Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming*

Review by Trevor Ruben

Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames, a figurative and literal mouthful of video game anti-essentialism, does not attempt to answer the question, what is a game? Instead, digital media scholars Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux ask what do games *do*? They rediscover meaning for the term metagame, finding it "a signifier for everything occurring before, after, between and during games as well as everything located in, on, around, and beyond games" (11). This meta-game of a book is deliberately not about games and their function as isolated media, it illuminates how games extend beyond themselves into every possible context.

As Boluk and Lemieux point out, the term metagame predates their book, but its meaning is currently unstable. For *Magic: The Gathering* creator Richard Garfield, the metagame is the "game within the game," or the invisible strategies that float above the explicit rule designations of the game itself. For the massively-multiplayer *EVE Online,* the politics of the in-game clans represent a metagame outside of the game. And so on, and so forth. If the metagame is all of these things, then for Boluk and Lemieux games are not contained within an ideological "magic circle," a straw man in the eyes of the authors originating from Johan Huizinga's idea that "inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count," (282). Liberating games from this ideological constraint is at the core of *Metagaming*'s construction. The authors construct a second, or "messy," circle that floats around all games, manifesting a "desire to distance leisure from labor, play from production…it's metagames all the way down" (15). The implicit foe of the metagame, that which Boluk and Lemieux seek to distance themselves from, and what they are consistently railing against, is the "standard metagame" that proliferates implicitly across video games under the following rules defined by scholar and HobbyGameDev founder Chris DeLeon:

> "The game is to be interacted with only by standard input controllers…"
>
> "The physical integrity of the hardware is not to be violated…"
>
> "The player should be directly and independently responsible for the actions made during the game…"
>
> "If playing against other players, the other players should not be disturbed outside the game…nor unfairly distracted within the game by meta commands that are not part of the core gameplay…
>
> "The computer game should be played as released and/or patched by the developer" (36)

We can see how individual sections of the book crash right up against the assumption that games must be contained within these standards. Even the subtitle of the book, "Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking," represents a reverse answer to this standard. The most consistent thread throughout *Metagaming* is a clear desire on the part of the authors to rescue both games and game theory from the heterogeneity of the standard metagame, or what is "right." When Boluk and Lemiux argue that "more than merely selling entertainment products, the games industry sells an ideology," they are attempting to overcome

what they see as an implicit privileging of what sells, rather than what actually happens as games are played and distributed into the culture (227). They argue against the lionization of the white, male and self-designated sufferers of independent game development in the documentary *Indie Game: The Movie*, and rather emphasize the speedrunning (an inherently meta activity) exploits of a transgender Twitch streamer by the name of Narcissa Wright. Wright's poetic observation that "all the categories are arbitrary," a reflection of her struggles to define in some way her gaming endeavors, financial and not, uncoincidentally punctuates an early section in the book (50). Game categories are arbitrary, as is the unnecessary privileging of the "correct" game, gamer, and metagame.

Boluk and Lemieux contend that "No matter how small, no matter how subtle, the metagame is never insignificant" (9). With nothing out of bounds, the book is both theoretically and topically scatological. Chapter 3, "Blind Spots," deploys Ad Reinhardt's aesthetics of negation to explain a distasteful Helen Keller Simulator meme (in the vein of Hellen Keller jokes) and the long-running *Metal Gear Solid* franchise's twinned obsessions with movie-like presentation and player debilitation. Chapter 4, "Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers," deploys Jean-Paul Sartre's models of seriality as disempowerment to preempt the unending cultural desire to iterate on *Super Mario Bros.'* first level across aesthetic forms. Chapter 6, "Breaking the Metagame," rewrites the feminist game critiques from Anita Sarkeesian as a "magic circle"-breaking method on par with the overarching effort of the book. The book is unselfconsciously proud of its scattershot breadth. The business travails of privileged indie game developers are a metagame, speedrunning is a metagame, memes *about* games are the metagame and, not especially but certainly potently, games about games are metagames. And, of course, all games are not without metagames; "Prepositions are to parts of speech as *metagames* are to games" (11).

As a practice of digital history recording*,* in service of the goal of stretching the metagame to its limits , the book partakes in the often arduous and complex task of recording cultural events originally made fleeting by their digital nature. Boluk and Lemieux attempt to not only record in writing digitally visualized artefacts and occurrences, from the proliferation of the Helen Keller meme across the web to the endless remediation of the infamous Super Mario World 1-1, but also accomplish diverse theoretical applications of these various things across aesthetics, game design theory, literature, and, of course, scholarly game studies. Where the book becomes provocative is in its insistence that these events and theoretical approaches are connected not through the games themselves, but through the concept of the *metagame*. To view games as such relegates them as tools of the metagame, instead of the metagame as tools of the game.

Premised on anti-essentialism, *Metagaming* is about everything that is neither the standard metagame nor the game itself, operating under the shared premises that no game is without a non-standard metagame, and the conceptual metagame-less game is the work of the elitist and the naïve. The many examples of the metagame that follow are then strung together on the thin material of an "everything but" argument; or, a reverse Occam 's razor, in which the idea that a game is just a game is tossed aside for the idea that everything is a game, very much in the Huizinga tradition. The moment when two players physically push each other in order to derail each other's Mario Kart race is the metagame, as is the moment when either player conceptualizes a way of winning that is not dictated by the ruleset of the game itself. The metagame is "occurring before, after, between and during games," in which "videogames [are] not considered games in the first place, but *equipment* for making metagames?" (11, 9). At all times, "we don't simply play games, but constantly (unconsciously) make metagames." (10). The magic circle is not just an arbitrary ruleset, then, but also a straw-strawman which frees the authors of any conceptual essentialism of games, in preference of a deep dive into what could more or less be called video game culture. All the theoretical application of the book, then, is both diverse and pragmatic, and is material to the cause of discussing game culture, rather than games themselves.

If this all feels like an elaborate justification to talk about video games without making an attempt to define them in a constraining way, then *Metagaming* both admirably and surreptitiously undermines game studies and traverses into game culture studies, where the pretense of conceptual truth, or "the magic circle," is wholly replaced by the pretense of experiential or observational fact; this is to say, these things definitely happened, and they naturally fall under an unendingly destabilized signifier of that of the emphatically, if not rigorously, signified "metagaming," thus

theorization in the book cannot be wrong, as it infinitely defers away from what has dominated the video game culture as "right." It's this implicit exit from a dichotomy or right and wrong that simultaneously frees the book from immediate skepticism but restricts it from the profundity it seeks in its larger statements ("we think the answer is already in, on, around, through, before, during, and after videogames. The answer is the metagame" 4). The unbounded conception of metagaming is more or less a vehicle toward simpler journalistic or historical work, yet in this work *Metagaming* does accomplish an impressive spectrum of things about games. Finally, this oblong, endearingly awkward spectrum serves a final purposeful step of getting the authors to their most inventive goal: the creation of metagames. Boluk and Lemieux created five metagames of their own, playable for free, which observe, reflect on, react to, and otherwise converse with their topical star points on this metagaming constellation, however random that constellation appears to be. To operate as metagames, each game, in one way or another, comments through the theoretical lens of its partner chapter on the presumptuous designations of the standard metagame over all game development and criticism. *99 Exercises in Style*, for instance, which tails Chapter 4 ("Hundred Thousand Billion Fingers") "engages in the serial history of a single level" to "reveal the kinds of metagames that constantly occurs [sic] outside any individual's experience of the Mushroom Kingdom" (205). Through gameplay, Mario is visually warped and his movements are noticeably altered away from what would be considered the standard Mario metagame. This active deployment of theory through metagame creation, as a metagame, coincides with another goal in the book, to reinforce the idea that "making criticism does not stand far from critical making," (21). If the authors have accomplished anything, they have accomplished the task of metagaming itself, and by extension of this premise, metagame criticism. Then again, in the metagaming tradition laid out in this book, haven't we all been doing this all along?

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