Game Studies
the international journal of computer game research
volume 1, issue 1
July 2001

Computer Game Studies, Year One

by Espen Aarseth, Editor-in-Chief

Espen Aarseth is Associate Professor in Humanistic Informatics at the University of Bergen.

His best-known book is *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997).

Aarseth has studied computer games since 1984. He is the founder of the Digital Arts and Culture annual series of international conferences (1998 -), and has directed the Lingo project at the University of Bergen (1997-2000), using and developing MOOs for language learning.

Welcome to the first issue of the first academic, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to computer game studies. This is a noteworthy occasion, and perhaps the most remarkable aspect is that such a journal has not been started before. As we know, there have been computer games for almost as long as there have been computers: *SpaceWar*, arguably the first *modern* game, turns forty this year, and commercially the genre has existed for three decades. So why not something like this before?

2001 can be seen as the **Year One** of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field. This year has seen the first international scholarly conference on computer games, in Copenhagen in March, and several others will follow. 01-02 may also be the academic year when regular graduate programs in computer game studies are offered for the first time in universities. And it might be the first time scholars and academics take computer games seriously, as a cultural field whose value is hard to overestimate.

To some of us, computer games are already a phenomenon of greater cultural importance than, say movies, or perhaps even sports. Seen from 2001, the potential cultural role(s) of computer games in the future is practically unfathomable. It seems clear that these games, especially multi-player games, combine the aesthetic and the social in a way the old mass media, such as theatre, movies, TV shows and novels never could. The old mass media created mass audiences, who shared values and sustained markets, but the mass media communities remained *imagined* (in Benedict Anderson's sense), with little or no direct communication between participants. Clearly, multi-player games are not like that. In games like *MUD1*, *Ultima online,* or *Quake Arena,* the aesthetic and the social are integrated parts, and this could be regarded as the greatest innovation in audience structure since the invention of the choir, thousands of years ago. To see computer games as merely the newest self-reinvention of Hollywood, as some do, is to disregard those socio-aesthetic aspects and also to force outdated paradigms onto a new cultural object. True, there is a considerable Hollywoodisation of the games *industry* at the moment, that started with the "interactive movies" failures of the early nineties, but there is also a world wide, non-commercial, collective games movement that has a better infrastructure than any amateur movement before it. Hollywood, like the record industry, is all about distribution, and now there is a distribution mechanism that rivals booth: the Internet. Even Bill Gates III failed to swallow up the Internet, and there is much less reason to believe that Hollywood will succeed.

From the closed ecosystem of Nintendo to the open source games communities on the Net; game studies must study both; it would be a mistake to assume that the "Nintendo-Hollywood" industrial complex will rule, and eliminate the alternative. As a cultural studies strategy, this would be like preparing to fight the previous war.

A cognitive, communicative revolution?

Much hype has been produced about the ability of new technology to instigate new ways of thought and communication. Take hypertext, which was supposed to give us writing skills that adhered much closer to the way our brains worked, a more "natural" way of textual communication. So far, however, the World Wide Web, the must successful hypertext system by far, has only produced a better distribution mechanism, and very few texts actually use the nonlinear possibilities of the technology. Games, however, are often *simulations*; they are not static labyrinths like hypertexts or literary fictions. The simulation aspect is crucial: it is radically different alternative to narratives as a cognitive and communicative structure. Simulations are bottom up; they are complex systems based on logical rules.

Games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played. Playing is integral, not coincidental like the appreciative reader or listener. The creative involvement is a necessary ingredient in the uses of games. The complex nature of simulations is such that a result can't be predicted beforehand; it can vary greatly depending on the player's luck, skill and creativity. In multi-player games, social skills are needed, or must be developed. Anyone who has spent some time in a multi-player game knows that. Yet much of the industry and the academic commentators see the need for "narrative" structures in order to understand games and make games "better." In this issue, the debate about narratives' and narratology's relevance to game studies is clearly visible. This is a debate that shows the very early stage we are still in, where the struggle of controlling and shaping the theoretical paradigms has just started. We expect the debate to continue, here and elsewhere, but hope that future contributions will address the points already made, and not simply make the same claims over and over again. That is what an academic journal is for.

Creating a New Discipline

The greatest challenge to computer game studies will no doubt come from within the academic world. Making room for a new field usually means reducing the resources of the existing ones, and the existing fields will also often respond by trying to contain the new area as a subfield. Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again. And again, until computer game studies emerges as a clearly self-sustained academic field. To make things more confusing, the current pseudo-field of "new media" (primarily a strategy to claim computer-based communication for visual media studies), wants to subsume computer games as one of its objects. There are many problems with this strategy, as there is with the whole concept of "new media," and most dramatically the

fact that computer games are not one medium, but many different media. From a computerized toy like *Furby* to the game *Drug Wars* on the Palm Pilot, not to mention massively multi-player games like *Everquest*, or the recent *Anarchy Online*, which was *tested by 40.000 simultaneous playtesters,* the extensive media differences within the field of computer games makes a traditional medium perspective almost useless. We end up with what media theorist Liv Hausken has termed media blindness: how a failure to see the specific media differences leads to a "media-neutral" media theory that is anything but neutral. This is clearly a danger when looking at games *as* cinema or stories, but also when making general claims about games, as though they all belonged to the same media format and shared the same characteristics.

Computer games are perhaps the richest cultural genre we have yet seen, and this challenges our search for a suitable methodological approach. We all enter this field from *somewhere else*, from anthropology, sociology, narratology, semiotics, film studies, etc, and the political and ideological baggage we bring from our old field inevitably determines and motivates our approaches. And even more importantly, do we stay or do we go back? Do we want a separate field named computer game studies, or do we want to claim the field for our old discipline? This is a common dilemma for any scholar in a new field; take for example digital culture studies. Today, every modern culture is also digital, so every sector of the humanities and social sciences must see the digital as part of their own territory. Hence, a separate field of digital culture is difficult to construct, and probably (after the existing fields warmed to its importance), completely unnecessary. The digital theorists will finally have found interest and acceptance back at the old discipline, and so the fellowship offered by interdisciplinary communities (such as the Internet Research Association) while still valuable, is no longer crucial when building a career.

In computer games, this is different. The old field of game studies barely exists (see Jesper Juul's review in this issue), and seems in no shape to give the computer game scholars a safe haven. Some would argue that the obvious place for game studies is in a media department, but given the strong focus there on mass media and the visual aesthetics, the fundamentally unique aspects of the games could easily be lost.

Today we have the possibility to build a new field. We have a billion dollar industry with almost no basic research, we have the most fascinating cultural material to appear in a very long time, and we have the chance of uniting aesthetic, cultural and technical design aspects in a single discipline. This will not be a painless process, and many mistakes will be made along the way. But if we are successful, we can actually contribute both constructively and critically, and make a difference outside the academy. I am not too optimistic about influencing a multibillion industry. But in the long run, who knows?

Of course, games should also be studied within existing fields and departments, such as Media Studies, Sociology, and English, to name a few. But games are too important to be left to these fields. (And they did have thirty years in which they did nothing!) Like

architecture, which contains but cannot be reduced to art history, game studies should contain media studies, aesthetics, sociology etc. But it should exist as an independent academic structure, because it cannot be reduced to any of the above. These are interesting times.

You are all invited!

[To the top of the page]