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Freak scene? Narrative, audience & scene

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Abstract

This paper develops, and expands upon, ideas first set out in both Crawford (2006) and Crawford and Rutter (2007), which posits the idea of considering gamers as a (media) audience — enabling parallels to be drawn with wider literatures and debates on audience research and media fan cultures. In particular, drawing on some illustrative examples from ongoing ethnographic research (currently funded by the British Academy) into the everyday lives of gamers, this paper suggests that the concept of 'scene' (borrowed most notably from music fan studies) allows us to understand how gaming, and also significantly game-related narratives, are located within the everyday lives of gamers, and the significance that this takes on in certain (physical) locations.

Keywords: audience, digital gaming, gamers, everyday life, narrative, scene.

Introduction

This paper offers a consideration of the social importance and location of gaming within patterns of everyday life. Building upon earlier work (such as Crawford 2006, and Crawford and Rutter 2007) we continue the argument for considering gamers as a media 'audience', as this allows useful parallels to be drawn with literatures on (other) media audiences and fan cultures. Specifically here, this paper argues that the concept of 'scene', borrowed most notably from music fan studies, provides a useful mechanism for understanding digital gaming culture. In particular, we suggest that the

concept of scene is useful as this highlights how ‘elective belongings’ are located within our identities and ordinary lives, but can take on extraordinary meaning in certain (physical) spaces. The importance of space *within* games has been highlighted by several authors, and most notably Henry Jenkins (2004), but little consideration has been given to the physical spaces games are played in. To this end, this paper proposes ‘scene’ as a useful tool for understanding and analyzing games, and moreover, contributes to debates on the usefulness of ‘narrative’ analyses in games studies — as here narratives become located outside of games, in gamers’ identities, social performances, networks and within physical spaces.

Though this paper is largely theoretical in its arguments, and endeavors to provide a basis for further and more detailed empirical based work, the paper does draw on some illustrative examples in the last section to support our arguments. This data is gathered from ongoing ethnographic research into the everyday lives of digital gamers. This research began in 2003 and was funded until 2004 by Sheffield Hallam University (UK), and continued from 2006 to date through funding from the British Academy. To date, this research includes a convenience sample consisting of interviews with eighty-two gamers (all based in the UK, sixty-six male, sixteen female, ranging in age from eleven

to fifty-six years old). These interviews were collected from a variety of sources: forty-seven were social science undergraduate students at Sheffield’s two universities; ten interviewees were obtained at LAN¹ events; fourteen had previously completed a postal questionnaire in Sheffield and indicated that they would be willing to participate in further research; and an additional eleven

¹ LAN events are (most typically) where gamers bring their own computers to attach to a temporary Local Area Network (LAN) in order to play with/against others both as individuals and in teams. These events can vary in size from a few friends meeting at one of their homes for a few hours, to thousands of gamers congregating for sometimes several days.

interviews were contacted via snowballing from this sample group. The majority of the interviews were conducted one-to-one, face-to-face, but in some cases where this was not possible telephone interviews (in two cases) or email interviews (ten cases) were used. In addition, this research has also gathered media use diaries, and has included extensive observations of gamers at play in their own homes, several LAN events (both small and very large) and games arcades (again, all in the UK). All interviewees have been given pseudonyms.

The first section of this paper suggests that gamers are infrequently considered as an ‘audience’, in fact, the very idea has been rejected by many. However, gamers are an audience, both in the traditional sense, in that they will often watch others play games, but even as individual gamers, they are an audience to their own gameplay. It is suggested that the rejection of the idea of gamers as an audience is frequently tied into a wider rejection of a literary/narrative approach to games studies. Though recognizing some of the limitations of narratological approach, we argue that narrative still has its uses in understanding the social and cultural importance of gaming. The next section suggests that a ludic approach to games studies has helped move (the narrative driven) focus on gaming ‘texts’ towards a consideration of the gamers themselves. However, this perspective, drawing on theories of play, often conceptualizes play as separate from ‘ordinary’ life and therefore considers gaming in (social) isolation. But of course, gameplay and gamers are never socially isolated, as their (and others) social lives will inevitably shape the nature of their play, and similarly, gameplay can have wider implications beyond the sphere (or circle) of play. Consequently the following section reiterates the arguments of Crawford and Rutter (2007) for considering gamers as an audience, and considering how gaming, and game-related performances, are located within everyday life and an increasingly ‘performative society’. A recent development of the ‘performative society’ thesis is offered by Longhurst (2007) and picked up here. This proposes that the concept of ‘scene’, borrowed from studies of music fan culture, could be applied to other audiences, which

would enable us to understand how elective belongings (and narratives) are located within our ordinary lives and identities, but take on greater significance within certain spaces. Following on from this then, the next section considers how (gaming) narratives are located within our everyday lives. There has been an increased awareness that narratives exist beyond texts, but this argument is developed further here with the work of de Certeau, Ricoeur and Giddens in relation to how narratives contribute to our sense of identity and are played out in certain locations. Finally, before concluding, the paper attempts to (briefly) apply these arguments by considering how ‘gaming’ is a relatively ordinary, even at times mundane, activity, but that takes on greater significance within certain spaces, such as bedrooms, LAN events and arcades.

Audiences and Narratology

Crawford and Rutter (2007) make the case for considering gamers as an audience. Here they argue that both a textual (often narratological) emphasis, and considerations of the disruptive possibilities of games technologies such as studies that focus upon either gaming aggression or theories of play, have meant that rather than being understood as an ‘audience’ much of the literature on gaming continues to situate gamers as individual players. There remains often implicit assumptions about digital gaming and the engagement with a certain piece of technology, and these are often encoded in a range of metaphors, such as ‘immersion’ (Murray 1997), ‘being there’ (Newman 2004) and ‘relationship’ (Aarseth 1997) to more, almost symbiotic, approaches (Crawford and Rutter 2007).

In particular, the case has often been made that gamers are simply not an ‘audience’. As Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003: 200) categorically and simply put it ‘games are audienceless’. Eskelinen and Tronstad suggest that like many other games, such as soccer, having an audience present is not a requirement of play, and they use this as justification for distancing the study of digital games from other media forms (such as books and films), which they suggest require the existence of an

audience. However, Eskelinen and Tronstad present a very limited understanding of what an audience is, assuming that any one individual cannot occupy the positions of participant and audience at the same time. As Eskelinen and Tronstad acknowledge, gameplay can involve significant elements of performativity, which will frequently involve participants taking on and acting out specific roles. But what they do not recognize, is that through their gaming performances, gamers create spectacles; which they are also a viewer of, and audience to (Rehak 2003).

Gamers can also be understood as an audience in a much more traditional sense. As Newman (2004: 95) writes: ‘it is essential to note that videogame experiences are frequently shared by groups, perhaps crowded around a television set in a domestic setting, or as Saxe (1994) has observed, around coin-op machines in arcades’. And both quantitative and more ethnographically orientated studies are increasingly highlighting the limitations of a focus merely on the individual gamer and game. Research undertaken for the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (2005) suggests that 55 percent of gamers play with others, and similarly academic research by Wright *et al.* (2002), Crawford (2005a) and Jansz and Martens (2005) supports the idea of gaming as a social activity. And the research of Schott and Kambouri (2006) suggests that even games designed and intended for one-player can become the focus of group-play; as players either take turns playing the game or offer advice, supporting, encouraging (or even sometimes less constructive, but still participatory) comments during gameplay. Even though it may be the case that many games are frequently played alone, so too are nearly all books read alone, and often television or cinema is watched alone, but most see no difficulty in referring to film or television ‘audiences’ or the ‘audience’ for a particular book.

However, there continues to be a reluctance by many (though notably not all) writers on games studies to align discussions of digital gamers with those of other media users. This unwillingness to engage with wider debates on audiences most notably originates in the assumption that gaming

constitutes a significant and marked departure in media forms and practice, which cannot necessarily be understood using the same theoretical tools or literature as ‘older’ media form, such as television. Therefore, the basis of this rejection of the idea of gamers as an audience, particular in the case of authors such as Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003), needs to be understood as a wider rejection of the idea that games and gamers can be analysed using theoretical and methodological tools borrowed from literary and/or film studies, such as narrative analysis.

In recent years there has been mounted and enthusiastic (and not wholly unconvincing) argument against the use of literary and film theory, and in particular narrative, in understanding digital games. For instance, in critiquing a narratological approach several authors point out that not all games tell stories, and even those that do, tend to have very limited narratives or do this in different ways to other media forms. The classic example used by many authors is that of *Tetris*, or similar ‘puzzle’ style games, which contain no discernable narrative structure. Furthermore, in many other games (such as the example of *Gran Turismo* highlighted by Kücklich 2006) the fictional world in which they are based only provides a prop or a setting for the action, and not any story arc or development. Similarly, Juul (2001) suggests that unlike traditional narratives, many games, such as *Space Invaders* do not have a conclusion. *Space Invaders* does not have a ‘story’ that ever ends; as we are simply confronted by wave after wave of ‘invaders’. Even when games do have some resemblance to a traditional narrative structure, they tend to have fairly limited stories that often only operate as a vehicle for stringing together action sequences or environments within games — such as the experimental failure at the Black Mesa Research Facility that opens up a portal between Earth and the world of Xen, which leads Dr Gordon Freeman on a adventure to close this rift in the game *Half-Life*. Furthermore, Juul (2001) highlights that traditional narration is the telling of a story that *already* exists, while in digital games the story is happening right *now*, as the gamer plays through the game.

This leads onto a further key criticism of a narratological approach; that unlike traditional narrative-based media forms (such as literature, television or cinema), which are ‘representational’, digital games are ‘interactive’ and ‘simulation’ based. In particular, Chris Crawford (1982) draws a clear distinction between the play of gamers and the ‘passivity’ and ‘non-interactive’ nature of traditional media audiences. Also as Loftus and Loftus (1983: 41, cited in Newman 2004: 94) write ‘when we watch a movie or read a book, we passively observe the fantasy. When we play a computer game, we actively participate in the fantasy world created by the game’.

The ‘interactive’ nature of gaming, it is suggested, means that gamers are not restricted in the same ways as a viewer of a film or reader of a book, and can instead (to some extent) choose how they interact with the game. Not every gamer plays the same game in the same way, and it is evident that even when narrative-like elements exist within games, gamers may choose to ignore (or skip past) these elements of the game. For instance, in her discussion of players of the RPG game *Baldur’s Gate*, Carr (2006: 44) suggests that gamers may ‘skip as much of the storytelling as possible’, and Poremba (2006) in her consideration of *Grand Theft Auto* highlights how players may use cheats or mods to skip sections (and story development) within this and other games.

There is little doubt that the activity of playing a digital game is quantifiably different to watching a film or reading a book, and that it is an oversimplification of media forms to suggest that these can be studied in the same ways. And to some extent, many authors’ reliance on narrative and other literary or film studies approaches to gaming could be understood as either a desire to carry on using the same tools as they have always used (Frasca 2003) or dismissed as a form of cinema or literary ‘envy’ (see Jenkins 2004). However, similarly in young disciplines (like games studies) just as we find ‘old dogs’ not keen to learn ‘new tricks’, we also often see a fervor for declaring the subject of study (whatever that maybe) as radically different from all that has gone before, and therefore requiring a complete rethinking of approaches and paradigms. Hence, while we do not wish to

advocate the wholesale application of ‘second-hand’ theories borrowed from other disciplines, we would similarly warn against, not adopting (and if necessary adapting) still useful ideas and tools and also making connections with other disciplines and areas of study. And in particular, we suggest that the consideration of gamers as an audience, and the use of the concept of narrative (in a wider social sense) can still offer significant insights into gaming and gamers.

Players and Ludology

One (other) fundamental difficulty with many narratological approaches to digital games, is that too often these focus upon the ‘textual’ nature of games at the expense of considering the gamers themselves or the social and cultural context of the game. This limitation is countered, to some degree, by a ‘ludology’ or ‘ludic’ approach to games studies, which focuses on play, and recognizes the active role of the game player.

However, ludological approaches to games studies, drawing on the work of (most notably) Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, have often (sometime misrepresenting this work) sought to distinguish and separate play from ‘ordinary’ life (Eskelinen and Tronstad 2003). For instance, Kerr *et al.* (2004: 13) argues that a key feature of gaming pleasure is derived from ‘...that it [gaming] is separate from everyday life’, and to support this argument they cite Huizinga’s argument play involves a ‘stepping out of “real” life’ (2004: 13) (cited in Crawford 2006: 500). Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003) suggest that in games studies this argument has been used in a number of different ways. First, that during play individuals are subjected to (through free choice) rules and goals that do not apply to their lives outside of the game — and hence gameplay takes place within (what Huizinga refers to as) a ‘magic circle’. As Rodriguez (2006: n.p.) writes: ‘according to Huizinga, the consciousness of play as a separate and self-contained sphere is often reinforced by the pervasive tendency to enclose the players within a spatiotemporal frame, the so-called “magic

circle”, which isolates their game from the more serious tasks of daily living’. Second, that play is fixed and limited to a specific location and time, and third, is connected to ‘make-believe, transforming the real time and place of play to an imagined time and place’ (Rodriguez 2006: n.p).

However, this third implication of the work of Huizinga is one that Rodriguez challenges. Rodriguez (2006: n.p) states how ‘Huizinga sometimes argues that all games somehow involve an element of illusion or make-believe’. However, Rodriguez continues: ‘It is...difficult to see how tic-tac-toe, for instance, contains any fictional features. This game appears perfectly literal; players simply put pieces on a board, and there is no pretence, make-believe or simulation involved at any stage of the process’. Hence, Rodriguez suggests that ‘perhaps Huizinga’s claim only means that there is an artificial universe of special rules that apply only within the sphere of the game’. But, by retaining Huizinga’s original argument that all games involve make-believe, and hence fantasy, we see an inviting link here between play and narrative — where narrative could be used as a means of understanding the fantasy encountered within gameplay.

However, a limitation with how Huizinga’s work has frequently been applied (particularly within games studies) remains in the almost literal interpretation of the idea of a ‘magic circle’; where gamers and gameplay are frequently seen as separate and isolated from everyday life. Of course, it would be unfair to suggest that this was true for all ludic-based discussions of digital games, as some (particularly more contemporary accounts of gaming) do recognize the location of play within everyday life (for instance see De Mul 2005). As Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003) rightly recognize, games can never be totally isolated from ordinary life, as gameplay will always be located within, and may have ‘intended or unintended consequences’, which impact upon our social lives, and in turn, it is our everyday lives that shape our gameplay. For instance, a gamer’s gender can play an important role in shaping gameplay. Though there is considerable discrepancy over what proportion of women make up gamers, there is little doubt that women (on average) are less likely to play

digital games than men, and those who do, tend to play these less frequently than their male peers (Crawford and Gosling 2005). ‘Magic circles’ of play are not located ‘outside’ of society, but rather all spaces carry with them varying degrees of social meaning. Hence, within recent years there has been a growing awareness (within some areas of games studies) of the need to consider and locate gaming within a wider social, and everyday, context. However, beyond this (increasingly frequent) recognition, there have been relatively few attempts to fully develop a theory of the location and importance of gaming within everyday practices.

Scene & Everyday Life

Though several authors have often drawn on the vocabulary of audience and fan research, very few have sought to apply this at anything but a fairly superficial level. For example, though Kline *et al.* (2003) in their consideration of gamers draw on the concept and literature of ‘active audiences’, they merely use this to highlight how individual gamers can adopt ‘oppositional’ readings to games, and include no understanding of how digital games are located within the everyday lives and social interactions of gamers. Crawford and Rutter (2007) draw on existing debates and literature on fandom and audiences in considering the social location of gaming ‘performances’. Kerr *et al.* (2004) highlight performance as a key component of gaming pleasure. As they write (2004: 15):

New media are seen to possess a performative aspect, insofar as they allow for and foster the users’ experimentation with alternative identities (Turkle 1995). This is true for computer games as well as internet chat rooms etc. The pleasure of leaving one’s identity behind and taking on someone else’s identity is regarded as a key pleasure in digital games (cited in Crawford 2006: 500).

For Kerr *et al.* (2004: 13) (as cited earlier and following a ludic line of argument) a key feature and pleasure of gaming performativity that this ‘is separate from everyday life’. However, as already argued, it is problematic to assume that there exists distinct lines between a ‘virtual’ gaming world and ‘real’ life. Consequently, Crawford and Rutter (2007) seek to expand the consideration of gaming performativity beyond those that take place ‘in-game’, and consider how gamers will similarly ‘perform’ to others they play with (either online or in-person), such as ‘trash talking’ opponents in online first person shooters like *Counter-Strike* (see Wright *et al.* 2002), or celebrating to individuals who they are playing with in the same room (for example, see Crawford 2006). Furthermore, they consider how these performances may extend beyond the game screen. For instance, how producing game mods (add-ons) or offering knowledge and advice on games to others (either online, such as through the production of ‘walkthroughs’ or in-person) can be seen as a display and performance of gaming competence.

In theorizing gaming (and game-related) social performances, Crawford and Rutter (2007) draw parallels with, and upon, the literature on audiences and fans. In particular, many considerations of both media audiences (such as Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) and fan cultures (such as Hills 2002) have noted the important (and increasing) role of performance (and performativity²) in

² Though we do not have the space to go into detail here, often a distinction is drawn between the term ‘performances’ and ‘performativity’. Where the first is associated with the work of Erving Goffman, which is often understood to provide a modernist view of identity, which sees a ‘real’ self behind the social performance. The latter (more ‘postmodern’) idea of ‘performativity’ is used by Judith Butler to suggest that there is no ‘real’ behind performativity. However, Butler herself does frequently use the terms performance and performativity interchangeably (Longhurst 2007), and we would suggest that the distinctions between Butler and Goffman are often overstated. Hence, we are fairly loose in our use of the terms ‘performance’, ‘performativity’ and ‘performing’ (the term is preferred by Longhurst 2007) in this paper, and here (unapologetically) uses them interchangeably.

contemporary society. Such authors highlight the proliferation and increased social significance of the mass media within contemporary society, which has concurred with, and helped to bring about, a change in the nature of contemporary media audiences. In particular, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) draw upon the work of Appaduari (1990) to suggest that the mass media surrounds and envelopes our everyday lives in a 'mediascape', which, as with the landscape beneath our feet, often goes unnoticed but is fundamental in shaping the world around us. This mediascape then provides a resource that individuals draw upon in their social performances. As such, 'being a member of an audience is no longer an exceptional event, nor an everyday event rather it is constitutive of everyday life' (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 68-69). That is to say, we live in an increasingly narcissistic and 'performative society' where individuals will draw on the media as a 'resource' (such as informing the way they dress, speak or act) in constructing their social performances, and consequently, in turn, we become what Abercrombie and Longhurst refer to as a 'diffused' audience to others' social performances.

This idea of the 'diffused audience' is expanded further by Longhurst in 2007. In particular, Longhurst suggests that the concept of 'scene' provides a useful mechanism for understanding how our social performances are located within our 'ordinary' lives. The concept of 'scene' grows out of debates on music culture and fandom, and is one attempt (of many) to provide a theory that moves beyond the now rather dated concept of 'subculture'³. Longhurst (2007: 57), drawing on

³ Sub-cultural theory suffers from numerous weakness, including most notably its overemphasis on the apparent cohesion and stability of these groups, as well as, ignoring individual agency and choice in joining subcultures, and most often sees subcultures as a largely structural and class based 'response' (see Hodkinson 2002).

Hesmondhalgh (2005), suggests that the concept of scene has generally been used in two ways: either to understand 'place bound' music cultures (such as in the UK the 'Mersey Beat' of the 1960s or the 'Madchester' scene of the late 1980s/early 1990s) (as used by Shank 1994) or as 'complex spatial flows of music affiliations' (such as could be characterized in the 'goth' scene) (as employed by Straw 1991). Though Hesmondhalgh highlights these two separate usages as incompatible, and therefore questions the validity of the concept of scene, Longhurst suggests that these are not necessarily conflictual readings, and in fact, highlights the very usefulness of this term. For two main reasons: first, scene allows for an understanding of how elective belongings are lived out and experienced in our ordinary lives, and second, how scenes take on 'extraordinary' meaning at certain times and in specific locations. Hence, this concept places particular emphasis on the importance of 'place'.

A good illustration of this point would be the (aforementioned) 'goth' scene. Goths are part of a wider society and culture, most have jobs, interests and friends outside of the goth scene, but they remain part of this scene in their ordinary lives, primarily through a sense of identity and belonging to this scene and their music and fashion tastes. However, this scene becomes 'extraordinary' and takes on increased significance at certain times and in certain places, such as at goth clubs, or most visibly (in the UK) at the bi-annual goth weekends in Whitby in North Yorkshire (see Hodkinson 2002). Focusing on the ordinary lives of goths may lead one to highlight the 'ephemeral' and fluid nature of elective belonging and identity, while concentrating on 'extraordinary' events may lead one to emphasize the coherence and 'substance' of this group (as Hodkinson does). Scene,

therefore Longhurst argues, allows for a greater understanding of the importance of elective belonging in ordinary life and how in certain places this could take on extraordinary significance. Furthermore, Longhurst argues that scene can be employed to understand elective belongings and enthusiasms beyond music, and here we would suggest that it may have value in understanding gaming audiences.

Furthermore, and significantly, Longhurst (2007) highlights the important role of narrative within scenes, suggesting that scenes include group (or scene) narratives, composed of interrelating and individual narratives, which in turn are also located within wider social narratives. And specifically it is to this, that we now which to turn.

Narrative and Everyday Life

Jenkins (2004: 121) suggests that too often critics of a narratological approach focus too much on ‘the activities and aspirations of the storyteller and too little on the process of narrative comprehension’. That is to say, critics of narratology tend not to recognize that narratives exist beyond the page or screen. This is an argument also made, by amongst others’ Torben Grodal (2003). Grodal (2003: 130) argues that narratives as well as being external to us (such as written on page) are also ‘body-brain-internal processes’, in that it is we who comprehend, internalize and emotionally respond to narratives. Grodal (2003: 133) also suggests that ‘a canonical story, that is, a story with one (or a few) focusing characters that unfolds itself in a linear, progressive time, from beginning through middle to end’, is the form in which we make sense of our world and process information. And he suggests that even when we are presented with information that is not canonical, ‘our innate mental machinery’ will rearrange and process this in a canonical format (2003: 133). As, Jenkins (2004: 126) argues, ‘few films or novels are absolutely linear’, rather

as more information is revealed the reader or viewer formulate (and reformulate) the narrative within their own minds on the basis of the information (resources) they have.

Though neither Grodal (nor Jenkins) make reference to their work, these arguments share many similarities and parallels with the work of Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens on the role narrative in identity formation. For Ricoeur (1988) the idea of ‘narrative identity’ suggests the idea of a self as a ‘storied self’, made up of stories told by the person about themselves and their lives, stories told by others about them and wider social and cultural narratives. Each individual therefore develops a life narrative and sense of who they are (their identity) through narratives. This then recognises the temporal nature of identity, for, as with a never-ending story, this is always being constructed, developed, and hence, ever changing. It also overcomes the dualism of fiction and history, recognising that our own personal narrative identities are a construct of both of these. Likewise, narrative identity mediates both ‘sameness’ and ‘selfhood’, locating individuals within a wider community and cultural narrative, but identifying the individual’s specific location and personal narrative within this. Similarly, Giddens (1991) (though this would be in contrast to Grodal’s argument) suggests that the ‘narrative of the self’ is a ‘modern’ social construction linked to our contemporary ideas of romantic love, which requires a shared history. Hence, for Giddens contemporary identities are made and maintained through narratives. As he writes (1991: 54):

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor — important though it is — in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external worlds, and sort them into ongoing ‘story’ about the self (emphasis in original).

Others have effectively used the idea of narrative identity in considering other contemporary leisure pursuits, and most notable here is the work of Tony Blackshaw (2003). Blackshaw provides an

insightful ethnography of the leisure lives of a group of working class men in Leeds (in the UK). He suggests that in an increasingly 'liquid modern' world (Bauman 2001), where the once certitudes of life such as social class, occupation and family become increasingly fragile, identities similarly become more fluid and flexible; out of need to negotiate one's identity and social position within this ever changing world. Blackshaw suggests that for the group of men in his study (as with many others), this creates many anxieties and a sense of dislocation, which they seek to combat through the creation of narrative identities played out in certain (hyperreal) 'solid' masculine environments, such as the local pub. It is in these locations that these men can draw on each other's constructed identities and narratives in (re)asserting and (re)defining their own masculine identities and narratives.

The question of increasingly fluid identities within contemporary society is applied to digital gaming by Miroslaw Filiciak (2003), and in particular how massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) allow individuals to play with their identities, and construct what Filiciak refers to as 'hyperidentities'. However, though Filiciak (2003) acknowledges that 'in-game' identity formations draw on and influence (what he refers to as) 'real life' emotions, Filiciak's main focus is upon in-game identity formations and he does not fully explore the location or implications of game-related identities within a wider social setting. However, as argued earlier, there is little doubt that not only is gameplay influenced by its location with everyday social practices, but that their importance extends far beyond the sight of the gaming screen (or any kind of 'magic circle'). As Burn (2006: 88) writes:

Engagement with the game does not finish when the game session ends and the computer or console is switched off. Players continue to think about, imagine, even dream about, the events, landscapes and characters of the game; and particular committed fans go further, joining online communities of fans,

and contributing to message boards, art galleries, writing groups and other forms of expansive embroidery of the game and its components.

Towards a Game Scene?

Following Longhurst (2007) and others, a scene exist largely in everyday, ordinary (and sometimes even mundane) activities and identities. While, as argued earlier, many authors are keen to highlight the extraordinary, socially isolating and even disruptive nature of games and gameplay. It is important to recognize that ‘gaming’ is about a lot more than just playing a digital game — it is cultural, it is social and it is embedded in everyday social practices and lives. Moreover, it is evident that the culture of gaming is for many a relatively ordinary, even at times, mundane activity. This can be seen in what Kirkpatrick (2004) refers to as the ‘cynicism’ of the gamer, where often gameplay involves the recognition by the player that gaming success comes from completing (and often having to repeat) a series, of at times, routine and monotonous tasks. This is clearly illustrated by one of our interviewees (‘Mark’, male, 35 years old, university researcher):

Yeah like gameplay can involve lots of boring stuff, stuff that you just need to do like to get on. Like in *Oblivion* [single person role playing game] there is this cheat...well you don’t have to do it, I suppose, but it really helps, where if you put your guy [player controlled avatar] in this one particular room, where there is this other guy [Non Player Character] and sneak against the wall, your sneak skill slowly goes up over time. So in then end what I did was taped my xbox controller stick into an upwards position, so my guy was just constantly walking, sneaking, into a corner and [I] sat there reading a book while it did that for a few hours [laughs].

This repetitive, even ‘work-like’, nature of many games is nowhere more evident than in the ‘grind’ needed in many MMOGs, which require gamers to carry out repetitive tasks to acquire greater

skills. The increasingly everyday nature of gameplay is also evident in the way that this has diffused into many people's everyday lives, such as the businessperson playing *Dr Kawashima's Brain Training* on the train, or the teenager whiling away the time by playing games on their mobile phone on the way to school. The increasing mobility of gameplay, coupled with technological convergence, is doing to gameplay what the *Sony Walkman* did for music. In particular, the majority of interviews all stated that they would often play games just to 'relieve boredom' or 'fill time', particularly while commuting to and from work, such the comments made by 'Natasha' (female, 21 years old, dental nurse):

well I play *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* because I always like to think I could win one million pounds. But I never do, I never get past thirty-two thousand but also I said it's on my phone so I can just take that with me and it's like mobile basically, so it's something to do once I'm bored on the train.

Also new gaming trends/technologies see the nature of gameplay blurring with other forms of leisure and entertainment, such as the afore mentioned Nintendo *Brain Training* games, or similarly, games such as *Wii Fit* on the *Nintendo Wii* console, which blur the boundaries between gameplay, and in these cases, (the already relatively mundane leisure activities of) puzzle-solving and keep-fit. But probably the most telling example of the everydayness of gaming, is its location within the conversations and identities of millions of people all over the world, as people at work, school, in the pub or elsewhere discuss games, strategies, cheats, hardware, or read about these in newspapers, magazines or online. As Haddon (2004:74) suggests of school children, and in particular young boys: 'they also talked about games at school. They swapped games. They compared notes as regards tactics. And they passed information about ways to cheat or get around games problems'. And as Newman (2004: 157) writes: 'sharing and trading knowledge is an important part of the social interactions that take place amongst videogames fans. The complexity of videogames and the

wealth of secret features in most titles means that information as to the whereabouts of a particular key, the solution to a particular dungeon, the technique for defeating a particular Boss character, is immensely valuable’.

Hand and Moore (2006) make a convincing argument for the consideration of gamers as a ‘community’. Though these communities are sometimes physically located in one place, such as at LAN parties, as with most ‘fan’ activities and elective belongings, where these ‘communities’ are primarily located is within the imaginations and identities of their ‘members’. And it is evident that many gamers with our research did indicate that they viewed themselves as part of a (some form of) ‘gamer’ community, which they often articulated as separate from other groups or activities they participated in. Such as the comments made by ‘David’ (male, 36 years old, civil engineering contractor):

...you know it’s [gaming] important to me because it’s another group of friends and I can sort of like you know meet up with people and know people and whatever else, but it is like important. It’s a difficult thing [gaming]...to talk about to people who aren’t sort of really aware of it. So although it’s an important part of what I do there are...I know that non-gaming friends know about it, occasionally ask about it, but we talk about other [non-game related] stuff, you know.

Of course the extent to which individuals feel part of a scene depends upon their own (often ever-changing) investment and identification within this particular community, and Rutter (2004) and Crawford (2005b) have suggested that gamers may be inducted along, and follow a (fluid) career path, similar to that seen in many other fan communities (for instance, see Crawford 2003). In particular, it is likely that those most actively involved in producing game-related material for other’s consumption (what Crawford 2003, and others, refer to the advanced career stage of ‘professional’ fans), such as ‘walkthroughs’ and game ‘mods’, are most likely to feel part of a gamer community or scene. However, even for the most committed walkthrough author or mod

programmer (or similar) their location and identity within this scene will most commonly be a fairly mundane and ordinary activity and identity. One illustration of this is the comments made by ‘Jerry’ (Male, 23 years old, customer services receptionist) in interview:

Yes, started off a mod team for a couple of mods, got bored to tell the truth [as] with like a lot of things in life I do...I did a little bit of modding and a little bit of mapping, but I was more creative design...got quite far, [but it] folded and that was it.

We would suggest that what makes gaming take on ‘extraordinary’ meaning, is its location within certain physical spaces. The importance of ‘space’ *within* games has been highlighted by several others, and most notably Henry Jenkins (both alone in 2004 and with Fuller in 1995). In particular, Fuller and Jenkins (1995) suggest that there are striking similarities between the centrality of the exploration of space in games and that found in sixteenth and seventeenth century literature on New World travel and discovery. Hence, what characterizes both gameplay and this New World literature is an exploration and a mastery of space and geography, and to further illustrate this similarity, they draw on de Certeau’s (1984, 1986) idea of a ‘spatial story’:

For de Certeau...narrative involves the transformation of place into space (117-118). Places exist only in the abstract, as potential sites for narrative action, as locations that have not yet been colonized. Places constitute a ‘stability’ which must be disrupted in order for stories to unfold...Spaces on the other hand, are places that have been acted upon, explored, colonized. Spaces become the location of narrative events (Fuller and Jenkins 1995: 66).

This argument Henry Jenkins continues and broadens in 2004, where he suggests that games not only provide spaces for exploration, but also spaces that facilitate ‘different kinds of narrative experiences’ (2004: 122). That is to say, that games (either rule-based or narrative based) provide gamers with an environment (a ‘map’) in which they find their own path (‘tour’) and story. What

this also does is carry narrative analysis beyond merely textual, game-based analysis, towards a consideration of how individual gamers use, interact and play with games. However, what we find quite surprising, is that though Jenkins employs the work of Michel de Certeau, who is most famously associated with his writing on ‘everyday life’, Jenkins does not carry his consideration of spatial narratives beyond those found ‘in-game’ and does not consider how gaming narratives are *physically* embedded within the everyday. For it is evident that the nature and importance of gameplay depends significantly upon its physical location. This is most obvious in public gaming locations or events, such as gaming arcades or LAN events, where the gamers in our research tended to emphasize the importance of socializing with other friends and gamers within these spaces. As illustrated by the comments of ‘Stephen’ (male, 44 years old, driver):

It’s more of a social thing [attending LAN events], I’m not that good a gamer, I come to see people like my friends, people that I know are really good I come and see you know? I have a couple of pints, but basically the social chat, that’s it really

However, the most common location for gaming still seems to be within the private locations of our homes, and most typically, living rooms, bedrooms and studies. However, these spaces are not without their own (often individual) meanings and significance, which are (largely) created by those using them at a particular time. As Byrne (2001: 141-142) suggests ‘in a social sense the components of a built environment, despite their concreteness, are not fixed and material. Rather they have meaning through the actions of interpretation and/or consumption in specific context’. This can be seen in the description of ‘Michael’ (male, 21 years old, university student):

Yeah like when playing a big *Champ[ionship] Man[ager]* session me and my mates back home [away from university] would turn it into a real event. We’d all come in football shirts, he had this old Man U

[Manchester United] duvet [cover] he had from when he was a kid, and he'd put that on his bed, and he'd decorate his room, put up 'specially scarves and stuff, and we'd all bring beer and crisps and stuff, and we'd turn his room into this *Champ Man* zone for the day, you really felt like you were in this different world when you were in his room, it was such a laugh.

Similarities can be drawn between the transformations of spaces made by gamers and those of 'cruisers', as considered by Blackshaw and Crabbe (2004). The particular form of 'cruising' Blackshaw and Crabbe describe, is (mostly) young men who gather in disused car parks or industrial wastelands (which drawing on Lash 2002 they categorise as 'wild zones') to race and perform their modified cars, and in the process transform these 'ordinary' places into 'performative' spaces. However, the transformation of place into gaming spaces, need not be as physical or obvious as that illustrated by 'Michael' above, but can be (and is more commonly) created in individual's own imaginations:

I remember when I was a kid playing *Elite*, when I sat in front of my computer in my bedroom, I felt like I was a lone pilot sitting in the cockpit of his Cobra Mark 3 [space ship]. That place for me was my ship, and for quite a while playing any other game [on my computer] seemed wrong and pointless, it was like, why would I play *Frogger* in my cockpit? ('Mark', male, 35 years old, university researcher).

Furthermore, the meanings associated with physical spaces can have further (often unintended) consequences (see Flynn 2003). For instance, Green (2001) has noted the propensity for games machines to be located with 'male' spaces (such as male sibling's bedrooms) within households, which she rightly highlights, may restrict many women's access to these:

We, me and my brother, had two *Playstations*... Like, a *PSone* and a *Playstation 2*, but me brother took both of them to uni' when he went, so I don't play any games anymore... So he's got 'em both...[laughs]...but even when we were back home, both of them were in his room, and he didn't like

me going into his room without asking. I would sometimes, 'cos they [the *Playstations*] were bought for both of us, but it was often less hassle just to not bother ('Julie', female, aged 20).

It is also important to recognise that even when gameplay is mediated across translocal (or 'virtual') spaces, such as gaming over the Internet, that the participants are still physically located *somewhere* (Hand and Moore 2006). This is an important point recognized by Longhurst in his theorization of scenes, and argues that 'while it is useful to point out that a scene have translocal...dimensions, I want to retain the idea that a scene involves some measure of potential co-present interaction' (Longhurst 2007: 54). In particular, he returns to the concept of 'performance' to argue that translocal/'virtual' spaces are merely forms of mediated interaction/performance (and it is important to recognize that all forms, even face-to-face interactions, are mediated, such as through language), which still involve physically located individuals in places that become 'nodes of communication'. This argument is clearly illustrated in the work of Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) which suggests that young people's bedrooms, and bedroom cultures, still play a significant and shaping role in the nature of their online communications, such as influencing and shaping the nature of their online journals.

Of course, this theorization of the location of gaming in both ordinary and extraordinary practices and spaces is not suggesting that there is a clear and distinct divide between these places and times (as meanings, identities and narratives are constantly shifting), but rather that the social importance of gaming needs to be understood and (physically) located with the complex and fluid nature of everyday life.

Conclusion

Though it is an accepted convention to refer to television or film viewers or book readers and an ‘audience’, the very idea of a gaming audience is deeply controversial. To a large extent the rejection of the idea of a gaming audience is tied into a wider rejection of a literary/narrative based/inspired approach to games studies, and also (the associated) idea that digital games are fundamentally different to ‘traditional’ media forms due to their ‘interactive’ nature. Though we acknowledge that digital games are different in many respects to other media forms, we (and many others) suggest that the idea of gamers as ‘interactive’ compared with the ‘passive’ nature of users/readers of other texts, has been a greatly exaggerated. Games, just like all other media forms, provide their readers with certain opportunities and limitations, but it is in the minds of readers that media (of all kinds) come to life.

One limitation of a narratological approach to games studies however, has been its common focus upon the gaming ‘text’ itself, often to the exclusion of considerations of the gamer and patterns of gaming. To some extent this is countered by a ludic approach to games studies, which shifts focus onto the gamer, but its, often and particular, application of classic theories of play (such as those of Huizinga) views play as separate from everyday life. But of course gaming is located within everyday life and social patterns, as the nature of games is shaped by social and cultural expectations and conventions, and similarly these also shape our reactions and interactions with games and styles of gameplay. Games and gaming also have many and extensive social consequences — it provides jobs and income, influences economies, it is discussed by friends and families, social networks and performances are built around games and gaming, it is a cultural industry, discussed, lauded and criticized in the mass media, and much much more.

It is therefore crucial that we consider the location and importance of gaming within everyday social relations and networks, and here we suggest that the concept of ‘scene’ is particularly useful in doing this. In particular, digital games, like all media resources (particularly within an increasingly media saturated society), contribute to our sense of identity and life narratives — be this as a hard-core (maybe even professional) gamer, or game author, or simply as one of many leisure interests — in our everyday lives, but the

(relative) significance of this increases within certain physical spaces. Of course, this is not to say that the meaning of these places is set, but rather that it is the use of these spaces that gives them their significance and meaning. Ultimately, what this does is recognize our interests, memberships and identities as fluid, but ones that never becomes separate from everyday lives.

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