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Gaming Matters: Art, Science Magic and the Computer Game Medium [Book Review]

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***Gaming Matters: Art, Science Magic and the Computer Game Medium.* Judd Ethan Ruggill and Kenneth S. McAllister, U Alabama P, 2011. ISBN-10: 0817317376 / Marc Ouellette**

Hard cover: \$35.00

The singular—maybe more aptly put as the pre-eminent—image that occurs when reading *Gaming Matters* is that of duelling dualisms. While this is a tried-and-true method of covering a topic, from the dissoi logoi to “The Owl and the Nightingale” and beyond, it is the site and the subject of these apposites that makes for an intriguing if (intentionally) unsettling read. The very title of the book makes the exercise of reading (and likely of writing) a part of and apart from this process. *Gaming Matters* stands as both call and catalogue. Gaming matters, most certainly, in terms of its audience, its purchase, and the purchasing power of its audience. What are the matters, though, for which gaming matters to scholars? Better yet, does gaming matter beyond its presumed role as a source of mindless escapism? While acknowledging the ambivalences of games and their study, the authors leave it to others to infer that similar sentiments regarding the instrumental rationality of cinema, television and even literature might have been overcome by previous generations of academics. The subtitle then interjects a frothy admixture of art, science, magic and the computer game medium. Attempting to combine these, then, is either quintessential or questionable given the popularity of computer games and the equally popular practice of dismissing them as irrelevant at best and as a sign of complete cultural collapse at worst.

To be more specific, what strikes me most about the book is not its treatment of the battling binaries that render computer games either attractive or repulsive - here enumerated by chapter as idiosyncrasy, irreconcilability, aimlessness, anachronism, duplicity, and work - but rather its many and several relocations from one side to the other as though it is attempting to convince itself and its readers at the same time that these "ineluctable" contradictions should be celebrated or at least begrudgingly accepted because these are the ultimate attractions of the games in the first place.[1] Even the accuracy of the terms "computer game" and "video game" is cause for debate (23). As they proceed through the maze of multiple meanings, the authors frequently invoke Walter Benjamin's observations from *Illuminations* and-not surprisingly given the history of gaming-from *The Arcades Project*, both for solace and for inspiration when considering the vagaries of mass produced curiosities whose "apresence militates against aura and authenticity [but are] always 'original' and 'authentic,' and therefore in some sense also always works of art" (95). According to Ruggill and McAllister, games are idiosyncratic, then, because the medium represents "a sculptor's blank from which developers can carve whatever they want, however they want" (2). Even so, the games themselves are filled with rules, borders, boundaries and the developers are constrained by real world concerns, including and especially sales. *Fallout 3*, for example, exists in different versions worldwide because of concerns about the reception of its content in some regions. The multiple versions and multiple platforms - Xbox, PC, PlayStation, etc. - are not the only ways in which games are irreconcilable or duplicitous. While the scholarship - beyond outright dismissals and their counterpart, trendy opportunism - remains divided on whether games are versions of existing forms (79), developers debate whether games are aesthetic or architectural (25). Here, one cannot help but think of "ghosts," which help programmers track inputs and outputs while debugging and which have become parts of games so that players can watch their exploits without ever knowing just how much surveillance they submit to during a game session. More than anything, though, it does seem that Ruggill and McAllister are intent upon revealing that while games do become aimless distractions involving aimlessness, there is work being done beyond that of the countless unseen labourers involved in any production.

This is quite a task given games from *Oils Well*, in which the reward for completing all ten levels was starting again at the first, to *Dead Rising*, in which the premise of using the objects in a shopping mall to mash zombies wears off sometime shortly after brunch on the proverbial Christmas Day of its receipt. Indeed, Ruggill and McAllister go so far as to say the medium is "best understood in terms of work" (84). However, it is the authors' own unstated work in shapeshifting between two types, the flâneur and the jouisseur, that one finds in arcades and in *The Arcades Project*, that strikes one upon reading the book to the "100% completion" level computer games demand; indeed, the good ones demand another go (AP 10). In other words, form becomes content so that Ruggill and McAllister are enacting the not-quite-cynical detachment of Benjamin's prototypical mallrat while easily sliding into the (relatively) shortlived gratification each game (or each session of gaming) offers and yet remaining mindful that games-computer or otherwise-are always already commodity divertissements. Flâneurs and jouisseurs they may be, but

Ruggill and McAllister never call too much attention to themselves in these regards. Ultimately, the authors take the courageous – read “dangerous,” since Sir Humphrey Appleby’s definition of “courageous” from *Yes, Minister*, applies to academics, as well – step of leaving explicit references to this particular dualism out of the book in a process that mimics the complexity-masking inherent in all games. In the parlance of our time, there are “Easter Eggs,” strewn about *Gaming Matters*, but ultimately the authors leave it to the judgment of their readers to decide where they—the games, the authors, the players, the readers—fit into the field.

Perhaps this aspect of *Gaming Matters* plays out best in the section called “The World, the Game, and the Critic.” Here, Ruggill and McAllister refer to Edward Said when asserting that games embody the same “system of exclusions” that shapes cultural productions (95). Moreover, games are sites of these exclusions. Any game is a collection—from frighteningly facile to terrifyingly tangled—of metaphorical and of physical switches, either “on” or “off,” and the resultant decisions, either “yes” or “no.” Games embody these exclusions within their architecture, in their play but also in their reception. In other words, “how the computer game medium is understood is as much a part of game criticism as the study of games themselves” (96). As long as the game critic maintains both presences, as the flâneur and as the jouisseur, gaming will matter, for the former will never experience the *dépaysement* that obviates “critical” reflection nor will the *jouissance* of the player occlude such reflection altogether. In this regard, the book’s most significant and yet least stated oscillation is its firm stance as a member of neither the ludology camp – which, simply stated, looks at games as and for the sake of games – nor the narratology camp – which wants to consider games as repurposed versions of canonical genres – which dominate and divide Game Studies as a discipline. Again, Ruggill and McAllister leave it to their readers to decide. Clearly, in making this move they hope that some of those readers might be colleagues who have avoided games and other “new media.”

Ultimately, this is the alchemy to which Ruggill and McAllister refer in the final chapter of *Gaming Matters*. It is also the proverbial silk purse from the sow’s ear to which they refer much earlier (40). In the logic of computer games, most of what matters – the vast labour force behind the production, the actual programming platforms and languages, the binary code – is somehow rendered invisible, transparent, or even non-existent in the infinite presence of a game (85). Indeed, this is the most Boolean operation of an entire culture industry built on nothing but the logical calculus of truth variables. It is the fact that computer games are themselves the practical embodiment of their own technologies of power that makes them matter so much. This should be understood as distinct from being their own rationale and their own outcome. The outcome of any game is never assured. That is why we play. That is why gaming matters.

[1] Indeed, “ineluctable” becomes one of the most repeated adjectives in the book, whether referring to the attraction of games or to the necessary allowances that must be made when considering them. Like time spent playing too many games, I

lost track of how many times the authors adroitly and resignedly write of games' ineluctable qualities.

Work Cited

Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. New York: Belknap Press, 2002.