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Anja Rau is a freelance writer, concept developer and consultant. She has written a dissertation on digital fiction and computer games (*What you click is what you get? Die Stellung von Autoren und Lesern in interaktiver digitaler Literatur*, 2000). Her writing portfolio is available at <http://www.wordwrap.de/>

Review: Germans at Play

by Anja Rau

Konrad Lischka
Spielplatz Computer: Kultur, Geschichte und Ästhetik
des Computerspiels.
Hannover: Heinz Heise (Telepolis), 2002
187 pages 15 EUR
ISBN 3-88229-193-1

Andreas Lange
Spielmaschinen: Ein Ausstellungskatalog
- exhibition catalog -
ed.: Verband der Unterhaltungssoftware Deutschlands
e.V.
Förderverein für Jugend- und Sozialarbeit
Berlin: Das Computerspiele Museum, 2002
78 pages 15 EUR
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GEE Games_Entertainment_Education
publisher: Redaktionswerft GmbH
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Look at your map of European Game Studies. Is there a white space south of Denmark? There needn't be. Over the past two years, game studies initiatives have sprung up in Germany, too, and the rate of activities is accelerating. Take, for example the Games Convention,

Leipzig, which has been bringing together developers, publishers, researchers and players annually since 2002. What's more, computer and video games are beginning to be recognized as cultural artifacts and funding is becoming available to support such endeavours. At the same time, the media have discovered that there's more to games than the recurrent violence discussion. One popular face amongst journalists who take games seriously is Konrad Lischka, who's risen to the rank of "Usual Suspect" with articles and book chapters as well as appearances in television-documentaries, such as Carsten Walter's four-part Games Odyssey, aired in 2003 by the ZDF and, later, by ARTE.

In 2002, Lischka published *Spielplatz Computer* (Playground Computer), a book that can be regarded as one of the first comprehensive German language introductions to the computer game as cultural artifact, and gaming as cultural practice. Of course, Lischka is not the first German to study computer games. Florian Rötzer and Claus Pias also spring to mind. But Lischka's easy mix of journalism and games theory helps his subject transcend the more arcane recesses of a handful of media studies departments and makes it available to a broader and not necessarily English-speaking public.

In the book's preface, film-critic Michael Althen characterizes *Spielplatz Computer* as a history of computer games and, indeed, Lischka dedicates a substantial part of his study to short narratives and human interest stories about, and around, the development of the computer as a gaming machine and of computer games as a genre. This effort may appear dated to the reader who has access to an international bookshelf. *Joystick Nation*, *Trigger Happy* or the *Ultimate History of Video Games* have ensured that this is well-trodden ground - albeit not necessarily for a German-speaking audience. And, while the international discipline of game studies is grounded in the humanities, the national philologies - academic disciplines that focus on the language and literature of individual countries - of central Europe as well as many media studies departments do not make use of material that hasn't been translated on a regular basis, so crossover effects are rather limited.

Spielplatz Computer might well serve as a cornerstone here - not least because of the extensive appendices that

contain a brief chronology of computer games, a list of games and game websites that Lischka considers seminal and an 18-page bibliography sorted by topic. Yet, it is obvious that a book twice its size would have supplied a stronger foundation.

Interspersed amongst the historical narratives are Lischka's excursions into game theory, covering economics, politics, sociology and the "violence-issue," questions of gender, narratology and the problems associated with archiving software as well as different genres and the terminological question of video versus computer game. This breadth comes at the expense of depth, which is hardly surprising for a net page count of 130 pages. The two recurrent motifs are achieving realism and the attempt to position computer games in a literary context.

Lischka is aware of the narratology versus ludology debate (although according to recent reports it may no longer be quite so ardent). Yet, in his attempt to establish computer games as phenomena of "high" or serious culture or even just to describe games, Lischka falls back on the terminology and concepts of literary theory. Sadly, there is not enough space for him to really develop his theories. For example, here is a quote from game-designer Shigeru Miyamoto (translated back into English from the German translation): "First we make the rules, then we create the characters for the game's system. Finally, we come up with a story that works with these elements."

Lischka overlooks the implications an approach like this one has for the narrativity of games, both the relatively small importance granted to the story and the fact that much story-creation works exactly this way round. Also, not quite up to date for 2002, Lischka still accepts the tenets of player/ reader as author that were popular in the early day of cybertext-theory. Spielplatz Computer doesn't represent cutting edge theory formation, but rather rehearses the status quo - however, on a thoroughly researched level.

A rather surprising key-motif of Spielplatz Computer is the quest for realism. From Michael Althen's preface

"Game Boys & Girls" to Peter Molyneux's concluding outlook, the focus is on how well computer graphics and computer games manage to represent "reality." This aspect of fully immersive realism does not appear to be a focus of current discourses. However, this impression may be owed to differences in vocabulary. More importantly, Lischka looks mainly at advances in hardware, and software, development that allow for more life-like representations in the digital medium.

Drop the idea that the degree to which we enjoy a game increases with the awe we feel for the smooth representation of reality and what remains are well-known research topics: the questions of law and ownership like those discussed in the Terranova weblog community, the consistency with which cars in a game like Driver behave, the way AI improves gameplay. In fact, in a short survey among game designers GEE magazine presented in November 2003, six out of seven developers predicted some sort of heightened realism, be it regarding representation, interaction or decreased mediation.

A shortcoming of Spielplatz Computer, though due, most likely, to the printing standards of the Telepolis-series, is the scarcity of images and illustrations. After all, there is a generation of gamers as well as game-designers who have never played Pong on a black and white TV set or held a Game&Watch. In the chapter that deals with the issue of exhibitions and archives ("Spieltheorie"), Lischka himself deplores the fact that young players and developers only have a second-hand knowledge of older games. As a minimum, a history of computer games should contain images of the games it covers and the machines they run on.

A good supplement to Spielplatz Computer is, therefore, the catalogue of the travelling exhibition "History of Games" that premiered at the Games Convention in Leipzig in 2002. The catalogue is a slim paperback volume of 78 pages, containing hardware shots and colour photos of screen displays, and includes captions. The platforms shown range from 1972 and the Odyssey console via a decade of TV and PC-based games and the first handhelds up to the 2000/ 2001 versions of the big three, PlayStation, Game Cube and Xbox.

The publisher of the catalogue - and curator of the exhibition - is the Computerspiele Museum, Berlin or, rather, Andreas Lange, the driving force behind this project. The Museum of Computer Games is a singular initiative in the area and is currently in the process of restructuring and reopening. It was founded in 1996 by the Verband der Unterhaltungssoftware Deutschlands e.V. (German Association for Entertainment Software) and the Förderverein für Jugend- und Sozialarbeit e.V. (Development Association for Youth and Welfare Work). And while the museum is struggling for funding as we speak, it's apparent how much the landscape has changed since the mid-nineties.

One indicator of this change is the spread of game-focused research centres and the diversification of the market for game magazines. In 2003 two new German-language periodicals were introduced: bold, lifestyle-oriented GEE Games Entertainment Education and with its decidedly academic approach, the Edge-like Game Face. Spielplatz Computer may not have blazed the trail for these developments, but it certainly pointed us in the right direction.

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