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# Introduction to British DiGRA issue

Paolo Ruffino, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, & Garry Crawford (Editors)

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This special issue of ToDiGRA collects some of the best articles presented at the British DiGRA conference which took place at The University of Salford at MediaCityUK in May 2017. For this issue we invited the authors of the full papers presented at the conference to submit a revised document. The manuscripts were then sent to a group of selected peer-reviewers, three for each submission. The reviewers, experts in the field of study of the assigned papers, provided their feedback and evaluation. The five accepted papers were then sent back to their authors who implemented the required changes and re-submitted their final work. Each one of the articles in this issue is the result of a process of research and revision that took almost one year of work from the time of their original presentation at the 2017 British DiGRA conference. In order to remove any perception of impropriety, José Zagal (currently Editor-In-Chief of this journal), was not involved in

the selection of articles, the peer review process, nor the decision to ultimately accept or reject the selected articles from this special issue.

This issue is emblematic of the diversity and broad-spectrum of the academic work discussed at the conference. In order to contextualize this collection, the special issue begins with a brief history of British Digital Games Studies by the conference organisers, Garry Crawford, Esther-MacCallum-Stewart, and Paolo Ruffino. This paper provides a short and potted recent history of digital games research in Great Britain, starting in 2001. The authors start this narrative here, as this was not only the year Aarseth (2001) marked as ‘year one’ for ‘computer game research’, but it was also the year of the first major international digital games research conference on British soil, and the first time a major research grant was awarded by a UK funding council to undertake digital games research. British digital games studies played a significant role in the early foundations and direction of early digital game research by hosting a number of key international events, research clusters, and publishing some of the key and defining textbooks in this emerging field. Moreover, it is our argument here that British digital games research continues to punch far above its weight as the location of major collaborations, clusters, events, and as the location of authors publishing work that is pushing debate forward into important new areas, and in particular, significantly adding to debates around the social, cultural, and political content of contemporary digital gaming.

Chris Bateman and Jose Zagal (in ‘Game Design Lineages: Minecraft’s Inventory’) analyse the inventory system in *Minecraft*, and use it a case study to introduce their notion of game design lineages. The authors argue that game design is composed of heterogenous practices, not always mapped by design documents, and not limited to the rules and conventions of a genre. These are design elements that mutate and evolve from game to game, and are largely modified by the uses and interpretations of their players. Designers, the authors observe, are also players, and the influences they receive while playing games are translated in their design practice. The inventory system in *Minecraft*

is an example of how design solutions in tabletop role-playing games, while not explicitly referenced by the developer, are re-purposed. Studying the lineages of game design elements is not just a way of appreciating the complexity of games as systems, but also their continuous communication with other socio-cultural phenomena and texts.

Carina Assunção (in ‘Is Pokémon GO Feminist? An Actor-Network Theory Analysis’) looks at the alternate reality game *Pokémon GO* and evaluates how embodiment and kinaesthetic awareness play a role in the representation of gender within the game. The author draws on Actor-Network Theory, and interrogates the flatness of the network, the ‘blank state’ from where networks are drawn and imagined. The game *Pokémon GO*, while presenting itself as a neutral mapping of the urban landscape which ignores divisions of class and gender, reinforces the social barriers that women face when moving in public contexts, and when playing video games. The game appears to draw on the cyberutopia of a world without gender divisions, but by ignoring their existence it ends up emphasizing their presence. Niantic’s game becomes a paradigmatic example of how networks (and mapping) are never neutral practices. Bodies are always present, even more when they are eliminated from our view and reduced to material and immaterial nodes to be flattened on a digital screen.

Feng Zhu (in ‘Computer Gameplay and the Aesthetic Practices of the Self: Game Studies and the Late Work of Michel Foucault’) investigates the production of subjectivities in the process of playing video games, looking at *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* as a case study. His analysis draws on Foucault’s notions of power and discourse and how they participate in the production of the self. Zhu argues that, when playing games, we can experience an aesthetic transformation of the self, which might deviate from the dominant subjectivities. At the same time, we might also inductate in those subjectivities demanded by current practices of governmentality. Ultimately his paper complicates our notions on the effects of games on their players by introducing a Foucauldian analysis of discourse as a key principle to understand how habits of play, across

different texts with similar game dynamics, could bring about specific subjectivities. The drive to level-up and self-improve, typical of RPG games such as *Oblivion*, could become instrumental to the production of a neoliberal subject.

Joanna Cuttell (in ‘Traumatic, Spectacular Prologues: AAA Players as Ethical Witnesses’) looks at the opening scenes of the major recent productions of the video game industry, and analyses the traumatic effect they set in the initial moments of the game. The initial trauma of the protagonist is a common trope in most AAA titles (such as *The Last of Us*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Dishonored*, *Mass Effect*, and many others). Drawing on theories on spectacle (Guy Debord) and the photographic image (John Berger), the author offers an auto-ethnography of how these initial experiences were resolved while playing the games. The player is immediately put in a situation where a traumatic experience needs to be reconciled. While traumas in cinema and photography might create a sense of impotence in the viewer, video games have the unique narrative and affective potential of offering a resolution to the player in the act of beating the game and its challenges.

Last but not least, Sonia Fizek (in *Interpassivity and the Joy of Delegated Play in Idle Games*) offers a critical overview of a border line example of digital game. Idle games are based on an initial input by the player, and then continue playing themselves even when the screen is turned off. Examples include *A Dark Room*, analysed by Fizek in the paper, *Everything’s* self-playing mode, and Ian Cheng’s artistic experiments. These are game environments that keep playing themselves via algorithms, and are supposed to be experienced as external viewers, with only occasional interventions by their players. Idle games question the basic notions of interactivity and agency, seen here as no longer necessary in the definition of a ludic text. These games are made to play themselves, and the pleasure of understanding and being challenged by a digital game is designated to the game, rather than the player. The player almost completely disappears, and must not even necessarily enjoy the game while it unfolds. Fizek draws on the notion of interpassivity

(Robert Pfaller and Slavoj Žižek) to disentangle the apparent paradox that these games pose to players and scholars.