

All the World's a Game: Video Game Culture and the Video-ludification of Society

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Abstract:

In *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*, sociologists Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford set out to explore the growing video game culture that has become part and parcel of our everyday life. Drawing on qualitative ethnographic research, the authors offer a pioneering study of the actors, practices, meanings, and identities associated with games and gaming. Connecting game culture to 21st century challenges and transformations such as digitalization and neoliberal culture, *Video Games as Culture* is an inspiring approach to understanding the world we live in that will appeal to students and professionals alike.

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In *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*, sociologists Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford set out to explore the growing video game culture that has become part and parcel of our everyday life. Drawing on qualitative ethnographic research, the authors offer a pioneering study of the actors, practices, meanings, and identities associated with games and gaming. Connecting game culture to 21st century challenges and transformations such as digitalization and neoliberal culture, *Video Games as Culture* is an inspiring approach to understanding the world we live in that will appeal to students and professionals alike.

Well above 50% of the population in the US and Europe plays video games, and about half of these are women. With an estimated 91 billion USD, the video game industry's global market revenue surpasses the GDP of sizable countries such as Ukraine. Numerous websites, blogs, YouTube channels, conferences, conventions, and exhibitions are dedicated to games and gaming. In short, there is a growing and consolidating culture surrounding video games and their players.

This video game culture, the "institutionalization of video game practices, experiences, and meanings" (p. 2), is what sociologists Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford set out to explore in *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*. However, and this is the central point of the book, video game culture is by no means an isolated phenomenon but reflects and drives developments such as digitalization, neoliberal political rationalities, and changing modes of community formation. As contemporary social reality is increasingly pervaded by video

game culture and the logic of play – what the authors call the “video-ludification of society” (p. 22) – taking video games seriously can help us make sense of the world we live in.

As yet, there are precious few attempts to comprehensively map game culture, not to speak of its entanglements with wider social transformations. In both scope and focus, then, the book can be considered a pioneering study. The research methodology is based on an actor-network approach. Aiming to gauge not only opinions and attitudes but also the practices surrounding game culture and its various actors, Muriel and Crawford draw on ethnographic research including semi-structured interviews and the observation of online and print resources (Introduction; pp. 4-10). In addition, methods of focused and analytical gameplay are employed. While the methodology chosen does not yield quantitative results representative of all social actors involved, the authors succeed in sampling a wide range of opinions and impressions concerning video games and their impact on society. The data thus gathered is then integrated at strategic points in the book in order to illustrate or support the arguments. These are then further substantiated by a wide range of theoretical approaches drawing on disciplines such as game studies and sociology, but also psychology and cultural studies. The equally comprehensive bibliography ranges from Foucault to Weber and from Agamben to Zingsheim.

The findings are structured around five key topics linking video game culture to contemporary social transformations: the dominance of games across fields such as entertainment, education, labor, art, or academia (Chapter 2); the role of agency in neoliberalism (Chapter 3), the importance of designed experience in contemporary culture (Chapter 4); empathy and identification (Chapter 5); and processes of identity (de)construction in and beyond the gaming community (Chapter 6). Although each chapter thus has a unique focus and can be read in isolation, the monograph’s truly innovative argument only reveals itself in the logical sequence of topics. As each chapter builds on and expands the ideas of earlier chapters, the impression of a close-knit video game culture intricately linked to all areas of contemporary social and cultural life is evoked. The accessible writing style and well-placed signposting further enhance the coherence of the monograph.

The impressive theoretical and thematic scope, which seems to transcend the boundaries of the initial topic at every turn, is what allows the authors to link observations that at first glance seem only loosely connected. A case in point is the set of different categories of gamers proposed in Chapter 6. In addition to the stereotypical straight male hardcore gamer, these include types such as the casual gamer or the video-ludic connoisseur, a category based on an interviewee’s analogy between game aficionados and ‘foodies’. The very ill-definedness of all the categories introduced, their arbitrariness, divergent logics, overlaps, and contradictions then serve as a starting point for an interrogation of the very concept of identity and its validity in contemporary society.

Chapter 6, then, is perhaps where the book is at its most radical. However, the points raised here also seem curiously underdeveloped in comparison to the rest of the book. The hypothesis that we are entering a state of post-identity, for instance, is merely raised and never pursued in much depth. This is of course partially due to the emergent state of game culture research. What is more, the unpredictable dynamics of the current age make it virtually impossible to formulate an astute diagnosis of contemporaneity, much less predict the future course of society. After all, as the authors themselves concede, the consolidation of game culture is but a first development corroborating the post-identity hypothesis. Rather than a shortcoming of the current project, then, this chapter is a highly stimulating foray into an emergent field of study.

“Video game culture is, then, a magnificent map that helps us understand contemporary society” (p. 184), the authors conclude. So, the reader may feel tempted to add, is *Video Games as Culture*. Offering a necessarily protean but highly evocative analysis of game culture in its relation to 21st-century challenges, Muriel and Crawford’s work is a timely and much needed contribution to and beyond ethnographic video game research. The monograph’s strongest suit is its ability to draw connections between games and wider society, ethnographic research and (poststructuralist) theory, sociology, and game studies. This is also the point at which the study may not only appeal to undergraduate students and those new to the topic, but also to senior researchers to whom the rise of video game culture will hardly be news.

German Abstract:

Und Frau'n wie Männer nichts als Spieler: Computerspielkultur und die Ludifikation der Gesellschaft

Computerspielkultur ist längst Teil unserer Gesellschaft. Dies ist die Prämisse auf die sich Daniel Muriel und Garry Crawford's Publikation *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society* gründet. Nicht nur im Bereich der Unterhaltungsmedien, sondern auch in Bildung, Freizeit, Militär oder am Arbeitsplatz begegnet uns zunehmend die Logik des Computerspiels. In ihrer wegbereitenden Studie gelingt es Muriel und Crawford die zahlreichen Akteure, Praktiken und Bedeutungspotenziale dieser Computerspielkultur in ihrer Komplexität zu erfassen. Dass dabei gleichzeitig ein Dialog zwischen Computerspielkultur und aktuellen sozialen und kulturellen Entwicklungen hergestellt wird, zeugt von der weiterführenden Qualität der Publikation.

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