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Questions concerning the magic circle of gamespace and space outside of games have motivated an entire sub-field of work in game studies — but the topic is still far from being fully explored. In *The Mergence of Spaces. Experiences of Reality in Digital Role-Playing Games*, Elke Hemminger (2009) approaches the theme through a study of German role-playing both on- and offline, including live-action role-playing as well as pen and paper variants and their digital descendants. Through this focus on a variety of role-playing scenes the doctoral thesis is particularly interesting.

Hemminger utilizes empirical approaches from field research and interview research and theoretical references from sociology and media psychology as well as game studies to explore first “Do individuals play games as postmodern media?” (p.26) and then how “spaces of reality and game interact in the experience of playing RPGs” (p.83). Hemminger divides this examination into three minor questions, first addressing Edward Soja’s concept of Thirdspace and its adequacy for a description of processes of role-play in RPGs, then considering terms to describe RPG user-practice in general, and finally relating the significance of fantasy elements to this practice.

In terms of media theory, Hemminger’s thesis remains somewhat unsatisfactory. Apart from an indistinct definition of digital media (p.17), her conceptualization of fantasy media as a genre leaves some questions unanswered. After considering genre theory, Joseph Campbell’s idea of the monomyth and a short history of fantasy media, Hemminger defines the latter as “a set of texts setting the hero myth in a special universe or world with its own geography, history, ethics, culture and language that is designed by the author using elements and motives from fairy-tale, folklore and mythology” (p.40). Hemminger too easily adopts Campbell’s framework of *The Hero’s Journey* and its further development into twelve stages by Christopher Vogler as a starting point for understanding such diverse forms as fantasy literature and digital RPGs, and it remains unclear why Hemminger’s division of fantasy media into four areas of literature, film, games and art combines, for example, film and television series into one category, or why it takes fanfiction and epic metal music together as art.

Furthermore, the way Hemminger includes sociological theories and concepts of media psychology seems to be slightly half-hearted. Hemminger outlines theories of Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, and Ulrich Beck (p.57-61) in order to point out that postmodern society is shaped by rationalization and individualization, from which she then draws some interesting conclusions. Still, her hypothesis that fantasy media work as a counterpart to rationalisation or as a “way to enchant everyday life in modern society” (p.62) is being considered only superficially in the analysis of the collected data (p.117; p.133), thus giving the impression that theory and empirical

data remain apart without further reflection. The idea of treating game characters as media personae seems likewise inadequately discussed. Interactions with game characters are considered by the author as some kind of para-social interactions (PSI) respectively para-social relations (PSR). Hemminger quite rightly states that the original concept of PSI “is not able to describe the complex case of interactions between players and avatars in RPGs and therefore must be revised for the adaption for this specific medium” (p.75). Instead of putting the idea of player-avatar relationships aside, she proposes a kind of “extended PSR”. A thorough revision of the concept that adequately takes the distinctiveness of games into account might prove to be a proper approach and would require an elaborate discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of such a perspective. However, Hemminger’s discussion of the relationship between player and avatar as “both para-social and social” (p.75), therefore being an extended PSR, doesn’t describe the phenomenon sufficiently.

Either to sharpen or to abandon the concept in this context, a closer look substantiated by the collected data would be preferable. Hemminger is apparently aware of this blank space, as she calls for further consideration on this in the conclusion of her thesis. Here, as in other parts of the book, it becomes apparent that the work would have benefited from a more thorough contextualization into the current state of research on avatars, gamespace, and the specificities of games (cf. Klevjer 2006, Aarseth 2001, Nicholls and Ryan 2004, Ducheneaut et al. 2007, Stockburger 2007, Copier 2007, Juul 2005).

That said, Hemminger’s selection of methods represents a reasonable choice. The empirical part of the study is based on a triangulation of methods of field research, questionnaire and focused interviews. As part of her field research, Hemminger conducted participant observation in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004). The interviews are complemented by an accompanied character creation using the *World of Warcraft* interface (p.85-86) as an implementation of David Gauntlett’s thoughts on creative visual research, and Hemminger describes some interesting results regarding the examined role-playing scenes. The survey should have been given a little less room to allow a more detailed discussion of the results of the participant observation and interviews, especially since the questionnaire’s distribution primarily on pen and paper conventions makes the sample not representative. Nonetheless, the interview data supports the idea of gamespace as Thirdspace. According to Hemminger Edward Soja’s model of the Triad of Spatiality in which Thirdspace combines and transgresses the realms of perceived and conceived space suits the perspective on user-practice in MMORPGs well.

Whether the typology of RPGs as described earlier fulfils the differences within the termed types deserves reconsideration. In MMORPGs there are severe differences regarding the structuring of space and user practice depending, for instance, on the game’s capacity for user generated content. One of Hemminger’s rather remarkable insights is that there are overlaps in the use of different types of RPGs (p.99). In this context Hemminger raises the question of how far the traditional RPG scene has been influenced by the establishment of digital RPGs (p.101-102), which would be worth further elaboration. Hemminger also works out several distinctions between MMORPGs and traditional RPGs in relation to the use and relevance of story (p.107) and regarding the interferences between real life and role-play situations (p.131-135).

The final part of Hemminger's analysis examines the state of MMORPGs as a lived space in more detail (p.135). Hemminger introduces a model to distinguish four different forms of user-practice in games, namely Primal, Extended, Secondary and Merged Gameplay (p.137). While Primal and Extended Gameplay do not transgress the inner logic of the game in question, Secondary Gameplay describes the phenomenon of using the game interface as a tool for out-of-character-communication. Merged Gameplay is a user-practice that is characterized by a representation of "real personalities" (p.138) through avatars and a merging of game space and real life into a public virtual space.

Above all, this book is meant to provide an explorative view on the subject of space in RPGs, which might excuse some theoretical and methodical flaws, and given the small number of works on different role-playing scenes it is worth reading. Moreover, it provides another example of a methodological approach to understanding RPGs and can be productively used to gain insight on possible research designs. However, as a comprehensive overview of the current state of research on MMORPGs or as a compendium of theories in relation to role-playing elements, *The Mergence of Spaces* still remains wanting.

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