BOOK REVIEWS

The culture of digital fighting games. Performance and practice, by Todd Harper, New York, Routledge, 2014, 172 pp., $145 (hardback), ISBN 978-0415821308

The international release of the documentary ‘All work, all play’ about eSports on 28 July in 28 countries proved that the audience of digital sports has gone global. Professional video gaming competitions have even begun to differentiate between genres. In his doctoral research, Todd Harper focused on one particular category: digital fighting games.

Fighting games were part of the initial video games, and many of the earliest controversies around video gaming concerned the portrayal of violence in popular titles such as Street Fighter (Capcom, 1987), Mortal Kombat (Midway Games, 1992), Tekken (Namco, 1994), and Soul Calibur (Namco, 1998). A particularly controversial game, Killer Instinct (Midway Games, 1994), provided further material for critics of violence in premier video games.

As of 2015, the latest versions of all these games are still being played which testified their lasting success. Todd Harper studied players of these games in order to understand their gaming culture. In 2009 and 2010, he attended the Evolution Championship Series (EVO) tournament, a multi-day tournament where gaming enthusiasts gather and compete to determine the best of them.

At the beginning, the author lays out his intention to study play practice, normative play, and social play (pp. 6–7). Fighting games are defined by the players’ actions during the game. After an introductory chapter, the author welcomes the reader in the arena by presenting the arcade play (Chapter Two) explaining that the disappearance of this mode of play triggered the need for gamer gatherings. Players report greater enjoyment from playing games in the same space with their opponents than from playing purely online counterparts (p. 24). Such meetings also represent the opportunity to show-off custom devices, such as arcade sticks (pictures, pp. 25 and 26), the cost of which can be regarded as an entry fee to the community (p. 30).

According to Harper, the gaming audience rewards spectacular moves when performed with a combination of technical mastery and drama (Chapter Three). The conditions under which the move is performed strongly determine the crowd’s reactions (p. 42), and this transfigures the gaming experience of players (p. 43). Harper continues by highlighting the prominent role of skills in fighting games (p. 41) that are even more important when a character disrupts the use of its opponent skills by being ‘broken’ meaning that the fairness of the game is contested (pp. 39, 58–59) because the character possesses more advanced moves. This chapter also drags the reader into the murky waters of categorizing video games without much relevance to the main theme.

The fourth chapter is intended to the social facets of playing fighting games, but this section suffers due to the vague definition of ‘social’ given in Chapter One. As a result, Harper mixes the observation of social gestures, interactions, the reactions of the audience and players, and values and norms governing social interactions without really going deep into the social aspects of gaming. In the middle of this chapter, Harper prefers focusing on cheating, rules, and creating the offline/online gaming experience; at the end, extraneous comments are added about performed identity with clothes and props. He explains that personalized gear functions as a marker of identity and/or distinction without giving any explanation about the importance of this behaviour to this specific social group of digital fighters.
In the chapter ‘Online fighting game communities’, Harper studies online forums devoted to fighting games, but in referring to them as ‘communities’, he fails to examine the implications of the term certainly because of the absence of any definition of this classic and complex concept. The reader is informed that members of these communities of play share knowledge and information about the game, a process called ‘theorycrafting’ in the Massively Multiplayer Online Game culture (p. 90) before learning, a few lines later, that theorycrafting can be the ‘scientification of gameplay’ too. In the end, the reader is left without a clear understanding of what theorycrafting is and its significance with respect to the main themes of the book. The chapter continues by unfolding the exclusionary spirit of these communities, demonstrated by the rejection of new gamers, who are called ‘09ers’ by the established members of this community (p. 94).

Here, Harper introduces the notion of a ‘tier-list’ of characters, which ranks characters according to their probability of winning regardless of the player’s competencies – even though all characters are supposed to be equal by game design (p. 48).

Chapter Six concentrates on what Harper calls ‘identity and performance’, but again, he fails to examine the definitions of these terms while applying them to his study. Instead, the author utilizes this chapter to be up in arms and to scream after everything that irritates him in the culture of fighting games. At this point, the book loses its sense of observational distance. The section on gender in this chapter is therefore coloured by the author’s conviction that players should be equally distributed by gender; however, his description of the issue entirely overlooks play studies scholarship on girl socialization. Studying this extended and classic body of research would have provided relevant background: for instance, girls are strongly discouraged from engaging in combative activities, and this could be one of the factors explaining why so few of them compete. Here, the lack of theoretical concepts definitely kills the attempt at analysis, turning Harper’s work into a journalistic report.

The book concludes with the chapter ‘Defining the game and defining the self’. Again, the primary concepts are not clearly defined and the concept of the ‘self’ disappears right after the title, supplanted by ‘performance’. Most of ideas displayed here are recycled from elsewhere in the text, in particular as Harper attempts to reorient the reader towards the core of fighting game experience: the challenge of competing against better fighters (p. 137). Then, an important misunderstanding takes place when the concept of the ‘third place’ (Oldenburg, 1982) is modified into a third space (p. 138) – as if the two terms are interchangeable. Yet, Oldenburg explained that a third place is defined by specific characteristics entirely overlooked by Harper. The book ends with the personal sentiment regarding the future of the author.

Overall, this book is an accessible, journalist read that gives the reader a glimpse into the world of digital fighting games – a topic that is essential to understanding contemporary video gaming. Harper spares his readership the overly technical jargon and succeeds in making the book accessible to all; the first four chapters suffice to deliver an accurate picture. In addition, each chapter can be read separately, as the main ideas are relentlessly repeated. The text is written in an engaging style suitable for non-academic readers, though the book is published by a core academic publishing house.

This book is, nevertheless, not an analysis, but a personal description of the digital fighting game arena. Although the author’s objective was to provide an analysis of the fighting game community, this book is more of an extended personal commentary on a subjective experience. For example, the author tried hard to include the case of his favourite game, Super Smash Bros. (Nintendo, 1999) in this study, even though it seems off-topic and unnecessary. The personal motivation, instead of being a good drive, is the chink in Harper’s armour, and in places it appears that the author has an axe to grind and has overlooked the theoretical tools that a scientific analysis requires. References serve as decorum instead of instrument.
The theoretical vacuum left by the lack of definition of key concepts annihilates the plausible debate. Not everyone has the same intuitive understanding of concepts such as community, social, identity, performance, or self. As a sociologist, I was puzzled by the misuse of well-established concepts throughout – Ray Oldenburg’s ‘third place’, ‘acculturation’ used to mean ‘socialization’, and ‘actors’ (p. 67). What was thrilling about this research topic was the nuance between an existing culture and a culture being constructed, yet this shade of difference goes sadly unnoticed.

Furthermore, the tiny sample of 10 players interviewed (p. 7) reinforces the perplexity regarding the methodology. In particular, there is this grey area around the use of non-participant observation and the author’s report that his ‘social’ participation was welcomed by the players (p. 143). Additionally, the book findings are mostly based on interview extracts. What methodology was used for which part of the research? No one knows. Too often, the book leaves the impression that the author had a preconceived opinion and tried to gather information from the field to support it. In the case of many quotes, the major element of information is contained in Harper’s contribution rather than in participants’ actual words.

This book would have benefitted from the inclusion of ideas from areas other than game studies: for instance, using studies of other combat sports (e.g. boxing, martial arts, wrestling) in connection with gender issues would have brought perspective and depth. In addition, the book does not cover the institutionalization although this element appears essential in this study of a culture. Even though the realms of video game studies, play studies and leisure studies have not merged yet, time has arrived for thinkers of all leagues to meet and learn from each other.

The *Culture of Digital Fighting Games* sheds a timely light on the upcoming trend of watching digital combat in public. Video gaming as a spectator sport has indeed been on the rise in recent years: an event like EVO, broadcast on the Internet, reaches plenty of enthusiastic viewers. With the booming of eSports attested by 32 millions of viewers of the world championship of *League of Legends* in 2013, I will not be surprised if sooner or later, these competitions – eSports including fighting games – went mainstream and conquered the TV screen for masses to join the arena. May the best one win!

### Notes

1. Retrieved from August 21, 2015, [live-event-confirmed-for-all-work-all-play-july-esports-premiere-broadcast-live-from-los-angeles-to-cinemas-across-north-america-300108765.html](http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/live-event-confirmed-for-all-work-all-play-july-esports-premiere-broadcast-live-from-los-angeles-to-cinemas-across-north-america-300108765.html)
2. Not to mention the typo in Pierre Bourdieu last name on p. 70.
3. Retrieved from August 19, 2015, [league-of-legends-world-championship-32-million-viewers](http://www.theverge.com/2013/11/19/5123724/league-of-legends-world-championship-32-million-viewers)
4. Like the American giant sport channel ESPN already started in 2014 on ESPN3 and in May 2015 on ESPN2.

### Notes on contributor

*Pascaline Lorentz*, PhD in Sociology, is an independent researcher on video gaming who has published sociological papers in English and French on video gamers. The monograph of her doctoral work on the teenage audience of The Sims (Maxis, 2000–2014) titled *The Socializing Voyage of the Video Game Player*, along with a collective book *Living in the Digital Age: Self-Presentation, Networking, Playing, and Participating in Politics* are freely available for download ([https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Pascaline_Lorentz](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Pascaline_Lorentz)).
When I was in the midst of writing my conceptual and empirical overview of play in animals, Brian Sutton-Smith published, in 1997, his compact and magisterial work, *The Ambiguity of Play*. I immediately saw that it provided an excellent window, indeed scaffolding, for integrating the voluminous work on play in many fields, not only the social science and humanistic approaches to play, but also touching on play in other animals and the evolutionary roots of play. Sutton-Smith’s book, advocating seven rhetorics of play, was probably the most sustained and comprehensive book on play since Huizinga’s book, *Homo Ludens*, first published in 1938 but not widely known until the 1955 edition. Huizinga viewed play as the cultural source of most attainments of human civilization and social life. Just as Sutton-Smith’s book was, arguably, the most major integrative synthesis after Huizinga, Thomas Henricks’ new book is a most important, comprehensive, and intellectually rich successor to these two works. *Play and the Human Condition* is essential reading for anyone trying to make sense of this most mysterious, elusive, and powerful phenomenon. He addresses play across its interdisciplinary incarnations, reviews, and insightfully comments on many of the most controversial and perplexing issues surrounding play, and advances the field greatly with his own integration of diverse theories and conceptual formulations.

Henricks is a sociologist, however, and thus brings a different toolbox to his work than did the historian Huizinga and the psychologist/folklorist Sutton-Smith as well as those students of play working in education, ethology, and neuroscience. Even when he covers similar ground, he often reframes issues differently by using the sociologist’s lens. While all the usual topics and suspects in philosophy, psychology, biology, anthropology, education, and sociology are covered, the reader is always aware that his guiding passion is play as a social endeavor and a means of personal discovery and understanding. The headings of several of the nine chapters indicate the material explored: Play as sense making, The psychology of play, Play’s nature, Play and the physical environment, The social life of play, Cultural play, and The play of possibility. As varied as the contents are, and the fact that in 250 pages one cannot cover all theories in depth, let alone empirical research, Henricks is still able to distill and incorporate a wide range of play phenomena in his relatively short treatise.

What one has here, in the first instance, is a detailed authoritative, clarifying, indeed cleansing, journey through the history of how scholars, especially in the humanistic and sociological disciplines have confronted play, sometimes frontally, but often tangentially in the course of other projects. Henricks is a masterful, authoritative, and passionate guide; his judgments about various thinkers and approaches are the most objective and carefully phrased as I have ever encountered. The book is not, however, an attempt to extract ideas from theorists on various issues to arrive at some ‘truth’ about play, derive a straightforward synthesis on