Where have we been? An Interview with Dr. Henry Jenkins

Kishonna: Thanks Henry for agreeing to chat with me. As you know, it's been almost 20 years since that seminal text was released, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. But before we started researching games most of us played games. Looking back, what got you into gaming?

Henry: I was a first generation gamer, having owned one of the original Pong machines for home consumption, and having played Atari games while hanging out with my then girlfriend (now wife) during our undergraduate years. I paid very little attention to the games during my graduate school days but they reentered my life when my son asked us to buy him a super Nintendo system for Christmas. I remember turning on Super Mario Brothers for the first time and I was blown away by how dramatic the progress is been over the past decade. What had seemed like a novelty had grown into a medium while my back was turned.

Kishonna: I bet games now just blow your mind! They are sooo real life! LOL. Well how did you get into studying and researching games?

Henry: I looked around the usual academic circles to see who was paying attention to this and found very little scholarship on games, especially given how central the medium had become in people's everyday lives, how large the industry has grown and the spectacular performances it offered for creative expression. I ended up writing a review of Marsha Kinders' *Playing with Power* which was one of the few books at the time which adopted a sympathetic humanistic perspective on the place of computer games in people's lives. My graduate mentor John Fiske was another early writer on the game arcade, though he read them through the lens of moral panic and struggles over time and resources. Finally, I was lucky enough to have regular contact with Brenda Laurel who would be one of the leaders of the girls game movement of the early and mid-1990s. I ended up flying to San Francisco to consult with Purple Moon, especially focusing on how to build up the fan following and transmedia strategies.

Kishonna: Many of us see the text, "From Barbie to Mortal Kombat" that you edited with Justine Cassell as the seminal text in gaming. How did that text come about?

Henry: The MIT women's studies program at the time was running a series of gender in cyberspace programs intended to acknowledge what was widely perceived as a gap in women's participation in digital spaces. I consulted with the women's studies program on this lecture series, bringing a range of speakers at MIT in the process drawing me toward a stronger focus on gender and technology issues. Justin Cassell and I met through some women's studies functions and decided that gender and computer games would make a timely

and original focus on MIT-based conference. We billed "From Barbie to Mortal Kombat" as the first women's studies conference "with demos" but this is almost certainly not the case.

Responses to the conference were so enthusiastic that we immediately began discussing with the MIT Press the possibility of turning some of the conference papers into e-book anthology. But the demos presented their own kind of challenge, since seeing cutting-edge work in computer games have been the primary appeal of the original conference. We discussed the prospect of adding some kind of computer disc, which would feature demo versions of the games themselves, but we were well ahead of the technological curve for this proposal. So we dispatched our graduate students – – Shari Goldin and Jennifer Glos – – to go out and interview some of the leading designers and entrepreneurs within the girls game movement. Along the way, Goldin called our attention to the girl gamer movement, which was offering some highly pointed critiques of what girls games meant within the industry discourse, and featuring some of their writings became the last feature we added to the collection.

Justine Cassell and I had flown to San Jose to promote the book and ended up having dinner with Brenda Laurel the very sad night that she had learned that Mattel was acquiring and scuttling Purple Moon.

Kishonna: Oh ok! I don't think I realized the conference led to the anthology. Well after the anthology, what direction did you go into? What path did your research and academic career take?

As a very early example of game studies, the book insured that I was on the list of scholars the press called on when they wanted perspectives on the medium. As a consequence of invitations, I found myself exploring games from range of different vantage points.

One strand of my early research was focused on formal aspects of games, in particular the idea that games might be read as spatial stories or narrative architecture. My interest in space based storytelling drew me into an emerging conflict between American scholars, sometimes labeled naratologists, and European-based scholars, primarily based in Scandinavia, who preferred to be defined as ludologists. This debate has been mythologized as it has helped to shape the first generation of overviews of game studies as a field, but from the start, I was perplexed by being used as the fall guy in an effort to institutionalize and fund a particular version of game studies within the European universities. We really were speaking past each other much of the time. Ironically, I would've argued that my interest in space within games would've aligned me more closely with scholars like Espen Aardseth and Jesper Juuls, if they were not so invested in pushing back against any encroachment of narrative theory and media studies into this new and emerging domain. By the time I had a public conversation with Aardseth, neither of us had any clue about what our points of disagreement

were. I saw little value in throwing out the baby with the bathwater, attempting to understand what lessons can be learned for the emerging field of game studies through comparison with earlier forms of expression, especially those that might seem to be in the peripheral of dominant forms of media studies. What would it mean to create a narrative/performance experience through features of space rather than through events that unfolded within time? In some ways, this work anticipates our current fascination with world building as an aesthetic and industrial practice across multiple media platforms. I remain interested in how details, often in the background of mise-en-scene, can be made meaningful in entertainment experiences, and I've been lucky since moving to Los Angeles to have a chance to learn more about production design and Imagineering through contacts I've made in the Hollywood industry.

Kishonna: Your work hasn't just been rooted in classrooms and lecture halls. Talk about the impact that you've had on the industry and other non-academic spaces?

Henry: Around the same time, I was invited to participate in a workshop that the Electronic Software Association was hosting to introduce game scholars to each other and provide us with some background with current industry structures and practices. There I fostered a relationship, which would ultimately lead to us co-hosting another such conference at MIT, focusing on the creativity displayed in contemporary game design. My keynote address at that event centered on games as a new lively art and would eventually evolve into my essay that playfully considered what Gilbert Seldes would have to say about games nearly 21st century. My willingness to define games as an emerging art form drew me into conversations with leading art critics, many of whom had been slow to recognize games as an expressive medium, and from there, to consult with the museum curators who would develop the first exhibitions around games as art.

An invitation to testify before the Senate commerce committee in the wake of the Columbine shootings pushed my interest in games in yet another direction. I had been frustrated by my experiences in Washington and wrote an email to my students describing the experience, which went viral overnight and was reprinted in Harpers and a range of local newspapers. My testimony itself ended up being published in several magazines aimed at educators, while my voice was remixed into a techno song critiquing the hearings as "goth control." It was becoming clear that moral panic around games violence could threaten the development of games as an expressive medium. I felt those of us who knew and cared about games needed to speak up. So I found myself going through the literature on games violence, trying to explain what a counter perspective grounded in cultural studies and anthropology might look like. Some of this work led me to try to define what might make representations of violence in games more meaningful and thus more defensible in the realm of public policy. I became interested in mapping the ethical potentials of computer games: this work was more targeted to game designers than at games critics. This work led to me speaking at a range

of different public policy events, including the law schools at Harvard and the University of Chicago and getting involved with a range of free-speech advocacy organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union. My efforts to explain these nuances to the general public was much more hit or miss, resulting in a public drubbing by Phil Donahue which I parlayed into a satirical piece for *Salon*. (You can read that piece here: http://www.salon.com/2002/08/20/jenkins_on_donahue/)

Kishonna: Well, you have to admit that any exposure and publicity is good, right? I mean it led to the creation of CMS?

Henry: My increased visibility as a game advocate coincided with the birth of the comparative media studies graduate program at MIT. William Uricchio and I bore the burden of launching an ambitious research agenda, which we could use to help fund graduate students. Games research ran across many of our core projects. I was one of the early participants in the MacArthur Foundation's digital media and learning initiative, which brought me into contact with games based learning experts such as James Paul Gee. Games were thus part of our work on new media literacies, though I was more interested by this point in questions of play and participation rather than interactivity which tended to dominate the game studies realm.

Kishonna: I became very familiar with James Gee's work while completing my PhD at Arizona State. What other kinds of 'games for learning' initiatives were you a part of?

Henry: Microsoft Research visited MIT in hopes of finding people who could make the case for designing video games to support learning. Alex Chisholm, the program's development officer, had been a key person pushing us to do more within this space and has continued to be a pioneer in thinking about games for learning and training. We ended up putting together a successful proposal, hiring Kurt Squire who was then ABD at Indiana to become our research director, and putting together a team of graduate students who would do thought experiments exploring different genres and models for what an educational game might look like. Those conversations led us to Eric Klopfer who was doing work on augmented reality games. When Squire left MIT to be hired by UW Madison, he was replaced by Scott Osterweill, a professional game designer; he brought a much more applied focus to the project. Our conceptual prototypes had been so vivid that we received many request from educators who wanted to use them right away in their classes. By the end of the first year, Microsoft research was pushing us to move into the design and implementation phase on summer concepts. As this happens, the original Games to Teach project morphed into The Education Arcade.

Kishonna: Ahhhh gotcha. And in comes Philip and the creation of the Games Lab!

Henry: Yes, Philip Tan had been one of the graduate students on the games to teach team and he stayed on as part of the staff from the Education Arcade. Tan brought with him a rich understanding of games and all of their various forms, including having done his masters thesis on the MIT Assassins Guild. He had overseen a project to model colonial Williamsburg as a mod for *Neverwinter Nights*. When the Singapore government approached MIT about building a partnership, Uricchio and I were successful in getting funds to launch the MIT Singapore GAMBIT Games Lab. Each summer, students from all of Singapore's universities and polytechnics came to MIT to work with our students to prototype innovative games and the lab served as an incubator space, launching entrepreneurial projects that fed the creative industry back in Asia. GAMBIT achieved what was for me an ideal blend of theory and practice, hosting critical conversations with game theorists and designers to critique and inform the prototypes, even as the students were working as teams under tight deadlines to explore the creative potentials of the games medium.

By this point, my own interest in games and game studies, however, had started to wane. I saw my role as a senior scholar as helping to pave the way for game studies as a field, laying down some broad foundation for what the study of the medium might look like and lending institutional support to get it off on solid footing. I'd spent the better part of a decade speaking at games related events and hosting games conferences both at MIT and at E3. But I was never very good as a gamer and I spent less and less time playing games. I looked around me and saw generation of younger scholars, many of them my former students, who had grown up with games and knew this medium inside and out. They could discuss countless titles in the ways that I could talk about the film, television, or comics, but I never felt at home in games in that same way. Moreover, I was feeling increasingly burnt by being caught in the crossfire both between the narratology and ludology crowds and within the debates about games violence.

Kishonna: Many in the field feel that when you left MIT, you left game studies. Is that a fair assessment?

Yes. When I left MIT, I left games and game studies behind. I certainly maintain social relations with game studies faculty at USC and I've ended up helping a few graduate students along the way. My own focus has shifted much more onto comics as a medium at a time comic studies is emerging as a field, onto Transmedia entertainment which sometimes does include games in its remit, and on to the role of media in activist campaigns, increasingly focused on the civic imagination as a way of understanding the blurring lines between politics and entertainment.

Kishonna: You mentioned your relationship with the industry earlier. Talk a little more about that. What kinds of relationships were developed between MIT and the gaming industry?

As we were beginning to explore what game studies might look like in the MIT context, we had a unique opportunity to foster dialogue between the Academy and the games industry. Electronic Arts, then as now a major player in the games industry, agreed to sponsor a creative leaders program, which would bring some of their most ambitious designers together periodically to explore some key aspect of games aesthetics. On my side, I was bringing core faculty and graduate students, some who had never encountered games before to share what they knew from the study of film, television, literature, and the fine arts with these game designers. Sometimes the dialogue was highly generative. I recall a particular session where dance scholar and choreographer Tommy DeFrantz was teaching a room full of slightly pudgy game designers how to move their bodies and in the process helping them to think about the physicality of character design games. Other sessions explored what the vocabulary of melodrama might contribute to developing "games that make us cry" or what games might learn from the visual storytelling of silent slapstick. Sometimes the group spoke past each other with the MIT faculty having difficulty letting go of cultural hierarchies in order to explore common ground with the game designers. Sometimes what we proposed was too far out and generated some immediate backlash from EA folks as having little or no applicability in their industry. But from this process of working through differences, I sharpened my understanding of how game designers thought and different models of the creative process within the industry. I know that my own writing about games gained much greater specificity as a result of these exchanges.

Kishonna: You've accomplished a great deal. You have enabled many to accomplish even more. Reflect a bit on all that. You and others created this field for us! But in your own words, talk about what you feel are your direct contributions to media studies?

Henry: I am very proud of what I accomplished in the early days of game studies. My work helps to map a number of important debates within the field, including the relationship of space and narrative, gender and computer games, the aesthetic status of games, games ethics, the impact of media violence, and games based learning.

Kishonna: What do you think of game studies today? Do you think we're still having the same conversations now as y'all did then?

Henry: As my own interests have shifted elsewhere, I have paid less and less attention to what game studies looks like today. So I don't feel qualified to critique the current state of research. My hope is that game studies continues to foster dialogue between academics, industry insiders and fans. From the start, game designers have theorized their own practice and engaged openly with academics attempting to do the same. Maintaining such conversations ensures the groundedness and accessibility of academic research.

My other hope is the game studies remains committed to promoting diversity and inclusiveness, experimentation and innovation, as games continue to take shape as an emerging and evolving medium. Nothing gives me greater pleasure than the idea that the work we did on games and gender has been taken up now by several generations of younger researchers as a rallying flag for more inclusive games culture. Such research is even more important today that it was early on, especially in the face of the # Gamergate thugs and bullies. And it seems all the more important to me today that such research should extend to factor in other kinds of identity, including issues of racial and ethnic diversity, queer and transgender perspectives, and the like.

Kishonna: We now have entire programs dedicated to studying video games. Is that crazy to you? Did you anticipate we'd be here? And are we doing enough?

Henry: Courses in game studies and design have taken root on many college campuses, including at MIT and USC, so it is hard for me to escape awareness of the institutionalization of this field and the growth of students taking such courses in hopes of breaking into a global games industry. Our focus should never be simply preparing people to work in the industry and complying with established norms and expectations about what games are and what they can do. As academics, we should always be pushing forward, advocating for groups who were left out of the existing market, insisting on experimentation with genres and affordances that have not yet found their killer app. We need to keep pushing the limits of industry thinking on all fronts and prepare students who will be forces of change whether as game designers, consumers, or critics.

Kishonna: Looking back, what has been some of your highlights? Any regrets? Do overs?

Henry: I am happy that some of my early essays remain part of the canon in the field. I was fascinated to get to know so many of the creative artists who shaped games as a medium – – from Will Wright to Brenda Laurel, from Peter Molyneux to American McGee. I was fascinated to watch some of these artists play through levels of their games and describe to me the creative decisions which shape them. If I have a regret, it is that we did not do a better job of documenting such processes. Imagine if we had film records of DW Griffith and Edward S Porter discussing the decisions that shape the early films. At the time we had an acute sense that we were watching a key moment in media history emerge around us. We wrote as fast as we could as we tried to document the core debates and discuss pivotal titles as they emerged. Heaven only knows what anyone will make of our scribblings several decades from now.

Kishonna: I tell you, those scribblings got me to MIT! So many of us are doing plenty with them, Dr. Jenkins. Trust me.

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