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Response for “Video Game Studies in the Academy”

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This panel’s précis identifies a rage in the academy for teaching (with), building, and studying video games. It cites a precedent of theoretical, practical, and historical interest in them. But video game studies has not unfolded as comprehensively as these triads imply. The popularity of video games lends our field legitimacy. Even scholars in other areas perceive video games’ importance: there *must* be something worth saying about them, whatever it is. Significant gaps remain in the scholarship, however, and to fill them we need as much variety as possible. To shore up disciplinary identifications and get “institutionalized” would foreclose several critical methods and questions that video game scholars have yet to fully explore and that might hold foundational coordinates within some future “Video Game Studies.” Our understandable desire for disciplinary security may risk stultifying a field that, despite some excellent work, has begun to crystallize along lines that limit critical possibility.

An essentially structuralist narratology of individual games remains troublingly popular. Such reduction of games to more or less isomorphic rubrics of choice and effect is often coupled with a pedestrian sociology of, say, violence or race or gender to yield analyses that cannot address the video game qua medium. We too often get broad claims about a game’s liberatory or antisocial effects, based on “what happens” in it. We too often answer questions about the medium with pronouncements on digital ontology or virtual embodiment. Some compelling materialist histories of digital gaming have appeared, but many focus on nostalgia and obsolescence. While these significantly affect developmental trajectories, their retrospection obscures the scenes in which people currently make and use video games. We would benefit from a rigorous contemporary history of the cultures of production and consumption subtending our texts. Such middle-grounds of production and reception might lead, for instance, to a more attentive phenomenology of the living rooms or arcades in which gameplay unfolds.

As a compelling alternative to narratology, some have asked how various aspirational affects (fantasy, nostalgia, dreaming, wanderlust) inform the design and reception of video games. Such questions do the important work of suturing affective topologies of digital gaming together with earlier theories of feeling under capitalism. They usefully unpack how our hopes for technology structure not only the pleasures we take, but also the perceived horizons of socio-technological possibility and thus the paths that technological development follows. But shortcomings lurk here too. The discourse on virtual identity yields countless utopian claims about liberation from normal matrices of identification, preferring such redemptive narratives over an interrogation of how gaming impacts off-screen social formations. Likewise, the recent emergence of more complex gesturo-haptic controllers—including Nintendo’s Wii and Apple’s iPhone—could improve our theories of interfacing. But perceptions of a fulfilled fantasy of gestural naturalism may unduly ratify idealizations of gesture as a perfectible interface rubric. The theories of embodiment underwriting such idealizations often elide the disciplining pressures that structure experiences of embodiment; we should not allow clever new accelerometers to further ensconce incompletely thought models of embodiment and interfacing. Thus, while traditions in literary, film, and media theory have provided video game studies with formative vocabularies and

methods, we risk putting the theoretical cart before the technological horse by reading new devices in the service of preexisting theoretical frameworks. A dual solicitation to disciplinary dissemination emerges: treating the salient aspects of video games calls for readings of non-gaming phenomena—like gesture on the iPhone or virtual sociality on Facebook—and the resources of sociology, materialist historiography, cognitive science, game theory, and other disciplines can further enrich the field of video game studies.

Last August, a man known as markm49uk found that his newly purchased iPhone arrived with four photographs already stored inside. They depict an attractive, smiling young woman working on an iPhone assembly line in southern China. Someone forgot to delete the images, taken to test the iPhone's camera, and markm49uk posted them online. The worker became known as “iPhone girl”; her photos appeared on Digg.com; she got her own Wikipedia page; and management assured everyone that she would not be reprimanded for this “beautiful mistake.” Despite her smile, the factory where she works has been accused of workers' rights violations; despite the accusations, she smiles at us from our screens, themselves made in China. Though the embodiment of gamers has emerged as a major stake of video game studies, scholars have largely avoided the complex questions surrounding this other set of bodies: those of the workers who build our video games, our phones, our computers. Such attention would enrich video game studies and challenge consumerist framings of new media aesthetics. In whose name and by whose hands do our digital fantasies become reality? An answer to this question would gear together with existing work on the experience of gameplay, unfolding a broader and more nuanced video game criticism. Anxieties about disciplinary integrity and institutional stature must not obscure such questions or the resources needed to address them.