

Role playing materials

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VALORIZATION ADDENDUM

Towards the end of my dissertation project, Maastricht University came up with the idea of having Ph.D. candidates write about the social and/or economic value of their work in an additional chapter, the Valorization Addendum. I first introduce the rationale behind this addendum. Then, I explain what it means to me, and finally, I show what social and economic value readers might draw from my dissertation project.

What Is the Valorization Addendum?

The Valorization Addendum is an additional chapter that is not part of the dissertation's assessment. The addendum should demonstrate the value of the knowledge that a dissertation in the Humanities provides. Knowledge valorization refers to the "process of creating value from knowledge, by making knowledge suitable and/or available for social (and/or economic) use and by making knowledge suitable for translation into competitive products, services, processes and new commercial activities" (adapted definition based on the National Valorization Committee, 2011, p. 8, as quoted from the Regulation Valorization Addendum sent by the Graduate School on 19 June 2014).

As stated in the definition above, the task is to suggest or show examples of how one's knowledge produces commodities for sale on the market. It should offer the Ph.D. candidate an opportunity to create bridges between her or his theoretical work and its utility.

What Is the Valorization Addendum to Me?

I have studied comparative literature and English studies at the Johannes Gutenberg-University in Mainz, Germany. Both philological disciplines are at the heart of the Humanities. English studies as a discipline creates further value in that one track of this study program produces English teachers. I did not follow this track. I studied English for the sake of the language, culture, and literature. My choice to study comparative literature followed the same interests. Interestingly, comparative literature in Mainz changed in 2009 into European Literature. The value of international comparative literature studies seemed to be not enough for my former university to translate knowledge into

“competitive products, services, processes and new commercial activities” (National Valorization Committee, 2011, p. 8). Or am I wrong and this change was rather about narrowing of focus, a change that has nothing to do with an economical imperative translating its agency across all differentiated institutions? By differentiated institutions I refer to Niklas Luhman’s theory that state, religion, and economy began to separate during the Renaissance. I wrote my masters thesis on this topic and how it shows in the work of Shakespeare. It seems that the imperative or driving force of economy is reuniting all these systems again. What I saw at my former university with the change in comparative literature and what I see in Maastricht looks like the same driving force at work. Humanities have to show how well they play the economic game, and how they produce commodities, otherwise they do not get funded and perish. One of the English studies scholars whom I admired during my more theoretical studies, Terry Eagleton, wrote about these changes more drastically in his essay “The Slow Death of the University” (2015). Here, he gives more examples of how the “deap-seated political and economic forces” work (Eagleton, para 14, 2015). One anecdote stuck in my mind, his withdrawal as a chair at the University of Oxford because he had the impression that his duties were those of a manager rather than those of a scholar. It is a drastic decision and in Eagleton’s case it serves as an exemplum, but for me as a Ph.D. candidate, I need other ways to signal what I think. Despite the lukewarm resistance to the addendum by my colleagues in 2014 (only two showed up at an open information morning on this topic), I think that the Valorization Addendum is the right place to show how a Humanities Ph.D. can play. I do not think that I am a good player or gamer, but I do not simply want to withdraw.

I thought about the economic valorization of my work after I submitted my masters thesis in 2009. At the time, I worked at Deutsche Telekom AG and was familiar with an operating economic force from within the economy. I wondered how to bridge my future academic work with these new impressions I got as an intern and later as an employee of this company. In 2010, I spoke with Dr. Peter Waldmann, a former tutor at Mainz University who shaped my studies profoundly with his expertise and passion for our discipline. At an Argentine restaurant, we talked about my plans. I showed him three dissertation projects: one on Shakespeare, one on virtual realities, and one on games. The moment I explained what I wanted to do, I made my decision. He also thought that it would better fit my development as a scholar if I did not write another piece on Shakespeare, but pursued my theoretical interest in role-playing games. Role-playing games are a genre of games that is enriched with narrative elements, an ideal topic to bridge my former interest in literary studies with new disciplines closer to economy. The work of the economic imperative in my decision was: If video games make more money

than Hollywood and the music industry together, there must be something interesting to keep me working for five years, right? Thus, my choice to write a dissertation on games has changed my pursuit of ‘purely’ theoretical knowledge to include the economic imperative. After a detour at the University of Siegen with GamesCoop, a group of scholars dedicated to games, I joined the project Narrative Fan Practices, part of the national project Cultural Dynamics, funded by the Netherlands Research Organization (NWO).

Valorization Questions

My dissertation is in the hands of the committee now. It is the end of 2015. I need to finish my musings about valorization that began in 2009. The “Regulation Valorization Addendum” document that I mentioned above suggests five questions that may guide the Ph.D. candidate in writing this chapter.

The first question is on relevance: “What is the social (and/or economic) relevance of your research results (i.e. in addition to the scientific relevance)?” This dissertation is the very first dissertation to examine the role of materials in role-playing games, one of the most successful genres of games. Video games alone made a revenue of \$22.41 billion in the US in 2014. Of this total, \$5.08 billion is spent on hardware (Electronic Software Association, 2015, p. 13). As such, people spend more money on video games than on DVDs, music CDs, or cinema. This dissertation proves that materials, such as hardware, have value as a research topic for game studies. The theoretical value of studying materials, as well as their economic weight, encourage further studies to improve our understanding of video games and analog games. Further research will provide vital insights for academia and for game designers. In Chapter 4, this dissertation shows game designers that in order to design more stable mixed reality games, they need to rethink their understanding of the digital/real divide. This dichotomy permeates not only academic thought, but also the video game industry. I show this ingrained belief in Chapter 4 when I discuss some of the literature on mixed reality technology and how Oculus promotes its virtual reality headset as a “step into the game.” The economic relevance of Chapter 4 alone helps the designer to rethink how game software, hardware, the site of play, and the player interact.

The second question asks about target groups: “To whom, in addition to the academic community, are your research results of interest and why?” The target group of my research results includes game journalists, game designers, and hobbyists. Game journalists have rarely written on the topic of game materials. As gamers are a growing and aging subculture, there are many interesting topics that my research invigorates. For example,

what does your gaming environment look like? What are your favorite game materials from the 1990s? Game designers include materiality in their game design documents when they plan a video game, but often this materiality does not refer to the physical aspects of playing a game, but to the materiality within the virtual world. My research informs how players experience the tangible side of games, even virtually oriented video games. Hobbyists get a voice with my research, as I address practices such as the crafting, maintaining, and modding of game materials ranging from costumes to computers.

The third question is on activities and/or products that might result from the theoretical work: “Into which concrete products, services, processes, activities or commercial activities will your results be translated and shaped?” This dissertation raises awareness on materials as active actors in role-playing games. To increase the awareness among players, designers, and scholars, I have disseminated my research and stimulated the discourse on game materials over the past four years. I have regularly contributed to the community of larpers by co-editing and editing an essay collection for the annual larp conference *MittelPunkt* in Germany. I have written for, edited, and co-edited the 2013, 2014, and 2015 anthologies (Bienia, 2009, 2011a, 2011c, 2012; Bienia & Dombrowski, 2013). Especially, the *MittelPunkt Aufsatzsammlung 2015* anthology ties directly into my research with its thematic focus on materials in larp with the title *Larp:Zeug* (English: Larp:Stuff) (Bienia & Schlickmann, 2015). Beside this, I have written popular articles for the print magazine *LARPzeit*, and the online magazines *Fandom Observer*, *inlarp.de*, and *teilzeithelden.de* (Bienia, 2009, 2011a). I have presented my research at the German *MittelPunkt* and Nordic *Knutepunkt* conventions. I contributed to the U.S. larp convention anthology with a quantitative analysis of larp motivations (Bienia, 2012). Additionally, I initiated the founding of the first academic research group on larp in Germany in autumn 2013 during a meeting of kids’ larp organizers. The research group is part of the *Deutscher Live-Rollenspiel Verband e.V.* and provides contacts, a library, and further help to students and graduate researchers. Thus, I have provided concrete products (*MittelPunkt* books), services (library at larp research group, articles), and processes (larp research group for networking).

The fourth question is on innovation: “To what degree can your results be called innovative in respect to the existing range of products, services, processes, activities and commercial activities?” There has been no academic monograph of comparable scope on game materials in general, and on role-playing game materials in particular. Above, I wrote that the concrete and theoretical results of this study can offer help in rethinking game design. The explicit focus on materials opens possibilities to approach games from an innovative perspective. Although game design always includes materials

and their function, the innovative result of my research is that it demonstrates the value of a change of perspective. It is the symmetric perspective that puts materials on the same level as the player (and designer). Materials are active collaborators, not passive intermediaries. The key to using the theoretical results is that designers change their focus from previously defined aspects of games, such as story or rules, to materials as collaborators, such as displays, input devices, and the movement of the player's body during play. Including game materials unveils how players experience the material aspects of games. Additionally, this change of focus interrogates how designers work themselves in relation to materials when they make games. Following Latour's laboratory studies, Hensel and Beil transferred the study of laboratories as workplaces to game development studios (Beil & Hensel, 2011). I contributed to this book at the beginning of my dissertation (Bienia, 2011b). A study of materials with actor-network theory, as I have done in this dissertation, offers insights and innovative tools for how to approach game design, work practices, and the workplace.

The fifth question is on the schedule and implementation of the products resulting from the dissertation: "How will this/these plan(s) for valorization be shaped? What is the schedule, are there risks involved, what market opportunities are there and what are the costs involved?" As concrete products, I have published the *MittelPunkt* books at the Zauberfeder Verlag in Braunschweig (Bienia, 2014; Bienia & Dombrowski, 2013; Bienia & Schlickmann, 2015). Furthermore, this book will be published with Zauberfeder Verlag as a print and ebook version in 2016. Any profit will be donated to non-profit organizations who create opportunities for children to play role-playing games. Additionally, there will be a free pdf offered for download at the publisher's website. The free pdf will guarantee everyone the access to this book.

Final Thoughts

In the beginning, I wrote that Maastricht University came up with the idea to have Ph.D. candidates write about the social and/or economic value of their work. I believe this is a move on the part of the university to translate the economic imperative.

As Eagleton writes in his essay, what is lost is a necessary distance between the ivory tower and other systems. Distance is necessary for being critical about "the values, goals, and interests of a social order too frenetically bound up in its own short-term practical pursuits to be capable of much self-criticism" (Eagleton, para 2, 2015). It is the short-term vision that I find most troublesome.

I do not disagree on the idea of thinking about the social and/or economic value of a dissertation in the Humanities. As I have written above, my professional and academic path has tried to bridge both. Writing this valorization document, I could ask myself new questions about the theoretical implications of my dissertation. Thus, I could reflect on and strengthen my point on how a study of game materials may contribute to the (video) game industry. However, I want to use the opportunity to stress the need for distance when writing any official document that asks the researcher to justify her or his work. If academia trains its next generations to write like marketing professionals, it should encourage them to keep a critical distance in this task. The Valorization Addendum gains its value when it becomes a place for new ideas about how to bridge theoretical and economic forces, and where a critical reflection on this bridging is necessary. A sixth question should be included to the regulation document: How does the task of justifying the social and/or economic value of my work collaborate with my academic tasks? Omitting a self-reflective question in a Valorization Addendum betrays the core principle of academic work: to ask questions. Otherwise next-generation scholars will degrade their work into craftsmanship that works for its own sake, a decorative art that justifies short-term ideas. Instead, any such task should encourage them to ask further questions. Good questions determine the value of any academic work.

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