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# RETHINKING VIRTUAL WORLDS: A REVIEW OF *GAMING THE SYSTEM* BY DAVID J. GUNKEL

**David J. Gunkel, *Gaming the System: Deconstructing Video Games, Game Studies, and Virtual Worlds*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018, pp. 264.**

The format of a book review establishes expectations of closure, whether in the shape of a synoptic overview summing up the book and its contents, or of a more prescriptive 'verdict' on the book's merits. How, then, to sum up a book that, in adopting Derridean deconstruction as its method, makes an explicit virtue of its own lack of closure, refuses to offer any neat conclusions, and, in short, presents itself as an open-ended critical intervention in dialogue with the discourses it sets out to examine?

Such is precisely the challenge set to a reviewer by David J. Gunkel's *Gaming the System: Deconstructing Video Games, Game Studies, and Virtual Worlds* (Indiana University Press, 2018). Gunkel's book positions itself as standing in relation to—in fact, as being *about*—the discourses of game studies. The preface introduces the book with a reference to Ian Bogost's notion of procedural rhetoric (2007), which Gunkel frames as a paradigm shift in the discourse of game studies, before positioning the present book as "another shift in perspective" for game studies (p. ix)—a shift he aims to perform by means of a self-reflexive turn.

The book's aims are more clearly stated in the introduction, where Gunkel—after providing a definition of critique as "an examination that seeks to identify and expose a particular [discursive] game's fundamental operations and conditions of possibility"—states, in an echo of the book's sub-title, that what the book shall contain is "this kind of critical effort directed towards video games, game studies, and virtual worlds" (p. 2). Closing the circle, in the book's conclusion, Gunkel again characterizes what has come before, in the book's four main chapters, as a deconstructive intervention "in a particular field—in this case, computer games and game studies" (p. 156).

The form of this intervention—or, to be more accurate, collection of interventions—is that of four extensive studies, each occupying one of the book's four

main chapters, and each constituting an interrogation or a taking-to-task of a particular notion or idea that is identified as being foundational to the discourse under analysis. As Gunkel points out in the introduction, though there are undoubtedly felicitous resonances between the sections, each chapter is fundamentally a standalone study, and could be read independently.

The stated goal of each study, following the deconstructive method, is "to unravel, follow and repurpose the sediment of metaphysical concepts that have already determined how we approach, understand and make sense of video games, game studies, and virtual worlds" (p. 22). Accordingly, in each chapter, Gunkel's approach is not to tackle the questions or debates that animate the discourses he examines. Rather, he aims to bring to light the unstated assumptions underpinning the respective discourses, and, by doing so, to demonstrate that the terms upon which the questions are asked are themselves problematic.

## Four studies

Gunkel's first study, "Terra Nova 2.0," focuses on the mapping out and interrogation of a particular idea—namely, the presentation of virtual worlds, and 'cyberspace' more generally, as *terra nova,* a "new world" or a "frontier," in terms that, very often, directly echo problematic colonialist discourses. His analysis starts with a diachronic overview of the historical development of the idea of a "new world," mostly in European, post-Columbian discourse, before going on to show how the same discursive idea was used to herald technological innovations in the twentieth century, particularly in the field of telecommunications (pp. 33-35).

It is hardly surprising, then, that, as Gunkel points out, "these conceptual formulations are also at play in video and computer gaming," given that the discursive construction of these fields emerged from, and, to a considerable extent, remains rooted in, these popular discourses surrounding technology (p. 35). Looking at a range of particularly apposite games—from the early educational game *The Oregon Trail*, through *Dungeons & Dragons* and Sid Meier's *Colonization* to *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*—Gunkel demonstrates how themes of frontier, conquest and colonization are not only represented in the game's worlds and mechanics of play, but are also integral to how the games are spoken about.

The book is arguably at its most incisive here. Gunkel brings to bear an impressive range of discursive examples—from marketing copy and popular games criticism, through academic works of game studies, to text and other messages conveyed by the games themselves—to convincingly depict the ubiquity of this trope. On the basis of the well-founded observation, resulting from this survey, that "MMOs, MMORPGs, and other online nongaming virtual worlds like *Second Life* participate in both the ideology and rhetoric of the European 'age of discovery' and American expansionism" (p. 41), Gunkel teases out the political and cultural implications of this adherence to colonialist discourses. This leads

him to sharp critiques of the utopianism inherent to the 'new world' discourse, and which finds its way into the discourse surrounding online virtual worlds in the form of an illusory egalitarianism, of the occlusion of the "burden of history" in the discursive promise of a fresh start, and of the inherent Western bias in presenting "the grand narratives of exploration, colonization, and settlement as if they were somehow beyond reproach and universally applicable" (p. 48).

In Chapter 2, "The Real Problem," Gunkel turns his attention to the discourse on avatars. Specifically—as the title of the chapter implies—he considers the discursive problem of the 'real'. He argues that there is a divide in discourses of the avatar—between, on the one hand, those who celebrate avatarial engagement as "a means by which to liberate oneself from the unfortunate accidents imposed by real physical bodies situated in real space and time" (p. 61), and, on the other hand, those who argue that the separation of avatarial identity from the user's real identity is both dubious and potentially problematic. In keeping with his stated approach, Gunkel pointedly refrains from taking a side within the binary opposition he presents. Instead, what he identifies as the "real problem" lies in the fact that "both sides deploy and leverage a particular understanding of the real" in a binary opposition to the virtuality of the avatar (p. 63)—an understanding that Gunkel sets out to unpack and critique.

The method Gunkel follows for this critique is that of highlighting the different philosophical assumptions underpinning the idea of the 'real' at work in the avatar discourse. The first conceptualization of the real is the one Gunkel frames as Platonic (pp. 65-72). Just as, in the Platonic view, the things that appear to our senses are merely imperfect representations of the ideal forms that constitute the fundament of the 'real,' so the avatar is understood as an imperfect representation of the 'real' human individual behind it. As a consequence, academic approaches to the avatar invested in this understanding of the 'real' consider it a necessity to study the human user behind the appearance of the avatar.

The other two framings of the 'real' that Gunkel identifies within the avatar discourse are described as reactions to, or divergences from, this simple Platonic position. First, there is what Gunkel describes as a Kantian approach to the question of 'reality' in relation to the avatar (pp. 72-77). Just as, for Kant, the reality of the thing-in-itself behind our phenomenal perceptions is an ontological necessity, but remains fundamentally inaccessible behind those perceptual representations, so, by this understanding, there must evidently be a 'real' person behind the appearance of the avatar, but, for various reasons, this 'real' person might be inaccessible to us as researchers, and, as such, the appearance of the avatar is all we can base our judgement on.

The third approach to the question of the real in relation to the avatar, then, is characterized by Gunkel as a Hegelian-by-way-of-Žižek "parallax" understanding of reality, according to which there is an inversion of the question of the real: what is 'real,' by this understanding, is the avatar we can observe in the virtu-

al environment (pp. 77-82). The human user is nothing more than an abstraction or extrapolation we can perform on the basis of the evidence given to us by the avatar really standing before our perception.

Gunkel wisely steers clear of explicitly taking a side in favour of, or against, one of these three positions. The modest conclusion he arrives at, at the end of the chapter, is that scholars studying avatars should be aware of the assumptions regarding the 'real' that they operate with. Of course, it is hard to argue against such a recommendation, and Gunkel is right to point towards a certain uncritical opposition of the real to the virtual. The problematization of this idea of the 'real' human behind the appearance of the avatar is, by all means, a much-needed endeavour, and, in this chapter, Gunkel convincingly makes the case for the untenability of such an uncritical deployment of the idea of the 'real'.

The third study, "Social Contract 2.0," finds Gunkel turning his attention to a topic that is, often as not, marginalized or ignored—the Terms of Service (ToS) or End User License Agreement (EULA) documents that users are required to agree to in order to participate in a virtual world or social media platform. Gunkel's provocative claim here is that these documents constitute "the most influential and important political documents of the twenty-first century" (p. 92). He goes on to argue that they enshrine an understanding of the socio-political sphere that is beholden to social contract theory, whether in its Hobbesian or Lockean formulation.

Here, again, Gunkel's discourse analysis is wide-ranging, taking in ToS and EULA documents themselves, community discussions and popular and academic critiques surrounding the virtual domains he singles out for analysis—mostly LambdaMOO, *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life* and Facebook. Once again, his reading between the lines of these documents is lucid, uncovering their hidden (and, sometimes, not-so-hidden) ideological baggage. Returning to a point already touched upon in the first study, for example, Gunkel incisively puts into question the egalitarian discourse through which Facebook in particular—and virtual domains in general—position themselves as utopian spaces in which social hierarchies are levelled. As he writes, in spite of the decree "that Facebook *should* be available to everyone in the world, it is, in fact, only available to a small fraction of the world's population"—namely, those who have access to the required technologies, and who have acquired the skills to make use of those technologies. As a result, "Facebook's "one world" is an elite gated community that already excludes a significant proportion of the world's population" (p. 116).

This, and other insights Gunkel's readings lead him to, allow him to forcefully argue for the claim that, in his words, "although promoting what are arguably utopian visions of alternative realities […] these virtual worlds are also designed for and serve the interests of multinational corporations and modern social institutions" (p. 118).

In the fourth and final study, "In the Face of Others," Gunkel takes a step into the field of ethics, and takes bots and AI

agents as his object of study. Here, however, the study's aims and focus are less immediately apparent than in the other studies. Pointedly moving away from discourses that have limited the discussion on this subject to "an anthropocentric framework and instrumentalist view of technology," Gunkel instead aims to "develop a mode of inquiry that is oriented otherwise," in order to "grapple with other questions concerning who or what can or should be 'Other'" (p. 126). We are—at least initially—provided with little indication of what such a non-anthropocentric, non-instrumentalist discourse should look like, or what questions it is to be directed towards.

An introductory whistle-stop philological, philosophical and historical tour of the term and notion of a 'bot' that makes all the expected stops (the Turing test, Searle's Chinese Room thought experiment, the early chatbot ELIZA) arrives at an observation of one of the central difficulties facing philosophical discussions of bots: namely, the fact that, even if the semblance of successful human communication is achieved (thus meeting the criterion for intelligence set forth in the Turing test), this grants no genuine insight into what goes on beneath the surface – that is, whether there is any real intelligence beneath the appearance of it.

This allows Gunkel to link the discussion of bots to the long-standing philosophical question of other minds. However—perhaps inevitably—this question is no sooner introduced than sidestepped: it is not necessary, Gunkel argues, for us to make any decision regarding whether or not an AI agent possesses 'real' intelligence. Instead, "all that is needed is that they appear to be 'close enough'" to encourage some kind of social response" (p. 136).

With this justification for considering bots as social agents, Gunkel then launches into his ethical analysis, which he structures on the framework of Floridi and Sanders' (2004) distinction between moral agents and moral patients. This inspired move allow Gunkel to engage, concisely but lucidly, with both sides of the question of morality in relation to AI agents: on the one hand, asking how we can assign moral responsibility to AI agents in the face of technologies such as machine learning (pp. 139-144), and, on the other hand, thinking through the question of what *our* moral responsibilities towards AI agents might be (pp. 144-148).

## Critiquing the critique

As the necessarily reductive synopses above should already make amply clear, each of the four chapters is thought-provoking, engaging and provocative. Each offers unexpected perspectives and fresh insights on fundamental issues surrounding virtuality and virtual worlds. And if—as Gunkel asserts throughout the book, and most explicitly in the conclusion—the end of the practice of deconstruction is not to arrive at *an end,* in the form of a set of definite findings or take-away points, but rather to set in motion a process of *thinking otherwise*, then these studies can be deemed a success.

However, for all its obvious merits, *Gaming the System* must, I believe, be

described as a qualified success. Part of the problem might be the fact that the book is wrongly framed. It positions itself as standing in relation to—in fact, as being *about*—the discourses of game studies. I have already mentioned how the book's preface, introduction and conclusion all make a repeated point of positioning the studies as interventions within the discourse of game studies. Again and again, Gunkel restates the trifecta of terms in the book's subtitle—video games, game studies and virtual worlds. It is rather baffling to note, then, that only the third of those terms can justifiably be claimed as being the book's focus. While it is certainly the case that the subjects addressed in the book's four critical studies are—to varying degrees—relevant to the study of video games, it is only the first of the four studies that can actually claim to be about games or game studies to any meaningful degree.

To start with the first of Gunkel's three terms, apart from the first study, which, as I have already mentioned, includes a number of key video games in its masterful discursive survey and critique, hardly any video games are mentioned, with the notable exception of *World of Warcraft* and, in passing, other MMORPGs within the same tradition. Single-player games, local multiplayer games or analogue games of any category—which, together, account for much of the gaming landscape—do not fall within the bounds of the analysis here. Across the last three studies, Gunkel's remit includes Facebook, *Second Life* and Twitter bots, but not *Fortnite*, *Minecraft*, *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, or any other title that would generally be classified as a video game, and there is no attempt to engage with either the historical or contemporary spheres of video games or video game culture.

Of course, the rejoinder to this could be that, as a discursive critique, Gunkel's project is not as such—at least, not directly—a book about games; rather, it is a book about how games are spoken about. Even if we move on, however, to game studies—the second of Gunkel's three stated aims—it is hard to claim that this is where the book's interest lies.

This is not to say that there is no engagement with game studies. A handful of major figures in game studies—not only the aforementioned Bogost, but also Espen Aarseth, T.L. Taylor, Jesper Juul, Markku Eskelinen and Gordon Calleja, among others—are briefly touched upon, mostly in the introduction and in Chapter 1. Still, these are nowhere near the focal points of Gunkel's analysis. Other major game studies figures—a by no means exhaustive list would include Janet Murray, Bernard Perron, Mia Consalvo, Miguel Sicart, Frans Mäyrä, Helen Kennedy, José Zagal, and so on—are excluded from the discussion entirely. In the same way, the major archives of academic game studies discourse—journals like Game Studies, Games and Culture and the Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds and the proceedings of conference series like the Digital Games Research Association Conference, the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference and the Foundations of Digital Games Conference—hardly appear at all. Rather than game studies, Gunkel's focus appears to lie in the related—but increasingly separate, both institutional-

ly and in terms of conceptualities—fields of new media theory and virtual worlds research.

This is not written in the spirit of enforcing hard and fast boundaries between academic disciplines—such an endeavour would be, not only misguided and untenable, but also, for an inherently multidisciplinary discourse like game studies, fatal. Nor is it to say that a game studies scholar will not find anything of value in Gunkel's book, which is far from the case. Instead, it is written in the spirit of taking *Gaming the System* to task for the territory it stakes out—all the way up to its subtitle—but then chooses to largely circumvent, resulting in the odd situation of a burgeoning, and increasingly rich, academic field being largely neglected in a book which claims to constitute an analysis of it.

This constitutes a problem, not only in the form of a mismatch between what is promised and what is delivered—in the sense that a reader picking up this book to gain a synoptic insight into where the discourse of game studies stands, and the promised critique of this discourse, will not find what she is looking for. Arguably, the more serious consequence of this lack of engagement with game studies is that, at various points, Gunkel's discussion is impoverished by the absence of directly relevant work in game studies that addresses similar questions, and that introduces perspectives and conceptualities that would constitute a radical reframing of much of the discussion—to the point that Gunkel might well be charged with misrepresenting the discursive status quo.

This is apparent, already, in the introduction, when Gunkel sets out to offer a working definition of 'video game' as a means of anchoring his analyses. For game studies, this is well-trodden ground indeed, so much so that there have been not only a number of seminal attempts at collecting and synthesizing definitions of 'game' (Salen, Zimmerman 2004; Juul 2005), but also meta-critical, reflexive commentaries on the inherent problems in defining a term like 'game' at all (Arjoranta 2014; Aarseth, Calleja 2015). None of this figures in the analysis here, which instead arbitrarily invokes one of the many definitions of 'game' that have been proposed within game studies—from Wolf (2008)—without situating it in the context of this wider debate.

Unfortunately, this limited engagement with work in game studies proves pervasive, despite the strength of Gunkel's engagement with adjacent discourses like new media theory. As a consequence of this limitation, there are points where the analysis is deprived of certain ideas that could have nuanced the picture being drawn. To take an example: while Gunkel is certainly right, in Chapter 1, to critique the discourse of virtual worlds as a "new world" or a "frontier" from—though he does not name it as such—a postcolonial angle, the critique could have been more complex and more forceful if it proceeded upon the foundation of a critique, informed by both formalist and experiential approaches in game studies (Salen, Zimmerman 2004; Calleja 2011) of the simplistic idea of *immersion* upon which the metaphor of the game as a new world is built. In other words, in what ways does the meta-

phor of a virtual world as a *new world*, in addition to being politically problematic, simply not hold? To wit: we do not leave the old world of our mundane, actual lives when we venture into a virtual world; we remain ourselves, socially, culturally and physically situated as playing individuals on this side of the screen *at the same time* as we venture into this supposed new world. Not to take this into account—to accept, without qualification, the unstated assumption that we do, in fact, venture into some new 'place' when we engage into a virtual world, and somehow stop being in the world we were formerly members of—is to adhere to what Salen and Zimmerman referred to as the "immersive fallacy" (2004, p. 450). It is, as such, to fail to recognize the much more phenomenologically complex nature of our engagement with video game worlds, and virtual worlds in general (Gualeni 2015; Kania 2017; Keogh 2018)—or, rather, of our subjective, experiential distribution across worlds, be they actual and virtual—which results from the fact that we do not, like the pioneers of the frontier myth, leave *here* to go *there*, but, rather, find ourselves *still here* at the same time as we are *there*. Gunkel does not take to task the discourse he considers for seeming to ignore the specificity of the virtual, and, in not doing so, simply entrenches this blind spot.

Chapter 2 is arguably the most egregious example of this tendency to omit directly relevant game studies work from the discussion. There is a vast body of work on avatars, and on the relations between players and avatars, in game studies. A brief, and by no means exhaustive, list would include approaches as rich and varied as Klevjer's phenomenological account of avatarial embodiment (2012), Gee's account of identity-play through the avatar (2008), Bayliss's formalist engagement (2007a; 2007b), Waggoner's work on identity relations between players and their avatars (2009) or Mukherjee's unpacking of the mythological implications of the term 'avatar' (2012).

None of these ideas are broached in Chapter 2, with the result that Gunkel's presentation of the avatar discourse comes to appear reductive. Much of the chapter constitutes a critique of the "default Platonic conceptualization," which Gunkel paints as being somewhat naïve and unsophisticated, even if he concedes it might work in some "admittedly limited" contexts (p. 87). By his characterization, such a judgement would indeed seem to be entirely justified. The problem, then, lies in the sense that Gunkel is constructing something of a straw man to rail against.

This becomes evident in his discussion of Robbie Cooper's photography book *Alter Ego: Avatars and their Creators* (2007), which he positions as an example of this Platonic approach. In Cooper's work, photographs of avatars from a variety of virtual worlds are presented next to photographs of the human creator of each respective avatar. Gunkel draws a comparison between Cooper's book and Thomas Boellstorff's distinction between the "virtual selfhood" embodied in an avatar and the user's "actual selfhood," claiming that both exemplify a "differentiation" between the appearance and the real that "is entirely in-line with the formal structure of Platonism" (p. 68).

One might well question such a claim. The Platonic approach to reality would frame appearances—as in the famous allegory of the cave—as mere shadows that one needs to learn to look beyond in an attempt to get to the 'real'. Analogously, then, a truly Platonic approach to the study of the avatar would see it as a failed, flawed or imperfect representation of its user. Such an approach would consider a situation in which a heterosexual male user chooses to play as a female avatar (to use one of Gunkel's own examples) as precisely such a case of flawed representation, and would dismiss the avatar as an illusion in an attempt to get to the 'real' person beneath. This is in no way an accurate account of Cooper's or Boellstorff's approach to the avatar, or, indeed, of any serious academic avatar research. To claim—even implicitly—that this relation of avatar to user is understood, or evaluated, in terms of accuracy or inaccuracy of representation, is to ignore the multivalence of the avatar-player relation and the richness of signification that are identified in works like Cooper's and Boellstorff's, as well as in many other relevant strands of research, from Waggoner's aforementioned study of avatar-player dynamics to Bowman's work on the player's relations to their role-playing characters (2010).

This apparent misrepresentation of the texts under analysis in an attempt to make them fit the "Platonic" model is, unfortunately, representative of the other—far less pervasive—issue with *Gaming the System*. For a self-proclaimed deconstructionist, Gunkel occasionally tries very hard to convince the reader that the discourses under analysis are entirely coherent and consistent in upholding the ideas he sets out to deconstruct. As such, though, by and large, his readings are astute, nuanced and insightful, there are points where one might be tempted to suspect a little too much smoothing-out of rough edges going on.

I will limit myself, here, to one indicative example. Gunkel's critique of Aarseth's seminal editorial for the inaugural issue of *Game Studies* (p. 55)—one of the few sustained engagements with a game studies text in the book—is insightful in its drawing-out of the colonially-tinged implications of Aarseth's characterization of the academic field of game studies as virgin territory that we can either mark on the map as a new country, "a separate field named computer game studies," or a field that we "claim for our own discipline," be it media studies, literary theory, or any other institutional port of departure (Aarseth 2001). As such, it represents a radical challenge, not only to Aarseth's text, but also to game studies' foundation myth.

However, Gunkel then extends his critique to Aarseth's 2004 paper "Genre Trouble," where, though the colonialist language is certainly still in evidence, an interesting inversion of perspective occurs. Instead of beckoning his fellow scholars to venture with him into the *terra nova* of the nascent academic field, in 2004 he is cautioning about a "land rush" by "academics from neighbouring fields, such as literature and film studies" in which, as with all colonializing land-grabs, "respect for local culture and history is minimal." Far from continuing to see the academic field as virgin territory for the taking, Aarseth now sees it

as a domain with a culture and history—and, moreover, positions himself, along with the fellow game studies scholars he addresses, as the 'natives' to whom the field, its culture and history belong.

Of course, this in no way neutralizes the problematics of the colonialist ideology that Gunkel rightly identifies at work here, structured around the binary opposition of colonizer and colonized. However, it does represent a radical shift in perspective from one side of the opposition to the other—a significant development that should not simply be interpreted as a repetition of the same discourse.

## Conclusions

Any attempt at summing up the breadth and depth of a domain of academic discourse is, to a certain extent, doomed to be met with a litany of criticisms that can be summed up as "What about *x*?" The omissions I have highlighted in *Gaming the System* should not get in the way of observing that Gunkel's literature review is impressively rich and wide-ranging—taking in new media and virtual worlds theory, popular discourses surrounding technology, marketing copy and legal documents, among many other discourses. Nor should it obscure the fact that Gunkel's deconstructionist engagement with this literature is lucidly readable and sharp in its unpacking and critique of a number of the philosophical assumptions structuring our understanding of virtual worlds.

At the same time, what is missing from this review is crucial in the light of the book's stated objectives. Judged purely as an engagement with video games and the discourses of game studies—two of the three areas it specifically sets out to engage with—*Gaming the System* does not deliver what it promises, with game studies literature and ideas being marginal in all but one of its four analyses.

Conversely, when it comes to the third area—virtual worlds—the book is on a much stronger footing. To new media scholars, virtual worlds researchers and, indeed, to anyone academically interested in the discourses surrounding online virtual domains, the four studies contained in this book will undoubtedly prove provocative and invigorating, finding a new slant to persistent questions. Even if, by design, it does not arrive at any new answers, its interventions, taken together, work as an invitation and a starting-point for rethinking virtual worlds and their significance—a much-needed endeavour as more and more of our lives come to be lived in these domains.

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