Critical Cyberculture Studies

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WITH A FOREWORD BY

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the Fourth Bad Writing Contest, 1998," available at http://www.yorku.ca/nollaig/links/bwc.htm.

2. This quotation is from the anthologized version of Michael Heim's "The Cyberspace Dialectic," in *The Digital Dialectic*, ed. Peter Lunenfeld (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 25.

3. I was hurrying to finish *Cybertypes* before someone else wrote a single-authored book on the subject of race and cyberculture. I shouldn't have bothered.

4. This quotation is from the anthologized version of Cameron Bailey's "Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace," in *Reading Digital Culture*, ed. David Trend (London: Blackwell, 2001).

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Chapter 3

How We Became Postdigital
From CyberStudies to Game Studies

Espen Aarseth

In the year of this writing, 2003, the number of transistors printed on silicon chips will have exceeded the number of characters printed on paper worldwide. By now, all of our public and personal media have become more or less digital. The feeling of excitement and wonder about all things cyber- that characterized the 1990s has been replaced by familiarity and business-as-usual. Finally, Web newspapers have started to make rather than lose money, while paper-based newspapers are finding it hard to recruit new readers from the younger generations (Berthelsen 2003). To the cultural researcher, the once marginal and exotic cyberculture (remember *Mondo 2000*?) has been subsumed by mainstream culture, and cyberdiscourse is finally ready to be integrated into the traditional research discourses. *We can all go home now.*

But even if cyberculture is all over (and all over the place), some areas have emerged that cannot be subsumed by traditional sectors of academia. One such field is the cultural genre of digital gaming. Not quite art, not quite children's culture, not quite, or should I say, not *only*, mass media, games are going through a renaissance that promises to produce the richest and most varied cultural interface we have yet seen.

The Rise and Fall of Digital Studies

The predicament of digital studies can be characterized by the paradox of successfulness, akin to Groucho Marx's membership paradox. The more mainstream and popular the field's object becomes, the less the need for

special treatment or attention. Here is an example of a more advanced case: From the late 1980s, the budding field of historical computing (historians using computer-assisted methods such as statistics and databases) had international conferences and a worldwide organization, as well as regional and national ones. The field quickly grew, but suddenly it stopped growing, and in 1999 the yearly conference had to be canceled because of lack of expected participation. What had happened? Did this mean that the historians' use of computing was merely a fad, a bubble that burst along with the inflated "new economy"? Not at all.

The field of historical computing was formed so that its practitioners could have a place to meet, exchange ideas, and receive merit for their scholarly output. In the beginning, they had been few and far between, so it made sense to organize themselves in a special interest group. But eventually, the mainstream history conferences and journals opened up and welcomed the computer-assisted historians to their main events and publications. Computer-assisted historiography was no longer viewed with indifference or suspicion. And so the special interest group, focused on method and technology rather than content, was no longer necessary.

One wonders if the field of cyberstudies or digital studies (if such fields even exist within identifiable boundaries today) may not experience the same rise and fall, perhaps within the same fifteen years. At present, the international Internet research organization (Association of Internet Researchers—AIR), perhaps the largest and most visible cyberculture research community, is a highly successful, growing movement with participants from a large number of disciplines, including communication and media studies, law, psychology, ethnography, political science, and linguistics, to name just a few. By the look of it, things are going very well. But even so, there seems to be an element of doubt about the scope of the field: The conference CFP mentions "digital art," a topic that is quite orthogonal to the Internet, and also it mentions something called the "The Post-Internet Age." Perhaps AIR will become the APIR, in an attempt to stay current? Already, socially successful technologies like SMS are expanding the AIR horizon beyond the Internet as such. Being online does not equal being on the Internet, and it never did. For example, as late as around 1988, computer magazines published articles about e-mail without mention of the Internet. And still today, in that most online of all online societies, Japan, online means mobile phones, not the Internet, which relatively few people have in their homes there.

But what happens when the difference between doing "Internet/online research" and doing "research" becomes hard to see? When, say, Web-based newspapers are simply called newspapers, and e-literature has become literature? Or when TV is completely digitized and transmitted via digital networks? We may not be looking more than ten to fifteen years ahead here, probably less. Will the Internet or even the "post-Internet" suffice as a scope, when already it is cracking up?

Most likely this is a generational thing. Young, untenured scholars need to get recognition for their work and band together across disciplines. But what happens when they get tenure? When the cybergeneration becomes department chairs? As in the case of the computing historians, it seems likely that cyberstudies at that point will run out of steam, or should I say glue. Just as cyberculture is already all over the place, so will cyberstudies be assimilated into the old disciplines. Cyberethnography will become ethnography, cyberlaw will become law, and cybermedia will become media.

It is of course of limited value and hard to predict what exactly will happen. A better question is perhaps, Will any part of cyberstudies survive intact, after the reassimilation into the mother disciplines?

Games Research—101 Disciplines or One?

One candidate for such longevity is the study of video and computer games (increasingly referred to as digital games—but for no good reason). The study of games has a long but thin tradition;[1] only in the last two or three years have games been the object of a broad and increasing attention from a number of disciplines (just like the Internet). There are already five independent and interdisciplinary research traditions that cover some aspect of games:

- Game Theory, a branch of mathematics and economics that is not really about games at all but about making sequential decisions in competitive situations with limited knowledge
- Play Research, a tradition focused on understanding children's play with contributions from ethnography, psychology, and pedagogics
- Gaming and Simulation, an experimental field that explores and creates games for use in learning situations; i.e., games as explorative tools, not entertainment
- Board Game Studies, the historical study of board games and their evolution

- The Philosophy of Sport, the study of physical games—sometimes a theoretical companion to university athletics programs.

These independent traditions have very different goals and means and little or no interaction with or even awareness of one another. In addition, their interdisciplinary natures make them vulnerable to logistics and university politics. None of them sees computer games as an important area in itself.

And now, enter computer game studies, like the other game disciplines with little or no regard for previous and neighboring efforts and with yet another set of research agendas. This particular emerging game research field is perhaps even wider and more disparate than the other four combined, yet it seems already set to become more developed and (hopefully) also more departmentalized than they are. However, what is computer game research, and can it become one field? Since computer games are simulations that in principle can contain any element of (popular) culture or reality that a game designer can think of, there is very little, perhaps nothing, that could not, somehow, find its way into these games, from beach volleyball to medieval heraldry. Also, nearly all existing fields of research are relevant, or can be made relevant, through their perspectives, methods, or objects of study. The list is practically endless.

A few years ago, the Humanities dean at a Texas university brought a few local game developers to a meeting with the provost to discuss a possible new undergraduate program for game developers. So, what courses did they think would be most useful? Medieval history and ancient mythology!

I once tried to imagine what academic field in my own university (the University of Bergen) could not be applied to game research, and I could only come up with one, namely, dentistry. Of course, when I mentioned this at the games conference in Tampere in 2002, there was a dentist in the audience who protested! So any academic field or discipline can probably be brought to bear.

The problem, then, becomes one of coherence. Are we talking of one and the same field? Already there are journals and conferences covering various subparts of the game field; some focus on the technical, some on development, and some on cultural and aesthetic issues. So can we have game studies as a monolithic, separate field? Probably not. But there seems to be an excellent opportunity for an interdiscipline or for several related viable subfields that cover various main aspects, such as those mentioned earlier.

The Case for Game Studies

While many subfields of cyberstudies, such as the study of digital art or of e-literature, can and should easily be studied in its "mother disciplines" (the Art History or English or Literature department), game studies does not have such a mother field to fall back into. It could, like film studies, be seen as part of media studies, but there are strong reasons why this might not be a good idea. The most compelling of these is that games, unlike film, are not a medium but a broad category of systems that exist across media, and they are capable of using different media. Take chess: it can be played online or against a machine or on a board or by postcard or in the heads of two blindfolded expert players. Between Tetris to EverQuest (EQ), there is a vast gap in all relevant dimensions: technologically, socially, aesthetically, cognitively, economically, and so on. Tetris and EQ are far from being in the same medium, and to group them together in the same "medium studies" is probably not going to reveal anything interesting. Games are not media; they do use media but many different ones.

The problem also arises when we try to define games or "computer games." It is such a broad field that it might just be too broad to constitute a meaningful, practicable academic area. One strategy would be to turn away from games in general and look at a more coherent subfield, such as what I have elsewhere termed "games in virtual environments" (Aarseth 2003a), that is, games that take place in some kind of virtual world, unlike card or dice games, computerized or not. Here we do get the problem that noncomputerized games like Monopoly and Dungeons & Dragons also fall under our definition, but that is only a problem if we insist that the "digital" is an overriding category, which is both an arbitrary and technology-fetishizing thing to do. As we now know, the online/offline distinction is not a very good one.

The study of games in virtual environments, then, becomes a tentative approach to a phenomenon that could not be subsumed by an umbrella discipline, because games have none. It might still be too optimistic to assume that this will happen, but at the moment it is more likely than not, especially given all the programs and even, in the United States, dedicated vocational schools, like Full Sail School of Game Design and Development in Florida or DigiPen Institute of Technology in Washington State, that have emerged in the past few years. Granted, most of these have a very practical and technical focus, but like any other mainstream

entertainment industry there will also be room for theoretical and "content"-oriented issues.

Games as Cyberculture

Also, let me make the case that the study of digital games is, or could very well be, a new core field that arises from the ashes of cyberculture studies. Here is why:

- Games (computer games and online computer games) combine culture, aesthetics, and technology in a new way.
- Games display all the signs of cyborgness (that nineties word!) and identity experiments.
- Games like EverQuest are vast community experiments, a kind of avant-garde society infrastructure that reconfigures our social roles and networks.
- Games encourage user activity and creativity and subvert the corporate entities that produce them.
- Games are a new mode of communication (in fact, several modes) with networking, space, and simulation as core elements.
- Games are used by the grassroots to make political and satirical statements (e.g., racist games, Bush/Michael Jackson/Bin Laden games, even presidential campaign games).
- Games are a semi-post-literate, global culture.

To sum up, there is probably not one characteristic commonly ascribed to cyberculture that could not be found in the gaming sector. This indicates that the world of computer games is a perfect test bed for cyberculture studies. Perhaps, in time, it will be the field in which cyberstudies has the strongest resonance and the longest dominance.

Toward a Game Studies Department

If, as I have suggested here, "games in virtual environments" is a viable empirical focus for our new scholarly field, we are still left with the conundrum of how to come up with a good disciplinary or methodological approach. Are we going to analyze the players, the aesthetic aspects, or the technology? Should we look at the cultural industry of games or the social aspects? Inevitably, our choice of focus will be predetermined by our backgrounds and by our methodological preferences, which is not exactly a rational, disinterested way to establish a discipline.

There are three main perspectives (or virtual-world game components) that readily lend themselves to a "postdigital" game studies field: the gameplay, the rules or structure of the game, and the game-world. These three components tend to attract different methodological and disciplinary approaches:

- Game-play: sociology, ethnology, psychology, pedagogy ("player studies")
- Game-structure: game design, economics, computer science/AI ("design studies")
- Game-world: art, aesthetics, history, cultural/media studies, law (intellectual property rights) ("aesthetics")

As we can see, just a "core" focus like this entails at least a dozen disciplines, all quite different. Still, it might be possible to contain them all in a departmental structure and to let them be part of the same teaching program, as long as the core empirical focus remains stable. However, different game genres will draw attention to and lend themselves to different components, so the success of this three-pronged approach would depend on the empirical balance. Some games, such as strategy games, are clearly more interesting from a rules/structure perspective; others, such as adventure games, are mostly interesting from a game-world point of view; and games such as massively multiplayer online games are most interesting in terms of game-play and player interaction.

As a less ambitious alternative, only one or two of the components/perspectives could be used, but this might create an imbalance that should be compensated by an explicit delimitation of the field. It is hard to understand games without knowledge of how they are constructed, and it is hard to construct them without an understanding of how they are played. A balanced combination of these three elements seems ideal but might be hard to achieve in a real-politics university setting.

We might also be able to learn from the mistakes made in other fields. There are other disciplines that combine user, design/production, and

aesthetic perspectives, most notably film/media studies and architecture. The lessons they have learned concerning the combination of these sub-disciplines could prove invaluable for the successful establishment of game studies as an integrated combination of the three elements.

The Game/Story Debate: Do We Have a Field Yet?

Though there is much momentum at the moment toward establishing undergraduate game-development programs and a growing dialogue between industry and academics through channels such as the Game Developers' Conference and the International Game Developers' Association (IGDA), the idea that games are an important area that deserves serious study is not enough to validate game studies as an academic field. If everyone agrees that games are important and should be studied, then all we have is a movement but hardly a field or discipline. A field is a social structure made up of people who produce, validate, and dispute scholarly results, and this is why, until very recently, the field of game studies did not exist, even though there were a fair number of academics who studied games. A field where everyone is in agreement, or not able to formulate differences through a common terminology, is not really a field but at best a special interest group or a thematic network.

In the beginning of the 1980s, games were studied by literary scholars who thought they were watching the birth of a new literary genre, the text-based adventure game, often called interactive fiction. In the early 1990s, games were studied by film scholars who thought they were watching the birth of a new cinematic genre, the interactive movie. Finally, at the start of our present decade, in reaction to these claims, a critical mass of researchers advocated an approach that takes as its point of departure the fact that games are games, not an (inferior) form of storytelling or filmmaking but a genre with its own intrinsic values, goals, and characteristics. This reaction against the application of older media theories has often been identified as "ludology," a term suggested by one of the main advocates, the game designer and theoretician Gonzalo Frasca (1999). From a history-of-science perspective, it is not hard to recognize this pattern as a paradigm shift, characterized by, not least, the average age difference of the participants on each side.

Although lamented by some participants (Jenkins 2002) as a "blood feud," the existence of a crucial debate in the early, formative stages of a new field is not only good but vitalizing and a sign of good health. The exchange of claims and counterclaims early on will only sharpen the participating scholars' senses and help them hone their critical apparatus and ideas. Other "new media" fields, such as the field of literary hypertext, have grown stale partly because of the lack of open disagreement and critical dialogue. For a critique of the concept of "new media," see Aarseth (2003b).

Conclusion: And the Next Big Thing Is . . .

If we regard games like EverQuest, which has evolved into "virtual economies" (Castronova 2001) with real money being made by players, as something more than "just games" and games like South Korea's Lineage, with its four million players, as a radical new form of social practice, it is possible to suggest that games have, indeed, interesting and serious ramifications beyond themselves and that they can well influence and shape the future of our culture and society as the most dominating and creative form of "new" media and cyberculture. Then it becomes obvious that games cannot simply be left to the newborn field of game studies but should also be allowed a place in disciplines such as sociology, architecture and urban planning, and even art history. Game studies may become a viable and critical contribution to the academic world, but games are too important to be confined to any single field.

NOTES

1. Jesper Juul (2001) calls it "the repeatedly lost art of studying games."

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Chapter 4

Internet Studies in Times of Terror

David Silver and Alice Marwick

Despite the Orwellian memoryhole that infects so much of contemporary American discourse, many of us will remember George W. Bush's *Top Gun*–like landing aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003. With "Mission Accomplished" as a backdrop, Bush appeared on deck in an outfit heretofore never worn by an American president: a flight suit featuring, among other gadgets, a bulging codpiece. Resembling a *militarized computer game avatar,* Bush praised the troops and declared, "major combat operations have ended in Iraq" (D. Bush 2003).

On the following day, Bush left the USS *Abraham Lincoln* and landed in Silicon Valley, where he would reveal his postwar economic vision for the country. With all major U.S. media outlets in tow, his motorcade ended in Santa Clara, formerly known as the prune capital of America and now a prominent hub of what only a few years ago was called the "new economy." His destination was United Defense Industries, or UDI, a defense contractor specializing in *militarized digital technologies* (DeYoung and Weisman 2003; Sanger 2003).

Like the day before, Bush praised the heroes of the war in Iraq, only this time they included high-tech war machines and the high-profit corporations that build them:

> The new technologies of war help to protect our soldiers and, as importantly, help protect innocent life. You see, new technologies allow us to redefine war on our terms, which makes it more likely the world will be more free and more peaceful. . . . You do a lot to keep the American Armed Forces on the leading edge of technological change here at United Defense. And I want to thank you for that. You not only help save lives, but you're an agent for peace. (G. W. Bush 2003)