

Media-ludic approaches

Critical reflections on games and research practice

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The Norwegian media scholar Espen Ytreberg defines media studies as the study of modern media, its regulators and producers, the media themselves, the users, and the context within which the media are used (Ytreberg, 2014). According to this definition, publishing an issue of *MedieKultur* that discusses the benefits of ludic research methods as part of media studies is evident. When we still choose to explicitly collect works on methods for researching games and play within this journal, it is to introduce to a wider audience how the study of games integrate in, draw on, and contribute to an established tradition of media studies. It is also a reminder that both fields, and the scholars participating within these blurred, but familiar, boundaries are still on a journey to meet Ytreberg's definition.

Game studies – a field of research exploring the cultural and aesthetic aspects of games – is on the cusp of its second decade as a consequential field of study. Game studies was formally introduced as a viable academic field in 2001 (Aarseth, 2001). While the journal *Simulation and Gaming* precedes the inaugural issue of the *Game Studies* journal by nearly 30 years (Crookall, 2000), this “new” wave of game studies gained serious traction and developed into an interdisciplinary field bringing together knowledge on a wide range of research approaches. These areas include those such as virtual economies and law (Castranova, 2005; Giddings & Harvey, 2018; Lastowka, 2011), interactivity and embodiment (Aarseth, 1997; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; TL Taylor, 1999; Hjorth 2011), research methods (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Aarseth, 2003; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce and

Taylor, 2012); aesthetics (Crawford, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Trondstad, 2012; Jørgensen, 2013; Mortensen and Jørgensen, 2013; Schrank, 2014), participatory cultures and networked identity politics (Banks and Humphreys, 2008; Gray, 2016; Nakamura, 2009; Shaw, 2012; de Castell and Jenson, 2018; Toft-Nielsen, 2016); problematic media use (Yee, 2006; Karlsen 2013); and the rise of professional play alongside of the casualization of new media work (TL Taylor and Witkowski, 2010; N. Taylor, 2016a; Witkowski, 2019; TL Taylor, 2018).

While there are many game-specific conferences, such as those organised by the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), regional DiGRA conferences throughout the Americas, Australia, Asia and Europe, topical conferences such as Philosophy of Games, CHI Play, and the Foundations of Digital Games. Game studies as media studies is now represented in several larger media conferences, for instance those of the International Communication Association (ICA), the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), and the Digital Games Research section to the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). Games research is a self-evident part of the academic study of digital media (Aarseth, 2015). Beyond this clear field association with media studies, games research has an increasingly vital role to play in areas such as regional media studies, where online games are situated prominently on or as the central platform for everyday communication, extending regional to global social and economic relationships through this participatory media form (Arnason, 2011). But we would also suggest that the vitality and reach of games in society places games studies as a fundamental topic and field informing the broader shifts in networked media writ large.

Distinct and exciting political, practical, and conceptual variation has come out of the study of games as process-oriented media artefacts and their situatedness as networked game cultures. Dovey and Kennedy's concept of *technicity* (2006) turned our critical attention towards embodied subjects' relationship and attitude towards individual networked technological practices as a central sociological indicator in game and new media cultures. The work of games and feminist media scholars Lisa Nakamura (2009) and Kishonna Gray (2013; 2016) describe through their respective qualitative research projects, the challenges and necessity of intersectional attentions to the study of networked games (see also Shaw, 2012; TL Taylor, 2018; and Nicholas Taylor in this issue). The ongoing marginalisation practices Nakamura and Gray discuss are a part of a well-articulated research repository: harbingers of the turn towards large-scale, online harassment "campaigns" mobilised to silence and disparage individuals and minority groups under the guise of play. Networked campaigns from which prominent participants used their experiences with game culture as a stepping stone to political influence, profits, and even international fame (Lees, 2016). More practically, productive networked media ecosystems, made across players, designers, and event makers, have been a regular component, or a quality of game cultures. Player passions extend from everyday

tinkering and sharing practices on game mod (modification) software, to developing user-generated content into fully functional, stand-alone games. *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG) is one of the most recent iterations on this phenomenon (a game based on a player mod inspired by the film *Battle Royale*), with millions of concurrent players (via the Steam platform), viewers (on global live streaming platforms as well as attending traditional stadium events), and live broadcasters (broadcasting to differentiated audiences as esports or variety streamers). While remarkable, player productions *cum* global commercial success narratives like these are not one-off events, but rather are recurring media agitations which sway the networked media industry in new directions from within. Such examples put games research in a front row seat on emerging, and more importantly, interwoven networked media issues and cultural shifts, which inform media cultures.

Games have been a driver for introducing advanced computers to private users, but games have also been an engine of media mutations. We can see this as new participants enter the networked platforms of Twitch, engage in play through social media, explore social interaction through Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) and other hybrid technologies and platforms, channelled via an interest in games and their playing publics. But despite the maturing field of game studies, and the surface (visible as well as material) intersections between media studies and game studies, richer dialogues remain to be produced on how we research these dynamic media moments, participatory networked forms, and intertwined materials/mediums of play. This pushes beyond field distinctions. Game studies also look inwards on itself and acknowledges the soft (and hard) knowledge divisions: as Deterding (2017) rightly questions, as an interdisciplinary field, how interdisciplinary is game studies really? Perhaps here we might take a cue from Raymond Williams ([1958] 1989), who states "cultures are ordinary". Game cultures are an increasingly significant part of our everyday life and social worlds, as activities and things that transform not only the materials we use, but also the kind of lives we live. If this is the case, then it is necessary for media studies to produce sophisticated knowledge on these meaningful cultural artefacts and daily life experiences, the methods being developed to study games are valuable tools.

Our intention with this special issue has been to bring together research working at the nexus of games and media studies. We offer examples of what games scholarship brings to methods thinking as well as media theory, and in the process wrangle with some interdisciplinary tensions. By focusing on the question of methods in games research and media studies, this issue of *MedieKultur* presents a collection of innovative research perspectives, which can reach beyond the growing field of games research and engage with interrelated subject areas such as audience studies, media sport studies, digital broadcasting, political economy, and leisure cultures research (to name only a few). With the continued and varied growth of games as media towards mobile, public, and domestic media space, this is an important moment to take stock and examine

the substance and productions of games in relation to media studies research. Of the contributing authors we ask: what has been discovered, connected, or renovated in games and media studies research since that first open invitation to study games? What does methods thinking in game studies produce? The perspectives brought to this issue demonstrate the importance of this ongoing work.

This issue addresses **emerging games studies methods** on how to study complex and “playful” media cultures and artefacts, but also renders visible some of the issues of researcher positionality within games and performance platforms. The specific challenges of studying such dynamic fields of play prompt questions around **new media-ludic methodologies**, and work to extend the knowledge exchange between games research and media studies.

As a videogame ethnographer working predominantly within public play, LAN (local area network computer game events), and competitive play scenes, Nicholas Taylor offers an embodied orientation to doing game studies research from a feminist media studies perspective in “I’d rather be a cyborg than a gamerbro: How masculinity mediates research on digital play”. Building on his previous work on the implications of research materials within distinctly male-dominated spaces of player production (Taylor, 2016b), his contribution here extends the perspective to an examination of the game researcher body, and the lines of scholarship that are made on, by, and through those bodies engaging in game studies. Taylor’s work contributes theoretically to media scholarship, building on German media theory and Peters (2015) work on media as techniques of bringing things together, as mediating work beyond machines and across other media productions from bodies to less visible aspects framing interactive possibility. In exploring the mediating work of research materials, he sets his focus on masculinity. Specifically, the straight, white, male research body as a materially and historically entrenched media instrument, which when questioned exposes certain intersectional freedoms and dilemmas to reckon with in the process of producing knowledge within such homo-social game communities.

Taylor’s feminist ethnographic sensitivity and attention to formations of power and knowledge in game studies research has a shared centre with Emma Witkowski’s piece on “Sensuous proximity in research methods with expert teams, media sports, and esports practices”. They both ask for greater attention to conditional, at times tacit, awareness of the “angles and scales” (Richardson and St Pierre, 2005) involved in their research methods and processes, calling for more reflexive attention to the closeness and distance created and accommodated in researcher involvements. Drawing on qualitative research exploring expert team processes in esports and across networked platforms, Witkowski raises epistemological concerns with “playing research” (like-for-like levels of experience between level of study and level of researcher expertise in the game, see Aarseth, 2003) as a conventional game studies methodology. In her work, Witkowski presents a methodological stance calling for field intimacy and collaborative involvement that acts

as an alternative to demonstrable independent technical mastery of an isolated slice of playable software. From the research standpoint of sensuous proximity, she offers a suite of conceptual lenses to study and engage with expert, inter-embodied teams (and team play) in games, as networked media sports practices involving multiple orientations and angles that formulate the event.

Luis Andrade's contribution, "Research method for locative games" demonstrates how playful technologies interact and change the behaviour of their users, creating new physical meeting places and forming new everyday habits. His search for a method with which to study *Pokémon Go* through moving around an urban area stretches and challenges how we are comfortable with seeing Actor-Network Theory used. *Pokémon Go* is a locative game, but unlike other locative media, it is more than a spatial exploration of media content. The movement is a vital aspect of the game, making the process of progress as important as the location or the spatial affordances. Instead it uses locative media and mediated localities (Thielmann, 2010), in order to create a quasi-social game of hunting, gathering and fighting, through digital enhancements of the existing geography. Andrade steps right into the discourses of media geography and brings it close to a non-mediated world, focusing on the connection between our passage through geographical points and the consumption of the game instead and not an end-point, a set arena for media use.

The interface between media methods, digital ethnography and game studies is further explored in Torill Mortensen's piece "Real game worlds: The emotional reality of fictional worlds". This questions the idea that games are not "real" and points out that they are definitely real for the players. A main concept in this discussion is "worldness", a term that describes the sense of being within a world that comes with playing games, and Mortensen expands on how worldness complicates the boundaries between fiction and perceived reality. Mortensen's background in ethnography in games from player-made and maintained text-based games (2001; 2003) to MMORPGs (2006; 2008; 2015) is the backdrop for this discussion highlighting the experience of the player.

In asking what productive knowledge claims come from games and media studies research methods configurations, this issue captures acute arguments and finer orientations to the craft of research within increasingly "ludified" (Frissen et al., 2015) media spaces. Cermak-Sassenrath's study "On political activism in digital games" offers keen insights on the various ludic practices of activism within digital games, where players initiate political performances through digital play, from in-game, live, peaceful protests to disruptive and subversive actions challenging the game narrative and social rules of play. An informed and critical eye on growing political activism in games is timely and necessary as player-activists use game platforms to voice and enact local and real-world issues, from sexist or racist behaviour (Gray, 2013), to game industry politics (such as the marketing of weapons in first-person-shooter games) and broader global issues. Cermak-Sassenrath's collection and categorisation of in-game activism highlights how everyday

activism themes and modes of address are reified within digital games but also extended within game worlds through different techniques and codes of play. As digital games and game platforms continue to grow as dominant places of meaningful leisure, this collection establishes the many ways youthful players may come into first-contact with civic politics in action.

These articles give a small peek at the discussions within game studies, but they represent some of the aspects that tend to be overlooked. As we well know from media studies, the media rarely change our lives through the often shocking, transgressive content. Instead our lives change in increments, in tiny, but ubiquitous changes, as media use becomes habit, and we adjust to integrate them in the entirety of our lives. Digital games have made their way into our lives in exactly this manner, whether it is through a word-game with friends after dinner or new career choices in professional play. It is up to us as scholars to engage critically with these changes.

Open Section

Kjetil Sandvik

This issue includes two Open Section articles, one in English and one in Danish. Cindie Maagaard and Marianne Wolff Lundholt's article "Taking spoofs seriously: The counter-narrative potential of spoofs as critical discourse" explores how the theoretical framework of "counter-narrative" can be a resource for the analysis of spoofing videos. Using spoofs deployed by activist organizations to critique Western aid appeals and "voluntourism," the article investigates the intertextual mechanisms of spoof videos as counter-narrative and how spoofers borrow generic conventions and use them to create alternative narratives. The article furthermore discusses the consequences of spoofer's cultural depictions looking at, for example, the discourse of volunteering which is contextualised in light of tendencies toward self-reflective campaigns. The article draws lessons about the counter-narrative potential of spoofs used as critique and edification and their ambivalent status as counter-narratives.

In the article "Hvorfor og hvordan 'betyder' nethandel? Om blandingen af teksttyper i Zalando's netbutik" [Why and how does online shopping 'mean'? On the mixing of textual types in Zalando's web shops] Thomas Hestbæk Andersen and Theo van Leeuwen study how shopping is increasingly being digitally remediated and how this remediation has impact on the ways in which customers and retailers interact, the way retailers present goods to customers, the way customers can examine goods, and the perceived and real risks customers are exposed to. Goods that can be touched and handled in markets and brick-&-mortar shops must now be inspected and selected by means of words and images, which presupposes linguistic and visual literacy. The article centers on an analysis of Zalando's use of multimodal resources, and demonstrates how different registers

intertwine. Also, the article points to an increasing importance of language and suggests that online shopping may in fact be less multimodal than face to face shopping, requiring linguistic skills and literacy not everyone possesses.

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