On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space
Soraya Murray, 2018
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Despite the massive global popularity of video games, scholarship on the form remains relatively new and still quite localized compared to other media. Even though research on digital play has been thoroughly interdisciplinary since the establishment of the field in the 1990s (and games work has been included at international conferences related to media, culture, and communication for some time now), there remains uneasiness around games as an object of analysis. As a feminist games scholar who began examining games in the context of early fiery disciplinary debates about appropriate approaches and terminologies (Bogost 2009), the consequence of boundary-policing around ontology and epistemology (not to mention the legitimacy of gaming experience and degree of fandom) has always been a concern, particularly for how it might inhibit fresh insight and new perspective from other critical and political fields, including feminist media studies.

In On Video Games, Soraya Murray makes an exciting intervention into these disciplinary challenges, providing a refreshing articulation of the links between games and visual and cultural studies and the significance of these approaches for the field. As an Assistant Professor in Film and Digital Media with training in visual studies and art history, Murray is well-positioned to model the value of close readings of contemporary games. In her Introduction and the four analysis chapters that follow, Murray provides an exemplar of how games critique attendant to interdisciplinary discussions of identity, space, politics, and power fuels exciting and rich insight. In this way, the book constitutes an important contribution to ongoing work linking game studies, culture, and texts to critical theory, making it a useful text for students and researchers within and outside games.

The Introduction is most explicit about the political stakes of approaching games critically and the value of methods from cultural studies to address the elitism, exclusion, and insularity associated with video games. Murray reveals how these norms are shaped, through the demonization of game addiction and mediated violence from critics outside games, the emphasis on formal and technical approaches to evaluation in games criticism, the persistence of highly gendered and racialized stereotypical understandings of game players and practices, and the vicious dismissals of in particular feminist critique from those associated with GamerGate. She links the rise of game studies in its political, technological, and institutional context with the earlier emergence of visual and cultural studies, noting the parallels in the ways in which taking seriously the power of cultural artefacts attributed a lower status – while contested – carved out a space for critical readings of popular objects not typically examined within art or other traditional disciplines.

The next four chapters provide the evidence needed to support Murray's argument that reflexive, critical cultural analysis via close reading of games yields significant insight. Chapter 2, which examines gendered and racialized identity in

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation, immediately demonstrates how a cultural studies approach enables critics to move beyond normative assessments of such representations as 'good' or 'bad'. It instead supports a nuanced interrogation of the game's poetics in conversation with historical context as well as critical theory, popular game journalism, and industry discussions. This approach results in a rich reading of the game that embraces ambiguity and contradiction, an exemplary perspective that carries through in Chapter 2's exploration of whiteness in crisis via The Last of Us, Spec Ops: The Line, and Tomb Raider, Chapter 3's consideration of the ideological norms embedded in the gameworlds that players navigate, and Chapter 4's examination of time and space in dystopian cities within games. In each of these chapters, Murray makes a significant contribution to the analysis of representation, aesthetics, mechanics, and context in video games, enhancing ongoing discussions within critical game studies of structures of exclusion in games production, play, and participation (Jenson and de Castell 2014) by modelling an analytic mode that captures the complexity of games as cultural artefacts.

Murray's argument for taking a visual and cultural studies approach to games highlights the ongoing significance of cultural expression in this media form, enabling a rigorous analysis of the games noted above as well as Metal Gear Solid V, Max Payne 3, and Remember Me. In the Introduction, Murray provides a compelling rationale for her focus on blockbuster games, noting the necessity of critical analysis of the representational regimes of dominant ideology through such mass culture forms. It would however have been useful to also include a discussion of how cultural and visual studies approaches and methodologies would be applied to less 'cinematic' or complexly rendered games. How might such a critical perspective on cultural expression be applied to serious games designed for social critique, indie games with more abstract approaches to representation, and mainstream games with less richly visual worlds? Other scholars drawing on critical theories to examine games, such as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009), do an exemplary job of signalling alternatives and critical potentialities within games even while recognizing their mass cultural status, and it would have enhanced the book if Murray had addressed wider applications of cultural studies methodologies in games beyond these types of texts. Still, this book is highly teachable and through its discussion of methodology and evocative game analysis, it provides an important introduction to those who have yet to integrate games into their media studies.

References

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