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Issue 14 (2021)

articles

History Games for Boys? Gender, Genre and the Self-Perceived Impact of Historical Games on Undergraduate Historians

by Robert Houghton, 1

Inaudible Systems, Sonic Users. Sound Interfaces and the Design of Audibility Layouts in Digital Games

by Eduardo Harry Luersen, 50

Ghosts, Spooks, and Martyrs. Historical Hauntings in *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon Wildlands*

by Megan Ward, 85

Feminist Gamer Social Identities

by Michael Winters and James L. Williams, 119

research reports

New Earth. Fantasy Pantheon Inspired by Afro-Brazilian Religion

by Eliane Bettocchi, 170

Holy Ocarina! Exploring Religion in/of/through *The Legend of Zelda* Series

by Johnathan Sanders, 198

interviews

Interview with Marcus Carter on Children's Play and Games Studies Discourse

by Antonija Cavcic, 221

Interview with Stella Wisdom, Digital Curator at the British Library

by Lissa Holloway-Attaway, 230

reviews

A Review of *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla's* Sensationalized History

by John Herman, 257

Review of *Ethik des Computerspielens: Eine Grundlegung* (Ethics of Video Gaming: A Groundwork)

by Bodil Stelter, 263

A Review of the Video Game *The Medium*

by Jordan Wood, 270

Interview with Marcus Carter on Children’s Play and Games Studies Discourse

Antonija Cavcic

Abstract

In this interview, Dr. Marcus Carter, co-director of the Socio-Tech Futures Lab and Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures at The University of Sydney, talks about his research on children’s play, his views towards discourse on *gaming addiction*, and games studies discourse.

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In the mainstream media, the discourse surrounding children’s play has predominantly focused on the negative aspects of gaming and particularly *gaming addiction*. For Games Studies scholars and gamers alike, the lack of sophisticated and well-informed discussions about the diverse uses and gratifications associated with gaming can be frustrating and also discredits much of the work and achievements researchers have made in the field. In this interview, Senior Lecturer in Digital Cultures at the University of Sydney, Dr. Marcus Carter, discusses his research on children’s play, the media’s overemphasis on *gaming addiction* rhetoric, and a need to shift towards more sophisticated and productive conversations about children’s play and gaming in general.

First of all, for anyone unfamiliar with you or your work, can you briefly introduce yourself, your work and how you got into the field of digital cultures and/or game studies?

My research into digital games began with my PhD which investigated the phenomenon of *treacherous play* – things like scamming and espionage – in the sci-fi MMOG *EVE Online* (2003). I was interested in what players found attractive in a style of play that I felt was underexamined in game studies. At the time I started my PhD in 2012, *EVE Online* had already been out for 9 years and many elements of it stood in stark contrast to MMOGs like *World of Warcraft* that were dominant – both commercially, but also in the field – at the time.

This interest in underexamined topics led me into studying games like *DayZ* (2018) and the TV show *Survivor* (1997). Folks typically treat games and play as a positive experience, but *DayZ* features highly consequential permanent death that can lead to really upsetting experiences. I wanted to write about our attraction to negatively-valenced experiences in games to challenge some of the dominant thinking about play. As an enormous fan of the TV show *Survivor*, I was drawn to the harshness of the game and the possible parallels of *Survivor*'s popularity with boardgames like *Diplomacy* and the rise of eSports. I write about treacherous play in *EVE*, *DayZ* and *Survivor* in my forthcoming book, *Treacherous Play* (forthc.).

What drew you to researching kids' use of games like *Fortnite* (2017) and *Minecraft* (2011)?

Game studies doesn't seem to take children's play seriously. Children's play is typically viewed through one of two dominant perspectives. It's either for its positive educational potential, typical in research of *Minecraft* and of *gamification*, or its

potential for harm, closely connected to pervasive discourses of gaming addiction. While this kind of scholarship can be useful, I felt like this was distinctly different from the kinds of ways we get to study *adult* play as being worthy of study for its own sake. In studying *Minecraft* and *Fortnite*, I wanted to understand why children chose to play these types of games and what their experience of games is like, the same way game studies already takes the play of *adult* games seriously.

My colleague Jane Mavoa, who recently submitted her PhD on *Minecraft*, has had an enormous role in shaping how I think about *Minecraft* and children’s play. *Minecraft* is a really interesting game not just because it is enormously popular, but because the characteristics of this popularity are quite unique. A very wide range of ages play it, and those children that do play it play it for several years, returning to it again and again. It’s not a fad. Understanding this appeal and the role it plays in the lives of children and young adults is a fascinating question.

One of the research questions that emerged out of our study of *Minecraft* was what children played *after Minecraft*. This was actually the title of the study: *Digital Play After Minecraft*. We had collected data that showed this transition away from *Minecraft* in the 8-12 years age range. *Minecraft* was still popular, but it doesn’t have as dominant a place. This transition struck me as a really interesting thing to study: some kids didn’t move on from *Minecraft* (why?), some moved into teen titles (why?), and others stopped playing games at all (why?). It just so happened that the timing of this study coincided almost exactly with the meteoric rise and popularity of *Fortnite*. Serendipitous! We were able to study these same questions, but against the backdrop of a rather intense media panic about the game. It was a valuable opportunity to take seriously the appeal of a game that the media was oversimplifying, or problematically attributing to *addiction*.

Play is undoubtedly essential for children’s development and when watching whatever it is they are playing (whether it’s hide-and-seek or *Fortnite*), some kids can get pretty intense and incredibly enthusiastic. So, generally speaking, how do kids’ gaming habits and interactions with games mainly differ from say the 18-35 age demographic?

I’ve studied a range of player cultures, from *harsh* games like *EVE Online* to *DayZ*, tabletop games like *Warhammer 40,000* (1987-2020), and mobile games like *Candy Crush Saga* (2012). So, viewing children’s play of *Fortnite* (speaking specifically here of that 9-13 years age range) from this perspective, I’d say that children’s play isn’t fundamentally different to adult play. It is of course characterized by different restraints and interests, but often these work to have similar effects. Screen time limits – in place from parents and carers – and screen-time limits – from full time work – for instance.

The main difference is that it is situated within a very different kind of gaming culture, formed primarily on YouTube. Although adult and teen gaming cultures are present on YouTube, the centrality of YouTube to children’s gaming practices can’t really be understated. In part this is due to the way game play is moderated and limited by parents, ensuring that watching play constitutes a larger part of their gaming related media diets. Understanding contemporary children’s play – for its own sake – requires an understanding of games content on YouTube. Overall, I’d say this is an area that game studies as a field has neglected.

A lot of mainstream media reports tend to frame children’s gaming in a negative light or focus on addiction or *gaming disorder*. Do you find it hard to demonstrate the diverse uses and gratifications of gaming to the non-gaming public or to those who feel disconnected from their gamer friends or family members? What kind of things are important to convey to these people?

Just like books, radio, film and TV – which were all at some stage accused of being addictive for children – games are not *addictive*. They are an appealing hobby, enthusiastically engaged in, but parents shouldn’t misinterpret this desire as problematic compulsion or addiction. We wouldn’t call someone *addicted* to books just because they wanted to read another chapter of *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) after bedtime.

Typically, in a popular media context, I’d try to frame a response around the educational and developmental benefits of play. I’d argue that viewing all play negatively might mean children miss out on these benefits. But in a recent article with colleagues in the *Media International Australia* journal (Carter et al. 2020), we drew on data from our study of *Fortnite* to account for children’s perspectives and attitudes towards the *Fortnite addiction* media panic. What I was surprised about was how pervasively young players were using the term *addictive* to describe their own play, and experience, but not in a pathologized way. A game was *addictive* when it was fun, or a friend might be *addicted* because he didn’t want to stop playing *Minecraft* to play *Fortnite* with a friend.

As is often the case, children take up these terms and attempt to understand their own play through it. Describing all digital play as addictive has the potential for harm. In the absence of a more sophisticated discourse around play, and the ultimate fact that children do struggle with compulsions to play, I think its crucially important that we reject the premise of the *addiction* question and engage more closely with children and parents about the conflicts that emerge around digital play in the home.

During the Covid-19 pandemic gaming has perhaps enhanced the quality of life in a stay-at-home context, but what do parents and players alike need to look out for aside from excessive screen time?

The concept of *screen-time* homogenizes all screen-based activities in a reductive way that ultimately obfuscates issues. There are clearly different benefits and experiences of 2 hours of watching *Fortnite* YouTube *prank* videos, playing 2 hours of *Fortnite* solo, and playing 2 hours of *Fortnite* squads with friends. Understanding the composition of screen-time is an important first step in negotiating gaming in the home.

Beyond that though, and as I mentioned before, understanding contemporary children’s play requires an understanding of games content on YouTube. I think it’s necessary that we spend more time looking at children’s gaming discourses which are often problematic. I’m reminded here of Marcus Maloney, Steven Roberts and Alexandra Caruso’s excellent paper in *New Media & Society* (2018) that looked at performances of masculinity in YouTube gaming, which examines the way that gender is constructed by male YouTubers. More attention should be paid to how many popular gaming content creators often espouse racist, homophobic and sexist views and ideas.

For areas in the world with ongoing restrictions on movement and the consequential disengagement of people with their physical communities, to what extent do you think gaming communities on various platforms provide solace and emotional well-being for new users?

It is clear that games have played an important role for many people during the pandemic. An excellent testament to this is the enormous popularity of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, released in March 2020 and achieving more than 31 million sales by the end of the year. It’s not a coincidence that a game with no violence or stressful combat, and without the responsibility of saving the world or defeating a boss, was popular in 2020. It provides a safe, comfortable space to hang out with friends, providing players things their lives were otherwise lacking.

Animal Crossing: New Horizons is also an interesting game in the context of discussing the differences between adult play and children’s play. For children, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* provides the opportunity to engage in adult-like chores and feel responsibility over a community. For adults, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* provides the control, safety and community their lives were otherwise lacking. This is of course an oversimplification, but highlights the way – as you put it – games provide solace and emotional well-being for players, but in different ways depending on their needs. That same lack of control and community may express in a different player the desire to dominate opponents in *Destiny* (2014) player-versus-player community, or sabotage an enemy alliance in *EVE Online*.

Play is something we choose – or don’t choose – to make part of our lifeworlds. Understanding and acknowledging the importance of that is key to advancing the field of game studies, and countering reductive claims about *gaming disorder*.

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