Games and Literary Theory Conference, 2013 – Conference Review

James Farrugia, Jeffrey Micallef

antae

Games and Literary Theory Conference, 2013 – Conference Review

James Farrugia, Jeffrey Micallef

University of Malta

The Department of English of the University of Malta collaborated with the Institute of Digital Games (University of Malta) to hold the First International Conference on Games and Literary Theory. It ran from the 31st of October to the 1st of November 2013, and was held at the Old University Building, Valletta, Malta. The event proved to be an overwhelmingly smooth and positive experience for all involved. One of the event's particularly positive aspects was its structure – only one panel at a time with two or three papers each – which admitted fewer papers than is usual for such conferences. In doing so, it gave space for, and indeed generated, a healthy debate after each paper was delivered, allowing both speaker and audience to immerse themselves in the topics at hand.

The two-day conference was initiated by Professor Ivan Callus, Head of Department of English of the University of Malta, whose opening address stressed the inevitability of an interdisciplinary approach in the spheres of gaming and theory. A collaboration between the two spheres, he said, might prove to be mutually enriching. In a similar vein, Professor Gordon Calleja, Head of the Institute of Digital Games at the University of Malta, delivered the second opening address, noting that multidisciplinarity is both a boon and a curse. The various connections that are inevitably drawn, he said, result in a discourse whose breadth comes at the expense of its depth of insight. With this in mind, Calleja said that *unidisciplinarity* might, in certain instances, ultimately be more beneficial.

Panel Presentations, Day One

After the welcome address, the first panel, chaired by Professor Espen Aaerseth, got under way. It was comprised of two papers, Jonne Arjoranta's (University of Jyväskylä, Finland) 'Meaning Effects in Video Games: Converting meaning-making tools from literary studies to game design' and Sebastian Möring's (IT University of Copenhangen, Denmark) 'The Game Itself?': Towards a Hermeneutics of Computer Games'. This panel largely centred on themes of perspective. In Arjoranta's paper, the nature of focalisation, modes of narration and aspects of granularity as they relate to video games were discussed in some detail, with references

being made to Gérard Genette's theories of the zero, external and internal points of view. Arjoranta's paper successfully applied these notions to various video games, including *Command and Conquer*, *Sim City 4* and *Tomb Raider*. Möring's paper, though avowedly more abstract than Arjoranta's, still gravitated around a question of perspective in that its primary concern was the way we look at games and the manner in which we can interpret them through a gaming hermeneutics. This comprehensive game hermeneutics, which, he argued, is missing in game studies, would also require a 'solid game ontology'. Möring also distinguished between the ludic, narrative and meaning elements in gaming, asserting that games are not texts and therefore cannot be interpreted as such. With space being given to both *Space Invader* and Heideggerean hermeneutics, the paper maintained a commendable balance between exemplification and speculation.

Showcasing the variety of the conference, the second panel, chaired by Daniel Vella, consisted of two papers – Marion Haza's (Université de Poitiers, France) 'Pseudo and digital parapraxis in video games' and Roger Dale Jones's (Justus-Liebig University, Denmark) 'Fail! Testing the Limits of Story in World of Warcraft Fan-Comics' – which were both diametrically opposed to the first panel in their personalised and personalising approach to game studies. Rather than focusing on purely theoretical aspects, both papers drew attention to the role of the player and to the storytelling aspects engendered through the player's interaction with the game, specifically MMORPGs. Haza's paper set out to delineate the integral part that the 'pseudo' plays in avatars. She argued that a flexible understanding of the 'pseudo' allows us to consider both written and graphical aspects of the avatar, that through this digital pseudo players can change a plethora of characters that can in no way be achievable in 'real life'. The pseudo-drawn avatar, according to Haza, conveys some of their creators' consciousness, which is where the issue of parapraxis comes in: not as an error made in speech, but as an expression on the part of the subject that conveys something other than originally intended. On the other hand, Jones's paper utilised fanstories as a tool in order to explore three concepts: alterbiography, failure in video games, and (un)worlding the story. Alterbiography was used, if with some stated limitations, to look at what narrative studies can do for games; failure in video games was identified as being either 'goal-type' or part of a path that leads to 'success'; (un)worlding the story was identified as consisting of two types, horizontal and lateral, the latter including multiple perspectives for the same story. Amalgamating these three concepts, Jones concluded by mentioning some of the limits of narrative sense-making in games, especially the extent to which disparate events can merge into an overall experience.

Theory and narrative combined in the third panel, chaired by Professor Calleja, which featured the first of two papers that were delivered by Professor Espen Aarseth (IT University of

Copenhagen, Denmark), the first of which was co-written by Johs. Hjellbrekke of the University of Bergen, Norway. The aim of the paper, as stated by Aarseth, is that of developing the ludo-narrative genre. This requires not only a formulation of the outlines of ludo-narrative theory, which at the outset must forget the falsely constructed 'ludology versus narratology debate', but also a pilot study involving some 186 games. The aim is that of arriving at a classification of the basic type of structure that underpins them. Corresponding analysis results were plentifully illustrated with the use of graphs classifying a broad swathe of games into four tentative groups: open world games, linear story-heavy games, strategy games, and so-called 'games in the middle', the last of which typically include role-playing games. Though Aarseth said that the results from a subsequent study were inconclusive, one notable and ironic result was that the games with less narrative often produced the most narrative. Following Aarseth, Veli-Matti Karhulahati of the University of Turku, Finland, presented his paper 'Demanding, Nondemanding and Extrademanding Narratives', which is part of a much larger project of providing the game ontology needed to 'supply game theory to literary theory'. The paper slanted towards the technical, tackling considerations of 'game fetishism' and asserting that a game is all about dynamic challenges. As to the questions of demanding and extrademanding narrative works, the paper asked what a narrative work is, with one of the points raised being that games engender kinaestheticity rather than discourse. Demanding narratives, implicated with cognitive demands (as in books, films, etc.), are set against nondemanding narratives which consist of both cognitive and kinaesthetic demands (as in games). In the Q&A session that followed, the audience put forward a remark on the proliferation of narrative and the notable absence of poetry in the papers thus delivered.

Not letting up on these grounds of literary disputation, Professor Callus, the chair for the final panel of day one, noted that Professor Aarseth's second paper, 'Ludo-Hermeneutics and the Semiotics and Ontology of Game Objects' could be aptly titled 'Against Fiction'. Aarseth's goals in the paper included the semiotic/mechanic paradigm and its alternatives, the problem with 'procedural rhetoric', and an exposition on why games are not fictional. Accordingly, Aarseth started off by explaining that in hermeneutic ludo-realism, what happens in a game is real, that virtual worlds have the potential to contain real knowledge. In contrast to this, in cognitive ludo-realism, inputted computer actions are akin to real instrumental ones. With this in mind, fiction is at best a faulty analogy for gaming, used analogically to describe and explain digi-ludic phenomena – the contentious point being that, while fiction has to be imagined, game objects do not. Within this context, David Parlett's concept of ludemes could be vital since ludemes refer to actual game components. A ludeme is a ludic signifier, something which is empirically accessible and is the conceptual equivalent of a material component of game; games use fiction for decorative purposes only, whereas the ludeme is conceptual reality.

The last two papers of the panel dealt with fiction as well, albeit in a less controversial manner. Justin Schumaker (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA) presented the paper 'Sea and Spar and Portals Between' in the absence of co-writer Stuart Moulthrop. Schumaker and Moulthrop's paper considers theory as an interface between distinct domains, one that might require careful handling when applied to less printable practices, as in the case of *Sea and Spar Between* which combines the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Melville's *Moby Dick*, a complex and experimental exercise that necessarily links to the argument of the sublime and anti-sublime, in which polarisation is an essential component of gaming. Timothy J Welsh's (Loyola University, USA) paper dealt with a less intimidating, if just as interesting, side of this fictional plane of discourse. His paper takes the game of *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time* as a reference throughout. From a theoretical perspective, the paper draws on John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* and Linda Hutcheon's 'narcissistic narrative' as metafiction paradigms. Welsh insisted that the divide between real and fiction is not enough, and that contemporary examples such as online bank accounts should make this shortcoming obvious. He argues that the *Prince of Persia*'s mixed realism is not restricted to one scene of the game, since it extends beyond phenomenological experiences in which moments of play achieve 'real' significance.

Panel Presentations, Day Two

The second day of the Games and Literary Theory Conference had an equally diverse offering for both initiated and uninitiated, with an increasing focus on politico-social themes as the day progressed. Starting things off in the first panel, chaired by Professor Callus, was Mario Aquilina (University of Malta) with his paper 'Is that my score?: In Between Literature and Games'. Aquilina explored the interface between games and 'the poetic' through electronic literature. Here, the element of performativity in some electronic literature provided the lead-in for a discussion of literature as event, as that which possibly bridges the gap between electronic literature and games because of its focus on the element of play inherent in both. Nevertheless, such a development does not attempt to assert the poetic in all events involving gameplay, but rather accumulates this limited applicability as further proof of the singularity of literature (including the electronic kind) as founded on the paradox of its undecidability.

In contrast to Aquilina's paper, with its focus on electronic games, literature and fiction, the other two papers represented on the panel had more to do with elements of narrative and non-narrative, and used games as case studies in pursuit of this focus. Dr Douglas Brown (Brunel University, UK) presented a paper entitled 'Coleridge and Metal Gear: Rehabilitating Suspension of Disbelief for Videogames'. The paper elicited a distinction between games

centred on a narrative and those, like Tetris, which are not. From a discussion of the character of Psycho Mantis in the game *Metal Gear Solid*, the potential of the former type to generate the effect of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'suspension of disbelief' was explored by Brown, who was all too aware of how loaded this term is, particularly when applied to game studies. In fact, he questioned whether it is correct to use it as a shorthand for 'immersion', and posited that in video games, in contrast to Wolfgang Iser's 'act of reading', suspension of disbelief almost works backwards. Complementing Brown's paper was Professor Michael Fuchs's (University of Graz, Austria) '"I'm a writer": Alan Wake and the (De?)Construction of Authorship'. Fuchs demonstrated how the question of authorship can be problematised in video games by showing a selection of clips from Microsoft Game Studios' *Alan Wake*. A solid contextualisation of the arguments complemented the presentation of video games as part of a long tradition of art.

Chaired by Giuliana Fenech, the second panel consisted of two papers, Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone's (University of Kent, UK) 'Self-Reflexivity and Humour in Adventure Games', and the first of two of Daniel Vella's (IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark) papers, 'No Mastery without Mystery: *Dark Souls* and the Ludic Sublime'. Giappone's paper explored the relationship between the postmodern nature of video games and the humour they are capable of providing. In adventure games like *The Testament of Sherlock Holmes*, humour can be seen as residing, for example, in the inter(-rupting) action, to wit, the interaction with humour which takes place within the interruption of the game's linearity. The play of comedy also allows one to look across media, and here the significance of the works of Shklovsky and Bakhtin was explored. Whereas Giappone's paper looked for humour in video games, Vella's explored their potential for the sublime. Starting out from the premise that video games are based upon definite rules, Vella asked whether there is any space at all for the sublime in this genre. Following a brief overview of various aesthetic schools of thought, lingering primarily on Kant's first and third critiques of judgment, Vella went on to posit that the ludic sublime can be said to operate between the knowledge that the game has an order to it and the knowledge that the player can never have full access it.

The penultimate panel, chaired by Mario Aquilina, proved to be the most eclectic panel of all. Starting off was Hans-Joachim Backe (Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany) with his paper 'Green Gaming: Reflections on Ecocriticism and Digital Games'. Focusing on the interplay between visuals, discourse and gameplay in relation to nature, Backe used games like *Read Dead Redemption*, *Dishonoured* and *DayZ Epoch* to provide the backdrop for a discussion on different ways in which nature and its expansiveness – and the player's interaction with it – can be portrayed in gaming. This, Backe said, can happen to the extent that the hunter can become the hunted, an observation which was picked upon by many of the audience in the

Q&A session. Similarly, and equally interesting, Jean-Charles Ray's (University Sorbonne Nouvelle, France) paper 'Phobos and Deimos: An Application of Literary Fear and Terror to Video Games' explored the aesthetics of video games in relation to a broader social perspective. Whilst making reference to books like Jean Clair's *Hubris*, the paper analysed the way in which video games like the critically acclaimed *Alone in the Dark* can actually be seen to mirror some of the elements in horror novels like Jean Ray's *Malpertuis*. Daniel Vella concluded the panel with his second paper of the day, 'An Aesthetics of Subjectivity', in which he posited some salient questions regarding subjectivity in gaming – questions such as who exactly is being addressed in the game, and asking whether a line can be drawn between the agency of characters within the game and the players themselves. Taking examples from games like *Kentucky Route Zero*, Vella showed that ludic subjectivity operates on multiple levels that are difficult to pin down since, as Paul Ricoer outlines in *Oneself as Another*, the notion of identity encapsulates much more than a distinction between individuals.

With Professor Calleja as chair, the final panel was equally concerned with the social aspects and effects of gaming and proceeded with Dr Joyce Goggin's paper 'Repetitive Pleasures: Gaming and Addiction'. Goggin presented a panoramic study of the way in which the relationship between gaming addiction has been perceived throughout the ages, tracing the roots of addiction's relationship as far back as Cardano's *The Book on Games of Chance*, published in 1520. Links are consequently seen to emerge between Victorian works such as Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* and the gaming culture in Las Vegas' Caesar's Palace. Neatly bringing things to a close by asking some fundamental questions about the unique nature of video games and how this differentiates them from other forms of art, Jonas Linderoth's paper (untitled) framed this discussion by asking if it is legitimate to question where the Hemingways and Woolfs of digital games reside. Linderoth concluded that it is perhaps wiser to acknowledge that for the past twenty years, digital games have not been anything quite like a highbrow form of art capable of the same kind of sublime associated with literature. Indeed, Linderoth suggested that to develop an artificial discourse structure that takes itself very seriously when it is centred around video games would almost be parodic given that this is not what video game identity is about.

After all the papers had been presented, the Games and Literary Theory Conference 2013 came to a close, but not before a final roundtable discussion that brought up the possibility of a second conference next year. There was a general consensus that, while it is refreshing that there is still such a productive uncertainty over certain terms prolific in game studies, there was, as Dr James Corby pointed out, a little less theory than one hoped for in a conference which was ostensibly about games *and* theory. That said, the conference was a well-organised

antae

success, having generated as much debate and promise as one could hope for in the space of two days within the confines of the Old University Building's Aula Magna.