suggest that such an approach greatly restricts the understanding of these groups and limits the range of theoretical tools that can be applied to the consideration of these. We suggest the separation of digital gamers from wider debates on media audiences, fan cultures and consumption does this too. Likewise, though some writers on fan culture (such as Hills 2002) claim to offer a 'comprehensive overview of fans' (cover notes) they have been guilty of focusing primarily (if not solely) on media fans, at the expense of other forms of fan culture, such as sport (Sandvoss 2003).

We wish to suggest there is an underexplored similarity between fan and gaming cultures and, more pertinent to our interest, the ways in which being involved in the gaming experience is linked to a rich intertextual and transtexual web of other texts and practices. Furthermore, recognizing the similarities and interconnections between fan and gaming cultures allows for a more fully formed understanding of the interaction between 'users' and media 'texts'. Audience activity is not just the preserve of a few 'exceptional' fans or gamers, but rather a range of possible activities and levels of engagement with texts. Gaming, probably more than any other media form, allows us to challenge the boundaries (as set out by authors like Jenkins 1992) between 'ordinary' and more active

fan readers, and allows fans and gamers to be located within wider discussions of audience behavior (also see Sandvoss 2003).

Below, we develop this notion and in particular highlight the parallels that can be drawn between the 'performativity' of both game players and media audiences.

gaming performativity

Many sociological considerations of both media audiences (such as Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) and fan cultures (Hills 2002, Sandvoss 2005) have highlighted the proliferation and saturation of media forms within contemporary society which has concurred with, and helped to bring about, a change in contemporary media audiences. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) suggest that as the mass media increasingly impinges and saturates contemporary society, 'everyone becomes an audience all the time. For them, mass media surrounds and envelopes our everyday lives in a 'mediascape' which, as with the landscape beneath our feet, often goes unnoticed but is fundamental in shaping the world around us. This mediascape provides a resource that individuals draw upon in their social performances. As such, being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor an everyday event rather it is constitutive of everyday life' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 68-69). That is to say, we live in an increasingly narcissistic and 'performative society' where individuals will draw on the media as a 'resource' (such as informing the way they dress, speak or act) in constructing their social performances.

Likewise, new media technologies, such as the Internet and digital gaming, contribute to contemporary mediascapes, providing resources individuals draw on in their everyday lives. Kerr *et al.*highlight performance as a key component and analytical tool

in understanding the nature and pleasures obtained from digital gamming. As (2004: 15) write:

> New media are seen to possess a performative aspect, insofar as they allow for and foster the users' experimentation with alternative identities (Turkle 1995). This is true for computer games as well as internet chat rooms etc. The pleasure of leaving one's identity behind and taking on someone else's identity is regarded as a key pleasure in digital games.

Gameplay can involve significant elements of performativity (Eskelinen and Tronstad 2003) and will frequently involve participants taking on and acting out specific roles. In particular, Rehak (2003) suggests that digital gamers constitute both participants and spectators in the games they play, who play out roles in these games and in turn observe their in-game performances. Digital games frequently allow gamers to play with their identities and to imagine themselves in different social and/or fantastic situations, though even the simplest of games (such as *Solitaire* or *Tetris*) involve the gamer performing certain in-game actions, such as moving cards or falling blocks.

However, where others have focused on in-game performances we wish to argue for an understanding of gaming performance within a wider social, cultural and media audience framework. For example, for Kerr *et al.* (2004: 13) a key feature of gaming performativity is derived as gaming 'is separate from everyday life'. However, clear distinctions between a 'virtual' gaming world and 'real' life are problematic. Bryce and Rutter (2001) argue, gamers are not 'absent' but constitute active participants within the games they play, and suggest that digital gaming can involve 'virtual', 'psychological' and 'physical' presence for gamers all of which are 'real'. Hence, the fantasies and

performances constructed in digital gameplay will not only be shaped and informed by the nature of the game but also by the gamer's 'out of game' social identity and interests. While gamers may wish to experiment with identities, avatars and new in-game experiences it is pragmatically apparent that they cannot do so in a rewarding fashion without drawing upon the language, knowledge and experiences they have when not playing the game.

Though many game-related performances are physically solitary and take place 'in-game', Sandvoss (2005) argues that most fan performances (such as those of sport or other media fans) are performed for and to the fans themselves. Both the literature on fans and gaming identifies the importance of individual escapism and fantasy, such as the gamer or sport fan imagining themselves in the action of 'the game' as a character or player. However, as with the performances of fans, those of gamers can extend beyond the intrapersonal.

In particular, multiplayer games allow in-game performance with other human players. This can simply involve competing against a human opponent, such as in a sport game like *Pro Evolution Soccer* or *FIFA*, or sending messages and engaging in synchronous talk to other online players in first-person shooters (FPS)[1]. More elobrately, this can take the form of performances, such as dressing and adapting characters in massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs), which the player may then use to interact with other human players — sometimes 'in-character'[2]. For some players, in-game performances with and to other players can constitute a (if not *the*) key focus or object of their gameplay. For example, King and Borland (2003) discuss a group of fifteen players of the MMORPG *Ultima Online* who together bought a (in-game)

tavern and set up an acting troupe who performed plays (such as Dickens' *Christmas Carol*) to other players. Indeed, Wright *et al.* go as far as to argue that the value of gaming is not to be found in the game text but the way it is performed within a social context:

> The meaning of playing Counter-Strike [a 'first-person shooter' online digital game] is not merely embodied in the graphics or even the violent game play, but in the social mediations that go on between players through their talk with each other and by their performance within the game. Participants, then, actively create the meaning of the game through their virtual talk and behavior borrowing heavily from popular and youth culture representations. Players learn rules of social comportment that reproduce codes of behavior and established standards of conduct, while also safely experimenting with the violation of these codes (2002: *n.p.*).

Indeed, gamers' performances and interactions will frequently extend beyond the in-game experience. At the simplest, and most obvious, level gamers will interact and often perform to those they game with. For instance, Crawford (2005b) highlights how gamers will often celebrate key victories or successes with, or to, the people they play with (or those around them). An example of this are the comments made by 'Mark' (male, aged 23, graduate student, UK) in relation to playing the football management game *Championship Manager*:

> It gets very emotional but…very frustrating game as well, it's crazy. I remember I won...first time I won the FA Cup [in the digital game *Championship Manager*] 'round my mates at midnight. Don't know, I wouldn't usually do, I mean his

parents were asleep, I woke his dad up I got so excited and you know, crazy. It's

weird like that... it has this hold over you (cited in Crawford 2005b: 256-257)

It is the significance of the 'non-gaming' encounter as an important element in the

enjoyment of digital games, which is highlighted by Jansz and Martens (2005) in their

survey of gamers attending LAN events.[3] They found that although these heavy gamers

corresponded in many ways to the stereotype of the male, teenage, single gamer who still

lives at home, their prime motivation for attending these events was for the face-to-face

social interaction found there. Similarly, the interview-based work of Swalwell on

LANners stresses the centrality of social interaction for a group of gamers. She writes:

> Most acknowledge that the sociality of the event is one of the best aspects of a
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> lan. To "have a chat and a beer" …Lanning's social nature is so strongly
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> espoused amongst lanners that one player, Martin, announced in email
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> correspondence that gaming exclusively online was anti-social, using the
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> negative label "lamer" to refer to those "who just play on the net." (2003: para
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> 9).

Furthermore, game-related social interactions and performances may also extend

beyond sight of the games screen (or LAN event), as conversations and friendship

networks based around gaming continue on into other social domains. For instance,

Crawford (2005) suggests that many gamers will frequently discuss games and gameplay

with family, friends or work-mates, away from the gaming-screen.

Gamers may exchange tips or gaming solutions or cheats, or gaming add-ons or

modifications ('mods'), which they have produced themselves — all demonstrating

(performing) their game playing and/or programming abilities to others (see Mactavish

2003). Jenkins (2002) also suggests that gamers can sometimes draw on the games they play to construct stories and narratives, which they recount to others. Moreover, these social performances can extend beyond face-to-face communication, as the Internet has proved a useful medium for gamers to construct and share gaming solutions, add-ons, updates and mods, as well as fictional stories or 'fan art' based upon gaming narratives. Illustrations of this include the official website of the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (worldofwarcraft.com) which features a section on fan art, while the official SI Games website (sigames.com) has a stories discussion board for players of the *Championship Manager* series to recount their gaming stories and exploits. This parallels the productivity of fans of other media forms as particularly highlighted in the followers of science-fiction television series such as *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* discussed by Jenkins (1992).

Moreover, gameplay can also act as a resource for social performances that are not based exclusively on gaming. In particular, knowledge and information gained from digital gaming can be used to inform conversations or social interactions based around other subject matter. This is particularly facilitated by the high levels of 'intertextuality' evident in many games.

Intertextuality is evident in a range of media forms including novels, television and film, where the understanding or 'decoding' of any one text may often refer to, or even require, the understanding of another text or texts (Rutter 1998). However, Marshall (2002) suggests that media intertextuality is particularly apparent in new forms of media, such as digital gaming, which frequently draw on the narrative of, or make reference to, other texts. As Murray and Jenkins (*n.d.*) wrote:

…a high proportion of the digital media on the market are second-order

phenomenon, adaptations of texts that gained their popularity through film and

television. In a horizontally integrated media industry, characters, plots and

images move fluidly across various media, participation in what Marsha Kinder

(1991) has called the entertainment supersystem.

In particular, digital games are frequently based upon televisions series (such as *The Simpsons*) or films (such as *Star Wars*), which add additional elements and narratives to these existing texts. A notable example of this is the digital game *Enter the Matrix,* which includes cinematic scenes and gameplay that follows a narrative that runs parallel with (and helps inform the understanding of) the final two films in *The Matrix* trilogy. There is likely to be a considerable crossover between fans of particular media texts and gamers, which enables individuals to draw on gaming texts in wider (non-game related) social interactions and performances.

Crawford (IP 2006) discusses how the games series *Championship Manager* is frequently drawn on by many of its players as a resource in conversations around soccer. Of the twenty-nine *Championship Manager* players he interviewed, twenty-five indicated that information and knowledge derived from this games series would frequently be used to inform conversations and social interactions around soccer. As indicated by 'Shaun' (male, age and occupation unknown, email interview, UK):

Yes I used to love trying to impress my work mates with my knowledge of

relatively unknown foreigners [footballers], never letting on that it was all gained

from buying them in CM. (cited in Crawford IP 2006)

This example illustrates how the performativity of gamers can be socially located and drawn on as a resource in wider, everyday, social interactions, it also identifies parallels with other fan and audience groups (in the case soccer fans), emphasizing the importance of not establishing (false) distinctions between 'types' of audiences, which may in practice share many similarities and even membership.

conclusion

This chapter has sought to highlight the location of gaming in wider social practices and in particular, its role in facilitating and informing social performances. Though, taking a partial view of digital gaming can make it appear a solitary activity, it is important to recognize that even the individual gamer brings their social, cultural and psychological selves to the games they play. Numerous games and gaming platforms facilitate in-game social interactions, such as playing with other online or in-person, and it is these social aspects to gaming that many find its most appealing feature. Beyond these in-game (or in front of the game) interactions, gamers will also frequently carry aspects of their gaming lives with them into other social arenas. Many gamers will frequently discuss games, swap and trade information or may produce game modifications, which they exchange with others. Games can also provide resources and information that can be draw on and inform social performances and interactions not directly related to gaming, such as the conversations of sport or media fans.

Many writers on sport and media fan culture and digital gamers have sought to emphasize both the exceptional nature of nature of these 'communities' as well as their distinction from other fan groups and/or audiences. What such distinctions fail to address is the frequency with which individuals engage with, and combined and draw on, a

variety of different texts, and also the usefulness of utilizing different cases to illustrate the contemporary nature of audiences and other wider bodies of literature that maybe of benefit in understanding these.

These social and performative aspects of gaming draw attention to the similarities and parallels with other media audiences and fan groups and it is the literature and debates on these that we suggest can provide new and fruitful avenues in the research and consideration of gaming patterns and practices. In particular, comparisons and links to the literature on fans and media audiences allow greater recognition and understanding of how digital gaming performances and interactions occur, not just at the level of the gamer/game interface, but can also take on wider social significance.

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[1] See Wright *et al.* (2002) for a discussion and taxonomy of the performance of in-game talk within games such as *Half Life*.
[2] Some MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* have 'role-playing' areas or servers, where the players are discouraged from stepping out of character or discussing 'real world' subjects.
[3] LAN parties are events where gamers bring their own computers to attach to a temporary Local Area Network (LAN) in order to play with/against each other both as individuals and in teams. These events can vary in size from a few friends meeting at one of their homes to several hundred gamers congregating for several days over a long weekend and playing around the clock. The largest organiser of such events in the UK is Multiplay - www.multiplay.co.uk.