

Games Are Social/Media(ted)/Technology Too . . .

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Abstract

In this manifesto, we argue that social media research needs to take the broader field of game studies in the exploration and understanding of social media. Many of the results, theories, and concepts developed in the study of games has significant implications for the study of all social media. Of course, game studies should be paying attention to social media research too.

Keywords

games, game studies, social games

MIA: The successful growth of game studies as a field has troubling implications for me. It is certainly gratifying to see a field that I have worked in for more than a decade become established, and for a body of theory and research to emerge that helps us better understand games, game culture, and the game industry. Game studies scholars have begun staking claims to spaces for their work in specialized journals, conferences, organizations and book series, associational divisions, interest groups, and mailing lists. Multiple international funding agencies have acknowledged the value of game-related research, not only for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM)-related work but also in the arts and humanities, the social sciences, and in funding games as cultural production. It used to be possible to claim knowledge of “game studies” as a field when the research on it comprised a bookshelf or two; now with increasing specialization, one cannot possibly stay current with all areas, all of the time. Yet, even with this success, I believe we are also witnessing a marginalization of that work.

CASEY: I've always thought that was one of the successes of Science and Technology Studies (STS), a field that has also struggled with the discipline/field structure. I think one of the strengths of STS is that it went out into the world and found new hosts. STS occupied other disciplines and fields, bringing new questions, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies into spaces of research that needed a breath of fresh air. Game Studies, on the other hand, worried too much about its boundaries and whether or not those walls were too high, low, or even necessary. In the meantime, so legitimated by those early researchers, games were validated as a worthy empirical realm of inquiry. Other fields stepped in with their own methods and theories and frequently ignored the work that made the study of games, gamers, and the host of

political-economic, social, technological, and cultural elements a reasonable realm of scholarly inquiry.

MIA: We see that happening in different ways, in different venues. One of the most problematic as I see it is the cordoning off of research about games to “just for game studies.” In practice, this means that research done about games online, for example, is not seen as applicable to other activity online, even if the research is about social activities and group formation, to take just one example.

CASEY: Take another example: Minecraft. Yes, simple enough. Which Minecraft? The game shifted dramatically during its development. Was this Minecraft circa 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, or 2015? Which play modes? Where there any MODs (“modifications”) installed? Were you looking at associated online user forums? What about the game's transition away from development by an individual to now being owned by the technology giant Microsoft? It is complicated. Yet, that is precisely what makes it so compelling for ongoing research. However, this work needs to be informed by both media research as well as game studies (and probably some other fields as well). And media research (and those other fields) needs to pay attention to games research, as it is often the proving ground for technologies that come to pervade media (O'Donnell, 2011).

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MIA: And it is not simply a matter of paying attention but also seeing where collaborative theorization or work might occur. One example of a place where games scholarship and social media scholarship coincide and could productively talk to one another is at the cross-section of social networks and social network games (SNGs), via platforms such as Facebook. Only a few years ago, SNGs generated 40% of all traffic to Facebook, yet that activity was largely ignored by social network researchers who instead focused on identity, community, and other issues, while the platform on which individuals were playing was often little more than mentioned by games researchers. Yet, Facebook users are not only engaging in identity management and community building—they are playing games such as *Candy Crush Saga* and *Farmville 2*. And they do so within the context of a pre-existing social network of their friends and family, where relationships obviously persist long after individual games are completed or abandoned. And they constantly negotiate a balance between requesting help from friends and sharing successes with spamming their timelines with game-related announcements, which others might object to.

CASEY: I would like to try another example. TweetDeck played a particularly interesting role in the last year's (and the current year's) #GAMERGATE harassment debacle.¹ The tool's ability to plug into Twitter's underlying platform in ways otherwise impossible is critical to understanding the events. As a personal experiment, if you have a Twitter account and you have TweetDeck installed, open it. If the "Activity" column is not already visible, use the "+" icon to add a new column. Watch the activity stream begin to slide downward as the people you follow interact with the tweets of others. Now make sense of it for me. Tell me a story. Tell me several stories. The feed is not really discernible, but nor is it random. It is technological; it is algorithmic; it is human-computer mediated. It is complicated. It is part of the system. It connects to the nervous system of Twitter, but it isn't Twitter. TweetDeck users can create new columns searching for a user's @handle or a set of search strings with or without hashtags ("#"). They can watch the activity feed for the actions of those they follow. This playful system became part of the fabric of a sub-set of gamer culture, plugging into existing gamer logics about interactivity, play, and ultimately that #GAMERGATE could somehow be "won." To understand #GAMERGATE, one needs to explore gamer culture(s), 8chan, TweetDeck, Twitter, and probably much more. Such a task must be informed by work from a variety of fields.

MIA: A key element of play that game studies scholars need to tackle is better understanding how play fits into one's daily activities—determining whether and when play is special, and/or when it is mundane, quotidian, detrimental, or even annoying. Scholars who examine players of SNGs need to better contextualize that play (Consalvo, 2009), just as researchers of social network sites must acknowledge the playing that accompanies a user's other activities.

CASEY: Context . . . It matters. As a graduate student, I was an optimist. I looked to Donna Haraway's (1991) "Cat's cradle" as a productive metaphor—the idea that studying social media would somehow result in a kind of "collective" endeavor, where technologies and socio-cultural analysis came together (p. 268). That perspective shifted to thinking about social media as various kinds of monsters, some happy, others sad, and more than a few depraved. I imagined the game of making monsters could be a collaborative one, with more than a few "hopeful" monsters (Law, 1991, pp. 17-19). During this same time, I observed portions of social media move, shift, swirl, experiment, #XGATE, and more. This is no longer an assemblage to be explored. Social media is a mess and it needs a bit more care for and attention to its propensity for mess making. Social media moves fast, like Activity Feeds. But that doesn't mean that our analysis needs to always be so fast, which will continually remain a temptation.

MIA/CASEY: For these reasons, we would hope to see *Social Media + Society* as a space where games scholarship is one (key) facet of social media scholarship, where each can mutually inform the other and build bridges where currently we see widening chasms. Games have always been social activities. Pre-digital (or non-digital) games demand multiple players (apart from a few examples like Solitaire, which, even still, has a social context), and even if a game can be played by one person, that doesn't stop players from talking with other players about their games, their strategies, what good or bad luck they might have encountered, or how to approach such a game in the future. And those behaviors form a key part of our larger social structures (Taylor, 2009).

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Note

1. If you've remained blissfully unaware of the events, but are nonetheless lured by things that you probably don't want to know about, but do, one of many accounts of the events can be found at <http://www.reddit.com/r/GamerGhazi/wiki/timeline>

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