Game Studies In *Media Res*: Beginning From The Middle-State

By Michael Hancock & Steve Wilcox

It is typical for the introduction of a special issue to begin with an origin story, and though we would like to think this issue is atypical its origin is nevertheless worth noting. This special issue of *Loading…* was inspired by a roundtable discussion from the 2014 Canadian Game Studies Association's annual conference entitled "Publishing in Game Studies." The discussion between panelists Jennifer Jenson, Suzanne de Castell, Gerald Voorhees and Jason Hawreliak brought together the editors of an academic journal, a book series and middle-state venue (respectively) to examine how these distinct channels for the dissemination of scholarship both compete and co-exist within a "publishing ecosystem." It should be no surprise, given how friendly Canadian games scholars are, that the panelist and interlocutors in the room dwelt upon the line of discussion emphasizing how the three types of publications exist as interdependent components of an ecosystem. The panel engendered a strong sense of optimism about middle-state publishing's capacity to -- among other things -- contribute to the ongoing development of journal articles, and journal publishing's capacity to -- among other things -- encourage more writing for the middle-state. This special issue is an effort to instantiate the metaphorical "pipeline" between middle-state and journal publishing.

While that was the origin of the issue itself, each of the articles in this special issue has its own genesis, a not-so-secret origin, as an expansion or response to an article originally published in *First Person Scholar* (FPS). FPS is an online game studies publication that seeks to draw out and develop the role of the game critic and scholar. On a weekly basis the site publishes essays, commentaries, and book reviews on games and culture. As a publication FPS exists in what is referred to as the middle-state. If scholarship begins as ideas dashed out in a word processor or posted on a blog, and if books and journal articles represent the final iteration of those texts, then the middle-state is where you see scholarship in motion. FPS articles are those that have moved past the initial stages of forming an argument and are now *en route* to becoming something more substantive and nuanced. But at the same time the thoughts and ideas contained in FPS articles are still flexible and pliable enough that feedback can have an almost feed-forward effect, informing scholarship before it even reaches its destination.

In this special issue we see the results of this process as we have invited the authors of six *First Person Scholar* articles to revisit and expand on their original arguments. Each essay presented here has moved along its own trajectory from initial idea to final published form, and each argument has been tempered and enriched by comments and critiques from its time in the middle-state. While submissions to *First Person Scholar* need not aim to become a published article or a chapter in a book, this particular collaboration between FPS and *Loading…* illustrates the pathways and conduits that middle-state publishing has begun to form with more established scholarly platforms. Thus, the model presented here is neither the sole one for our publications nor something that limits *First Person Scholar* to a stepping stone towards further publication; rather, *First Person Scholar* illustrates how different approaches to critical work unfold in different sites and move towards distinct destinations. In this case, the selected essays reflect the varied

approaches to studying games found on *First Person Scholar* and in game studies at large, with topics including disability studies, gamer culture, historical realism, gender, sexuality, and visual representation.

In "The Tyranny of Realism" Adrienne Shaw broaches the topic of historical accuracy in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise by critically examining the politics of representation in *Assassin's Creed III*. She begins by identifying three types of realism at play: emotional, production, and constructed. Shaw goes on to explain how these forms of realism constrain the game's capacity to foster a critical interpretation of the colonial powers involved in the American Revolution. She concludes by exploring a counter-historical version of *Assassin's Creed III*, one that liberates the player from the stifling role of one who merely replays the past to one who can rethink the past so as to envision a better future.

Sarah Gibbons explores the relationship between disability studies and game studies in "Disability, Neurological Diversity, and Inclusive Play." Eschewing rehabilitative and therapeutic applications, Gibbons examines the ways in which videogames have been used to represent persons with disabilities. Her interest lies in neurological diversity and she juxtaposes two approaches: simulation, through the game *Auti-Sim*, and narrative representation, through *To the Moon*. Gibbons explains that while both games address neuro-diversity and the exigencies of inclusion and acceptance, simulations often fall short of such an objective by reinforcing the pejorative and all-too-common notion that life with a disability is confusing, fearful, and arduous. In contrast, narrative-driven games tend to be more successful at representing disabilities in more nuanced ways, allowing empathy and compassion to emerge from a more representative understanding of life with a disability.

Megan Blythe-Adams investigates portrayals of sexuality in videogames with an examination of popular series such as *Super Mario*, *Mass Effect*, and *Dragon Age* in "Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Magic Circles in the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* Series." Many such videogames portray a heteronormativity that cannot be avoided in order to play the game, or subject deviations to implied normative judgment, such as polyamorous options in *Dragon Age: Origins*. Adams' close study of sexuality in Bioware titles opens the door for discussions on how different sexualities can be respectfully portrayed in videogames, how we can achieve an "inclusivity that actually feels inclusive."

In "Cyborg Games: Videogame Blasphemy and Disorientation," Elise Vist explores the titular concepts and applies them to close readings of Anna Anthropy's *dys4ia* and *Defend the Land*. Borrowing cyborg and blasphemy from Donna Haraway, the cyborg game is the game that creates spaces where normative players are confronted with a game world into which they don't fit neatly, a process that can be disorienting, a feeling a player may find enjoyable or even hostile. Anthropy's games, Vist argues, qualify as cyborg games in the ways they challenge the primacy and agency of the player.

In "Going beyond the game" Rachel Kowert and Jan Grooten broach the contentious topic of gamer identity. The authors explore the notion of a 'gamer' and gamer identity, treating it as a complex and expansive concept that comes to function both as a personal identifier and as a social identity. They conclude by presenting a multi-modal framework for thinking about gamer identity,

one that reflects the complexity and heterogeneity of the gamer while still articulating its relevance as a personal, social, and virtual moniker.

Discussion of visual representation in videogames can go astray through overly broad terminology, or the failure to recognize both videogame's indebtedness to other visual forms, and where it departs from them. Dominic Arsenault, Pierre-Marc Côté, Audrey Larocelle, and Sacha Lebel provide a system specifically for the study of videogame visual representation in "The FAVR: A Framework for the Analysis of Visual Representation in Video Games." The authors contextualize their research in both existing approaches in game studies and in the connections and differences videogames bear to other modes of visual representation, including film and animation. From this base, the paper culminates in the FAVR model, providing the reader with examples of its approach to composition, ocularization, framing mechanisms, and tri-planar space.

We would like to thank everyone who played a part in the production of this issue. Our contributors have all returned to the well and did not find it dry; on the contrary, we have been consistently surprised and impressed by the new approaches each has provided, and we commend them for their work. Our referees are also deserving of praise, as they have done much to provide useful feedback and guidance for these pieces. No middle-state publishing effort can survive without an engaged audience, and we thank our readers at *First Person Scholar* and hopefully our new readers from *Loading…* for their support. We would also like to thank Neil Randall and the Games Institute for providing and continuing to provide space and support for *First Person Scholar*. Finally, thanks to the editors and people at *Loading…*, for granting us this opportunity and making the issue a reality. Middle-state publishing is a lofty goal that requires much support, and we have been fortunate enough to receive that from friends, colleagues, and readers alike.