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GAMING THE SYSTEM: DECONSTRUCTING VIDEO GAMES, GAME STUDIES, AND VIRTUAL WORLDS (2018) BY DAVID J. GUNKEL

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David J. Gunkel in his book of essays *Gaming the System* (2018) proposes to introduce a shift in perspective within game studies. As he sets out in the preface, his concern "is not *the argument in the game* but *the game in the argument,*" claiming that a shift in perspective can bring new answers to old philosophical questions such as: whether a social contract is required to stop humanity's return to nature and what is the nature of reality (ix, original emphasis). Gunkel draws on Immanuel Kant as an example to follow, a philosopher famous for, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), reframing the argument surrounding metaphysics making him one of the most influential figures in modern philosophy. The thesis of *Gaming the System* therefore is ambitious – unfortunately one which does not always succeed. While Gunkel seeks to introduce the study of games to the questions of philosophy, he does not engage with other academic work on philosophy and games such as Jon Cogburn and Mark Silcox's 2009 book *Philosophy Through Video Games*, a notable game studies text. In addition, *Gaming the System* deliberately does not engage with current game studies debates, due to its database of sources including games and virtual environments. Consequently, *Gaming the System feels* rich in examples but unfocused due to both the breadth of different mediums that these examples are drawn from and its distance from the critical discourse surrounding studies of games.

In the introduction and conclusion Gunkel draws from Jacques Derrida to establish the theoretical framework of his argument. Derrida's influence is reflected in the title; *Gaming the System*, as much like how Derrida's deconstruction subsists within the system that it argues against and is therefore reliant on for its own continued existence, *Gaming the System* relies on subverting the traditional expectations of a book of essays. As such, Gunkel promises in his introduction to include a conclusion but then refuses to provide a satisfactory end. Gunkel writes:

> Consequently, what results from this kind of effort is not a set of stand-alone, generalizable insights and outcomes that can be extracted and enumerated, but a necessarily incomplete and ongoing involvement with the systems in which and on which it operates. (26)

Gunkel applies deconstruction as a tool to identify how the medium of a book of essays attempts to hide its incompleteness by masquerading as a definitive product which once complete is removed from the system of criticism and change. By using Derrida as a key part of his framework he also examines how easily a text is affected by its context. In not providing a conclusion Gunkel attempts to position both the medium of 'a book of essays' and the subject of virtual worlds as texts without end, to be viewed in terms of a system which continually adds new context where a definitive conclusion cannot be drawn. Therefore, Gunkel's essays feel as though they are directing the reader to explore beyond the book and to create their own conclusion. The practical result is that *Gaming the System* can feel frustrating, as if it is holding back and missing the opportunity to make a final statement. Gunkel sticks to his Derridean ideas but as a result *Gaming the System* can feel like a gimmick; its very theoretical framework overshadowing the ideas that the essays explore.

The collection of essays begins with "Terra Nova 2.0," which examines the linguistic history of phrases such as 'New World' and 'Frontier' and what meanings are applied to virtual worlds through the use of these descriptors in their marketing. The argument is nuanced and covers how the limits of language enforce the boundaries of – in this case – the virtual world. Gunkel examines the historical context of the words, with 'New World' stemming from the European encounters with the Americas, and the 'Frontier' as the western movement of European settlers across America. Both words have a colonial history, which implies the virtual explorer as conqueror, continually moving and 'discovering' new territory. The chapter looks at games which purposefully explore the frontier such as *The Oregon Trail* (1974), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), and other titles which emulate the feeling of new world exploration, such as *Second Life* (2003-current). The argument posits both 'New World' and 'Frontier' as terms utilised within American myth building to exorcise negative feelings surrounding that period of American history. Where, Gunkel asks, does this leave indigenous populations and non-Americans? However, he does not engage with the vibrant indigenous American game developer community, which could have provided an alternative, instead closing this chapter stating that it is a naïve reader who asks for critiques to provide solutions.

The second chapter, "The Real Problem," is concerned with the connection between avatars and the illusive 'Real' chased by philosophers from Plato to Slavoj Žižek. This is arguably the most abstract of all the chapters requiring the most out of its reader due to the complicated nature of its philosophical ideas. The chapter takes the stance that a player's avatar and their experience piloting them is no less real to the player and those around them within the virtual environment than their experience of the reality outside of the virtual space. This section and the following essay use fake Facebook profiles for philosophers as a way to explain their ideas and the positions they hold on how to conceptualise reality in relation to other philosophers. This sets philosophy up as a network which is continually in discussion with itself rather than a linear line of progress, convincingly reflecting the Derridean framework Gunkel is creating.

"Social Contract 2.0," the third chapter, cites a virtual world's Terms of Service (TOS) as, "the most influential and important political document of the twenty-first century" (25). This chapter's attention is almost exclusively on using Facebook as a case study to represent the current use of

these types of contracts in online spaces. This section focuses on consent, the practical use of the document by companies, and the history of this type of online contract, as well as an introduction to the philosophy of the social contract as outlined by Thomas Hobbs and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Social Contract theory is interested in the morality of humanity and whether we are, as Hobbs suggest, inherently evil and in need of governance, or, as Rousseau argued, a blank slate. This is used compellingly by Gunkel with the case study of LambdaMOO (1990), a virtual environment which deliberately declined to enforce a TOS until an avatar called Mr. Bungle violated avatars within the space. This section argues that a TOS requires a definitive decision by the user unlike the original social contracts discussed by Hobbs and Rousseau, which only requires tacit consent. However, this, I would argue, ignores the obscuration of information that these forms cause and does not question whether the act of clicking a button can count as informed consent.

In the final chapter, "In the Face of Others," Gunkel interrogates our relationship with Artificial Intelligence (AI), ranging from individual chat bots, public entities such as Microsoft's bigoted Tay-bot whose interactions with the public on Twitter resulted in it remixing racist and anti-Semitic remarks it received in its replies, and non-interactable AI such as those which operate self-driving cars. Considering these examples, Gunkel explores responsibility for the actions of an AI, and the consequences of such decisions on how we conceptualise our place in the world. This chapter feels like the most important due to the contemporary innovations within AI. Although it can feel at times like Science Fiction when discussing the possibility of being catfished by an AI, Gunkel is highlighting the questions we should be asking now to avoid potential disasters in the future. I felt as though this chapter could have been expanded to fully explore this area as a key question was missing to understand the ethics of who has responsibility of an AI's actions; namely, when does a human agent have the right to know when an AI agent is involved? As humans we like to believe that we can tell the difference between something that is human and something which is not; that we would be victorious in a Turing test. As programmers become smarter at developing AI which can, for instance, convincingly book a hairdresser's appointment or beat the world's best players at *StarCraft* (1998), when this information is disclosed needs to be addressed. Unfortunately, this chapter is too short to fully grapple with these questions; however, Gunkel has released another book, *Robot Rights* (2018), which appears to be an expansion on these ideas. Whether each chapter will be expanded into a later book is unknown, but if *Gaming the System* is a practice ground for ideas then readers with an interest in only one topic might wish to wait to see if Gunkel expands and builds a fuller argument in the future.

Each chapter is distinct, offering little overlap to the others; as a result the book feels like a tasting platter of individual pieces rather than a cohesive whole. Combined with Gunkel's Derridean framework, this set of essays feels like a mixture of ideas which do not build towards a satisfying conclusion or the furthering of any of the ideas found in each individual chapter. The structure of each essay provides the reader with an introduction to the philosophical argument being navigated. These introductions provide enough depth to stimulate interest, however, as each chapter is isolated from the rest, the reader will find themselves moving to sources outside the text. Whether this a purposeful result of the Derridean framework, or an unfortunate side effect of the bite-size nature of the collection is unclear.

Due to *Gaming the System* comprising of four separate essays which each cover wildly different topics, each chapter contains a breadth of different philosophers, which include; Kant, Derrida, Žižek, and Plato among others. A book which involves so many philosophers, within the relatively short space of 198 pages, runs the risk of becoming too dense for most, while also expecting the reader to approach the book already fluent in a wide range of philosophical ideas. *Gaming the System,* however, succeeds in being well-written enough to ask that its readers only have a base knowledge of the language used within philosophy, and failing that, a curiosity in the subject.

To conclude in a more definitive manner than Gunkel, *Gaming the System* is a set of essays where philosophy can be found everywhere, even within the structure chosen for the piece. Although this should, in theory, complicate the work, it is an easy to read explanation of different philosophical ideas which are reflected within the spaces of video games and virtual worlds. This would suit those who have an interest in game studies and virtual worlds who are interested in the application of philosophy but require a refresher on debates and concerns. Where *Gaming the System* struggles is continuing the momentum throughout all four of its essays, with each ending without an identifiable link between them and without the promise of each being drawn together to a defined conclusion. Overall, the book is made up of interesting individual parts which could have made a coherent whole but, by design of the author, is denied cohesiveness. A structural decision which I ultimately believe harms the individual chapters. *Gaming the System* is therefore a good place to start but readers will find themselves dissatisfied with the conclusion; a very Derridean result.

BIONOTE

Charlotte Gislam is a PhD student at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, researching how Artificial Intelligence and narrative intersect in digital games. Her other research interests include: film, Science Fiction, Gothic, and spatial theory. Physically she can be found in the North-West, digitally on Twitter @gislam93.