Introduction

John Vanderhoef and Alexander Champlin

Issue 8 of *Media Fields*, Playgrounds, investigates the connections between media, space, power, and various approaches to "play" across culture and society. Admittedly, this is a broad area of inquiry, but one we hoped would attract submissions that spoke across media, methods, frameworks, and disciplines. Indeed, the articles collected here investigate a number of play spaces, from digital to analog, from the virtual streets of *Grand Theft Auto*'s Los Santos to the art-strewn streets of New York City.

Collectively, these essays ask how social, cultural, economic, or political power shapes mediated spaces – from digital games to adult theaters - and how the polysemic element of play allows people to challenge or subvert these prescribed meanings and uses.

One way to address the sheer expanse of spaces such questions elicit is to consider Michael Nitsche's five digital game spaces: mediated, fictional, play, social, and rule-based.[1] Together, these cover many of the spaces this issue's articles illuminate. Mediated spaces refer to the virtual space of the digital game world. Fictional spaces are those imagined by the player through her interaction with the game and its ancillary materials. Play spaces include the physical environment where the player engages with the game. Social spaces

are those spaces defined by human interactions. Finally, rule-based spaces are those located at the level of protocol, code, and algorithm.

The essays in Playgrounds follow a rich tradition in media and game studies of analyzing these multiple gamic spaces. For example, Henry Jenkins' has explored the gendered "borderwork" that many gameworlds perform, suggesting that the mediated space of *NiGHTS into Dreams* presents what he considers an androgynous protagonist and dreamscape for players to explore, a rare occurrence during the game's release in the mid-1990s.[2] The fictional space of games is largely under-researched, although we feel scholars like Carly A. Kocurek[3] and Raiford Guins[4] work within this gamic space in their examination of gaming ephemera and the narratives such materials encourage players to imagine. Bernadette Flynn provides an emblematic exploration of play space while tracking the migration of digital games from the dim arcade to the living room.[5] Furthermore, T.L. Taylor brings many of these spaces together, but particularly the social space of play, in her examinations of massively multiplayer online[6] and eSports players.[7] Finally, although under-theorized in terms of spatiality, Alex Galloway[8] and Wendy Chun[9] have examined the often-ignored space of code to consider its place in shaping the ideological experience of the player or user.

Following the productive work of these scholars, each essay in Playgrounds equally explores and interrogates one or more of Nitsche's game spaces. Through the versatile concept of play, the authors usefully extend the mediated space of the game world, malleable and ripe for subversion by both designer and player, to include subjects usually outside the purview of game studies, such as radical street art and couples' "play" in increasingly scrutinized adult movie theaters.

Many of Nitsche's five video game spaces are represented in this issue's articles, but there is a sixth game space neither Nitsche nor the articles in Playgrounds address: the space of game production. Although production space may very well overlap with some aspects of social space, as it concerns economic and social relations between people, it also differs in that it is a space defined by the locations and global dynamics of digital game production and distribution.

Today game development occurs across globally spatialized production networks that connect markets and development clusters across the globe, from San Francisco to London, from Warsaw to Seoul. Shifting economic, political, and policy conditions continually shape and reshape the globally dispersed space of game production, such that old, seemingly fixed, centers of production can decline and new centers emerge when specific factors change. For example, game production cities like Montreal blossomed thanks to aggressive tax subsidies for digital game companies.[10] Yet just as easily, these meccas can crumble when government-backed incentive programs change or expire. Quebec's provincial government recently cut Montreal's lucrative tax rebate by 20 percent because of budgetary concerns, leading some to speculate as to the future viability of the development sector in Montreal.[11] Large game publishers Ubisoft and WB Interactive Entertainment, among others, maintain sizable facilities in the city and employ hundreds of people; the publishers' exodus would scatter developer talent across the world and damage the local economy in Montreal. We contest that recognizing the space of production as a sixth analytic space for digital games is necessary to explore questions concerning the globalization of the gaming industry, its environmental impact, labor abuses, traditional and emerging markets, and ultimately how and why certain games get produced in and across certain locations.

Map of development studios that worked on *Assassin's Creed 4*.

Many scholars are already recognizing and exploring these spaces, including Randy Nichols, Ben Aslinger, and Nina Huntemann. Analyzing the spatialized production of gaming hardware, Nichols suggests:

> "While the stories games tell about us are certainly interesting, the stories the products themselves tell – of power relations and centuries' old systems of inequality – demands increased attention as well. These stories are written in the process of production and consumption. These stories touch on violent conflict, environmental damage, exploitative labor, and practices that are often discriminatory."[12]

Similarly, Huntemann and Aslinger remind us that "what games have been, what they are, and what they will become depend on shifting relationships between particular people acting, creating, working, subverting, playing, and resisting in *particular times and places*."[13] Indeed, owing to its important position in the circuit of culture and its ability to explain the shifting global structure of the gaming industry writ large, as the study of play, games, and space expands, we must consider production space a sixth significant category for the spatial analysis of digital games.

Yet one thing an analysis of production spaces cannot often address is the concept and influence of play within mediated spaces like digital game worlds. Fortunately, the essays in this issue address this dynamic with exceptional results. In video game studies, play is often discussed as a free activity governed by rules and driven by clear goals. This understanding is largely built upon the theoretical work of Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois.[14] Although play can often be seen as non-political, frivolous, and anathema to the serious concerns of society and culture, play in fact constitutes - and itself mediates - our everyday lives, (re)shaping our material world and producing new fields of meaning and action. The essays in this issue manage to illustrate how play can radically reshape, re-territorialize, and reclaim contested spaces across digital games and public spaces.

While a playground is a designated space for the practice of play, usually by children, these essays illustrate how such an apparently fixed concept can and does travel. Indeed, through the element of play, any combination of people and space(s) can be the grounds for spontaneous and radical action.

An airport. An arcade. An adult theater. A virtual town. These essays carefully knit together concerns over the interactions between play, power, and mediated space with critical engagements in issues such as militarism, capitalism, identity, art, and resistance.

The first essay in this issue, Matthew Thomas Payne and Michael Fleisch's "Policing the Sandbox in Grand Theft Auto Online" explores the theme of the playground directly. Considering RockStar's machinations in *Grand Theft Auto Online* against players' attempts to manipulate the economic structure of the game's open world, Payne and Fleisch highlight the fraught politics of policing a space that on its surface purports to offer players a world in which rules are made to be broken. In this sense, play takes on a para-ludic character as cunning players find ways to manipulate the game's virtual marketplace while the developer moves to protect a vested interest in the game's real economic potential, carefully curated micro-transactions.

The next two essays explore the way in which familiar spaces can be recoded through play. Andrea Ziffiro's "The Street is in Play" reads Banksy's public art series in New York, *Better Out Than In*, as a site of dialogue about public culture and urban space. Between Banksy's ostensible critique of New York's commercial landscape and local artist's response to the privileged position that Banksy's installations enjoyed, Ziffiro proposes that we recognize a larger struggle over a right to public space. The playful deployment of street art becomes a way to stake claims to the urban topography and negotiate the meaning of this work. Where street art negotiates space through visible interventions in the urban landscape, Kyle Moore's discussion of the pervasive game *Blowtooth* demonstrates how players have subverted the surveilled space of the post-9/11 airport. "The Passenger and the Player" reads the invisible trafficking of virtual contraband across security checkpoints and through waiting areas as a playful critique of the modern airport. Moore's analysis sees this play transform the space of the airport from one of immobility and waiting to a space of mobility and action as players engage in a game of Bluetooth hide-and-seek, outside of the vision of security apparatuses. This kind of game allows players to experience a level of ludic mobility that reanimates the otherwise highly structured, closed space of the airport terminal as a playground for passengers while they wait.

Where Moore's work highlights play as a means to reenergize a familiar

locale, essays by James A. Hodges and David Church study spaces of play in states of decline and reconfiguration. Hodges's essay, "Antagonism Incorporated," returns to the early history of the video game arcade in order to foreground the interconnection of commercial, domestic, and military influences in its growth and subsequent decay at the rise of home gaming. Citing Walter Benjamin's study of the Parisian arcades as a model, Hodges proposes that in looking back at arcades in their heyday, we may better recognize their historical importance and the way that they fit (or failed to fit) within the commercial shopping mall. Church's article, "This Thing of Ours," focuses on the modern porn theater as a site of play. Church documents the way in which the porn theater has recast itself following the advent of internet pornography and porn on video. Using the blog, *Dr. Emilio Lizardo's Journal of Adult Theaters*, as a guide to the porn theater in the age of the internet, Church considers the different forms of play that enliven these spaces, when the features are no longer the primary draw, and the way that online infrastructures create communities of recreational sex.

Like Church's essay on porn theaters, Nathan James A. Thompson's discussion of the "Pornshire" hall in *World of Warcraft* highlights an intersection of sex, play, and networked space. In "Queer/ing Game Space," Thompson explores the culture of sexual role-play on this server in terms of the multiple layers of gender play and possibility at work. Thompson identifies a gaming community where, on the surface, heteronormative configurations seem to prevail but give way to more complicated performances that challenge a "heterosexual matrix" when we account for cross-performance in much of this space's role-play. This reading of the Pornshire hall seeks to map both the limitations of this performative space while also indicating where subversive work is being done. Rob Gallagher's "Careless Whispers" addresses a similar potential in the first-person stealth game *Dishonored*. Arguing that while the "triple-a" game is coded as a predominantly normative text, Gallagher suggests that *Dishonored*'s spatial storytelling and mechanic of infiltration encourages the player to consider the domestic and economic dynamics of the game's narrative world in ways that open onto more nuanced readings. While Gallagher is reluctant to embrace this reading as entirely progressive, his essay explores its enabling implications.

Oscar Moralde's "Haptic Landscapes" uses the bleak first-person mystery

game *Dear Esther* to theorize the narrative importance of landscape in games. Beyond a space to contain the player's progression through the game, Moralde offers a discussion of gamic setting that is attuned to the central role the environment take in narrative development. This paper complicates the layered relationship between player, interface, and story by inserting a discussion of the game world into this framework. Moralde's essay highlights the importance of virtual embodiment, motion, and hapticity. Moralde's critique of a utilitarian view of game landscape is echoed by Garfield Benjamin's essay, "Playing Dead." Focusing his analysis on *The Path*, a game which challenges the player to abandon the linear narrative and move away from their objective, Benjamin's essay uses *The Path*'s subversive ludic gratification to think through movements that extend out of the space of the game. Benjamin's essay explores the video game as a field that allows players to flirt with fantasies of undeath.

The final piece in this issue is an interview with Professor Anna Everett. Her dialogue addresses contemporary issues around race in video games and contributes a critical position that broadens the discussion of play's political implications. Everett's insight into games as "raced space" points to long-lingering issues in the representational field of gaming and games culture. While identifying critical work left to be done in game culture, this interview concludes by offering hope for new trans-disciplinary directions in game studies and asking questions that forward discussions of game space as political space.

We are very grateful to all of our contributors for their engagement and patience, and to the *Media Fields Journal* editorial collective for all of their feedback and support. Carlos Jimenez deserves special thanks for his dedicated work as coordinating editor during the development of this issue. Bhargavi Narayanan, Rachel Fabian, and Juan Llamas-Rodriquez also deserve thanks for their thorough copyediting.

Notes

1   Michael Nitsche, *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

2   Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement": Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces. In Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Eds.)*, From*

Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

3 Carly A. Kocurek, "The Treachery of Pixels: Reconsidering Feelies in an Era of Digital Play," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 5, no. 3 (2013).

4 Raiford Guins, *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014).

5 Bernadette Flynn, "Geography of the Digital Hearth," *Information, Communication & Society* 6, no. 4 (2003): 551–576.

6 T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

7 T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

8 Alexander Galloway, *Interface Effect* (Malden, MA: Policy, 2012).

9 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011).

10 David Kocieniewski, "Rich Tax Breaks Bolster Makers of Video Games," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/technology/rich-tax-breaks-bolster-video-game-makers.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

11 Tracey Lien, "Tax Credit Cuts Threaten Future of Montreal Video Game Industry," *Polygon*, June 24, 2014, accessed August 6, 2014, http://www.polygon.com/2014/6/24/5835260/tax-credit-cuts-threaten-future-of-montreal-video-game-industry

12 Randy Nichols, "Who Plays, Who Pays? Mapping Video Game Production and Consumption Globally," in Nina Huntemann and Ben Aslinger (Eds.) *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 33-34.

13 Ben Aslinger and Nina B. Huntemann and, "Introduction," in Nina Huntemann and Ben Aslinger (Eds.) *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 12.

14 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (New York: Schocken, 1979).

John Vanderhoef is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research interests include digital game production, media industries, residual media, power and resistance, and discourses around gender, race, and sexuality in media and production cultures. He has published work in *Television and New Media*, *Spectator*, *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, and *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. He has contributed to the Carsey-Wolf Center's Media Industries Project, and is on the editorial collective for *Media Fields Journal*.

Alexander Champlin is from Los Angeles. He received his BA in English and Sociology from the University of California, Riverside and his MA in American Culture Studies from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. He is currently an MA/PhD student in Film and Media Studies at UCSB. Alex has written about video game interfaces, apparatus, and network culture. His current interests include structures of play, software studies, piracy, and 1970s film theory. He is also actively involved with the *Media Fields Journal* collective and works as a teaching assistant in Film and Media.