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The Art of Neighbours Gaming: Facebook, fan-crafted games and humour

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In this article, I discuss the relationship between gaming, craft, humour and television text as I explore the production of fan-made board games by members of the Facebook group 'The Art of *Neighbours*'. I draw upon examples from the group and from a series of interviews¹ with its members to argue that the paratextual 'play' these fans partake in replicates the notion of Australian soap *Neighbours* (1985-present) as being a programme whose pleasures come through a combination of affection and having 'much to laugh at' (Wober and Fazal 1994, 85) - indeed, the show itself encourages a playful approach to its narratives.

Neighbours has a history of attracting a following who often enjoy the programme partly because they feel able to 'laugh at' it - often including teenagers, students and young adults – or those who first came to watch the show in their youth and have continued to watch (see: Wober and Fazal 1994: 85; Gillespie 1995; Williams 2010). Despite at its peak attracting 15-20 million viewers in the UK and around 1 million in Australia, the show has long had a sense of attracting a 'cult' following, largely due to its daytime scheduling in the UK and appeal to the student audience. Its current audience figures stand at around 400,000 in Australia and 1.5-2 million in the UK - the two markets most associated with the soap, although it is shown around the world².

In the spirit of being able to 'laugh' at the subject of fandom (see also Baym 1995/2010; Klink 2010), Facebook group 'The Art of *Neighbours*' (AoN) was launched by a group of then students in 2007 (see Bury et al 2013). The group (which has just over 3200 members as of February 2014) is made up of primarily British viewers and operates at 'UK pace', discussing episodes as they air in the UK (Australia is two weeks ahead). AoN members discuss the latest developments in the show, primarily through the medium of fan-created artwork - however, unlike the more 'serious' fan art of other communities (see Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), AoN's tribute is deliberately low-tech

and humorous: 'We have decided to represent our love for it through the refined medium of MS Paint. If you want to have a go at creating a beautiful tribute to your favourite character, then you can submit it to our gallery for all to see and worship.' (Art of *Neighbours* 'About' page).

Images submitted are usually satirical, although the group points out 'We freakin'[sic] love *Neighbours* and all the actors and would hate [them] to think this is how we ACTUALLY see them. SO, everything in here is made in jest'. They focus on plot developments, things characters say and do, or simply depicting characters in a humorous way. (See Figure 1)



Fig. 1 Stephanie Scully as depicted on AoN

The use of the deliberately low-tech MS Paint for creating art work echoes the approach of other popular web phenomena, such as *MS Paint Adventures*, *Hyperbole and a Half*, *Jim'll Paint It* and any number of memes; all of which use this or similar software, usually for humorous purposes. This adoption of a retro technology echoes Simon Reynolds' (2011) depiction of the retro sensibility as one that is 'amused and charmed by' the past and makes a plaything of it.

The humorous retro artwork on AoN frequently extends to crafting and gaming, with a yearly 'Secret Santa' in which members buy or make a *Neighbours*-themed gift for one another. The currency of

the AoN fan 'gift economy' (see Jenkins 2006, Hellekson 2009, Baym 2010) is crafted artefacts that reference the fan object - and often the fan community - with humour.

A common gift is a *Neighbours*-themed board game or DVD game. Members adapt popular games such as *Cluedo*, *Top Trumps* or *Connect 4* to represent aspects of the show and, often, aspects of AoN itself. In this respect, these activities replicate other, commercially available board game adaptations such as the TV-show or film themed versions of *Monopoly*, *Trivial Pursuit*, *Cluedo* and *Operation*. However, what differentiates the AoN board games from these 'official' games is their deliberate amateur-ness. Games may be partially created digitally, but there is handcrafting involved through cutting, pasting and sellotaping – often onto existing games or cardboard, and in a deliberately low-key manner with the 'rough edges' showing (see Fig. 2)



Fig 2. *Neighbours*-themed Snakes and Ladders.

The act of game creation not only references characters (as seen above); running jokes from the AoN community are incorporated into games, through the inclusion of community memes/running jokes, popular 'arts' or references to other members (see Fig. 3):

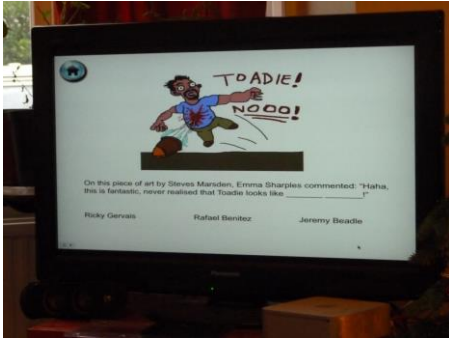


Fig. 3: DVD trivia game.

AoN members occasionally arrange meet-ups with one another, and gaming has formed a key part of this. S told me how she created a *Cluedo* game digitally which was then developed into a physical product by another member and played at a meet-up to celebrate Australia Day (fig. 4):

The game I made was a version of *Cluedo* based on the story line where the guy who didn't really do anything/assaulted Didge at their prom was killed. In *Neighbours* there was some question over who was responsible so I took this further as is the wont of AoN and replaced the *cluedo* [sic] characters with *Neighbours* characters and gave them each a themed weapon/way of killing that took the piss. I called it *Who Did(ge) it?*... I designed the board and characters and weapons but [member] brought it to life by making a physical copy... I didn't make the game for anyone in particular I just thought AoN would find it funny. (S, interview, 2013)



Fig. 4. Members playing Cluedo at a meet-up.

In the acts of game creation and sharing, fans are explicitly engaging in forms of collaborative play where the activities of creating, receiving and sharing are as important as playing the board games. A core component of the Secret Santa gifting is the photographing of presents and sharing of these photos with the group, followed by another game - of guessing who created which item.

The acts of DIY fan-creation within AoN are in distinct contrast to those fan-creators in some other fandoms whose work has become a professionalised purchasable commodity to compete with 'official' merchandise (see Scott 2009). Indeed, the AoN fan created paratexts fill a gap where very little official merchandise exists outside of that produced in the soap's late 1980s and early 1990s peak, when items such as collectors' cards, annuals and tie-in novels were released. In Australia a series of merchandise items were released in 2005, to coincide with the soap's twentieth anniversary, including a trivia game, but these items were not released in the UK.

In terms of official game-oriented paratexts 'extend[ing] the invitation to play' (Gray, 2010: 187), there has, again, been very little. In addition to the 20th anniversary game, Spears Games released a set of trivia cards in the 1990s³, and in the late 1980s, an official *Neighbours* board game was released. The aim of the game was to construct storylines using a series of cards representing characters and events. This game receives mixed reviews from these fans:

Quite hard to actually play- too many rules and despite watching it back then I now can't remember half the references the game makes! (SJ, 25 March 2014)

I remember playing it in Year 4 when we had 'free time'. Neighbours free time was the best time! (HH, 5 Feb 2014)

I got out the Neighbours board game to play with friends last weekend (first time) and gave up as it was all a bit too complex. (LT, 21 October 2012)

No-one in AoN has crafted an update to this game that has been shared with the group, although two users did say they had customised it at home:

My friends and I have added extra character and plot cards to make this more current. As board games go, it's one of our favourites. (DM, 5 Feb 2014)

I had it, we loved it! Even made up our own version for our street. (CL, 5 Feb 2014)

A video game was also released in 1991 by Zeppelin games but its plot, involving a skateboarding Scott Robinson, bore little resemblance to the soap in terms of its (lack of) storylines.

The lack of official merchandise is such that, when Channel 5 launched a *Neighbours* competition in 2014, to win £10,000 plus a selection of *Neighbours* merchandise, AoN members excitedly speculated on what the merchandise might be, and discussion quickly turned to community in-jokes such as references to props like Paul Robinson's 'I Like Me' mug and Karl and Susan Kennedy's Blue Box (used euphemistically in the show to refer to their sex life):

...but what's the Neighbours merchandise???!? (CH, 5 Feb 2014)

Bollocks to the £10k, I wondered that too! (AE, 5 Feb 2014)

I hope the Neighbours merch is the Dial-A-Kyle sign, the blue box, and Dahl. (HC, 12 Feb 2014)

I hope it's an "I like me" mug! now [sic] that's top quality and we've not seen it since Paul moved into the Eclipse Apartments! (SC, 13 Feb 2014)

I made my own I Like Me mug and I'm still delighted by it. (HC, 13 Feb 2014)

That HC recreated a prop for herself as a form of referencing both the show and AoN is unsurprising and acts as another form of creative paratextual 'play' between viewer, text and fan-community that is common to this group - for example, other Secret Santa gifts have involved creators recreating props from the show, crafting magnets, mugs and figurines based on AoN arts and the production of an annual of *G'day* - the in-community digital magazine created by one member. *G'day* is presented as a gossip mag based on the soap's events given away free with the *Erinsborough News* and *West Waratah Star* (the show's fictional newspapers) - a form of paratextual play that both extends the text outside of the TV episodes (see Booth 2010; Gray 2010) and draws upon fan readings and jokes (see Veale 2013) (Fig. 5). AoN members speculated that the show was deliberately referencing the magazine when character Chris, the fictional agony aunt in *G'day*'s 'Ask Christos' column briefly took the role of Agony Aunt in the show:

It would appear that the writer monkeys have been reading aon and g'day again. Looks like chris [sic] is going to help summer[sic] with the dating column et voilà, we have "Ask Christos" (J, 12 July 2012)

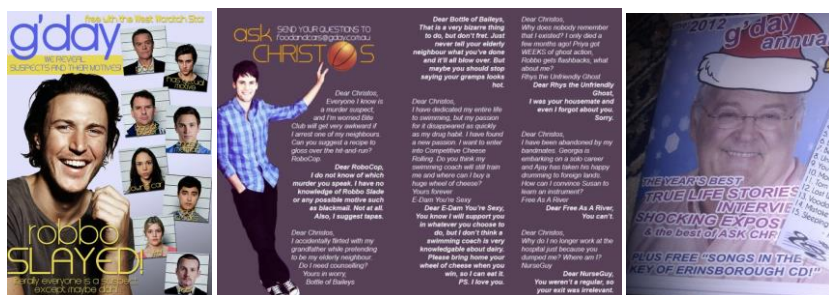


Fig 5. *G'Day* magazine (September 2013) and its 2012 annual

As in the above example, AoN members often look for references in the show to particular fan community memes, speculating that the production team are playing games with the community by deliberately dropping in references to AoN memes such as character Kate's obsession with limes,

horses being killers, or use of fan-adopted names, such as a reference to Matt Turner as 'Robocop', AoN's nickname for him:

"Can I get a lime & soda for Kate?" AoN lime win. (SC, 11 May 2013)

Bailey called Robocop Robocop! (Has this happened before and I've missed it, or has AoN inspired the writers...?) (HD, 12 September 2013)

Here, fans replicate the practices of other cult fandoms in looking for references to fan in-jokes or fan-pleasing content within a text as indications of the production team sharing in this act of play with the audience (see Felschow 2010; Hoge 2011; Veale 2013). Whether or not the production team deliberately drops these references into episodes is unclear, but some of those involved in the show do engage in AoN's jokes: a number of actors share arts and crafted creations from AoN via their Twitter or Instagram feeds, an act that validates the community's importance to the show (see Figs. 6 and 7).



Fig 6. Saskia Hempele (Georgia) tweets an AON artwork.



Fig 7. Alan Fletcher (Karl) tweets fan-crafted Guess Who? to Gemma Pranita (Jade)

In this latter example, the show's actors are sharing their own gameplay, whilst reinforcing the value of fan-crafting. On AoN discussion about this example blurs the distinctions between characters and actors, and between the fan community and the objects of fandom:

MA: So I'm guessing an AoNer gave this to Karl?

EM: ...Was he in the Secret Santa?

ER: I made this!!!!!! I gave it to Dr K 9 years ago! I can't believe he still has it!! I have an exact version (but signed by the legend himself) at home!!! Wow, claim to fame

IW: What i [sic] love more is that he wanted to show it off to Jade!

MD: As if anyone WOULDN'T want to show it off to Jade...!

(22-25 April 2012)

As we can see, play forms a central part of the AoN culture, in which the creation of character art involves practices similar to those in other fan activities, such as writing fan fiction. Charles Hoge argues that 'The act of play in fan fiction writing involves the generation of a new narrative, organized around the fan writer's creative interaction with the textual world around which the writing is based' (2011, par 1.4) and through emphasising particular aspects of the narrative in the arts, AoN members engage in similar forms of interactive play with the text.

Although *Neighbours* as a soap has dealt with serious subjects in serious ways (including eating disorders, terminal cancer and multiple sclerosis) these storylines are always played out alongside more humorous plots such as garden gnome theft or neighbourly rivalry. Its reputation has long been one of a light-hearted show (see Williams 2010). Therefore, it should be unsurprising that official paratexts in the form of the show's website, YouTube channel and social media accounts further encourage a sense of 'playfulness' from viewers, recirculating memes, humorous commentary and 'play along' video stories. Even serious storylines - such as the hit and run killing of 'bad boy' Robbo Slade - become rife for meme creation and comedic promotional artwork, often adopting the tongue-in-cheek style found on AoN or referencing fan in-jokes⁴.

Although ratings are much smaller than at their peak, the show still has a high degree of visibility within British culture and its most popular actors, particularly Alan Fletcher (Karl) and Ryan Maloney (Toadfish), often appear on British television shows, usually in a humorous capacity, or 'in character' (see Fig. 9), as well as touring university student unions or appearing in pantomime. These acts of promotion for the soap all reinforce the text as a site of play between production teams, actors and viewers – even those viewers who no longer watch the soap on a regular basis.



Fig. 9. Eve Morey (Sonya), Alan Fletcher (Karl) and Ryan Maloney (Toadfish) on *Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* (ITV)

Its status as a soap with a high degree of recognition (particularly for those who associate it nostalgically with their youth) with a modest-but-loyal audience and its traditional appeal to students and younger people means *Neighbours* operates on the borderlines of 'cult' and 'mainstream' (See Hills, 2010 and Jancovich and Hunt, 2004 for further discussion of the tensions between 'mainstream' and 'cult'). This status as operating as a 'mainstream cult' was recognised by some of my respondents when I discussed the appeal of AoN:

I think AoN works because the fan base is small and loyal but people who don't watch still recognise certain key characters e.g. Toadie. Because it's a soap sometimes the story lines are ridiculous and the fact the actors recognise this as well makes them more likeable outside of neighbours [sic]. I think something like AoN could work for other TV shows/films but I think it would have to have a "cult" following but be recognised by everyone and I think few shows have that like neighbours (K, interview, 25 July 2013)

It is precisely this status as a text that sits on the borderlines between cult and mass; between serious and silly; between audiences and production teams, that enables it to operate as a true site

of play. When I interviewed members of AoN about their crafting, many specified that Neighbours-related art/craft was their only such expression. They pointed to the show's knowing humour and sense of play as being its unique appeal, and doubted that a group such as AoN would work for other texts, even other tea-time soap operas such as *Hollyoaks* or *Home and Away*, which might be perceived as having a similar audience:

I haven't done any other arty things, it's clearly only AoN that brings the crazy out. I think the pure cheesy-factor of *Neighbours* is what makes it quite so art-able, I'm not sure it would work as well for something else. (E, interview, 30 July 2013)

It's slightly tongue in cheek and doesn't take itself too seriously. But you can get really into the show nevertheless. It's fun to see discussions between people who are clearly such massive fans too (but also recognise it's a bit silly sometimes) (R, interview, 25 July 2013)

I think AoN works for *Neighbours* in particular because there is a huge wealth of material from the longevity of the show, it's on every day near enough and has a fast storyline turnover. It works because people have a real affection for the show but at the same time recognise [its] faults and quirks. The show also recognises that it's not the most serious or high budget show itself which makes it feel like an in joke. *Neighbours* features a lot of soap opera tropes but also some that are uniquely *Neighbours*. People have tried Art of *Hollyoaks* and Art of *Home and Away* on Facebook [sic] (directly ripping off AoN in the process too) but they haven't taken off. This would suggest it's not just the soap factor i.e frequency of the show and storylines. I think the show would need to be something genuinely enjoyable, that doesn't take itself too seriously and that has a lot of mistakes/poor acting/nonsense to joke about. A lot of the appeal of AoN is sharing with other people who have spotted the same mistake or astonishing scene. (S, interview, 25 July 2013)

Whilst the crafted board games created by members of the Art of *Neighbours* may appear amateur, it is precisely this home-made quality (see Gauntlett 2011) that reinforces both the humour fans derive from the show and the genuine affection they feel for it - like the show itself, they are low-budget, quirky, self-referential and crafted with humour and affection.

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Biography

Ruth Deller is a Principal Lecturer in Media at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. She has published work on a range of topics including the use of social media by fans and audiences; portrayals of religion on television; gender/sexuality in TV talent shows and audience responses to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. She is the co-editor of special issues of *Sexualities* (with Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones, December 2013) and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (with Feona Attwood, forthcoming).

¹ Interviews were conducted with 16 members, four male and twelve female, over email and Facebook, in Autumn 2013. Interview participants have been anonymised and referenced by the initial of their first name, and participants whose Facebook posts have been used are referenced by two initials.

² Whilst this seems a dramatic drop in viewing figures, it is comparable with declining audiences for other television programmes, including soap operas. For example, at their peak, UK soaps *EastEnders* and

Coronation Street would attract around 20 million viewers, and currently maintain audiences averaging 7 million. The UK figures for *Neighbours* are similar to *Home and Away* and *Hollyoaks*, also shown in daytime and early evening with a strong tradition of attracting a youth/student following. Before the UK broadcast of *Neighbours* moved to Channel Five in 2008 (Channel Five's prime-time programmes regularly attract 1 million or fewer viewers), it was watched by around six million people on BBC One (see Kilkelly 2013).

³ I only found one member who had the Australian trivia game, although a few others owned the Spears trivia cards. Both trivia games were criticised for their difficulty: 'The questions are IMPOSSIBLE. One is 'What was the name of Charlene's driving instructor?'' (OS, 21 October 2012), ' Lots of very hard, time specific questions like which is Lou's favourite chair? The answer was something like the blue reclining one! Quite difficult as all sets have changed since!' (NR, 25 March 2014)

⁴ For example:

- <http://tenplay.com.au/channel-eleven/neighbours/features/kates-guide-to-relationships> - a website feature AoN members speculated drew upon AoN conventions: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2247247027/10152360708087028/>
- <http://instagram.com/p/mEyqiXkf37/> - an Instagram post presumed to refer to the AoN discussion of Kate Ramsay's lime obsession
- <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10151802108643351.1073741866.190062823350&type=3> - 'Who most probably didn't kill Robbo' - Facebook promos
- <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151731555608351&set=pb.190062823350.-2207520000.1396280756> - meme inspired promo
- <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10152279563968351.1073741913.190062823350&type=1> - '7 words that have different meanings in Erinsborough' - drawing on fan comment and prompting AoN members to speculate 'Oh my Lord, we DID basically write this for them!!!' (HL, 25 March 2014)

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