

Alexander N. Galloway, **Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture**, University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 143 pp, \$17.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Dmitri Williams
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

I feel sorry for physicists. Those poor souls are confronted with studying the properties of light, and light simply will not cooperate. One minute it's acting like a wave, and another it's acting like a particle. Does the physicist just sort of look the other way and pretend she didn't notice one of those two? It sure would be easier.

And frankly, that's the kind of dilemma we media researchers now face with interactive media. Whether we're hailing from critical and cultural studies, quantitative social science or elsewhere, we've all long been familiar with how to at least argue about our subject material. A large corporation creates some content and then broadcasts it to people who consume it. Whether you fall on the Katz-esque-Jenkinsian active audience side or the soul-crushing Frankfurt School viewpoint, you at least know what you are studying. If you want to figure out what's in it, you do a content analysis or a close read. If you want to figure out what happens when people consume it, you put them in an experiment.

But as Alexander Galloway insightfully points out in *Gaming*, those clear-cut definitions are no longer possible. Faced with media which actually change during and *due to* the act of their use, and which involve other user/creators, how can we stay within the same research paradigms? Do we embrace the waves and tuck the particles under the rug?

Galloway argues that that is not only the incorrect and easy path, but that we can deal with interactive media like games by enlarging and enriching our theoretical approach. As a researcher who has been working with games effects and game uses, I find myself challenged in my assumptions and prodded into new directions by Galloway's insights.

His central innovation is to toss out the concepts of text and effects and to instead consider games as an act. The act is created by both machine and human forces and includes elements from both inside the bounded game world ("diegetic" in his terms) and without. These axes of two dimensions: machine/operator and diegetic/non-diegetic, open up a wealth of new theoretical insights. By walking through game scenarios across all four elements of the axes (e.g. pressing start vs. pressing pause), it becomes clear that traditional approaches have not been able to capture the nuance necessary to fully explain game-playing phenomena, or the resulting "content" we should be studying.

What then do we actually examine, and how can media researchers start studying an "act" rather than a thing? Galloway's solution comes from the tension surrounding active vs. passive audiences (see Hay et al, 1996). He does not want his approach confused with the active audience one, but there are of course similarities and potential connections and pitfalls. Non-diegetic acts in his framework are akin to the out-of-story social contexts and interactions that occur during normal media use like side

conversations during a TV show. This “out of media” component is tackled by invoking Geertz’s “deep play” concept: What’s going on outside the formal game is just as important as what’s going on inside. Moreover, it impacts the inside. As Geertz wrote while studying Balinese cockfights, the villagers and their social world are mimicked and therefore “in” the fights themselves. Likewise, the game player’s world is often “in” the game as well—only here, the villagers are down among the fighters pulling the strings.

The balance of the book is equally thoughtful, but may be of less direct interest to communication scholars, particularly social scientists. Themes of use and activity make way for perspectives from film theory and considerations of realism and tone. Indeed, *Gaming* becomes an updated take on some of the film-heavy work in Wolf’s (2002) *The Medium of the Video Game*, going so far as to delve into issues of games as avant-garde. However, some of the discussions of social control and world view will prove interesting to those interested in the network society and the larger social issues confronted by Castells and other big-picture theorists. In Galloway’s view, mastering a game means mastering its underlying algorithm, a process that he suggests enables the player to recognize real-world algorithms of elite control. It’s a heady claim worth investigating: games as political tutors.

Later chapters show how the conventions of the First-person shooter (FPS) genre began in early cinema, and convey a filmic grammar that audiences have learned first from film. Film theorists will find the material provocative. The section is intriguing in that it shows how the first-person perspective affects the emotions of the viewer, yet this is only addressed for games briefly when Galloway suggests that the activity of games insulates them from the predatory feel of an FPS shot in cinema (e.g. *Jaws*). Given the earlier arguments around active users and acts, this is unconvincing.

Galloway also describes the distinctions between photorealism and social realism. He spells out for the game neophyte why some games look as if they were real and some games mimic real life situations, but that photorealism does not always equate to actual realism. It is an important concept, and could be taken a few steps further in a discussion of how purposely non-photorealistic games allow for biting commentary on real-life events: games as satire (*The Simpsons*, after all, does not aim for photorealism). Still, the material on different global perspectives on first-person shooters is eye-opening.

Whatever one thinks of Galloway’s ideas, there is no doubting that he has a firm grasp on his subject material. To be blunt, there are a lot of games researchers who clearly know little about games or the world of game players. Far too many studies remove games from their social contexts and treat them as if they were exactly like TV, only more so since they are “active.” This has always felt simplistic, and this book helps explain why. As a confessed games enthusiast, Galloway brings years of examples to bear when laying out his theory. And crucially, he is not an apologist for the medium. Whatever approach one brings to the study of games, more knowledge of the subject matter is clearly an asset, and Galloway has shown how it can lend intelligent insight into complex theoretical issues. By invoking hundreds of examples from across the vast galaxy of games and game platforms, Galloway has been able to construct a framework that allows us to understand the theoretical import of a player’s choices, the game’s mechanics and the designer’s intentions. Clearly, it’s more fun to be a games researcher than a physicist.

References

Hay, J., L. Grossberg & E. Wartella (Eds.) (1996). *The Audience and Its Landscape*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Wolf, M. (2002). *The Medium of the Video Game*. Austin: University of Texas Press.