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The Winding Road to Discovery: A Review of *Gaming Matters: Art, Science, Magic, and the Computer Game Medium*

VIRGINIA F. HOLMES

Game studies lacks a text which deeply explores the medium that is the object of our study. Yes, many scholars discuss the facets, trends, and specific examples of computer games and do so in a myriad of ways, but few have taken on the momentous task of exploring and defining the medium itself. The computer game medium is a vast collection of software, hardware, consoles, codes and systems that can seem quite daunting. And though Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken McAllister might have been overawed by the sheer magnitude of the medium, they overcame the vastness and produced a startling piece of scholarship that fills a void in game studies. In their book, released in the late spring of 2011, *Gaming Matters: Art, Science, Magic, and the Computer Game Medium*, these two computer game alchemists take readers on a winding, twisting, whimsical journey of discovery and exploration through the computer game medium as they set out to examine and illuminate their object of study, as well as "encourage concentrated exploration of the medium and its relationship to millennial methods of meaning-making" (6). The book is discursive—within itself, as well as with the medium and the medium's participants, and beyond, with the hopes of extending this relationship to include the reader.

While in some arenas game scholars seem to think we have moved past the need to justify ourselves and our object of study, Ruggill and McAllister remind us that nearly every day we are still forced to justify our object of study to colleagues, friends, family, and the guy we met in the elevator. Their in-depth delineation of our chosen object of study, in *Gaming Matters*, is exploratory and definitive. Though at every step, the computer game medium seems to thwart the authors' attempts to pin it down, Ruggill and McAllister manage to accomplish their goals. They give a comprehensive and clarifying look at the computer game medium through their seven fundamental qualities, while remaining aware of the nature of their object of study. When irreconcilabilities arise, they present those facets rather than ignoring them or trying to obscure them from full view. Their desire is to explore that veritably forgotten middle ground between the macro and micro perspectives, which pervade game scholarship and which have resulted in a "profound vision of what games can be in the grandest, most abstract sense, and a similarly deep understanding of what games are in the most concrete, discrete sense, but little that works to link the two together" (4). This piece is a winding exploration of the computer game medium with two true alchemists who are reading, praying, and working toward ennobling the base matter and encouraging readers, developers, players, and scholars to join them in their attempt to fill that unintentional "aporia" (4) in game research.

The introduction lays out the idiosyncratic nature of the computer game medium. It is the peculiarity and uniqueness of the medium with which developers, players, pundits, and scholars work with that leads to the discussion of the idiosyncratic

features of their relationships as well. This whimsical, plastic, and magical medium has seven fundamental qualities, which "structur[e] its artifacts and effects in staggeringly diverse yet strangely consistent ways": Idiosyncrasy, Irreconcilability, Aimlessness, Anachronism, Duplicity, Work, and Alchemy (6). They seek to define and discuss the medium through these terms. Each step of their exploration is peppered with the whimsy they claim as part of their multidisciplinary methodology which is set in contrast to the complexity of the medium they are trying to pin down. Their methods are also inspired by their magical view of computer games as embodying and being made up of those seven fundamental qualities of medium. Throughout the text, the authors attempt to strip bare and illuminate the complexity, complications, and inner workings of the computer game medium while still viewing the medium as essentially magical and wondrous.

While Ruggill and McAllister are fascinated by their subject, they are also intrigued by the many and varied connections within, around, and surrounding the medium. Their second goal with this piece of scholarship is to "illuminate the many and unusual connections between [the computer game] medium, the industry that produces it, the consumers who buy it, and the role of the academy in interpreting and historicizing it" (6). In each section, they look at the often contradictory and seemingly irreconcilable locations of each of these groups: developers, players, pundits (politicians, reviewers, reporters, etc.), and scholars. Within the medium, there are not only seven contentious qualities, but also several groups whose engagement, approaches, uses, and meanings vary at every level of engagement. In reconciling the computer game medium, the authors also look at each quality from the location of the various participants and how those locations intersect and affect one another.

The book is structured through the introduction and discussion of each of the seven qualities that Ruggill and McAllister lay out in that initial chapter. Throughout these explorations that span across the locations of different participants in the computer game medium, the authors argue for those participants (especially game scholars) to take a more comprehensive view of their object. I think this is one of the keys to a great deal of their argumentation, even down to the minutest rhetorical and rebellious choice of using "computer game" rather than the more vernacular "video game." These authors are hyper aware of the different facets and approaches to the medium and in sharing that view with the readers they are encouraging the audience to also take off whatever blinders they may be wearing and see more of the medium than they may have allowed themselves to see previously. The industry affects the player and the culture, which in turn affect the industry in a circuitous relationship that exists in the strange place that is the computer game medium.

The computer game medium is a complex entity with no clear definition or taxonomy. Most taxonomies, as the authors note, tend to wind up being as inclusive as they are exclusive—yet another example of the irreconcilability of the medium. There is no common language for discussing games across locations (developer, player, pundit, scholar) which makes it hard for members of one group to effectively speak to other groups using, exploring, creating, and talking about the computer game medium. Despite and because of these complexities of the computer game medium, McAllister and Ruggill see computer game studies as important to the understanding and study of knowledge production in general because "[c]omputer game business and aesthetics have begun not only to remake the mass media landscape, altering the

productions, distribution, and consumption of media of all types, but also to change the relationship between human beings and the technologies they use to work, play, and communicate with one another" (14). The computer game medium, in the largest sense, has not only remediated media that preceded it (namely film and television in that many game consoles are also DVD and Blu-Ray players, as well as capable of connecting owners with video streaming products like Netflix) but it is also influencing the media around it (i.e., television, websites, advertising, etc.) through processes like the controversial gamification approach and through other more aesthetic influences. The computer game medium is changing the ways people interact with one another in a variety of locales (private, business, public) and discursive situations. The medium and the rise of the casual gamer are also altering the ways and the ease with which human beings interact with a broader spectrum technology.

In the conclusion of the book, the discussion of alchemy, Ruggill and McAllister review the other six "magics" that distinguish the computer game medium and remind the readers of the multiplicities of each of those traits. They go on to describe alchemy as "marked by combination, distillation, and ambiguity. ... Alchemy connotes an alloy (or is it a brew?) so dense as to be impenetrable, so fluid it cannot be held" (97). For them, in this purpose, alchemy is the whimsical proto-science, that is not quite completely art either, which accounts for and activates the brew of the six other traits in various ratios and through varied means. Alchemy is not just the process of "ennobling the base matter" (103) but can also be the process by which discoveries occur; discovery is the only promise of the alchemical mantra that stresses reading, prayer, and work. And as game scholars, developers, players, "there is only ever discovery whichever way we turn" (106).

One challenge the authors, and readers, face is the very nature of the thing being studied and discussed. The computer game medium includes a vast collection of artifacts beyond just the game itself. And these artifacts of the medium (software, hardware, consoles, peripherals, et al) are variously diverse and it is these material and aesthetic differences which cause the medium to suffer from the inability to be labelled in any completely definitive way. The idiosyncrasy and the irreconcilability of the medium seem to be the greatest challenges to this work—it is a challenge that Ruggill and McAllister do not shy away from, but embrace and incorporate fully. Those seeming oppositions which could have created holes in their research were incorporated to enrich the understanding of the computer game medium through its idiosyncrasy, irreconcilability, aimlessness, anachronism, duplicity, work, and alchemy. By doing so they fill a gap that seems to be developing in computer game studies between the large-scale and small-scale research that has become most prevalent.

References

Ruggill, J.E. and McAllister, K.S. (2011) *Gaming Matters: Art, Science, Magic, and the Computer Game Medium*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.