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A Ludicrous Discipline?

Ethnography and Game Studies

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The information age has, under our noses, become the gaming age. It appears likely that gaming and its associated notion of play may become a master metaphor for a range of human social relations, with the potential for new freedoms and new creativity as well as new oppressions and inequality. Although no methodological or theoretical approach can represent a cure-all for any discipline, in this article the author discusses how anthropological approaches can contribute significantly to a game studies nimble enough to respond to the unanticipated, conjunctural, and above all rapidly changing cyberworlds through which everyone in some way is now in the process of redefining the human project.

Keywords: *anthropology; culture; ethnography; game studies; methodology*

Introduction

This inaugural issue of *Games and Culture* marks an important step toward recognizing game studies as a discipline. It indicates that the study of gaming is moving from the periphery of scholarly inquiry to take a central position in how we study and theorize social life. I continue to be surprised by the lack of scholarly interest in video games and interactive media more broadly given not only their massive and rapidly increasing impact worldwide but their usefulness for thinking through a range of key questions concerning selfhood and society. The newness of interactive media means that scholarly work in the area is marked by a refreshing intellectual openness and interest in foundational questions. (What does it mean to be a person? What does it mean to interact? What is a body? What does it mean to be equal or unequal, similar or different?) Although the study of games is sometimes termed *ludology* in reference to the Latin term *ludus*, meaning “game,” the idea of game studies is far from *ludicrous*, whose origin in the same Latin term reveals just how deeply pervasive the stance of dismissal toward games has been in the Western tradition.¹

Author’s Note: I thank Celia Pearce for her insights and support. I thank also Douglas Thomas, Mizuko Ito, and all participants in the Digital Cultures group at the University of Southern California. I have received great support from my colleagues at the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine, and also from colleagues elsewhere on campus, including Paul Dourish and Bonnie Nardi.

It is at a moment such as this, when we are on the cusp of a new discipline, that it is critical to step back and consider the new discipline's character: its emphases and inevitable absences; the linkages it makes between data, theory, and method; the canon and archive that will accumulate in its wake. The study of gaming has always been powerfully interdisciplinary, drawing together an array of scholarly disciplines as well as a broad range of practitioners. This eclectic character of the game studies is evident in many of the works already seen as foundational to the emerging field (e.g., De Koven, 1978; Huizinga, 1950). Some might regret the "disciplining" of game studies, but I would argue that disciplines open new possibilities for collaboration and innovation. To quote Marilyn Strathern (2004), one of the most significant anthropologists writing today (and whom I cite again later in this article), "The value of a discipline is precisely in its ability to account for its conditions of existence and thus as to how it arrives at its knowledge practices" (p. 5).

It seems that every discipline creates a pivot term that it cannot do without: biologists need *life*, historians need *history*, psychologists need the *psyche*. Disciplines are often marked by discussions about pivot terms: What counts as life? Can we have women's studies without assuming a category "woman"? Even though such discussions rarely resolve all debate, they often result in better methodologies and theoretical frameworks. For anthropology, it seems difficult to make do without the pivot term *culture*.² In the remainder of this article, I would like to argue that a close alliance with anthropology can benefit game studies.³ The moniker *games and culture* accurately reflects how for the emerging discipline of game studies *culture* acts as a secondary pivot term alongside *game* to define the field of inquiry. Indeed, culture is often described as encompassing the notion of game (and the notion of play, to which game is closely allied in English).⁴ Given this state of affairs, anthropology (a) can provide game studies with frameworks for theorizing culture and (b) can provide a methodology—participant observation—for investigating games and culture.

The Pivot Term: Culture

In his famous 1871 definition, Edward B. Tylor, a founding figure in anthropology, termed *culture* "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871/1958, p. 1). More compelling definitions of culture have appeared in anthropology since that time, but this early characterization provides a helpful starting point. Note that Tylor's definition refers to a "complex whole" that includes not just knowledge but enacted social relations. Most discussions of culture in game studies to date (see, e.g., Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) employ a symbolic or semiotic definition that frames culture in terms of schemas, cognitive maps, and meaning. Although these elements are certainly part of culture, they reflect somewhat outdated views of culture that anthropologists would term *structuralist*, *structural-functional*, or *cognitive*.⁵ A structuralist anthropology for instance assumes that

human behavior and belief is determined by culture in the same way that (it is assumed) the grammar of a language “produces” speech through rules for well-formed and ill-formed utterances. A cognitive anthropology assumes that “a society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members” (Goodenough, 1964, p. 36).

Questions of meaning, indexicality, and signification remain crucial in anthropology and will remain crucial in game studies as well. However, views of culture that privilege such approaches may be attractive to some game studies scholars because they harmonize with a view of social relations as determined by a set of rules. It is typically assumed that rules are a basic characteristic of anything to be termed a *game* (e.g., De Koven, 1978), and the work that game designers, programmers, and players do can be seen as the crafting, coding, and implementing of rules. Yet, there are fundamental problems with viewing culture in terms of rules, as demonstrated by a range of poststructuralist (not postmodern) scholarship in anthropology and elsewhere. First, some of these views (particularly cognitive ones) assume a kind of self-awareness of the rules (“whatever it is one has to know or believe”) that is not borne out by observing everyday life: Just as most of us cannot explain the rules of grammar we use every time we talk, so most of us cannot explain the cultural beliefs about everything from gender to aesthetics that shape our social worlds. Second, these views of culture assume that culture exists first and foremost as representations in people’s heads. Yet as Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and others pointed out, any view of culture as a schema, script, or cognitive map makes the mistake of confusing a researcher’s outsider interpretation for the actual practice of culture as an intersubjective domain of experience, one that takes shape not in individual heads but in social relations:

It is significant that “culture” is sometimes described as a map; it is the analogy which occurs to an outsider who has to find his way around in a foreign landscape and who compensates for his lack of practical mastery . . . by the use of a model of all possible routes. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 3)

Finally, there is a massive domain of economics, power, and history that is simply beyond the scope of these theories of culture. If culture, in Goodenough’s (1964) terms, “consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members,” then it is hard to explain why men and women, who both can operate acceptably, are nonetheless unequal. Rich and poor people can both speak language, but framing culture on the model of a language elides issues of inequality that can be found in most cultures worldwide. In game studies to date, the relative absence of feminist, political economic, queer, and other theories of culture is striking, particularly given the importance of profit, consumerism, and capitalism more generally in gaming. Although there has been a considerable body of work on the economics of gaming and interactive media (e.g., Castronova, 2005), this work often speaks of “economics and culture.” It thereby works within the horizon of one of capitalism’s founding myths, namely, that “the economy” exists as a distinct domain of human experience (Mitchell, 2002). Such theorizations of culture also further the idea

that *culture* is to *game* as *context* is to *text*, making it difficult to ask how in some circumstances games can act as contexts for culture. Concepts like the Gramscian notion of “hegemony” (e.g., Gramsci, 1971) or the Foucaultian notion of discourse (e.g., Foucault, 1976/1978) hold great promise for investigating some of these questions but are far less likely to be cited than the ethnomethodological work of Garfinkel and Goffman, which suffers from many of the problems associated with “cognitive” approaches as described earlier. Addressing overly symbolic or semiotic approaches to culture will be crucial to the future of game studies.⁶

The Method: Participant Observation

It is quite common in game studies to equate anthropology (and the study of culture in general) with ethnography. But to anthropologists, what ethnographic research really entails is participant observation, a method widely used in game studies. Every method used properly is useful for some questions and less so for others; participant observation’s strength is in the domain of culture. The term *participant observation* is intentionally oxymoronic; you cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time, but it is in this paradox that anthropologists conduct their best work. In place of surveys or interviewing, participant observation implies a form of ethical yet critical engagement that blurs the line between researcher and researched, even when the researcher is clearly not a member of the community being studied. It is a method based on failure, on learning from mistakes to develop a theory for how a culture is lived—for its norms and its “feel”—that may not be reducible to rules. As noted by Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the most significant anthropologists of the 20th century, participant observation (unlike interviewing or surveys in isolation) allows the researcher to study the gap between what people say they do (which may sound quite rule like) and what they actually do (which is often not very rule like). Participant observation is of particular utility in disciplines like game studies where the object of study is emergent, incompletely understood, and thus unpredictable:

What research strategy could possibly collect information on unpredictable outcomes? Social anthropology [cultural anthropology in the United States] has one trick up its sleeve: the deliberate attempt to generate more data the investigator is aware of at the time of collection. Anthropologists deploy open-ended, non-linear methods of data collection which they call ethnography; I refer particularly to the nature of ethnography entailed in anthropology’s version of fieldwork. Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact. (Strathern, 2004, pp. 5-6)

Three Futures for Game Studies

With this very preliminary discussion of the culture concept and participant observation in mind, I see three futures for game studies wherein interdisciplinary associations with anthropology may prove useful.

1. *Game cultures.* Many games, and other forms of interactive media like metaverses or “synthetic worlds” that are less clearly game like, are taking on cultural forms in their own right. (I am currently researching one such metaverse, Second Life.) These cultures cannot be reduced to the platform, that is, the rules and programming encoded in the game engine and the rules of the game or metaverse. One approach to studying these game cultures involves examining the relationship between the metaverse and the physical world by examining if participants play at home or at work, alone or in groups, if they play a gender different from their physical gender, and so on. Another approach, one that I think holds the potential to illuminate a different set of questions, takes these games or metaverses on their own terms, trying to understand their cultures as coherent systems of meaning and practice in themselves.

2. *Cultures of gaming.* Most persons who participate in games and other interactive media like metaverses play more than one game or metaverse. We are seeing the emergence of cultures of gaming on a range of spatial scales—some local, some national or regional, some global—shaped by a range of factors from language spoken to quality of Internet connection. These cultures of gaming include multiple subcultures such as youth, male versus female, cooperative versus competitive gaming, and so on. Studying these kind of cross-platform cultures of gaming poses problems not unlike those anthropologists have historically faced in terms of cross-cultural comparison and globalization.

3. *The gaming of cultures.* As it gains in significance, gaming increasingly affects the whole panoply of interactive media, from television to movies to cell phones to the Internet in all its incarnations. Gaming also shapes physical-world activities in unexpected ways, including the lives of those who do not play games or participate in interactive media. Understanding the “gaming of cultures”—that is, how cultures worldwide are being shaped by gaming and interactive media—represents another area of exciting new research.

Why game studies now? Because the information age has, under our noses, become the gaming age. It appears likely that gaming and its associated notion of play may become a master metaphor for a range of human social relations, with the potential for new freedoms and new creativity as well as new oppressions and inequality. Although no methodological or theoretical approach can represent a cure-all for any discipline, anthropological approaches can contribute significantly to a game studies nimble enough to respond to the unanticipated, conjunctural, and above all rapidly changing

cyberworlds through which we all in some way are now in the process of redefining the human project.

Notes

1. One genealogy of the term *ludology* can be found in Eskelinen (2004).
2. I am here speaking of the subfield known as cultural anthropology, social anthropology, or socio-cultural anthropology, which for the sake of convenience I term *anthropology* throughout this article. The term *social anthropology* is more common in Britain, whereas *cultural anthropology* is more popular in the United States. Where *culture* is not seen as a pivot term (as in much of the British tradition, where it is often seen to be overly cognitive), debates over the meaning of *society* replace and to a great degree replicate debates over *culture* elsewhere.
3. A corollary I do not have space to discuss here is the necessary centrality of game studies to an anthropology of the 21st century.
4. See for example Salen and Zimmerman (2004).
5. For classic examples of structuralist, structural-functionalist, and cognitive approaches to culture, see for example Lévi-Strauss (1963), Radcliffe-Brown (1952), and Goodenough (1964).
6. Examples of the kind of anthropological work I have in mind are too numerous to mention here, but examples include Helmreich (1998), Mahmood (2004), Mintz (1985), Taussig (1980), and Wolf (1982).

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