Alan F. Meades. *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games.* London: Routledge, 2015 (= Routledge Advances in Game Studies 5). 204 pp.

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One of the most fundamental challenges in the academic study of games lies in the very feature that defines them, their rule-bound interactivity, which not only both limits and enables players to do things but always also entails a certain positioning on their part toward these rules. Every game comes with its own metagame, and players' experiences differ not just within the more or less fuzzy limits of their game but across them as well. Since interactivity offers not only a set of limitations and affordances but also a perspective on the set itself, it opens up a vast multiplicity of possible ways of playing that make it hard to analyze 'the' gameplay or 'the' gaming experience, and even harder to construct 'the player' than to posit 'the reader' or 'the audience' in other forms of cultural expression. Instead of avoiding this fundamental element of uncertainty, video game studies in particular has been facing and even embracing it almost from the start, and its explorations of the many different ways of playing have yielded fascinating results whose implications are relevant far beyond the immediate context of video games.

  Alan F. Meades's *Understanding Counterplay in Video Games* is part of this research tradition, whose cornerstones are the work of Mia Consalvo and Julian Kücklich on cheating and Espen Aarseth on the transgressive player, and which

also includes notions from other disciplinary contexts such as Richard Schechner's "dark play."[1] Meades's study is a fine addition to this interdisciplinary scholarly discourse, although it could have drawn on it even more substantially to delineate its own conceptual contribution more precisely. The study is also an indication of the immense further research potential that the issue of counterplay will continue to hold, not only for the foreseeable future but indeed as an integral part of video game studies in general. Studies on counterplay – "play that is understood as oppositional, anti-social, and even criminal by its players and observers" (p. 1) – may be systematic but can never be exhaustive or conclusive, and Meades's work shows that any overly theoretical approach will not do justice to the often rapid changes in the media environment of video games. The strength of Meades's own approach lies in its particularity and its empirical method, since he considers a rather precise set of counterplay cases and tries to understand them first on their own terms rather than use them only as starting points for abstraction. The downside to this "ethnographic manner" (p. 1) is that the study at times dwells too extensively on the anecdotal, on what it openly admits is "a descriptive snapshot of practices, motivations, and, as a corollary, meaning" (p. 1). In doing so, it occasionally does not quite manage to convincingly connect the particular with the general, but its value lies less in theory-building than in its thorough and knowledgeable analyses of particular practices of counterplay that have not yet received sufficient scholarly attention.

Meades defines counterplay as play that goes against "the general expectation of compliant conventional play," and which "instead contains a dynamic that works against rules, against other players, seeks alternate ways of playing and potentially different pleasures" (p. 1). Thus, counterplay may range from mild banter to swatting, and its very openness makes the term both appealing and potentially problematic, like an all-purpose tool that is too cumbersome to actually handle. Meades acknowledges that counterplay has been amply discussed in various ways since the term was introduced by Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter in 2005 and then modified further from their Marxist approach by Tom Apperley in 2010.[2] Along his lines, Meades understands counterplay to be "in

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1 See, e. g., Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007); Julian Kücklich. "Forbidden Pleasures – Cheating in Computer Games" (*The Pleasures of Computer Gaming*, ed. Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson; Jeferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2008, pp. 52–71); Richard Schechner, "Playing" (*Play & Culture* 1 (1988): pp. 3–19).
2 Cf. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, "A Playful Multitude? Mobilising and Counter-Mobilising Immaterial Game Labour" (*The Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005), http://five.fibreculture-journal.org/fcj-024-a-playful-multitude-mobilising-and-counter-mobilising-immaterial-game-la-bour/. Accessed Dec 12, 2018); and Tom Apperley, "Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from

contrast to the norm and, through its opposition, the structures, contexts, and expectations related to the game: etiquette, rules, its spirit, and discourses of legitimacy, ideology, and/or law" (p. 6). He is highly aware of the political and sociocultural implications of the concept, even though the counterplayers he encounters are usually not, which will sometimes result in a significant discrepancy between theory and practice in the individual case studies that makes the interpretive framework seem less effective, but which should not detract from the validity of Meades's own assessment.

Notably, Meades is also highly aware of the theoretical elusiveness of counterplay, and his first chapter on "What is Counterplay?" is aptly followed by one entitled "The Challenges of Studying Counterplay." He knowingly stretches the concept to the point where it threatens to become both all-encompassing and useless, only to then identify some features that provide enough family resemblances to still make the term theoretically valid without being defined beyond practical application. Meades convincingly presents counterplay as a dialectic of normativity and transgression as well as of individual and collective agents, arguing that the rules of 'normal' play are not first established and then crossed but are often revealed only in being transgressed, and only if their transgression is responded to by others. He rightly insists that counterplay is necessarily contingent and relative, since the dialectic of normativity and transgression may shift along many axes, so that counterplay may only be described in very general or very particular terms that do justice to the situatedness of their own historical, technological, moral, and sociocultural conditions. This includes an appropriately self-reflexive normativity on the part of the researcher himself, whose construction of "the general public" (p. 29) or "contemporary Western play values" (p. 21) is just as contingent. Especially the positing of "compliant average players" (p. 29) would have deserved more scrutiny at times, since one may well wonder if compliant play, if it even exists, is not just as elusive a concept as counterplay.

All in all, however, this consideration of the relative norms of play is the most pertinent and far-reaching theoretical aspect of Meades's project, since it offers a fruitful perspective not only on the complexity of rule-systems but also of their contexts. This perspective is naturally haunted by the deconstructive issue of delimiting context itself, and occasionally Meades's notion of counterplay blurs the already fuzzy boundary between game and non-game so much that the term

the Situated to the Global" (Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2010. http://www.network-cultures.org/_uploads/TOD%236%20total%20def.pdf. Accessed Dec 12, 2018).

seems to become synonymous with transgression in general and thus loses its conceptual value (for example, I would be much more hesitant to include software piracy or infringement of intellectual property laws in counterplay so as to retain more analytic precision). Nevertheless, Meades offers some structure when he opposes the dominant yet reductive understanding of counterplay transgression as "pathogenic" (p. 30) to four alternative forms: transgression as resistance, mastery, identity, and carnival. (At the same time, he expresses a valid desire to move away from understanding the counterplayer in terms of identity – 'the' cheater – toward understanding it as an activity.) These categories are apt in theory, and yet their application to the case studies sometimes seems more of an afterthought than a methodological structure, and they do not add as much to the analysis than the discussion of the counterplay practices themselves. The most striking result with regard to these categories is that the first one, resistance, eventually turns out to be quite irrelevant to counterplayers, and Meades persuasively argues that they are much more seduced by the gaming industry than seeing themselves in opposition to it, which forbids any romanticizing of counterplayers as rebels against the (capitalist) system, as well as ascribing any other all too ideological motivation to them.

Such conclusions are derived from the four sets of case studies that constitute the major part of the monograph, and which address different yet related modes of counterplay: grief play, boosting/glitching, hardware hacking, and illicit modding. Meades sets the framework for each case study by defining his terms and commenting on the technological aspects that enable counterplay, speaking from the position of a participating observer who joins glitchers in their quest for finding the things that the developers and their quality assurance teams have missed, or documenting written conversations he had with asking grief players, hackers, or hardware modders for their motivation in playing with, against, and beyond the rules – rules that include moral and legal ones as much as those of a particular game. The chapters focus on a few individuals rather than groups, and on just a few games as well, and yet they offer more than anecdotal evidence in their empiricism, since Meades usually manages to embed their cases in a larger and more general discourse and shows that they are indeed exemplary rather than unique in their actions. His narrow focus also allows him to avoid speaking of counterplay as an identity rather than an action, and if a composite image of 'the' counterplayer emerges, it is sufficiently multiple to serve the purpose of inquiring into what people *do* instead of what they *are*. This is particularly relevant when some of these people seek to derive an identity from what they do, as their self-conception often seems to be at odds with how they are perceived by others, which seems almost tragic in the case of the glitchers who seek the recognition of developers as peers but are seen as criminals by the industry whose

end user license agreements they violate. Here, Meades's broad understanding of context is much more productive than problematic, as he concisely traces the economic effects counterplay can have, and how in-game actions may eventually result in plunging stock market prices. At the same time, this chapter in particular shows the numerous profound implications Meades's work has that it naturally cannot pursue within its scope, since the economic clearly works both ways here, and the glitching scene is drawing attention to an increasing issue of ownership and stability: In times of more or less centralized online distribution and digital rights management, do we own the video games we play, and if so, in what way exactly? May we play the games we own in any way we like, and if we cannot play that way, do we really own them? What do we own exactly if the game may be changed at any point by a patch? What *is* the game in these conditions? These are the very general questions raised indirectly by Meades's particular approach, and they validate his narrow focus by showing their relevance far beyond this immediate context.

In general, Meades represents the counterplay practices in a balanced way and positions himself when he should; in arguing for the need to move away from the often negative connotations of many varieties of counterplay, he is careful not to celebrate them uncritically either, and he also does not pretend to be a neutral or objective observer without an opinion. His empiricist take on counterplay repeatedly discusses its embeddedness as much as it acknowledges the necessary distance to its object, and Meades has managed to overcome the methodological difficulty of collecting sufficient data in a realm that is often marked not only as immoral but also as illegal.

Notably, Meades focuses on the counterplayers' own assessments of their activities but always offers his own critical take on their positions, and he writes as diligently about the technological processes of counterplay as about those who employ them. This makes for fascinating reading, and in those passages Meades provides a contemporary history of technology along with his discussion of counterplaying as a media practice or a subculture. Curiously, the one aspect of this media environment that is neglected in this mode of writing is the attention economy in which counterplaying often occurs, and while Meades repeatedly dwells on YouTube channels and other modes of self-representation online (such as the videos of *Minecraft* grief play or glitchers sharing their craft), it seems to me that his argument acknowledges it rather implicitly than explicitly, and this lack makes itself felt rather conspicuously in the larger speculation as to the motivations for counterplay.

Be that as it may, all of the above indicates that Meades's study of counterplay is productive in more than one way, not only in the results it produces in its own unique way, but also in the numerous open questions on the subject that

Meades points out. If readers will assume a critical stance toward Meades's project, then it is not because what is there is flawed (and it hardly is), but because it immediately points to so much more, and the answers it gives seem to vanish beneath the questions it raises. Meades's study of counterplay is firmly embedded in the academic discourse on the subject, but from this solid footing it manages to explore further just how complex counterplay is, not in a vague but in a concrete way, since it offers ways of approaching it analytically nevertheless. From individual case studies, Meades works out clear theoretical implications that will enrich our scholarly understanding of what counterplay can be, precisely because the study itself convincingly argues against the possibility of ever defining counterplay as anything but relative to a large variety of factors. Exploring this variety further beyond Meades's own particular case studies will not only allow for a clearer understanding of what we may mean by counterplay (and what counterplay may mean), but perhaps, along the way, even for a better understanding of what it means to play at all.