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# ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces [Book Review]

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Call for Papers

Editorial Board

Submissions

Search

## *Reconstruction 6.4 (2006)*

Return to Contents»

# *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces.* Ed. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska. London: Wallflower, 2003. 229pp., 1-903364-23-X (pbk). $22.00.

<1> Recognizing the growing importance (at least for consumers) of video games as a popular form of narrative fiction, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska situate their collection, *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces* as a text which is corrective, informative and explorative. In the first case, the editors sought essays which would move the critical discourse on video games away from the more familiar but reductive debates surrounding the "effects" of video games (especially on children) and their modes of representation (especially of the female form and violence). Indeed, these have become the sine qua non of video game criticism and one feeds the other in a tautological fashion. As such, King and Krzywinska fulfill the second part of the contract by limiting the essays to those considering a) video games in terms of film; b) games diverge from film which further delineates (i) games as games, (ii) films as films; c) games in terms of film makes us question our u/s of film. As far as I understand it, this means how (a) produces or influences (b). The third part of the formula rests in offering new approaches to new media.

<2> That said, the majority of the papers consider the first perspective, that is by applying the methods and theories of Film Studies to the study

of video games. This does lead to some important insights regarding the utility of film within the video game milieu. For example, Sacha Howells delineates the functions of the disruptions caused by filmic vignettes inserted within the game narrative. As well, Andrew Mactavish provides a method of reading video games based on work in hypertext fiction. Admittedly, two essays, those of Burrill and Carr, focus on representations of gender. This leads to an intrinsic contradiction within the video game studies in *ScreenPlay* (and in general) based on film theory and, like most debates about visual media, it centres around the place of Laura Mulvey's critique of the gaze. For while Mactavish heeds Espen Aarseth's caution to scholars who seek to claim a new terrain for their theoretical models, several subsequent essays cling to the notion not just of an *a priori* male spectator, but that spectator as described by Mulvey. Given the wealth of more nuanced and inclusive accounts of viewership, this seems to be a significantly underexplored area of investigation.

<3> Admittedly, the primary focus of the collection is on the relationship between narrative and gameplay, for video games are not merely a form of "interactive cinema" (25). This focus problematizes the notion that games not a mature form and therefore should develop, progress, improve, especially in terms of the (re)presentation of violence and in terms of the (lack of) plots. This is the mantra of MIT's Henry Jenkins, who has become perhaps the most cited academic on the subject of video games. King and Krzywinska rightly recognize that this debate assumes and reinscribes a hierarchy of narrative forms with drama at the top and games competing with comic books for the bottom.[1] As such, most of the categories of analysis will be familiar to colleagues from a variety of disciplines. Cultural and Film Studies scholars will find a range of contemporary approaches and the narrative and content analysis are drawn from traditional literary disciplines which makes them accessible to most readers. However, one is immediately struck by the jargon of the new discipline--avatar, power up (or level up), FMV, etc--which nearly requires a glossary of terms. Indeed, there is potential for a volume of key terms and concepts as the discipline progresses.

<4> If there is a major shortcoming in *ScreenPlay* it comes from outside the text. The rate of advance of games, the players, and the machines on which they are played makes keeping up with the field a daunting prospect. One of the difficult decisions the editors had to make was what constituted a cinema/game interface. As they explain, "Many games, and many types of game, clearly have very littler point of contact with cinema or the cinematic. Examples range from abstract or puzzle games [. . .] to the innumerable driving or other sports-based simulation games, and many others, including multi-player online games" (3). This statement reveals much about the reach of video games in contemporary popular culture and about the rapid changes that have occurred in their development, even since this book was written. In the first instance, the editors are correct to point out that abstract or puzzle games share little with the cinematic.

<5> However, they have (perhaps necessarily) overlooked the ongoing and developing relationship between televised sporting spectacles and video games. The most important contributors to this area of interchange are

professional wrestling, the NBA, the NFL and major open-wheel auto-racing, especially Formula 1. In all of these cases, the presentation of the game action is meant to mimic not only the camera work but also the (often imposed) narratives of the sporting events. Formula 1 auto racing, especially in its HDTV broadcasts has borrowed liberally from games. For example, shots from the cockpit mimic games' presentation of on-screen data, including speed, RPM and a ghosted map. Miniaturization has allowed the producers to include multiple cameras on the cars to provide perspectives previously seen only in games. In the second instance, recent on-line games do intersect with the cinematic. The foremost examples are the newer games in the *Medal of Honor* series. Although *Counterstrike* might be more popular, I mention *MOH* because it is a Stephen Spielberg production and shares many of the same creative staff, stories and situations as the *Band of Brothers* series and, of course, *Saving Private Ryan*. Simply put, *MOH*, and the sports games, function as part of what Marsha Kinder first described as an "intertextual web" of indoctrination involving film, television, heroes and children.[2] The current generation of game machines bring on-line gaming to a wider audience by building on the familiar consoles. Previously, such gaming was restricted to computer gamers who often built or customized their own machines.

<6> The rapid pace of game development is in no way a limitation of the work. Although it does privilege cinema over other visual forms such as television. Rather, this points to another area for further research. The TV, in its various forms, is the primary screen on which console games are played. PC games appear on monitors which are more closely related to TVs than they are to movie screens. In other words, there is plenty of room to continue the important conversations started in *ScreenPlay*.In this regard, the work lives up to the editors' claims regarding its explorative nature.

**Works Cited**

Cassell, Justine and Henry Jenkins. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender in Video Games*. Boston: MIT P, 1998.

Kinder, Marsha. "Playing with Power on Saturday Morning Television and on Home Video Games." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 14 (1992): 29-59.

**Notes**

[1] One of the topics that Jenkins carefully avoids mentioning directly-- for example, in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*--is morality. Yet many of the concerns expressed therein, especially regarding effects and representation, stem from moral judgements. King and Krzywinska also avoid this topic but not for the same reason or in the same fashion as Jenkins. In other words, the topic of morality arises from Jenkins not from the essays in *ScreenPlay*. [^]

[2] In fact, Kinder's original response was to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* craze of the early 1990s. Curiously, there are no references to Kinder's study in *ScreenPlay*. [^]