**Notes on Seminal Works in Game Studies**

**Gary Alan Fine – Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds (1983)**

Fine invokes Goffman’s dramaturgical model explaining that fantasy rpg can operate as a proving ground – players can be educated, can escape, socialize and use these avenues to improve their personality for real life encounters. Fine also notes that women’s presence in fantasy rpg was extremely low – perhaps the paramilitary structure of recruitment, ritual and assimilation is less appealing to them. I also let my mind go to darker places while considering this gendered endogamic phenomenon in fantasy rpg subsociety. If a sociopathic misogynist were looking for a community to belong to, it would have to be one that doesn’t include, or rarely includes, women. Conversely, the subsociety may be a positive space for exploring bicuriosity or articulating across the trauma of closeted homosexuality. In this case, the presence of women could disturb that dynamic. Finally, it might be an issue of engrossment, whereby females are less inclined to become obsessed with fantasy rpg than males. In this case, recruiting females would be seen as a less worthwhile investment than recruiting males. Fine’s evidence that most of the females who play regularly are almost always spouses or girlfriends of regular male players lends support to my point about engrossment – females need other reasons to be engrossed than just the game itself. Fine also alludes, albeit obliquely, to the possible fact that many fantasy rpg players are sexually frustrated individuals – the presence of women could add to that frustration. The examples of a desire to have rape fantasies imposed on the group of players by select players tends to suggest that sexual frustration and trauma is at play in the psychology of select members of the subsociety. Another explanation that was left out of Fine’s work was that the sexual frustration could be exacerbated by the presence of females and cause rifts among the male players competing for the female’s affections. One thing that was clear is that many players joined the subsociety to remove themselves from the stress of everyday life.

The fifth chapter of Fine’s book examines the role of referees and the importance of status in fantasy rpg subsociety. Fine notes that the dynamic of refereeing games and managing a status hierarchy can often lead to fragmentation and schism in the subsociety. I would suggest that it is possible that fantasy rpg subsociety isn’t in fact about escape, but is about adaptation – forging the same opportunities and structure of real life within a more controlled context. The discussion of status and power portrays the subsociety as one rife with opportunities for ladder-climbing and abuses of power (not so different from experiences of working in retail or studying in institutions of higher-level education). The subsociety is keyed to specific interests and skills that may provide members new possibilities for attaining greater status than they can in real life situations. The fantasy may in fact be to have a boss and co-workers that are simply more collegial about the culture of work because of shared interests and outlooks, generally (thus, play is a form of work). Further evidence of this is that the subsociety readily codes outcasts and deviants – they become benchmarks for the subsociety’s standards of conduct. Fine rightfully concludes, “gaming groups are social worlds with status systems”. Intraparty cooperation is very important, but ostracism is no less important. Rivalries form and operate rather similarly to wolf pack behaviour (ie. attrition of alphas, battles among near-equals). Thus, fantasy is a tool for exerting social control over defining normalization in the game. The social structure of the real people transcends the play of the fantasy game and the burden of work in existing in real life transcends the play of the game.

**LUDICA – Playing Dress-Up: Costumes, Roleplay and Imagination (2007)**

One point that the Ludica authors don’t hit on (as their name ironically implies) is the importance of narrative to somatic displacement in games. For example, my characters in online GTA V have no narrative basis whatsoever – they have an assortment of unique costumes, but they have no inherent purpose as characters in their own right. Their purpose is only as an avatar that allows me to navigate through the open world of the game and act/react. In Def Jam Fight for NY or Star Wars KOTOR, the narrative constructs the character *a priori* – I am playing a cage-fighting thug or a force-wielding warrior prior to constructing unique features such as costume, ethnicity or physiognomy. As such, the characters that are created through costume are imbued with personality beforehand. The difference between GTA and KOTOR because of the narrative radically alters the mode of identification. My KOTOR characters represent a character I would like to know or one that I would like to be one day, whereas my GTA character is a true avatar, just me in the GTA world, costumed in a way that I would like to be one day – the KOTOR character is a person while the GTA character is more-or-less, garb or simply a visual quip. In fact, this is clearly sensed by others, because when I crafted a female avatar for GTA V, many of my gaming buddies dubbed me “Loba” as a feminized form of my real gamertag, “Lobotomous” (often abbreviated to “Lobo”). I strongly believe that if the game had been one based in narrative, then this berating would have been considered non-sequitur.

However, the Ludica authors attempt to use real events as comparative with games in a manner that strikes me as being rife with confirmation bias. For example, they comment about fashion at Burning Man and how it denotes individuality while connoting discourses of status and equality. From reports of numerous people I know who have been to Burning Man over the years, its purpose is actually as a drug exploration event – one so grand that authorities find it a ticklish proposition to intervene, or even survey. In addition, the Ludica authors are so dogmatic in their endorsement of ludology in game studies, that they make absolutely no mention of the impact of other media forms, such as music videos or movies. Halloween is connected with games with regard to costume-making while movies are indeed connected generally with video games as digital media forms, yet there is no recognition in the essay on how movies and music videos influence Halloween. The Ludica approach ignores several important transmedia effects across media forms or how dress-up is remediated across media forms.

When referencing the work of Yee, the all-but likely primary reason for male transgender play is totally missed: the creation of an ideal mate. I play as female avatars all the time in narrative-based video games and do so because I am trying to construct an ideal mate – the kind of woman that I would like to date and have romantic involvement with. Finally, I’m not sure why gear and fashion have to be coded through gender as Ludica authors seem to be fixated on. Gear should be that which is worn and emphasizes function while fashion is that which is worn and emphasizes form. These erroneous presumptions also affect the work of Pearce when the Ludica authors reference “kombat lingerie”. The quandary posits the improbability of one going into battle in lingerie. The presumption is that such characters serve only to satisfy heteronormative male fantasy. I’ll say this rather inelegantly… go into battle in lingerie? Why the Hell not?! Many male players who attain elite status in a game shed their armour as an intimidation tactic and a sign of bravery. Female players could enjoy that act equally. If such acts get stigmatized as being denigrating toward women, then an avenue of pleasure for female gamers is effectively cut off or at least made very difficult, unnecessarily. Males go scantily clad to show off… I go scantily clad to show off or mix it up… why can’t females? That it may or may not stimulate scopic pleasure for the male is absolutely irrelevant and this is why I have suggested in the past that the male gaze is a fallacious concept – a floating signified – a confounding mode of presentation and method of representation in the production of meaning. The true phenomenon is the “female gazed”. The male gaze does not denote and has no referent. The female gazed denotes and connotes and has a referent in the imagination of the female who believes that they are being gazed upon (or any spectator that believe in the act). The male desire to look at the female cannot be confirmed through the act of presenting a female form. What can be confirmed is that the female form is arrayed in a manner that presents for a look. “Desire” is a concept inherently and profoundly subject to processes of aberrant decoding (Umberto Eco’s concept), thus it is a teleological fallacy to postulate “desire” in the encoding process.

**LUDICA – The Hegemony of Play (2007)**

The Ludica authors offer a rather polemical and dogmatic indictment of the video game industry. They refer to “hegemony of play” as a banner for stigmatizing the “elite” class of developers and publishers in the industry. They claim collusion through complex layering of technological, commercial and cultural power structures that have come to dominate the development of the digital game industry. The hegemon has alienated women and non-gamers which has in fact been a detriment to commercial success, as claimed by Ludica. The Hegemon of Play is basically an “old boys club”. I don’t completely disagree with the indictment and certainly am more receptive to the content of their argument than its rhetoric per se. However, having worked with over one hundred professional illustrators and painters (probably 40% were female) as well as programmers/coders (90% male), I can confidently write that their temperaments are almost always reserved and conscientious – they do not respond well to agitation or ire. They do not respond well to people who bring drama or judgment to the workplace or those who are generally difficult to work with. I don’t refute that the game industry is an old boys club, but if the change comes from agitators and difficult people, then there will likely be a formal resistance to change. Valve provides a telling example with regard to this concern – they have had staff issues, where the ideology of inclusiveness for the company has led to the hiring of radical personalities that then affected the reputation and economic viability of the company while also upsetting it from within. Maybe the owners deserved insubordination – I’m not here to judge. I am simply observing that animators, concept artists and programmers usually desire a calm, amicable work environment free from a barrage of politics. This likely aids the industry with maintaining the nature of its hegemonic discursive formation. The Ludica authors don’t necessarily endorse that workers in the industry become agents provocateurs as much as they lean on game studies in academia to expose the machinations of the hegemon. The Ludica authors challenge that research in the field has been based on many assumptions – players are male, for example. They also note that there is a lack of separation between the values of the culture and those of the industry – the industry transcends games. Hardcore players have been promoted over minority players who become invisible. In addition, the technological means of producing games reduces their folk meaning and imposes a certain way of playing. The Ludica authors reach back for lessons from history when purporting that women played a significant role in the board game industry. Women were inventors, producers and consumers, as well as, board games having represented them graphically. However, this begs questions about whether there was an anxiety in the late Victorian era regarding young women having activities outside the home. A richer historical account could reveal confirmation bias here. The Ludica authors push for more even gendered representation in game creation and game testing. However, they seem to leave out that game creators were traditionally male because the creators were the programmers (this has been at the heart of the narratology vs ludology debate). In addition, the Ludica authors cite Laurel to confirm one of their points but totally ignore something else from her report regarding research indicating that female gamers are quick to blame themselves instead of the computer for problems that arise. QA testing requires a level of objectivity whereby the tester does not assume fault but finds fault in the game. In sum, the Ludica authors are identifying a real and serious problem at the heart of the fundamental structure of the game industry, but they are describing it through a myopic lens and explicating it through a degree of confirmation bias that is quite suspect.

**Tanya Sihvonen – Players Unleashed!: Modding *The Sims* and the Culture of Gaming (2009)**

It would be interesting to know whether Maxis or EA pay players to mod or whether they have staff that mod. For example, many social networking sites during beta launch proliferate profiles in the community that operate as both templates to guide new users and as deceptions to create a sense that the community is growing and the site is popular. I researched for a paper in my Masters year that theorized the television host as a “re-encoder” of meaning – a figure that decodes the producer’s message and re-encodes it for greater equivalence as it is then decoded by the audience. Perhaps, staff modders could be understood as functioning similarly at which point there would be a new relation of friction and flux in the semiotic flow of the game-as-product and game-as-process discursive formations.

My suggested hypothesis regarding “re-encoding” is elucidated on by Sihvonen when examining John Carmack and his game, Doom, whereby the editor software for engines became an efficient means of scouting new talent in the programming world. It would seem that game-as-product has significant alignment with the hegemonic discursive formation within the game industry. On the other hand, game-as-process operates fluidly with the Bakhtian ‘carnivalesque’ non-hegemonic discursive formation – a swarm-like anarchical structure that can use a mod to establish a subversive entity within the industry. All of these networked interactions in discourse raise issues of participatory design that may be best addressed through conceiving of modding as “intense play”.

I would like to suggest an altering in definitions whereby “modding” would be understood as a casual practice that constitutes a user, while “hacking” would be understood as a serious practice that constitutes an engineer. Both roles would be designers and players in the game-as-process-and-product paradigm, respectively. I have formulated in this manner in response to a notation by Sihvonen regarding The SimDay event. SimDay seems to indicate that it is important for developers to control their IP through making modding accessible. If access was hindered, modding would shift into hacking and would in effect be operating ‘underground’. There would be no adequate oversight by the developer and a black market would emerge and potentially thrive. This could be compared with the drug policies of the Netherlands and current anxieties in play with black market narcotics in the Philippines. The state (ie. hegemon or IP holder in games) lacking oversight guarantees a thriving black market.

Therefore, following my distinction of modding and hacking, from a social interactionist perspective, modding would constitute “fandom” whereas hacking would constitute “naffdom”. ‘Naff’ is a loose inversion of ‘fan’ (or back slang), and is defined polysemously as: 1) inferior; and 2) (interjection) get away. The “inferior” connotation is applicable as hacking underground practices would likely lack the resources of the studios in the game industry while the “get away” interjection connotation would refer to hacking as an undesired practice operating outside the official confines and sanctioning of the game industry. Furthermore, the two practices of alteration (modding and hacking) could be understood distinctly with respect to their representational systems or frameworks. Modding would be considered textual poaching – an additive process of remediation that bends metarules for game code. Hacking would be considered textual “cracking” – a bastardization process of transformation that breaks the metarules for game code. The additive process of modding could be married with Sihvonen’s categorical frameworks of interpretation and configuration while the bastardization process of hacking could match up with her framework of reworking. In my framework, skinning would be modding while machinima would be hacking at the representational level. If the developer responds to “reworkings” (ie. bleeding in The Sims) then the relationship becomes complex and the patronage for the bastard hacker exists alongside maintenance of a profound degree of disavowal (not unlike the relationships between Shakespeare’s King Lear and Cordelia or Gloucester and Edmund). The purpose of this framework for modder and hacker is conceived as a method for properly applying a critical lens to issues of “playbour” in the game industry. As such, modding would be playbour and hacking would not. There would be nothing problematic or exploitative for these relationships, however patronage of the bastard hacker would become problematic.

**Richard Bartle – Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs (1996)**

He presents an “interest graph” as a representational structure. Equilibrium is set off by tilting, whereby different quadrants of the interest graph are emphasized and thus shape the MUD. This act of tilting will forge new play styles and encourage/discourage particular play styles. The play styles are dynamic modes of representation and identification within the community and can lead to players developing stereotypes about players of a particular style. Socializer stereotypes of Killers are rife with anxiety and animosity – a culture of victimization emerges. Understanding play styles and player dynamics allows the game developer to know how to implement changes in order to achieve equilibrium for the playing community of a MUD.

For Gears of War 2, Bartle’s structural schema on play styles has valuable import. If a match has more than one player (out of ten) glitching-out of the map, typically most of the players leave the match prematurely. If there are too many “campers”, players that wouldn’t have used exploits may start to in order to contend with a play style that is overly defensive. A team where most of the players never stop rushing may result in players of the other team dropping out if they have anxiety about being overwhelmed or to a minority of players on the rushing team dropping out from seeing their teammates become cannon fodder. The best “squads” are ones that exhibit a balance of play styles where one or two members on the team are “tanks” who rush the opponent, while one or two others produce crossfire with their rifles from a distance. The fifth player is most useful as a weapons expert who excels with long range weaponry. A sneak type can be mixed in or a player that is adept at being defensive but then “clutches” rounds by being excellent under pressure. When you have a full team that is balanced, you are said to be “running stacked”.

**Tom Boellstorf – Coming of Age in *Second Life*: An Anthropologist Exploires the Virtually Human (2008)**

Griefing using modding and scripts can even operate to facilitate control of one player’s avatar by another. This produces a culture of victimization in the community of the game as some toss around rhetoric that such acts constitute “rape”. Grabbing a teddy bear or doll and rubbing its “private parts” areas is suggestive and depending on *mens rea* could constitute sexual harassment if a lack of consent over the activity was clearly expressed by an adult victim and then ignored (not necessarily a threshold when involving a child) but it certainly doesn’t constitute “rape”.

Bandying around flagrant language and conflating the quality of heinous acts with relatively trivial ones is potentially destructive to a virtual community as well as an actual one. Griefing should be judged based on its violation of ToS and EULA, as well as, through some attempt at discerning *mens rea* of the offender. Does the griefer appreciate the quality of the act? What are the reasonable expectations of the public when navigating a virtual world of simulations? The moment that society allows subcultural ideology instead of the law to define the quality of acts that are labelled with criminal rhetoric then we all lose some of our inalienable freedoms. Subcultural ideology can inform the law of its sensitivities, and nothing more.

**Hector Postigo – The Socio-technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting play into Youtube Money (2014)**

Postigo claims, “game commentators are gamers first”, but this is in fact false. Through a close analysis of game commentators’ use of argot and cant, it seems fairly obvious that more commentators are broadcasters and would likely have went into television and radio if those media forms were more viable economically and socially in the contemporary moment. Very few game commentators are “elite” players of the games they stream, review and critique. They are decently skilled in their chosen games, but far from professional caliber. Postigo’s definition of “pub star” is way off. Postigo claims that a pub star is an elite/professional gamers who goes down to public arenas for publicity, practice and maybe even tom-foolery. Postigo likens this to Michael Jordan playing pickup on some public 2v2 court. I wholly disagree with this definition. Pub stars are gamers who are not skilled enough at the game to be professional, but still largely the most skilled in the public matches. They have a style of play that emulates the competitiveness of professional play styles, but in an arena where the same stakes do not exist. Pub stars is the flattering term, but the same players can easily be denigrated by the label, “tryhard”. Pub stars often employ mods and other hack & exploits that wouldn’t be possible to use in MLG or GB matches. It is poor practice and underscores the differences between elite/pros and pub stars.

**Matthew M. White –** L2P NOOB: Examining Tutorials in Digital Games by Matthew M. White (*Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, Vol. 6(10): 30-52)

White’s most provocative finding was that there was a reduction of idle-time through changing the modality of instruction from stochastic visual cues to auditory cues.

For me, this latter finding makes a lot of sense because one of my favourite series of games is Hitman (IO Interactive) whereby the playable character, Agent 47, is given tutorial instruction from a voice-over narrator that is part of the diegetic world (Diana is his liaison at the international contract killer agency). Diana is always instructing during missions in Hitman games and using her for “intel” is encouraged, thus using her for player tutorial instruction is married with her primary diegetic function. This flattening of representation has the effect of encouraging greater immersion for the player. There are other forms of tutorial instruction that are “embedded” into the diegesis (Halo’s Master Chief must get his systems calibrated prior to combat while Isaac of Dead Space can use his suit’s interface with the ship’s computer to find out directions for the next mission). Another mode for effective instructional strategy in games is demonstrated in Darksiders (Vigil Games), whereby the playable character, War, is able to use all of his powers during the tutorial and is subsequently stripped of them once the tutorial has ended. Not only is the player empowered during the tutorial, but the full array of moves and weapons whets the appetite for further play and creates a desire for progression through the game.