



## Porting game studies research to virtual reality

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Paul Booth, *Game play: Paratextuality in contemporary board games*. Bloomsbury Academic: New York, 2015; 264 pp.: ISBN 9781628927436, \$29.95 (pbk)

Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy, *Players and their pets: Gaming communities from beta to sunset*. The University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2015; 200 pp.: ISBN 9780816689835, \$20.00 (pbk)

Miguel Sicart, *Play matters*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA, 2014; 176 pp.: ISBN 9780262027922, \$19.95 (hbk)

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In 2016, years of speculation, crowd-funding campaigns, major investment, and general hype around virtual reality (VR) finally culminated in several consumer products making it to market, ushering in what many in the tech industry have broadly referred to as a new frontier in interactive entertainment. Initial sales and pre-order figures for headsets such as the HTC Vive, the Facebook-backed Oculus Rift, and the Sony PlayStation VR all indicate that there is indeed a voracious market out there for these new technologies, even if most initial purchasers fall into the category of risk-taking “early-adopters.” In any case, among enthusiasts for the hardware are a considerable number of writers who have expressed excitement around the idea that VR technologies have finally advanced enough to open up new possibilities for how we might think about play itself. They point toward early experiments in new kinds of community interactions, new types of experiences in worlds that users could otherwise not visit, and new kinds of disruptive, reality-bending exercises that ask users to reconsider both the potentialities of play in virtual spaces as well as the relationship between those spaces and the actual, embodied, physical spaces in which they live.

For many reasons, not least of which is that VR offers intriguing commentary on absence/presence binaries, the technology has long been theorized by critical theorists as philosophically diverse as Baudrillard (1998),<sup>1</sup> Virilio (Kellner, 1999),<sup>2</sup> Rheingold (1991),<sup>3</sup> and so on. Although that foundational work will continue to inform how we conceptualize VR’s cultural significance, there is as yet a lack of scholarship that engages specific VR technologies through consideration of specific hardware/software and their related discursive formations. Indeed, while there has been some enthralling recent work done by the likes of Walden (2006),<sup>4</sup> Castronova (2009),<sup>5</sup> and Parisi (2015),<sup>6</sup> very little

critical scholarship in the game studies space has addressed VR as anything but an abstract, deferred technology whose future possibilities are understood to be more intriguing than its present. Part of the reason for this gap in research is practical; aside from the failed Nintendo Virtual Boy that was marketed briefly in the mid-1990s, there has never been much of a commercial presence for VR technology until recently. Part of the reason for that gap in research is also, perhaps, due to the generally predictive nature of much of the work alluded to above; if we follow the logic of Keogh's (2014) claim that the best game studies work privileges phenomenological work over more formalist ludic, narrative, and media studies traditions, then there is not much room for speculative scholarship on emergent technologies.<sup>7</sup> Given that VR is emerging as a popular and commercially viable technology at a particular moment in the development of game studies research, those interested in pursuing scholarship around the technology would be well served in considering how prominent features of VR have been recently addressed in other contexts.

There are several recent books that, collectively, offer something of a compelling primer for considering how one might analyze the development of these distinct possibilities for VR technology. To be clear, none of these books say anything significant about VR technology at all; rather, each provides a useful lens through which to engage the kinds of intersections that new technologies such as VR represent.<sup>8</sup> To borrow from the terminology used in software development, we might think of productively "porting" some of the ideas found in these texts (grounding theories, methodological approaches, findings from case studies, etc.) to our analysis of new media technologies and contexts, including VR. *Players and Their Pets: Gaming Communities from Beta to Sunset* (Consalvo and Begy, 2015), which focuses on the lifespan of a fairly novel massively multiplayer online game (MMO) and its community, offers a model for tracking the development of communities in new kinds of spaces; *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games* (Booth, 2015), by theorizing ludology at the intersection of intellectual property and player agency, provides a valuable case study in how extant research in game studies might be articulated to critical readings of distinct, affiliated play spaces; *Play Matters*, in its consideration of the form and function of play across contexts, provides a rich framework from which to assess play's adaptation to new contexts. It is worth considering each in turn.

The first book, *Players and Their Pets: Gaming Communities from Beta to Sunset*, tracks interactions and activities among players of the Big Fish Games MMO *Faunasphere* from the game's announcement in 2009 to its closure less than 2 years later. *Faunasphere*'s player base was largely made up of middle-aged women who engaged in caretaking-focused gameplay and developed many of their community dynamics around social hierarchies grounded in who began playing the game and when. Consalvo and Begy (2015) had unique access to the company and its community during this time period, and the book draws on this extended contact to both build on and complicate existing scholarship around the kinds of users who participate in MMOs, their changing motivations for doing so, and the relationships between a game's community dynamics and its evolution on and across particular hardware and software platforms. In the case of *Faunasphere*, the authors argue that there is value in close, contextual, and prolonged studies of "unusual games" (Consalvo and Begy, 2015: 121) that offer important variations from the

kinds of titles typically addressed in game studies scholarship. Doing so, they argue, productively problematizes typologies and broad theories that threaten to define genres, players, or gaming itself.<sup>9</sup>

Consalvo and Begy's (2015) approach to research around community dynamics (and specifically on communities whose demographics are atypical from those researchers traditionally study) has notable implications for research in VR in part because of the way that social features are being built into recent VR hardware. Indeed, probably the most intriguing moment in the development history of the current wave of VR headsets was when Facebook, just 2 years out from its initial public offering, purchased Oculus Rift for US\$2 billion USD. Facebook has big plans for engaging its large user base in VR contexts. CEO Mark Zuckerberg, speaking to Samsung's Mobile World Congress, asked attendees to

Imagine being able to sit in front of a campfire and hang out with friends anytime you want. Or being able to watch a movie in a private theatre with your friends anytime you want. Imagine holding a group meeting or event anywhere in the world that you want. (Burgess, 2016)

These are not the kinds of activities that one typically associates with video games, but they are activities that extend the audience for the emergent hardware in intriguing new directions. Among the Oculus Rift community, the looming Facebook integration may also end up mirroring the kinds of divisions that arose in *Faunasphere* when that game was ported to the social platform.<sup>10</sup>

The second book, Paul Booth's (2015) *Game Play*, is likely not one of the first that would come to mind when considering recent research that may bear on the study of VR. However, Booth's ability to translate scholarship emerging from the study of video games to an insightful analysis of board games is an instructive transposition for those who may wish to bring existing research into a new, but related, context such as VR. Booth's project provides a systemic analysis of "paratextual board games as both reflexive of and contributing to our contemporary digital media environment," specifically in how the "aesthetic, ludic, and textual concerns of cult franchises" of which they are a part demonstrate how a "philosophy of playfulness energizes our interactions with media today" (Booth, 2015: 6–7, 14). The book's overview of player experiences that structure board games designed to connect to existing franchises such as *Star Trek*, *Doctor Who*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *Game of Thrones* moves through considerations of how specific themes found in game studies research (such as cooperation, production, community, fandom, interaction, and transmedia) can be productively problematized by their application to board games. In this way, Booth's (2015) work shares with Consalvo and Begy's (2015) manuscript an interest in "illustrat[ing] the need for new models" of theory around central ideas in game studies such as adaptation and interaction (p. 180).

There are already a number of announced VR programs that offer what Booth (2015) refers to as texts which "seemingly exist within the cult media text's diegesis, extending and developing it in varied ways" (p. 10). Some, such as the slate of pinball tables based around popular franchises (*Alien*, *South Park*, *The Avengers*) found in the Oculus Rift's *Pinball FX2*, were previously released on earlier (non-VR) platforms and don't

necessarily take full advantage of the possibilities for VR technology as a platform for new paratextual experiences. By contrast, games like the *Star Wars*-themed *Trials on Tatooine* or the Hobbit-related *Thief in the Shadows* are designed to offer a new way for players to take part in familiar universes, to create their own narratives, and to view parts of a story's canon from unique perspectives; all of these are common outcomes that emerge from varied practices of play found in the board games that Booth selects. Furthermore, just as Booth's sees value in reconceptualizing game studies' understanding of "the interactive mechanisms by which audiences construct and develop these stories" (Booth, 2105: 90), and given player practices in board game interaction, so too might they be reevaluated in the context of VR.

Finally, Miguel Sicart's (2014) book *Play Matters*, another excellent entry in the "Playful Thinking" series from MIT Press, offers a very accessible read of his "portable theory, or rhetoric, of play" (Sicart, 2014: 2). He considers the idea of play from a wide array of perspectives (what we play with, where, when, and why we play, the aesthetics and politics of play, etc.). As with other books in the series, Sicart's (2014) writing is exceptionally accessible to a wide audience, with the vast majority of academic prose and dense citation relegated to a substantive endnotes section of the text (itself a very rich resource for tracking the development of theories of play). Sicart (2014) offers much to think about concerning play (an activity) and playfulness (an attitude), including insight about how both have impacted (and been impacted by) computer technologies.<sup>11</sup> However, it is probably his insights into the relationship between space and play that have the most direct bearing on the future research into VR technology:

The relationship between space and play is marked by the tension between appropriation and resistance: how a space offers itself to be appropriated by play, but how that space resists some forms of play, specifically those not allowed for political, legal, moral, or cultural reasons. Play relates to space through the ways of appropriation and the constant dance between resistance and surrender. (Sicart, 2014: 52)

Sicart's (2014) discussion in this section is directly informed by his analysis of the significance of environmental design theory to spaces such as playgrounds, skate parks, and sandbox games (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto*). Across all of them, he finds a compelling tension between the intended or structured forms of play that occur in these spaces and the deviant or creative interventions of playfulness that emerge. These tensions are already apparent in some of the first public engagements with VR.

For example, one of the major questions that lingers around the long-term success of VR as a technology people will want to use in the living room is how existing spaces, and the kinds of interactions that they encompass, might need to be redefined. To wit, successful setup of the HTC Vive requires, at minimum, an open 6 foot × 6 foot × 5 foot space to move in and two or three strategically located power outlets that are close enough to the computer to connect a 16-foot headset cord (HTC Vive User Manual, 2016). One of the most popular kinds of VR-themed videos on YouTube surrounding the Vive's release was clips of users banging into walls, breaking controllers against furniture, or otherwise injuring themselves or their VR hardware in an attempt to adapt play to a new space.<sup>12</sup>

What Sicart's (2014) theorizing on play (specifically as it relates to space) offers is a way to consider how the processes of adapting to, transforming, or reimagining a space as one for play has marked the introduction of almost all new ideas. Furthermore, Sicart's understanding of play as, in part, disruptive, creative, and appropriative means that a technology like the HTC Vive has potential to "function as the physical embodiment of play's freedoms" (Sicart, 2014: 42).

A final example may be useful for illustrating how these texts are instructive for considering VR. The *Ikea VR Experience* was released in early 2016 by the Swedish furniture maker and explained in a press release as software that

Brings the user a virtual IKEA kitchen in real world size. Using an HTC Vive headset, consumers can use the app to explore one of three differently-styled kitchen room settings. The user can change the color of cabinets and drawers with a click ... view the kitchen from different perspectives by either shrinking or stretching yourself to move around the kitchen at the size of a 3.3 foot-tall child or a 6.4 foot-tall adult ... [which] enables you to discover hidden dangers or possible design solutions. We also see IKEA VR Experience as an opportunity to co-create with people all around the world. We hope that users will contribute to our virtual reality development, by submitting ideas on how to use virtual reality and how to improve the virtual kitchen. (The Ikea Group)

The software, available for free on Valve's Steam service, brings together the non-traditional gamer audiences and atypical community interactions emphasized by Consalvo and Begy's (2015) work with Booth's (2015) focus on how ideas associated with existing intellectual properties (in this case, Ikea's brand) might be extended and/or disrupted in spaces of play. A quick glance through various videos of the game shows users finding new uses for Ikea's meatballs, framing their trips through the store with tropes associated with genres like survival horror, and otherwise reinforcing Sicart's (2014) arguments about the centrality of playfulness in human engagement with new texts and contexts. Here, these authors' work finds relevance in a space outside of their selected area of focus, a porting of research that each would seemingly find fitting.

In eschewing the traditional approaches found in much of game studies research, these three books collectively offer something of a fresh perspective on the field and the utility of its predominant modes of inquiry outside the analysis of certain kinds of popular games. Most significantly, this branching out offers useful perspectives for considering design, playfulness, community, and a range of other concepts associated with game studies in new contexts, such as in VR experiences, where different understandings of these terms may emerge.

## Notes

1. "What's beyond the end? Well, beyond the end, there is virtual reality, that is to say, the horizon of a programmed reality in which all our physiological and social functions (memory, affect, intelligence, sexuality, work) gradually become useless" (Baudrillard, 1998).
2. "Whereas for Baudrillard reality disappears in hyperreality, for Virilio new technologies provide a substitute reality, a virtual reality which becomes more powerful and seductive than ordinary reality" (Kellner, 1999: 115).

3. Imagine a wraparound television with three-dimensional programs, including three-dimensional sound, and solid objects that you can pick up and manipulate, even feel with your fingers and hands ... Imagine that you are the creator as well as the consumer of your artificial experience, with the power to use a gesture or word to remold the world you see and hear and feel. (Rheingold, 1991: 16).
4. Real life and virtual reality are in complex relation ... the participant undertakes to discover, learn, create, and interact with the other human participants ... [virtual reality experiment *AlphaWolf*] does not produce separation or alienation, it does open a space for reflexive understanding. (Walden, 2006: 52).
5. VR will surely produce tension between cultures of life and cultures of death, each of which will make its own case for the way VR should best be used ... Perhaps society will integrate VR in its practices of good living in full respect of human dignity. Or, perhaps the law will seek to prohibit VR and prevent healthy, safe, successful integration. (Castronova, 2009: 1126).
6. "Erasing the seams that serve as reminders of the gaps between our bodies and the virtual worlds they enter helps push ... toward an embodied sense of immersion absent from previous interfacing schematics" (Parisi, 2015).
7. Keogh's (2014) approach to video game criticism "is not interested in reducing videogames to any one model or taxonomy, but in methods of critical analysis that can locate specific, embodied phenomena of videogame play and understand them as gestalts of cultural meaning."
8. Lisa Gitleman's (2006) reminder that new media are located at the "intersection of authority and amnesia" and that they are therefore "socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such" is instructive here (p. 6).
9. For example, they argue quite convincingly that "the term *avatar* needs to be retired" (Consalvo and Begy, 2015: 117).
10. For example, many of the hardware's Kickstarter backers were vocal opponents about Facebook's acquisition, fearing the advertising and invasiveness of Facebook's website might permeate software designed for virtual reality (Benedictus, 2014).
11. "All computation is play" (Sicart, 2014: 100).
12. Worth noting is that this kind of phenomenon has recent precedent, most notably with the flood of videos of users throwing Nintendo's Wiimote through their TV screens.

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