Inhabiting Games Well (If not Uncomfortably...)

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An Introduction

It is significant to see the field of Game Studies asking the questions associated with this special issue on "Theories of Well Played." As a scholar of Science and Technology Studies (STS) I have had the privilege of growing up in a field that has long struggled with how to position itself with regard to it's subject of interest (Latour, 2004; Collins, 2002; Jasanoff, 2003). STS, as a field, remains largely interested in exploring the structure and work of scientific and technological practice. I have maintained that thinking of scientific and technology production as a game makes sense. As an Anthropologist, I am also fortunate; the field continues to ask very similar questions about researcher and researched (Marcus & Fischer, 1999). Thus, it was with much delight that I observed this special call for Well Played, which provided the opportunity to return to some of the reflexive questions that framed much of my early graduate career and continue to haunt my work today.

Theory/Method

I was once instructed to, "divorce ruminations on method from those of theory." That demand set my work back by nearly six months. For some, theory represents a stand-in for "jargon," clouding what should otherwise be a straight-forward set of research activities. Yet, it is the theoretical frame that helps the researcher make sense of the materials they have gathered as well as their approach to the collection itself. In my case, such a disconnection was the re-moval of my project's life support.

Thus, acknowledging the interconnection between theory and method is important early on in an essay on what it means to Play Well. Theory and method have always been closely tied, though their discussion is often divorced in the interest of "clarity" or some other logic that may very well prevent analytic lucidness. Game Studies has done an exceptional job of continuing to think well about methods (Boellstorff, 2006; Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Elverdam & Aarseth, 2007; Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004; Malaby & Burke, 2009; Malliet, 2007), yet discussions of theory, explicitly in the context of Playing Well, have been less central to the field. That in and of itself is interesting to note, given that in most cases, each of those methods was informed in greater or lesser degree to some set of theoretical frames.

In this essay, I do not attempt a "unified" theory of Playing Well. Rather, I explore how I Play Well. Clearly, I have not Played Well, in that I do not include here an empirical example of what I consider playing. Rather, I explore Playing Well from the analytic stance that I have long since committed myself to with regard to studying game de-velopers and game development practice. Not quite the same thing as Playing Well, I'll admit. Instead, I connect these ideas with previous Well Players in the hope to demonstrate the value of this theory of Well Played.

To contextualize, I approach this essay from the very explicit perspective of a scholar of STS. As a field, STS has long struggled with how to (ethically) make sense of complex systems of scientists, engineers, technologies, users and broader political-economic systems. Not unlike those exploring the Well Played game is attempting to explore deeply a game's assumptions and context, researchers in STS take a similar tact to the study of scientific and techno-logical production. My frame is further complicated by a methodological perspective rooted in Anthropology. The quandary posed by post-structural theory sent Anthropology scrambling to make sense of itself in a context where a

multiplicity of readings rendered ethnographic writing problematic. Yet, the product, a text produced through the activity of Playing Well is not unlike the kind of descriptive project that characterizes the products of anthropologi-cal work.

It is this literature that I return to, nearly a decade later[1], to suggest that those reflections of a young graduate stu-dent offer much to the reflexivity that Game Studies now asks of its own subjects. It is with this standpoint, that I attempt to frame my theory of playing well.

Inhabiting Games

Clearly, when a Well Played project is undertaken, there is the intent of the author to perform an "in-depth" reading of the game in order to make sense of the (multiple) meanings and experiences that can be taken from the combina-tion of the underlying game system, presented aesthetics and stories as well as the context the player often embodies through their play of the game[2]. While games may offer up to the viewer a variety of visual experiences when a game goes unplayed, these cannot be said to characterize what a game "is." Game systems are de-pendent upon the (various) inputs of their players. They demand input in a way the makes them particularly interesting texts for analy-sis.

Simultaneously, the various layers of a game lend themselves to a multiplicity of messages. The very possibility of "ludonarrative disso-nance," (Hocking, 2007) demonstrates the diverse attentions that can be paid to a Well Played game. Even when one examines the various methods associated with studying a game's "message" (as if such a thing were singular) there is a tendency for the multiple. What are its visuals? What are the rules? What kinds of interac-tions does it involve? What various outcomes or experiences can be had?

There is something inherently deconstructionist (Derrida, 1976) in this activity. Deconstruction seeks to explore the assumptions built

into constructed narratives (or systems/structures). It is not destructive. It is more akin to the dis-assembly of a system in order to explore its built-in assumptions. Such an approach seems ready-made for the analy-sis of games, though in other contexts, such as the deconstruction of scientific practice, such activities are viewed with suspicion. Thus, one frequently finds particular breeds of criticism leveled at deconstructionist projects (Derri-da, 2005), and regardless of how fatally flawed those arguments are, they persist (Derrida, 1988). Yet, for some rea-son, the deconstruction of a game does not seem to attract the same ire that it has in other contexts.

Despite the lack of overall controversy (or at least external controversy) to be found in the Well Playing of games, there is a great deal that can be said for turning to deconstructionist projects to explore how they have framed them-selves in ways that position themselves and their object of research in ways that lend themselves to more productive (ethical?) arrangements. It is from this perspective that I launch into a theory of Playing Well that demands inhabita-tion and allows for the various multiplicities that ultimately emerge from games.

Not unlike the deconstructionist projects explored below, it is impossible to Play Well, if one does not take the pro-ject seriously. The object of deconstruction is not to be taken lightly. It is a serious project, though all that serious-ness ought not prevent a kind of fun and play, but I am getting ahead of myself. Part of what makes the deconstruc-tionist bent so reasonable in the context of games is that each player is assumed to have at least a marginally "unique" or personal experience of the game. Yet, as Derrida noted in his explicit and precise deconstruction (and in this case, destruction may actually be a fitting sub-term) of Searle, "there is a 'right track' [une 'bonne void'], a better way, … this [Searle's] definition of the deconstructionist is false (that's right: false, not true) and feeble; it suppose a bad (that's right: bad, not good) and feeble reading of numer-ous texts" (Derrida, 1988, p. 146). Thus, the same ought to be true of a deconstructionist approach to Playing Well.

Perhaps more than other cultural forms, games have lent themselves willingly to a deconstructionist perspective al-most willingly. Film, literature, philosophy and numerous other projects have found the deconstructionist lens so uncomfortable to bear, primarily because of a kind of imaginary of authorial intent. Games (and their design-ers/devel-opers), on the other hand, have never enjoyed such an imagination. The role of the player, the interrelation of rules, game systems, and aesthetics have always proven difficult to manage and police. Games always lend them-selves towards excess[3]. Game designers frequently dissect (vivi-sect) games in order to break them down into their component parts. The variety and variability in understanding them seems obvious.

Inhabiting Games Well

What does it mean to Play Well? How does one, or how ought one Play Well? Perhaps what makes a deconstruc-tionist bent for Playing Well feel uncomfortable is the kind of baggage that academics fear will come along with it:

There are many vicissitudes of these antideconstruction misreadings: deconstruction simply re-verses binaries, privileging the secondary term; deconstruction reinstalls the binaries it criticizes; deconstruction destroys binary structures; deconstruction makes knowledge impossi-ble; decon-struction is rhetorical free play; deconstruction marks the end of politics. These concerns - often owing more to a popularized understanding of deconstruction than to a close reading of any par-tic-ular deconstructive texts - have become the commonsense political responses to the complexi-ties of deconstructive procedure. (Wilson, 1998, p. 21)

And yet, if the corpus of Well Played represents a set of deeply de-constructionist texts, which I think it does, then why have similar concerns not been voiced? I think the answer, in part, lies in the kind of care that seems to be taken in approaching each game. This may

also prove a limitation for Well Played projects. Too often accounts are almost too respectful; too reverent. It is not uncommon to encounter apologies for one's care of a game in the Well Played text. For, "[h]ow can I begin to talk about one of my favorite games," (Falstein, 2009, p. 37), which represents a kind of analytic bent not always found in previous deconstructionist projects.

For this reason, I turn to Wilson's work, which at first glance might make Game Studies scholars ponder, what is the connection between Playing Well and feminist/psychological/neuroscience work? The answer lies in the relationship or "location" from which she approaches her work. Drawing heavily on deconstructionism, she cuts to the heart of what makes deconstruction a particularly difficult task, which would indicate why one might ponder the possibility of Playing Well one's favorite game:

Deconstruction has effect by inhabiting the structures it contests. This means, of course, that de-construction and its practitioners are always internal to and complicit with the structures they ex-amine. ... For Derrida, the question of criticism can never be a question of whether or not one in-habits the domain that one criticizes, whether or not one is contaminated by the logic and violenc-es one wishes to contest. One always inhabits, excludes, violates; contamination is the condition of criticism in general. (Wilson, 1998, pp. 29-36)

It is precisely this complicity that makes Playing Well so seemingly uncomfortable, and yet, when undertaking a Well Played project, the researcher clearly is making an effort to understand the game critically[4]. In some ways, it is the dissection (vivisection) of one's most prized play experiences. Playing Well is about examining all aspects of a game. It is a commitment to a good (that's right: good, not bad) reading of the game. To inhabit a game well, to Play Well, but to examine both the game and the player simultaneously. Why is the game being read in this way and how might it be read multiply?

Wilson demonstrates a mode of deconstruction different from what might be referenced solely as a "hermeneutics of suspicion," (Žižek, 2004, p. 42) and rather approaches the subject matter more playfully. The suspicious mode is not an interrogation, but a kind of conversation or dialectic with and through the material. It matches more the affect of Deleuze's "excessive benevolence" but does so through a kind of game. Ultimately hoping to present a kind of match that as readers we might remark on as, "well played" (De Koven, 1978). Playing well feels different. It isn't a de-tached, or disconnected, "objective" analysis, but a situated "fully engaged" and "totally present" (De Koven, 1978, p. 5) kind of playing. When observed, it can feel uncomfortable, because it is such a "radical departure from what we do, as adults, when we play" (De Koven, 1978, p. 10).

The relationship that the Well Player has with a game when Playing Well seems to speak to the kinds of positions that some researchers in STS have attempted to foster. Though often conceptualized not explicitly as deconstruction-ist, the interest that STS has shown in the opening of black boxes (Latour, 1999), too seems intimately linked to the deconstructionist project.

I have written elsewhere about the particular mode of play that many designers and developers employ as they ex-plore games, for it differs from "typical" play of a game (O'Donnell, 2009). This kind of "instrumental play"[5] is critical for understanding, or at least making sense of, the systems that Well Players find themselves engaging with in their analysis. Others have written about these various analytic bents in a variety of ways, though the "labyrinth" (Rheinberger, 1997) and "dance of agency,"[6] (Pickering, 1995) are two particular favorites of mine. Yet, the single metaphor that has long since spoken most clearly to me is that of the Cat's cradle:

Cat's cradle is a game for nominalists like me who cannot not de-sire what we cannot possibly have. As soon as possession enters the

game, the string figures freeze into a lying pattern. Cat's cradle is about patterns and knots; the game takes great skill and can result in some serious sur-prises. One person can build up a large repertoire of string figures on a single pair of hands, but the cat's cradle figures can be passed back and forth on the hands of several players who add new moves in the building of complex patterns. Cat's cradle invites a sense of collective work, of one person not being able to make all the patterns alone. Once does not win at cat's cradle; the goal is more interesting and more open-ended than that. It is not always possible to repeat interesting pat-ters, and figuring out what happened to result in intriguing patterns is an embodied analytical skill. (Haraway, 1997, p. 268)

Perhaps, again, it's too simplistic. Of course Cat's cradle as a way of thinking about Playing Well jives with how we should think about a theory of Well Played, Haraway is thinking closely and critically about a game. While that might be the case, I think it also encourages our thinking about Well Played to also not close off the idea of Playing Well more than once. That Playing Well may often mean returning, over time, to those games examined and re-explore them in light of the work done by others. Playing Well ought to mean beginning to engage in a broader con-versation with a community Playing Well.

At the same time, this isn't really a call for some sort of deconstruc-tionist kum ba yah. Inherent in both Haraway and Wilson's accounts of deconstructionist approaches to Well Played, there is important element of critical engagement. It is simply that that engagement must "inhabit" or engage with the activity not as something to be done without serious commitment. Further, there is an important element to consider, in each of these passages, explicit in Hara-way's and more nascent in Wilson's, that of surprise.

Discomfort in Playing Games

Discomfort might be too strong a word. Surprise might be better. A theory of Well Played ought to encourage read-ers of a Well Played text to themselves return to a game to be surprised again at the kinds of multiplicities that can emerge from a Well Played game. Foucault, discussing the work of Jean Daniel, encourages us to, when return-ing to texts, like many of those writing Well Played text do, to "not reconstruct those moments" from our past experiences. Rather, that the reader (player) of these texts, "is on a quest for those subtler, more secret, and more decisive mo-ments when things begin to lose their self-evidence" (Foucault, 1980, p. 447). These moments when Playing Well when:

[Y]ou see again something you had never completely lost sight of; it gives the strange impression that you had always sort of thought what you had never completely said, and already said in a thousand ways what you had never before thought out. (Foucault, 1980, pp. 447-448)

Deeply caught up in this search for good (not bad) sessions of Play-ing Well is a sense that the temporality of what is under inquiry can actually take a great deal of time and care. Those moments when you wake up thinking about a game, for one reason or another, though you might not be able to put your finger on it. This is the kind of uncom-fortable, "ethic of sleepless evidence," that all of our explora-tions of Well Played games, no matter how small or limited provide insight into a rigorous reading of a Well Played game. It is precisely those games that make you un-comfortable, or when playing a game again that it provides pause, speaks to what makes a Well Played game so im-portant.

Time and again, you get a sense, when exploring the annuls of Well Played, that when game analysts returned to games that were spurred, cherished or well-remembered, that their subsequent experiences were

different from those of their first encounter. Time and again in the corpus of Well Played, one can find comments such as, "My nervous-ness, as I began playing [again?], was unusual," (Zagal, 2011, p. 56). In some cases, there is an acknowledgement of the ephemerality of the events a Well Player has even encountered, "I was not even pursuing it. It just happened, like a shooting star that I happened to glance up and see – completely out of my control, yet a reward all my own" (Sharp, 2010, p. 57).

At the same time, these same analysis often rediscover uncomfortable readings, "an ominous warning can be seen in the Schwastika-like flag in the nerd observatory," (Battle, 2009, p. 74) that may very well turn a Well Player's analy-sis toward a more critical bent. Good readings are not necessarily nice readings. The point of the analysis, is to open up new discussions about those moments that might have gone under-examined previously, but strike us differently as they are re-played again.

Inherent in these analysis is an acknowledgement of the seriousness of what Playing Well means, and yet a penchant for finding new surprises, perhaps even some unpleasant ones. The Well Player in these cases is responsible for playing (perhaps numerous times) a game quite carefully, in order to make sense of the variety of systems, aesthetics and multiplicity of meaning that at game might present as a seemingly unified whole ("title"). The negative perspec-tive offers as much possibility as the positive. Both can, and perhaps ought to, exist simultaneously. They form a core of Playing Well that can support a much richer perspective on each analyzed game.

Game Over

If a theory of Well Played, rooted in well inhabited notions of deconstruction are not quite your cup of tea, perhaps, "It's too hoity-toity," or ,"You're over thinking it." Maybe it's the discomfort (in search of new surprises) that has you feeling a bit estranged. In this case, I'll

turn to science studies scholars and physicists for assistance in the for-mation of a theory of Well Played:

The sciences, then, are something of a game, albeit a very serious one. But if we are in a time in which responsibility has become a key word for the sciences, that doesn't mean that having fun at this game will or should go away. We need a new aesthetic for performing sciences that includes both the pursuit of responsibility and the preservation of the joy, exuberance, and creative affirma-tion that the sciences have always provided for their practitioners - and sometimes for the rest of us. (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 145)

All this deconstruction and discomfort ought not negate the joy and exuberance we find through the act of Playing Well. My suggestion at a deconstructive bent for Playing Well shouldn't be thought of in such a way. Even with a critical predisposition, I doubt that Playing Well could ignore the rather "creative, joyous, wonderfully imaginative and productive, positively charged side of the sciences as well" (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 143). If anything, per-haps this should be the lesson that STS offers Game Studies:

'Fun' used to be a basic principle in the defense of pure science in the modern era, particularly among physicists. (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 112)

What it does mean, however, is that if Playing Well can be com-pared to the care and craft (or game) of science, then Playing Well is "a dense, intricate, and volatile assemblage of practices, metaphors, articulations, and other kludged-together elements of nature, culture, and power," that must ultimately be "muddled through" (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 147).

As Well Players of games, our critiques might be better served as, "a game of judging, which is different from a game of policing" (For-

tun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 146). Put another way, the act of Playing Well (and thus its theoret-ical foundation, for method and theory intertwine) finds Well Players attempting to balance "heavy-handed pro-posals for sociocultural value-policing of" games and "laissez-faire purity for total, autonomous fun," and "require[s] something more akin to the reciprocal and even contradictory alternations" (Fortun & Bernstein, 1998, p. 147) be-tween those perspectives. To judge a game well is to explore all of its facets, in the hope of exploring the range of readings, including those that are pleasant and those that haunt the Well Player. This isn't a fan-boy/girl's account of their favorite game, though that might be a start. It is a deeply interested exploration of a designed system, done in the hopes of demonstrating the depth of this medium. Such readings will always invariably find disconnects or faults, every work exhibits imperfections. It is what makes the game and the deeply engaged readings so important.

Playing Well with a deconstructionist tact, thus requires a kind of care(ful) reading of the game, where a marriage of methods comes together to make sense of the multiplicities each game offers. For, each of those systems was craft-ed, quite carefully with particular emer-gent experiences in mind, but it remains a text that can and ought to be read with an eye (and ear and …) for surprising conclusions, not precisely what one experienced on first play. These read-ings ought to challenge our assumptions of what the game is, was or could be.

NOTES

[1] In 2004 an essay was published in the Newsletter of the Society for Social Studies of Science (O'Donnell, 2004) that explored the meta-phors and theories that frame inquiry in STS and how young scholars positionalities were quite different from those that had been deployed previously.

[2] I have often had the question posed by students if someone "must"

play a game to offer commentary on it. Must they? No. Do I put much stock in such an interpretation, based on my experiences as a researcher of game designers and as a game designer? No. It is certainly possible if one observes players for a long enough period, but I remain skeptical based on experience.

[3] Hence all of the controversy, productivity and ambivalence around the concept of the Magic Circle (Zimmer-man, 2012). As noted in Zimmerman's essay, the concept was used to productively think about the process of game design. Like most concepts, however, they move and swerve when put into practice. Game designers seem more capable of picking up and setting down conceptual frameworks as they fit a given situation, and thus what was envi-sioned as a tool for designerly thought became something much larger.

[4] I mean "critically" in the post-Marxist "critical theory," sense.

[5] I elaborate extensively on "instrumental play" in my forthcoming book (O'Donnell, 2014), differentiating it from what might mistaken-ly be identified as a kind of instrumental rationality. The "play" aspect of the endeavor is the lynchpin that sets it apart from the traps of the Frankfurt School's conception of the phrase.

[6] Both of these terms appeal to the role that materiality and agen-cy play in the construction of scientific "fact." The materiality of an object of inquiry is not immobile in the play of scientific (playful) inquiry. The scientist (player) is not the sole owner of agency. Such a perspective ignores the more complex relationship between the system being explored and the explorer.

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