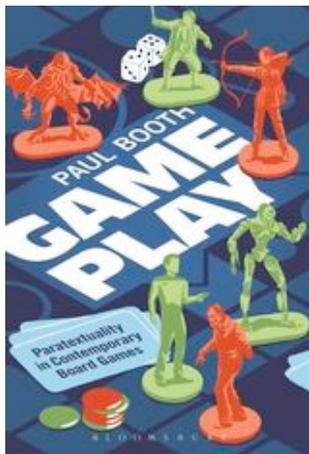


Book Review: *Game Play* by Paul Booth

Douglas Brown
Falmouth University



Booth, P. (2015) *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. 264 pp. ISBN: 978-1628927436.

Paul Booth's *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games* takes on the task of understanding and explicating the place of board games in the context of transmedia franchise projects old and new. Booth is an Associate Professor in the College of Communication at DePaul University, whose deep interest in games combines in *Game Play* with previous work on digital fandom, play and close analysis of new media texts.

In the past I've written on film and videogame hybrids and encountered something similar to what Booth describes here when outlining the specific area the book explores—licensed board games from major media franchises. This is an important sub-genre to study, as it comprises many commercially high profile examples of board games in the mainstream. However as is the case in movie-videogame adaptations, a few critically successful games stand out amidst a wasteland of derivative, rebranded and mass-market product. Booth's methodology manages to shine a light on the process of adaptation by exposing both the trash and the treasure to the same degree of critical enquiry. This judicial approach also

extends into the analysis of the games themselves. Booth takes neither the approach of a transmedial 'aca-fan' seeking only how the franchise is demarcated, nor that of the grizzled board gaming veteran who overlooks thematic or franchised niceties to focus solely upon gameplay. Booth is aware that these texts are complex, nested adaptations, often the product of several degrees of authorship, and so should be studied holistically as cultural artefacts with game, theme and audience all given their due. Thus anecdotal examples of gameplay encounters sit happily alongside closer examinations of rules, algorithms or design strategies throughout the book. Through this even-handed scrutiny, presumptions on both the content and purpose of licensed board games are pleasantly challenged, and the role of games in transmedia franchises of the present are explored with a view to their future potential.

Booth's approach demonstrates exemplary textual analysis of games in its methodology but also shows why this approach is important through the results which it produces. Taking board game adaptations seriously, warts and all, allows for consideration

of the process of adaptation to raise the sorts of questions which are what the book is really seeking to answer. These numerous comparisons between different takes on the same license, running the gamut from *Lord of the Rings* and *Dr. Who* to *Star Trek* and *The Walking Dead*, build upon one another around the book's core thesis: that licensed board games can be fruitfully seen as paratexts rather than derivative spin-offs. Booth includes a list of paratextual principles in the introduction which are engaged with in the analysis that follows. This approach is as much a reminder to engage with the historical context of adaptation as it is an appeal for future board game adaptations to embrace the potential of the form in the context of transmedial projects. Booth describes through his analyses principles of a special role for the board-game paratext: 'paratextual board games allow players to enter a cult world, but use a more tangible and material presence than video games to harness player affect' (2015: 6). He demonstrates the way this happens by opening each chapter with a story set in the world of the franchise which gradually pans out to reveal the ludic superstructure enabling and enhancing these player's experiences in the franchise world.

It is the space and consideration which Booth gives to the critically lesser-known games in this book which is really important for games scholarship and reminiscent of some of the work in the 'platform studies' series of books in videogame studies (Bogost & Montfort 2009; Altice, 2015). It's easy to see the effective alignment of game mechanics with story in something like the hit *Battlestar Galactica* co-operative board game, published in 2008 after the franchise was rebooted, and its source material. Booth, though, contrasts and connects this game with its progenitor, the old *Battlestar Galactica* space-combat game from 1978. Placing the two on an even footing reveals so much more about both games unified by an originator fiction which, in this example, has also made evolutionary strides and negotiated growing pains. The chapter uses the two games to look at approaches to adaptation—the older game phrasing the adaptation spatially and the newer taking an approach which favours temporality. This becomes an opportunity to interrogate the place of games within franchises, considering the 'Spime-like' connection

gamers have with games as spatio-temporal moments of interactivity, building upon Bruce Sterling's (2005) concepts and seeing a particular nuance in their application to games. Booth argues that licensed board games are Spimatic moments within the grander context of a franchise, and through this lens: 'the perception of consumption and play as separate practices shifts to see them as one cogent and chronological process instead. Paratextual board games are uniquely positioned nodes in a network of player activity' (2015: 103).

There are 15 principles on Booth's list which are demonstrated through the book's eight comparative chapters—and certainly the analysis in this book concentrates on some of these principles more than others. The most prevalent principles turn out to be the earlier ones Booth describes, particularly that of designed 'unstructure' motivating the process of adaptation, game design and player engagement in these paratexts. He outlines this in the chapter which looks at Lovecraft games, in particular *Fantasy Flight's Arkham Horror* (2005). As Tanya Krzywinska (2009) observes in the context of Lovecraftian video game adaptations, Booth finds in these games Lovecraft's horror of the unknown and unknowable represented through complex, sometimes unfair and sprawling rules systems, dense rulebooks and an inability to know what the ramifications of actions could be. Many of the features of so-called 'Ameritrash' games' focus on theme over fluidity of gameplay are celebrated through this lens as successful adaptations of Lovecraftian horror. In the very irony of an attempt to convert Lovecraftian themes to any kind of structured rules system, Booth sees a determined and designed attempt at creating 'unstructure'—'Ultimately, these attempts to concretise the unstructured [nature] of Lovecraft represent a method of rhetorically hybridizing rules and story that highlights the unique positioning of paratextual board games within the media environment' (2015: 42). This unstructure is shown in future chapters to be a playful, dialogous space where tensions between the multiple competing authors and the audience's playing and authoring their own stories can be reconciled. This quite unique paratextual location is magnified when coupled with the Spimatic approach described above to become the book's most enduring observation, highly

relevant to transmedial content creators.

This book is that rare combination of solid critical methodologies alongside such clear enthusiasm for the subject matter that anyone with an interest in the hobby could enjoy just as easily as those in the academic fields of Game, Media or Film Studies at which it is aimed. The board game enthusiast could, in fact, find something of a resolution to the perennial colliding of 'Ameritrash' and 'Eurogame' design philosophies or 'pasted on' game themes which sometimes polarise the hobby in Booth's measured, generous analysis, beginning with but going well beyond the 'unstructure' detailed above. I would hope that this book heralds further close textual analysis of board games in other contexts; the medium is definitely mature enough for more of this. However, it is in its clarifying of the role of paratexts in transmedia through the lens of board games where this book may well have the most lasting impact, as expanding transmedial franchises mutate to encompass and relate to both the present board game renaissance and a generation better versed in interactivity than any before.

Dr Douglas Brown is Head of Subject for the Games Courses at Falmouth University's Games Academy in Cornwall, UK. His research interests include games and adaptation, board games and how games tell stories.

References

- Altice, N. (2015) *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer/Entertainment System Platform*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Bogost, I. & Montfort, N. (2009) *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Booth, P. (2015) *Game Play: Paratextuality in Contemporary Board Games*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Krzywinska, T. (2009) 'Reanimating H.P. Lovecraft: The Ludic Paradox of Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth' in B. Perron (ed.) *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*. Jefferson: Mcfarland, 267-287.
- Sterling, B. (2005) *Shaping Things*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.