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Kücklich, Julian

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Review

Jesper Juul, *Half-Real. Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005. 233 pp. ISBN 0262101106 (hbk) £22.95

Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations. An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006. 243 pp. ISBN 026202599X (hbk) £22.95

Since its inception in the late 1990s, the field of digital game studies has been characterized by a colonial discourse that pits those trying to invade the field from other disciplines against those who fend off these invaders, insisting that games must be approached on their own terms. The two schools of thought are usually referred to as ‘narratology’ and ‘ludology’, although these terms are misleading, and have added nothing but confusion to a debate already rife with misunderstandings. However, the current development of game studies can be understood only against this background of disciplinary schism. While the debate between narratologists and ludologists has cooled off considerably in recent times, the paradigms and attitudes created by this debate continue to inform the participants’ relations. This is also evident in two recent publications which can be regarded as contributions to a post-colonial discourse about the study of digital games.

In *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul attempts to posit video games as a phenomenon that cuts across disciplinary boundaries. As he points out in his introduction to the book, ‘to play a video game is ... to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world’ (p. 1). According to him, the rules of video games can be studied with methods derived from the work of theorists of play, such as Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, while fictional worlds are regarded better from a literary point of view, using models such as Thomas Pavel’s possible world theory. In the first part of his book, Juul builds upon his game model to develop theoretical tools for the analysis of games and their rules. Most notably, he differentiates between games of progression and games of emergence, which allows him to explain why some game models are more suitable for supporting narrative structures than others. Importantly, this also indicates that some games may be



better suited to narrative analysis, while others are regarded better from a ludological point of view.

Ian Bogost's aim in *Unit Operations* is to demonstrate 'that similar principles underlie both contemporary literary analysis and computation' (p. 1). While his primary focus is the medium of the video game, he insists that any medium can be regarded as a system of 'interlocking units of expressive meaning' (p. ix), which he calls 'unit operations'. These are fundamentally opposed to totalizing and undifferentiated system operations, which tend to render fine nuances of meaning indiscernible. There can be little doubt that Bogost would consider Juul's claim that his game model – a set of characteristics common to all games, which 'applies to at least a 5,000-year history of games' (p. 23) – a system operation. A self-professed ludologist, Juul leaves no doubt about his belief in the primacy of rules over fiction: 'Though rules can function independent of fiction, fiction depends on rules' (p. 121). Bogost argues against such sweeping claims, pointing out that this kind of essentialism has its roots in a functionalist approach to video game analysis that 'privileges the material at the cost of the expressive' (p. 53). Bogost positions his theory outside the binary opposition of ludology and narratology, stating that 'taken in their strongest sense, narratology is just as formalist and reductionist a practice as ludology' (p. 68). In order to establish an alternative to these practices, he uses terminology borrowed from philosophers such as Heidegger, Badiou and Deleuze as well as scientists such as von Neumann, Russell and Stephen Wolfram, to construct an eclectic set of theoretical tools for the analysis of computational and non-computational media.

It is this theoretical richness that makes *Unit Operations* a pleasant challenge to read, especially when compared to Juul's much more straightforward style of writing. While the style of *Half-Real* is certainly accessible and engaging, the book frequently reads more like a game design manual than an academic study of video games, and the author often glosses over the complexities inherent in some of the material that he presents. This becomes especially obvious in the last two chapters, where Juul tries to reconcile his game model with a theory of fictionality. Problematically, Juul seems to assume that the term 'fiction' is self-explanatory, and does not require definition. His outline of possible world theory is brief, and more recent theoretical models such as those of Marie-Laure Ryan are mentioned in passing, but never elaborated on – thus the reader must simply take on good faith the ontological dictum on which Juul's argument hinges: 'The space of a game is *part* of the world in which it is played, but the space of fiction is *outside* the world from which it is created' (p. 164; emphasis in original).

If *Half-Real* will disappoint readers with a penchant for theoretical rigour, *Unit Operations* will fail to satisfy those primarily interested in a theory's application. While Bogost's theoretical work is engaging and imaginative, his analyses often fail to be entirely convincing. An analysis of



Steven Spielberg's *The Terminal*, for example, culminates in the revelation that the film is a 'meditation on the unit operations for various kinds of uncorroborated waiting' (p. 18). The problem common to both books is that their authors seem to lack an understanding of the social, economic and political contexts in which the production and consumption of video games take place. While Juul asserts that 'a video game only takes place on the screen' (p. 165), Bogost simply stops short of the more radical implications of his approach. Thus, he investigates the way that ideology becomes part of gameplay, but fails to account for players' complicity in this process of interpellation.

However, Bogost deserves credit for attempting to tackle such thorny issues at all. So far, the academic discourse on video games has been, for the most part, far too uncritical of the medium, and Juul's book is a case in point. Adorned with blurbs from game designers Eric Zimmerman and Ernest Adams, *Half-Real* wears its affirmation of games culture literally on its sleeve. This celebratory attitude towards game culture has important ramifications for Juul's theoretical approach. As Kline et al. have demonstrated in their book *Digital Play* (2003), it is hardly feasible to approach a video game as the creation of a romantic author, because this effectively obscures the way that marketing, technology and culture shape the products of the games industry. This romantic notion of video game production is evident in Juul's problematic claim that there 'is nothing inherent in video games that prevents them from ultimately becoming and being accepted as high art, even if this may take some time' (p. 21).

Bogost attempts to achieve a similar goal, albeit with a significant difference. While Juul seems to suggest that video games will attain the status of art by their own merit and that it is only a matter of time until they do so, Bogost is convinced that it takes the power of criticism 'to vault video games to a status higher than entertainment alone' (p. xiv). It may seem doubtful that criticism can resolve the contradiction between video games' lofty ambitions and their commodity status, but at least he recognizes the problems inherent in this endeavour. He comes closest to achieving this redemption through criticism in his analysis of the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) *Star Wars Galaxies*. As he points out, the game is perceived as rather dull by some players, due to the fact that 'the tedious, empty play that healing and commerce require seem to emulate work, not play' (p. 125). However, according to Bogost, this might be beside the point. Instead of a mechanism for the production of 'empty gratification', he challenges us to conceive of *Star Wars Galaxies* as 'a game that challenges certain con-temporary social practices' (p. 125). Bogost locates these social practices in the interaction of the service industry and the entertainment industry in southern California – the place where *Star Wars Galaxies* is produced. By revealing how the game functions as a critique of its conditions of production, he calls attention to the multiple ways in which the real and virtual are interwoven in the game. While traditional games



often take place in a 'magic circle', to borrow a term from Johan Huizinga, contemporary video games are thoroughly permeated by the rules of the real world.

In a similar vein, Juul points out that 'the fictional world ... depends strongly on the real world in order to exist, and the fictional world cues the player into making assumptions about the real world' (p. 168). While this seems to be an interesting and insightful statement, he fails to make clear how this is different from any other form of fiction. Reading or watching a film could be regarded as real activities which create fictional worlds, and in this sense literature and cinema are just as 'half-real' as video games. The first part of *Half-Real* is certainly an important contribution to the field of game studies, and the theoretical instruments that Juul develops in these chapters are useful additions to the set of tools available to game researchers. His differentiation between games of emergence and games of progression, for example, is a promising new way to approach the classification of video games. It is unfortunate, then, that the second part of the book does not deliver on the promise of the first. While not without its flaws, *Unit Operations* is a more accomplished book. Bogost develops a number of concepts that are highly versatile and can be used for the analysis of different media and genres. While some of his concepts are remarkably similar to those developed in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, his infusion of semiotics with contemporary theory is executed with confidence and deftness. His juxtaposition of unit operations with system operations is a significant theoretical achievement, and will certainly prove productive in the future.

In the final analysis, the two books by Bogost and Juul demonstrate that both formalism and critical theory can contribute to the study of games. However, they also draw attention to the fact that any kind of game analysis must necessarily take into account the sociocultural contexts in which games are embedded. Ideally, in the future, the different approaches will complement each other, and enable a truly interdisciplinary discourse. Therefore, neither *Half-Real* nor *Unit Operations* should be read individually, but side-by-side.

Reference

Kline, K., N. Dyer-Witheford and G. De Peuter (2003) *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press.

Julian Kücklich
University of Ulster, Northern Ireland