Völlig Losgelöst!? Bodies, Space and Digital Games

Roger Dale Jones

Abstract:
Digital games involve more than building up heroes and shooting down monsters. And gamers do not simply sit passively in front of a screen for hours or days on end. Build 'em Up – Shoot 'em Down explores the role of the human body, both within and in front of digital games. This anthology includes eighteen essays in both English and German that cover topics such as identity, interfaces, gender, and death in games. The essays offer various methodologies of exploration, analyses of multiple game genres and different contexts of use from numerous disciplinary fields and perspectives. They produce not only a number of insights into questions of corporeality in games, but also uncover further questions for future research. Finally, they reveal the profuse and complex ways digital games induce the human body to states of play.

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What happens to our bodies when we play digital games? Do we inhabit avatars and game-worlds, or do they inhabit us? Can we even talk about bodies in digital spaces? Such questions of corporeality are not only relevant to future game designers but also to anyone interested in understanding the future of life in the digitalized 21st century.

Build 'em Up – Shoot 'em Down enters this 21st century discourse by examining the body in digital games. It explores how games play with our bodies and minds, how they entice us to enter the liminal space between real and digital, and what it means to be human in the digital world today.

This anthology is edited by Rudolf Thomas Inderst and Peter Just and appears alongside twenty seven other works in the Game Studies series by vwh publishers. Four thematic chapters, "Avatare, Konstruktion und Identität" ("Avatars", "Construction" and "Identity"), "Interfaces", "Gender" and "Jenseits-Ludografie" ("Beyond Ludography") categorize a collection of eighteen essays that are written in both German and English. The set of all German authors provides a range of diversity through their different disciplinary backgrounds and academic levels. The anthology also contains a variety of research objects, focusing not only on analyzing digital games, but also on games in learning contexts and even on player behavior. The following text provides a sampling of essays that both exemplify the range and the depth of this anthology. It also represents the thematic structuring into four chapters.

In the first chapter, Iris Schäfer researches the Left 4 Dead series and explores the effects of horror on players' identification with their avatars. Schäfer looks at different game options to demonstrate the importance of context on player immersion (42). Jürgen Fritz, on the other hand, provides a comprehensive investigation into the body, identification, and immersion across game genres. His essay provides several categorical paradigms that include both the body of the player and the inhabited body of the avatar (93, 105). Rudolf Thomas Inderst takes a closer look at pain and shows how many games recreate sensorial signals of pain in order to create a sense of realism and to induce immersion (132). Finally, Linda Breitlauch discusses how (and what) players can learn from digital games. Breitlauch also takes a critical look at learning games (181) and offers a list of learning principles to analyze both serious and non-

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serious games (181). In the second chapter, Michael Mosel investigates the interface, its representation of the avatar's body and its effects on immersion. He traces the historical development of ludic feedback to show the continual (virtual) embodiment of information (232). His closing statements suggest a future of transparent interface (248) reminiscent of Janet Murray's holodeck. Busch, Conrad and Steinicke, on the other hand, discuss the practical implementation of digital games for problem solving and communication skills development in leadership training. The results of their project-based research suggest the value of "spectator experience" (278) and Joseph Campbell's monomyth for teaching and learning with games (283). In the third chapter, Beier and Schreiber investigate both male and female representations in digital games. While Beier questions "traditional" feminist approaches (328), Schreiber reveals surprisingly uniform representations of male protagonists (344) as well as a male gamer population that appears largely indifferent to those representations (347). Furthermore, Beier and Schreiber both illustrate salient differences in gender representations between American and Japanese games (347), raising some interesting questions for future games. In the fourth and final chapter, Judith Ackermann and Dominik Härig both thematize death in video games in their essays. While Ackermann focuses on the effects of avatar death on immersion by analyzing player speech during gameplay (373), Härig concentrates on death as a process in digital games. He also discusses the representation of the avatar corpse through multiple theoretical and symbolic perspectives (388).

I recommend Build 'em Up –Shoot 'em Down to game researchers – and especially game designers – interested in the subject of corporeality. The body as a theoretical lens enables the anthology to participate in a number of current discourses in games studies and design. Its collection of eighteen essays provides a large array of subtopics and perspectives. Furthermore, the anthology's bilinguality reflects the international reality of research on games, and the inclusion of female authors echoes the gaming community's call for more gender inclusion. However, while diversity within an anthology can be seen as a general strength, it also creates challenges that Build 'em Up does not always meet. First, there is a noticeable repetition amongst some of the essays, which leads me to recommend that readers choose contributions most relevant to their own interests. Furthermore, the anthology's thematic organization and distribution of essays into chapters is problematic and fails, to some degree, to orient the reader to the structure and purpose of the anthology. However, despite these criticisms, Build 'em Up manages to provide a thorough overview of the role of the body in digital games and offers numerous theoretical constructs and models to assist future game research and design. It provides multiple credible lenses with which to pinpoint the body's ambiguous existence between player and avatar.