

'Balance' and Gaming Capital: Meritocratic Myths in Video Games

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Response to "Playing with Capital, Capitalizing Play"

An integral part of the consumption of any cultural object is the accrual of knowledge. Activities ranging from pub trivia to sports debates to workplace knowledge offer opportunities for those who possess information to share it, lord it over others, and demonstrate their capabilities. In gaming this concept can be clearly traced to the works of Edward Castronova who coined the term "avatar capital" to address the investments players make in their characters and the knowledge players accrue about a game and how it is played (Castronova, 2005). Mia Consalvo took the discussion of gaming capital in a different direction, arguing that knowledge about cheating is often tied to a desire to demonstrate how much gaming capital a player holds (Consalvo, 2007). The idea of gaming capital is built into the core of games (Paul, 2010) in a manner that is often used to a general approach to AAA game design that results in the establishment of allegedly balanced, meritocratic worlds.

A premise frequently underlying video game design is the belief that games should be balanced (Paul, 2012). Balance is actively sought by designers in an effort to develop games that provide a 'fair' playing field that can easily be translated into an appropriate test of gamer skills. The governing ideology of balance allows those with the most gaming capital to triumph over those with less, as developers seek to make games where success is shaped by skill, rather than chance. As the norms of gaming capital and balance have become increasingly ensconced within game design, one of the implications is that games become meritocratic, where the 'best' are the most successful.

The concept of the meritocracy was originally advanced in Michael Young's 1958 satirical account of future life in Britain (1994) and, as Young looks at what meritocracy in the world has wrought, he observes that "general inequality has been becoming more grievous with every year that passes, and without a bleat from the leaders of the party who once spoke up so trenchantly and characteristically for greater equality" (Young, 2001). Christopher Hayes has applied a critique of the meritocracy to contemporary U.S. society, arguing that the seemingly unbiased measures of achievement are increasingly rigged and that the system is falling apart (2012). These critiques of meritocracy are incredibly important in an effort to better understand video games and those who design and play them.

An expansive examination of gaming capital and game design demonstrates how Young's satire and Hayes's disintegrating society can be seen within games and game culture. The discourse about gaming capital typically focuses on the work players can do inside or outside of games and the knowledge that can be gathered through the mastery of the arcane rules and lore that govern games. However, these are limited examples of gaming capital and those limits reify video games as a space typically dominated by white men of means.

In addition to elements of gaming capital like theorycraft, modding, or fluency with cheats or exploits, gaming capital hinges on underlying knowledge like: the ability to navigate in 3D worlds, norms about how game genres work, and even knowing where to find games. These and other precursors to gaming help shape what games are and support a structure of gaming that appeals to balance in an effort to build meritocracies where 'anyone' can accrue vast stores of gaming capital, while eliding discussions of what kind of knowledge is foundational to participating in the process of establishing gaming capital and those who are left out of gaming altogether.

The governing principle of balance and the seemingly open ability to accrue avatar capital help form a perception of video games as cultural objects where those who are the most skilled rise to the top through their own efforts. Unfortunately video games are not open, free spaces of expression and a continued focus on designing balanced meritocracies is detrimental to the development of a diverse, productive community of gamers and game developers.

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