

## REVIEW

### **GAME PLAY: PARATEXTUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY BOARD GAMES, PAUL BOOTH (2015)**

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Paul Booth's *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games* (2015) is a timely publication on-board games, which draws from studies on television, new media and fandom. The study specifically examines transmedia board games inspired by large franchises. As transmedia texts, board games are often considered trivial. 'Rarely can media-based board games influence transmedia narrative development', Booth writes. 'If games are not narratively consequential, can they even be considered transmediated?' (69). Much of the opportunities for games to help build worlds, and sustain franchises, reside in the affective components of gaming – their opportunities for immersion and engagement – rather than their potential for storytelling.

The aim of *Game Play* is to theorize the relationship between board games and other media. Board games do not add to the content of narratives per se, but mediate a feeling of the original text, and allow players to engage with the story world further. To shed light on these complex processes of transmediation, Booth cross-compares board game adaptations from the same franchise. He shows that one franchise may inspire fundamentally different board games. One *The Lord of The Rings* game mediates the notion of 'fellowship' through cooperation, while another is more competitive.

To fully account for the potential of board games, the structure of *Game Play* consists of two parts: Understanding Games and Understanding Media. The first part is structured around Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's theory (Salen and Zimmerman 2004), which signifies three core characteristics of any game – namely, rules, meaningful play and culture. Booth applies these concepts to three different cases – *Arkham Horror*, *The Lord of Rings* and *Walking Dead*. Although Booth draws specifically from game studies in these

chapters and investigates cooperation and competition in board games, he also emphasizes how transmediality translates to the affective experience of playing board games. In *Understanding Media*, Booth relates these studies of play to new media concepts and fan studies. The franchises that he studies include *Battlestar Galactica*, *Star Trek*, *Hunger Games*, *Game of Thrones* and *Doctor Who*.

Different principles guide the reader throughout the book. These statements or arguments help summarize Booth's findings in a clear way. Booth starts every chapter with an anecdote of his own play of the board games. While these introductions help set the tone, they do become boring after several chapters. Setting them up more as ethnographies, rather than anecdotes, would have perhaps allowed for more divergent accounts. As they are now, the introductions are too focused on the narrative, and written from the point of view of the characters that Booth is playing. They hardly scrutinize Booth's identity as a player, or reflect on his method or the group in which he played. A more ethnographic stance, and an explicit methodology for close-reading and playing the games, would have strengthened the study.

A major strength of the study is that Booth draws from both game and fan studies to close-read board games, often yielding interesting results and arguments. In a case study of *Star Trek* board games, Booth meticulously analyses the figurines as collectibles, thereby shedding light on materiality and customization as key elements in board games. Another case study of *Battlestar Galactica* demonstrates how the board, as a game space, can mediate a feeling for the story world.

The most exciting and innovative chapters of the book are, without a doubt, the ones in *Understanding Games*. Most chapters in *Understanding Media* are shorter and fail to deliver deep readings. It struck me that some of the case studies were underdeveloped. The close reading of the complex and celebrated *A Game of Thrones Board Game* is watered down to several pages, and theorized only by an abstract application of the database theory. The final *Doctor Who* case study also falls flat because it mainly repeats some of the concepts, without a new argument. It is also a shame that the book lacks an overarching conclusion. This would have been a lovely chance to revisit the principles, and make a more comprehensive argument about the role of games in building transmedia story worlds.

Theoretically, I am also not convinced by *Game Play*. While reading the different case studies, I often wondered whether paratextuality was the best fit for the phenomenon that Booth was discussing. This concept, which helps theorize textual peripherals, suggests that board games are separate from the main text and encourages the idea that these games are not main texts altogether. The use of paratextuality in *Game Play* helps support the idea that games are ancillary to the source-text, but in our complex transmedia landscape this is hardly the case. Indeed, Booth himself acknowledges that 'Even if I have never read *The Lord of the Rings*, I can still enjoy the *Lord of the Rings* board game; the two are not as much separate texts, as they conjoined textual moments' (5). The idea that today's franchises consist of connected textual moments resonates throughout the book. Perhaps Booth envisions a broad application of paratext as textual experiences, but that is never made explicit.

A more helpful concept that Booth signposts in his introduction is performance, specifically in relation to Kurt Lancaster's important study of derivative games based on *Interacting with Babylon 5* (2001). Lancaster argues that the role-playing games and card games offer fans a chance to perform

characters to relive the text. Booth agrees, and also emphasizes that play is always situated: '[...] paratextual board games allow a free and open interpretation, where "meaning" – like the text itself – is performed at specific sites of audience play' (4). This emphasis on performativity could have been augmented further in the theoretical framework. Booth acknowledges from time to time that 'play is always experiential and always lived' (47). This idea could have informed his conceptual framework. Rather than reading games as (para)text, they should be understood as rule-driven media that facilitate unique performances and lived experiences. Board games do not only weave stories, after all, but engage communities through play.

Despite this criticism, I am convinced that readers interested in transmedia franchises, narratives and play will find this book interesting. *Game Play* is an important book, and the first of its kind. This interdisciplinary study makes an exciting and timely read for fan scholars, as well as scholars of new media, games and television. Designers may learn a thing or two from this study as well, such as what characterizes the best television board games, and how to apply these techniques in their own work.

*Game Play* is a study that truly widens our understanding of transmedia storytelling and practices. The case studies are engaging and build on each other well. This book is a strong contribution to fan studies, which allows us to envision the future and development of transmedia.

## REFERENCES

- Lancaster, K. (2001), *Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Salen, K. and Zimmerman, E. (2004), *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, Cambridge: MIT Press.