

Historiographies of Game Studies

What It Has Been, What It Could Be

Edited by
Alisha Karabinus,
Carly A. Kocurek,
Cody Mejeur, and
Emma Vossen

HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF GAME STUDIES

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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Acknowledgments

What began as a frustrated group chat has now evolved into a book. This book was a passion project that began when Emma took a public conversation from Twitter to Facebook Messenger in December of 2019. Within the hour, Carly said, “I say we pitch an anthology to punctum,” and that is exactly what we did. We met for the first time in February 2020 to get the ball rolling. When the pandemic hit North America about a month later, it felt like we were at risk of abandoning the whole thing, but despite everything, over the course of five years, it evolved from just a joke on Twitter to a finished book.

In the interim: a pandemic, major surgery, pregnancy and birth, losses (large and small), grief, joy, wonder, and all the messy reality of any human endeavor. We were, probably, fools to start this in the midst of a global pandemic, but having a rich project to turn to in the midst of so much professional and personal upheaval was often a comfort. We have accumulated a debt of gratitude throughout the process.

Thank you to punctum books, for letting this book be as long as it needed to be and for investing the significant resources required to bring it to fruition; the editors’ robust comments and occasional corrections have resulted in a better book. Thank you to SAJ and Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy for your editing assistance. Thank you to Hatim Eujayl for book design, and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei for cover design.

To the many (many!) authors who trusted us with their ideas, to the senior scholars who trusted us with your words in in-

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We have relied on various institutional resources throughout this process, and wish to express appreciation to: Galvin Library, Lewis College of Science and Letters, and the Department of Humanities at Illinois Institute of Technology; the Chicago Public Library — especially the Harold Washington Library Center, which is a wonder; the Brian Sutton-Smith Library & Archives of Play and the Strong Museum of Play; the Learning Games Initiative and our many colleagues there; the Department of Media Study, College of Arts and Sciences, Humanities Institute, and Digital Scholarship Studio & Network at University at Buffalo, SUNY; the Center for Scholarly and Creative Excellence and the open access community at Grand Valley State University; the Diversity Working Group of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA); The Games Institute at the University of Waterloo, The organizing committee of the International Conference on Games and Narrative (ICGaN), and the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA); and the Video Game Studies Special Interest Group of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and our colleagues there.

It takes a village and a tremendous amount of patience to complete a project of this scale, and we could not have done this without substantial help. That said, the mistakes and omissions are our own. The successes belong to all. We hope only to

leave things better than we found them. Thank you to everyone who left or was forced out of game studies for the work you did and tried to do to make it a more inclusive field — we hope this collection helps ensure you are not forgotten. Thank you to everyone currently laboring to make game studies a better place to study games. And thank you to future scholars who take up the torch and lead us to exciting new places.

INTRODUCTION

What Game Studies Has Been, What It Could Be

*Alisha Karabinus, Carly A. Kocurek, Cody Mejeur,
and Emma Vossen*

Today, the study of games is a thriving field with multiple dedicated national and international conferences, journals, professional societies, and a strong presence at conferences in disciplines like computer science, communication, media studies, theater, visual arts, human computer interaction, popular culture, engineering, health, and others. But what exactly is “game studies” as opposed to the larger world of academics who study games? When did game studies start? What (and who) resides at its core? These questions have a range of answers, all of which have significant implications for how we conceptualize the field, and this collection turns to historiography to help bring all of them into focus.

Historiography is always vexing, and the historiography of a body of scholarship that emerges from so many points and times is all the more so. Yet, beyond building a history of game studies, historiography provides a critical framework for examining how and why the field is the way it is. This collection thus uses historiography to investigate how people have thought and written about game studies, what values and interests have moti-

vated those working in the field, and what alternatives might be possible for the study of games.

Fields are defined as much by what they are not as by what they are, and their borderlands can be hotly contested spaces. As Marinka Copier explained in 2003, “doing game studies, creating a new discipline, means constructing various boundaries on content, researcher and institutional levels and therefore participating in a process of inclusion and exclusion, of constructing the other (‘othering’) to construct oneself.”¹ Years later, we are still attempting to identify what boundaries were constructed and who was excluded. In this anthology, we ask: Where did game studies begin? How has it developed? How have the boundaries of game studies been established, codified, and protected? What is left out? Who is left out? What’s at stake if and when those boundaries are moved? How is game studies currently being reshaped? What could it become in the future? Messy answers are the most necessary answers, and our project here is not to define or constrain game studies but instead to trouble it, opening new possibilities for understanding, relating to, and working in and beyond the field.

Historiographies of Game Studies makes a critical intervention in the framing of game studies. Throughout, the writers and thinkers address three major areas of concern: efforts to limit, gatekeep, and maintain game studies as a discipline that often ignores its political stakes; the marginalization of scholars and thinkers who contribute or have contributed to game studies; and how these two factors affect what types of knowledge have been and can be created within the existing framework of game studies. This book represents an effort to think through a broader vision of what game studies is and could be, and therefore it is not intended to be comprehensive so much as an introduction, a step, and a call for further research and writ-

1 Marinka Copier, “The Other Game Researcher: Participating in and Watching the Construction of Boundaries in Game Studies,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2003: Level Up*, 405, <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/35>.

ing. We are calling for a contingent and continuous approach to understanding and defining the field, one that is explicitly self-reflective and actively concerned with its own stakes, politics, and inequalities.

Building Histories, Not History

Let's start with some dates of publication for some formative texts: in 1938, Dutch historian Johan Huizinga published *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture*, which was translated into English for publication in 1949.² British folklorists Peter and Iona Opie published their first co-authored book, *I Saw Esau: Traditional Rhymes of Youth*, based on their exhaustive study of children's games, rhymes, and folklore, in 1947.³ Roger Caillois, a French sociologist, wrote *Man, Play and Games*, first published in French in 1958.⁴ Beginning in the late 1960s, the New Games Movement worked to rethink play to utopic ends and produced several books beginning with *The New Games Book* in 1976.⁵ The philosopher Bernard Suits wrote *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, which was published in 1978.⁶ In 1983 I-Min Liu wrote the master's thesis "A Critical Comparative Study of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*" at Purdue University.⁷ In 1985, Mary Ann Buckles completed her PhD with a disserta-

2 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element of Culture* (Routledge & K. Paul, 1949).

3 Iona and Peter Opie, *I Saw Esau: Traditional Rhymes of Youth* (Wren Books, 1947).

4 Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes* (Gallimard, Folio Essais, 1958), and Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001).

5 Andrew Fluegelman, *The New Games Book: Play Hard, Play Fair, Nobody Hurt* (Headlands Press, 1976).

6 Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, illust. Frank Newfeld (University of Toronto Press, 1978).

7 I-Min Liu, "A Critical Comparative Study of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*" (MA thesis, Purdue University, 1983).

tion, "Interactive Fiction: The Computer Story Game 'Adventure,'" which is now considered to be the first about electronic games.⁸ The following year, Brenda Laurel finished her dissertation, "Toward the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System," which later informed her book, *Computers as Theatre*, first published in 1991.⁹ In 1989, Jon Lanestedt completed the dissertation, "Epic Software-A Literary Text Type," which contributed to Espen Aarseth's work in *Cybertext*, later published in 1997.¹⁰ Julian Dibbell's influential article "A Rape in Cyberspace, or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society" was published in *The Village Voice* in 1993, and then later became the first chapter of his book *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* in 1999.¹¹ In 1995 Sherry Turkle published *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*.¹² Janet Murray published *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* in 1997, and in 1998 Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins edited an anthology on gender and video games, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*.¹³ In 1999, T.L. Taylor began to question how we conduct

8 Mary Ann Buckles, "Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame 'Adventure'" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1985).

9 Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Addison-Wesley, 1991), and Brenda Laurel, "Toward the Design of a Computer-Based Interactive Fantasy System" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1986).

10 Jon Lanestedt, "Episk Programvare — En Litterær Teksttype" [Epic software — a literary text type?] (Magister diss., University of Oslo, 1989), and Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

11 Julian Dibbell, "A Rape in Cyberspace: How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society," *The Village Voice*, December 23, 1993, and Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (Henry Holt and Company, 1998).

12 Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Simon & Schuster, 1995).

13 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1997), and Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (MIT Press, 1998).

player-centric research in “Life in Virtual Worlds: Plural Existence, Multimodalities, and other Online Research Challenges.”¹⁴ In 2001, *Game Studies* launched as a scholarly journal.¹⁵ Lisa Nakamura published *Cybertypes: Race, Identity, and Ethnicity on the Internet* in 2002.¹⁶ In 2006, T.L. Taylor tackled the massive multiplayer online game *EverQuest* (1999) in *Play Between Worlds*, and *Games & Culture* launched, followed by *Eludamos*, in 2007.¹⁷ Mary Flannagan’s *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* merged questions of design and analysis in 2009 and in 2013 Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor released *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*, which outlined the complexities of conducting ethnography in games and online.¹⁸ Since then, numerous other journals have been established to study games and hundreds of books have been published on the topic.

Every publication here represents some type of game study. While these thinkers come from diverse backgrounds, contexts, and times, they share a consideration of what games and play *are* and what they *mean* culturally, historically, and socially. Of course, this listing is fragmented and partial, being, as it is, primarily informed by our own educational and scholarly backgrounds, language skills, and disciplinary reading habits. As such, the list skews toward things published in English and toward thinkers from the us and Canada. And, while this list

14 T.L. Taylor, “Life in Virtual Worlds: Plural Existence, Multimodalities, and Other Online Research Challenges,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 436–49.

15 Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies Year One,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

16 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Identity, and Ethnicity on the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).

17 T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (MIT Press, 2006); Tanya Krzywinska, ed., *Games & Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006); and Emma Westecott et al., “Introduction,” *Eludamos* 1, no. 1 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.7557/23.11>.

18 Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009), and Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

is not arbitrary, it is perhaps, idiosyncratic; after all, we could have and perhaps should have included child development and pedagogical experts like Maria Montessori, who published her first book in 1909, or Friedrich Froebel, who invented the idea of kindergarten and whose “gifts,” considered the first learning toys, were integrated into systems of games and play carefully based on his own study.¹⁹ The point here is not that this list is useless but rather that it is illustrative: any effort to locate a single origin or historical trajectory for game studies as a field or a discipline is itself necessarily ambiguous, limited, and incomplete.

You would think that the history of game studies is simply the history of the people who studied games. Unfortunately, through a cycle of bad citational practices, aggressive disciplinary policing, and passive gatekeeping, it has evolved into something much more complicated. Most young game studies scholars never learn the real and diverse origins of game studies due to repeated attempts to tell an efficient but oversimplified and unilateral history. Reading most contemporary game studies texts, you would never know that Colette Weil wrote her MBA thesis — “A Study of Two Game Centers and the Profile of their Patrons,” about gender and player motivations — in 1980, or that Mary Ann Buckles wrote her PhD dissertation in 1985, *sixteen years* before Espen Aarseth declared 2001 to be “Computer Game Studies Year One” in the first issue of the journal *Game Studies*. Aarseth cites Buckles in that piece, helping bring her scholarship more into view, though writing studies scholar Sarah Sloane did so much earlier in her 1991 dissertation.²⁰ Aarseth insists that while people in disciplines such as Media Studies, English, and Sociology *should* study games, the study of games is “too important to be left to these fields” which had

19 Maria Montessori, *Il metodo della pedagogia scientifica applicato all'educazione infantile nelle case dei bambini* (E. Loescher & Company, 1913), and Carol Woodard, “Gifts from the Father of the Kindergarten,” *The Elementary School Journal* 79, no. 3 (1979): 136–41.

20 Sarah Sloane, “Interactive Fiction, Virtual Realities, and the Reading-Writing Relationship” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1991).

“thirty years in which they did nothing.”²¹ But, as we established with our list of texts above, this is explicitly incorrect. Even if the intended meaning of these statements is that the larger fields ignored or were actively resistant to the study of games, there exists plenty of scholarship on digital games published before 2001, and that work must not be erased and excluded as “nothing.”

In his 2004 essay “Genre Trouble,” Aarseth engages with this work again, though not to build on it as legitimate game studies, but to push it aside.²² He refers to the work of both Laurel and Murray as “narrativistic colonialism,” neatly excising both of them from the field as unwanted interlopers invading from narrative study, meaning they aren’t proper, legitimate game scholars. By framing key research before the founding of *Game Studies* as both nothing and as the work of invading colonists coming to snatch up games, Aarseth created his own timeline for the field of game studies which has caused many misunderstandings since. Now, when young researchers come to game studies and read this foundational essay, they understandably think they are reading the “beginning” of the field. No need to dig further! This is the beginning! This is year one! This is our history! When game studies is narrated this way, important work becomes missed or forgotten, and this process repeats itself for years to come.

The attempt to establish game studies as its own, definitive field with a specific starting point has set the stage for many of the problems that game studies still suffers from today. When contemporary scholars cannot see a connection between the work they are looking to do and these fabricated origins of game studies, they may believe that their work does not belong in game studies. Much of the most important work that has been done in the field was conducted by scholars who see themselves as forever “outside” of it. The essays contained in this volume

21 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”

22 Espen Aarseth, “Genre Trouble,” *Electronic Book Review*, May 21, 2002, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/genre-trouble/>.

demonstrate that not all who work in game studies feel a sense of membership or belonging. The initial disciplinary boundaries drawn by Aarseth and others in prominent publications are partly to blame, leading to the lack of citation, acknowledgment of, and engagement with crucial early scholarship.

As we look back, it is important to note that there were no game studies departments or programs at the turn of the millennium. Every scholar who took up games research had been trained in and were technically coming from “other” fields, programs, and departments, a tradition that continues for most scholars now, twenty years later. But games research spreads across fields and disciplines,²³ with each providing different perspectives on and relationships to game studies. Here, we hope that diversity of histories becomes a strength rather than a point of contention or an opportunity for erasure, and that more of these “outside” scholars are welcomed under the umbrella of the interdisciplinary space rather than abandoned in the landscape beyond. Despite the struggle to establish a narrative of game studies, game studies has never existed as a single story, or a single history. In fact, since its debut in 2003, the Wikipedia page for game studies has documented this struggle for narrative framing and demonstrates the vast differences in values that have come into place as ideas around games in the academy have shifted and evolved. In 2006, for instance, a description of that evolution read: “Although departments of computer science have been studying video games from a functional perspective for years, the study of them in the humanities is still in its infancy.”²⁴ In this one sentence — from the first paragraph on the page at that time — there already existed multiple histories: a history of computer science and games, from which a turn to the humanities was seen as new. Histories of the research into those functional perspectives would look quite different from

23 Paul Martin, “The Intellectual Structure of Game Research,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1801/articles/paul_martin.

24 Wikipedia 2006, s.v. “Game Studies,” https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Game_studies&oldid=46286221.

those presented in these chapters. In 2007, the Wikipedia entry shifted to indicate that “early attempts were made by Film Studies to bring video games into their academic field, but these were not successful”²⁵ — an odd note given that the Video Game Studies Special Interest Group (SIG), founded just a year later in 2008, regularly boasts the largest membership of any SIG in the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. What would have been considered successful efforts? What is the right or valid relationship between film studies and game studies — and who decides that? Again and again, game studies has been defined against other fields in ways that restrict and exclude. Each time this happened, a flashpoint emerged that revealed the relationship between game studies and other fields, and in the debris of these interactions we can see other possible histories and trajectories that might have been. As game studies formed over time, a history was shaped, and other fields, stories, and people fell away.

In this book, we ask: what does game studies look like if we open space that welcomes these differences? Imagine if, from the beginnings of study in digital games, we had read those scholars who were excluded alongside those who were ultimately lionized in the canon. How might this space look now if we had thought from the beginning not just about territory and claiming space, but about what games were doing to and for players, as early scholars like Buckles did? What if the infamous narratology versus ludology debate that cast narrative scholars as colonizers *actually* never took place — what field might have sprung from a more harmonious convergence of theories and approaches? Of course, we can’t go back, so instead here we ask: what happens if we shift to include these ideas now? Within these chapters, we make space for the stories and the perspectives that never got to the stage or were quickly booed off.

25 Wikipedia 2007, s.v. “Game Studies,” https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Game_studies&oldid=160930318.

Who Is Left Out?

What happens to scholars—and to the field—when we define it through exclusion rather than inclusion? Buckles, for example, did the critical interdisciplinary work of reading through the scholarship in film and radio studies and applying it to games. Furthermore, she completed participant observation and data collection of people playing *Adventure* (Willie Crowther and Don Woods, 1977). She was primarily interested in cultural change brought on by technology and how communities would form around that technology. This foundational research engages topics still relevant today (something that can't always be said for other dominant early ideas, as technology has moved on), and scholars in and around games would still benefit from reading and citing Buckles's work. Yet after struggling to get people to take her work seriously, Buckles ultimately left academia.

It is hard not to hear stories like Buckles's and think about who else has been and still is excluded from game studies. As Sal Humphreys pointed out in "On Being a Feminist in Games Studies":

If exclusions lead to silences and gaps in our field, it is possible to break the causes down in a number of ways. As researchers, we individually create gaps and silences, and we collectively reinforce some. For instance, not only might we valorize papers on particular topics and not others, but through citation practices, we often lose sight of valuable work that has already been done. Many papers by women in games studies are overlooked in the citation practices of scholars who trot out the same canon of literature that reinforces the dominant values of the center of the field. Avoiding these practices requires reflexivity on an individual and disciplinary level.²⁶

26 Sal Humphreys, "On Being a Feminist in Games Studies," *Games and Culture* 14, nos. 7–8 (2019): 14.

These citational issues led Kishonna Gray to create the hashtag #CiteHerWork in 2015 out of frustration that the work of many women wasn't being cited.²⁷ Later Wendy Laura Belcher, building on this, proposed a Bechdel Test-like experiment called the "Gray Test" in which scholars were encouraged to look to their bibliographies and see if they were citing at least two women and two people of color, and actually discussing their work in the text of the article. While this seems like a low standard, in game studies much work published could not pass this test. This hashtag and these tests exist because, unless we make deliberate changes to the way we are teaching, citing, and circulating research, most scholars will continue to learn that game studies is a field that began in 2001 and was pioneered and dominated by a small number of men. As Adrienne Shaw has explained in "Are We There Yet? The Politics and Practice of Intersectional Game Studies," "Unless game scholars make intersectionality central to all of our work and understand our own positionality in relation to the research we produce, cite, and assign, then it will always seem like we need to go out of our way to do intersectional work."²⁸ This work exists and has long existed, but many continue to lament the lack of it, or instead rush to reinvent this work from scratch, instead of finding, citing, and engaging with what has already been published.

Beyond these gaps and silences, scholars working from the margins of game studies and looking at issues around identity, culture, and representation have been taken more seriously in recent years, in part because of the pushback and harassment these scholars received from the amorphous movement known

27 Kishonna Gray, "#CiteHerWork: Marginalizing Women in Academic and Journalistic Writing," *Kishonna Gray*, December 28, 2015, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200812172137/https://www.kishonnagray.com/manifestmy-reality/citeherwork-marginalizing-women-in-academic-and-journalistic-writing>. With changes to Twitter/X in recent years, the records of the conversations are fractured, and Gray's original blog post is gone after a redesign, but the impact of #CiteHerWork lingers.

28 Adrienne Shaw, "Are We There Yet? The Politics and Practice of Intersectional Game Studies," *Velvet Light Trap* 81 (2018): 77.

as GamerGate which forced these issues to the front and center.²⁹ In their 2020 book *Gamer Trouble*, Amanda Phillips outlines the double-edged sword of this recognition. They explain that while GamerGate was a “boon for visibility” for the work of these scholars it also:

Set the terms for conversations that many of us had been building for years. It is not lost on the feminist gaming and game studies communities that our relevance is now justified by the emergence of a virulent harassment campaign rather than the self-evident value of the nuanced conversation about the politics of gamers and video games. The landscape has been irrevocably altered, but the work remains the same.³⁰

While research on games and gender, sexuality, race, politics, culture, capital, social media, and other cultural forms is increasingly recognized for its significance, this recognition is often accompanied by frustration from scholars who have been working to legitimize these areas of study for years. This collection, for example, showcases such work, yet repeatedly highlights how long overdue this acknowledgment has been.

It was not long ago that people would scoff at the insistence that white supremacist capitalist patriarchy was baked into games culture. While now this is readily acknowledged by most scholars, it is not because of the word of their colleagues, it is because the events of the past ten years made this public knowledge. Scholars like Lisa Nakamura, Kishonna Gray, Samantha

29 For more detail on the interworkings of GamerGate and the effect it had on game studies see Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, “A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2015): 208–20, and Emma Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018)

30 Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York University Press, 2020), 21.

Blackmon, S. Craig Watkins, Anna Everett, and David Leonard deserve their just dues for engaging in these issues long before the rest of game studies was ready to do so. While this culture shift in game studies was much needed, maybe hegemonic game studies is finally acknowledging and allowing this scholarship that has *always* been important simply because its importance cannot be undermined and ignored any longer. Although perhaps the why exactly is less important than the yes finally. If the US and other nation-states had not embraced — or at least flirted with — fascism in recent years; if GamerGate had not happened; if we had not been pushed to these breaking points; would the importance of this research ever have been acknowledged in the way that it has? Or would this work still be pushed out of games studies and into other disciplines despite being, at the end of the day, research about games?

Looking at all this information together, the question becomes not just about who is left out, but also who is *pushed* out? Who is ultimately forgotten? And, possibly most importantly, who then gets to be remembered in their place? Unfortunately, due to the more significant constraints of academia, there are often limited seats at the table, therefore when we are discussing who has been marginalized and excluded, we must also keep an eye on who has benefited from this exclusion.

What Game Studies Could Be

Since its beginnings, game studies has claimed to be different — a field about a different medium, demanding different concepts, frameworks, and methodologies. Yet the field's most privileged voices have been frequently (and sometimes intensely) territorial about these differences in ways that have marginalized particular scholars, perspectives, and even entire disciplines.³¹

31 Amanda Phillips, "Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field," *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 12–36; Whit Pow, "Critical Game Studies and Its Afterlives: Why Game Studies Needs Software Studies and Computer History," *Just Tech*, March 20, 2023, <https://just-tech.ssrc.org/field-reviews/critical-game-studies-and->

These border wars can be contextualized as a strategy to distinguish game studies as a legitimate academic discipline in the eyes of established higher education, but in carving out a distinct institutional space for game studies, many have been left or driven out of the field.³² Further, the results of this strategy are conspicuous: for all of its claims to be a distinct field about a different (playful, experimental, emergent) medium and its cultures, game studies perpetuates the same issues that plague other fields and higher education generally. In 2017, for example, a keynote speaker for the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG) conference drew criticism for ignoring issues of consent and equating nonsentient robots and women; he then responded to criticism of his talk with such vitriol that the organizers issued a public statement in defense of the researcher targeted.³³ At the 2024 conference of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), longstanding concerns about diversity and inclusion

its-afterlives-why-game-studies-needs-software-studies-and-computer-history/; and several chapters in this collection, e.g., those by Emma Vossen, Jennifer deWinter and Gillian Smith, Samuel Poirier-Poulin, Outi Laiti, etc., as well as the interviews.

- 32 For discussion of the behaviors that have alienated people in the field see: Alex Gekker, "Against Game Studies," *Media and Communication* 9, no. 1 (2021): 73–83; Pow, "Critical Game Studies and Its Afterlives"; Bianca Batti and Alisha Karabinus, "A Dream of Embodied Experience: On Ian Bogost, Epistemological Gatekeeping, and the Holodeck," *Not Your Mama's Gamer*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.nymgamer.com/?p=16363>; Kevin Moberly, "Preemptive Strikes: Ludology, Narratology, and Deterrence in Computer Game Studies," in *The Game Studies Culture Reader*, ed. Jason A. Thompson and Marc Oulette (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 162–74; Janet H. Murray, "The Last Word on Ludology v. Narratology (2005)," *Inventing the Medium*, June 28, 2013, <https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/>; Gerald Voorhees, "Criticism and Control: Gameplay in the Space of Possibility," in *Ctrl-Alt-Play: Essays on Control in Video Gaming*, ed. Matthew Wysocki (McFarland, 2013), 9–20; and Vossen, "On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming."
- 33 Liz Lawley, "Thoughts on the FDG '17 Keynote Controversy," *Medium*, March 7, 2017, <https://medium.com/@mamamusings/thoughts-on-the-fdg-17-keynote-controversy-d9ede0b83b>, and Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games, "Open Letter Regarding the FDG 2017 Keynote," <http://www.sasdg.org/fdg2017-keynote-letter.html>.

in the organization and failures to enforce codes of conduct became public. A collective statement circulated among scholars garnered 280 signatures from current and past members and even others who had avoided the organization due to its reputation.³⁴ These problems are not unique to any single organization or even to game studies; they can be found in many academic institutions, organizations, and fields.

Game studies struggles with and sometimes does not seem to care about equity, diversity, and justice. Throughout the field, funds, opportunities, and research are concentrated in countries that benefit from legacies of colonialism and imperialism.³⁵ Game studies researchers pursue the same grants, industry partnerships, and “publish or perish” mindsets of other fields. So what, ultimately, is so different about game studies? Of course, these systemic issues cannot be blamed solely on a relatively young and emergent field. But if academia is an institutional game, game studies has not done much to shake up that game or play against its rules. This collection takes aim at these problems, tracing how and why we got here and also charting potential paths to more, different, just, and transformative game studies. To that end, we close this introduction with a vision of what game studies could be.

As a field organized around particular subjects (games, their players, and their cultures) rather than a particular set of theories and methodologies, game studies could be uniquely and innovatively interdisciplinary, and to a certain extent, it is. “Interdisciplinary,” at this point, is a bit of an administrative buzzword, but at its greatest potential it could mean the weaving together of multiple, different methods and types of knowledge, as Buckles did in her foundational study. Rather than analyzing one or two game elements, interdisciplinary game studies

34 DiGRA Diversity Working Group, “DiGRA Diversity Collective Statement,” *Digital Games Research Association*, August 19, 2024, <https://digra.org/digra-diversity-collective-statement/>.

35 Cody Mejeur, Mahli-Ann R. Butt, and Alayna Cole. “Feminist and Furious: Diversity Work(ers) Against Game Studies of Empire!,” *Games and Culture* 16, no. 3 (2021): 342–56.

could develop more holistic pictures of games that draw on many epistemologies to capture games' complex and multivalent aspects. More structurally and radically, interdisciplinary game studies could challenge the institutional siloing of games knowledge in particular disciplines, as well as contribute to destabilizing established discourses, assumptions, and privileges in those disciplines. Game studies already has numerous examples of what interdisciplinary game studies could look like, especially in the work of game studies scholars in the humanities and social sciences.³⁶ Yet the siloing remains in every part of game studies, from program curricula to conference tracks to disciplinary journals, and even existing interdisciplinary work is primarily or exclusively read only by subgroups of game studies. Realistically, this is because interdisciplinary work is arduous to do—one cannot read or do all the things related to games, and keeping current with games research in just a few disciplines is often beyond individual scholars' capacities. Many academic systems do not encourage, reward, support, or in some cases even allow interdisciplinary research. Interdisciplinary studies are further complicated by the imbalance of resources, funding, and opportunities between existing disciplines, with science, technology, and industry studies of games often privileged while game studies in the social sciences, humanities, and arts are devalued. But what if game studies were organized to increase opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange and collaboration, rather than to accept and perpetuate the confines of institu-

36 The following sources provide a few examples of scholars who work in this space, although there are many. Michael Anthony DeAnda, "Chisme, Lo Cotidiano and Disruptive Gameplay," *Convergence* 28, no. 2 (2022): 522–38; Christopher Hanson, *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games* (Indiana University Press, 2018); Josef Nguyen, *The Digital Is Kid Stuff: Making Creative Laborers for a Precarious Economy* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Anastasia Salter and John Murray, *Flash: Building the Interactive Web* (MIT Press, 2014); and Wendi Sierra, "Gaming from the Margins: Indigenous Representation, Critical Gaming, and Pedagogy," in *Critical Pedagogy, Race, and Media: Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education Teaching*, ed. Susan Flynn and Melanie A. Marotta (Routledge, 2021), 195–210.

tional and disciplinary boundaries? What could game studies look like if it prioritized play, experimentation, and learning beyond one's expertise rather than enforced specialization and mastery? Truly interdisciplinary game studies would require us to rethink how we research, write, and teach game studies, and further restructure our programs and institutions to support relationships between disciplines. Crucially, realizing the interdisciplinary potential of game studies can only happen by centering, respecting, and valuing differences: different disciplines, yes, but also different experiences, knowledges, and perspectives that are meaningful for understanding games. As Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge argue in the preface to *Intersectionality*, we may start from different places but coming together and working to "[get] fluent in each other's language of intersectionality, in each other's ways of putting things together, perspective and perception" is complex but crucial.³⁷ As they further explain in the book's opening chapter, intersectionality has an accepted meaning, perhaps recognizable to most from Kimberlé Crenshaw's writing, but just as many axes of identity and context may shape and determine a person's life, intersectionality is an active consideration: it is an analytical tool, a heuristic, a convergence, but it is what we do — or do not do — with it that matters.³⁸

Game studies could be interdisciplinary, and in order for it to be so, it must also be intersectional. Valuing different types of knowledge also requires valuing *whose knowledge it is* — whose voices are most prominent in a particular field, whose perspectives are prioritized (or often assumed to be universal) in analysis, and whose experiences are given more or less consideration in research. As we play, observe, write, design, and teach games, we always do so in a specific context and from a position within systems of interlocking power, so the knowledge we generate about games is inherently tied to who we are, what we know,

37 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Polity Press, 2016), vii–viii.

38 Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

and what experiences we have had. In other words, knowledge about games is created by people, people exist at intersections of identity and systems of power, and those intersections always affect the knowledge we create, whether we are aware of this or not.³⁹ As discussed in this introduction and multiple chapters of this collection, game studies was established with a primary focus on the knowledge, research, and perspectives of white, male scholars in Europe and North America (especially the United States), and that bias continues to exist in the field as evidenced in the metrics of who gets cited the most.⁴⁰ Game studies must confront this structural bias by shifting citational practices from a constant rehearsal of an established canon of predominantly white male scholarship toward more inclusive and equitable knowledge-making that centers the work of many different scholars. The point of this, as Phillips explains, is not to “uncover a truer form of game studies” but rather to cultivate a “proliferation of acceptable voices” that decenters currently privileged scholarship.⁴¹ Accomplishing this would require a communal, field-wide effort to think more intersectionally, actively and continually considering our own positionalities and seeking out other perspectives. Intersectional, interdisciplinary thinking requires that we craft our games scholarship in relation to different knowledges, points of view, and axes of identity across boundaries, even as we focus on particular issues and topics in games.

A Home for Games Studies

Such a vision for game studies would have to be built in and around communities, both established and yet to be. Community is a great goal that, as Shaw writes, often invokes posi-

39 Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 1–5.

40 Gray, “#CiteHerWork.”

41 Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*, 16.

tive feelings of comfort, belonging, and support.⁴² Yet building community is complex and arduous work — it means bringing together different people with different experiences, interests, beliefs, and values. These differences mean that communities can often be sources of tension as well, but, like Shaw and others, we envision a future for game studies that prioritizes difference rather than trying to massage it away. Instead of aiming for a united, universal, homogenous game studies, the future of the field could be a series of interconnected and interrelated communities, with scholars working in and across multiple groups. To a certain extent, this already exists, and can be seen in international and interdisciplinary organizations like DiGRA that include many national and regional chapters and interest groups, despite its ongoing struggles to improve its practices for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. But the future communities of game studies would be more than this — they would be communities oriented toward difference, that resist siloing and canonization and promote multivalent futures for the field.

So where does that take us? A future game studies that is interdisciplinary, intersectional, and community-based could make the field more attentive to the structural issues that got us where we are today: enforcing disciplinary boundaries, excluding or dismissing scholarship, and prioritizing academic legibility over marginalized voices, to name a few. Critical attendance to these issues could lead to studies of games that are more equitable, inclusive, and, most importantly, different. For too long, game studies has been playing by the toxic and oppressive rules of the systems that encapsulate it — academia, capitalism, and colonialism, among others. This collection traces how and why that has been the case, but also envisions a game studies that plays the game differently. One that seizes the variable, emergent, and radical potentials of games and uses them toward transformative ends. Game studies could be a part of changing systems, rather than playing into them, and we hope this col-

42 Adrienne Shaw, “The Trouble with Community,” in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

lection contributes new insights, perspectives, and strategies to that effort.

Chapter Summaries

Historiographies of Game Studies: What It Has Been, What It Could Be contains twenty-four chapters by an international roster of scholars as well as seven interviews with influential game studies academics. These scholarly contributions cover topics rarely or never explored in any other publication. The book is organized into four sections: “Institutions and Infrastructure,” “Alternative Origin Stories,” “Methods and Schisms,” and “Trajectories in the Field.”

The chapters in “**Institutions and Infrastructure**” explore the established “norms” of game studies and how they intersect with the similarly deeply entrenched norms of academia and the university system around the world. The section begins with an interview by Bianca Batti with Janet Murray that explores Murray’s over forty years of experience teaching, studying, and writing about digital media, technology, and games. Murray recounts the shape of her early work, the “founding” of the field of game studies, and the personal attacks against her and her work. Emma Vossen (University of Waterloo) explores the negative effects that the ludology versus narratology debate generally and Espen Aarseth’s *Genre Trouble* specifically have had on the field, and Jennifer deWinter and Gillian Smith explore the Gamesnetwork listserv as a frequent platform for controversy in the field. This section also features an interview by Cody Mejeur with Espen Aarseth that explores Aarseth’s influence on the field since the 1990s, especially since the founding of *Game Studies* in 2001, and highlights the tensions and misunderstandings that continue to haunt the field. Dennis Jansen explores the institutional politics of game studies in the Dutch context highlighting complexities and inequities. Kirk Lundblade examines James Paul Gee’s work and legacy as a critical boundary formation in game studies, particularly as it intersects with learning science. Drawing on frameworks from linguistics, Jasper van

Vught and Joris Verbeek argue that terms like “video games” or “digital games” are radial categories that shape and reshape our understanding of the field. Lastly, Tobias Unterhuber questions whether game studies has schools of thought, using the Game Studies & Cultural Studies Colloquium Munich as a point of inquiry.

“**Alternative Origin Stories**” includes chapters that consider what game studies could have been if other scholars and histories had received more attention or prominence, in many cases building on the work begun by Samantha Blackmon and TreaAndrea Russworm.⁴³ Jaroslav Švelch uncovers the early game studies work of Czechoslovakian scholar Bohuslav Blažek, and Liam Mitchell reframes discussions of play by Johan Huizinga to recenter Bernard Suits, James Carse, and McKenzie Wark’s play theory. Bo Ruberg provides a queer reading of Roger Caillois’s *Man, Play and Games* that confronts the supposed “newness” of queerness in games. Judd Ruggill interviews Ken McAllister about the origins of the Learning Games Initiative, McAllister’s book *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture*, and the complexities of building academic game studies programs. Cameron Kunzelman and Michael Lutz suggest a game studies in which C.L.R. James’s 1963 autobiography *Beyond a Boundary* is a central text. Carly A. Kocurek argues for a game studies deeply entwined with play studies and cultural studies. Interviewed by Sarah Christina Ganzon, Lisa Nakamura reflects on a research approach in which games are only one part of a broader digital culture. Outi Laiti reflects on the Indigenous Sámi perspective and how game studies might be done through the knowledge-building practices of Sámi culture. Lastly, Laya Liebeseller and Josh Rivers employ actor-network theory to examine how the fields of play studies and game studies strategically entangle with and disconnect from larger

43 TreaAndrea M. Russworm and Samantha Blackmon, “Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 93–118.

fields like anthropology, using *The Association of the Study of Play* as their case study.

In **“Methods and Schisms”** chapters turn toward the question of research methods and excavate game studies’ tendency toward and away from particular approaches. Stephanie Jennings interrogates the exclusion of autoethnographic approaches despite researchers’ own role as players and community members. Michael Anthony DeAnda questions game studies’ focus on skill in games at the exclusion of chance — a critically important aspect of game design and play. Ruminating on the digital and analog divide, Evan Torner considers the role of analog game studies in a field often dominated by concerns with digital media. A roundtable conversation between Racquel Gonzales, of *The Strong National Museum of Play*, and the staff of the *Computerspielmuseum* raises interesting questions about the formation and function of institutions. In a consideration of *The Strong National Museum of Play*, Lee Hibbard asks researchers to consider the role archives play in shaping histories. Lastly, in a chapter considering the possibilities of ludic scholarship, Justin Wigard questions why making and studying are still treated as separate endeavors in game studies.

“Trajectories in the Field” brings together a diverse set of offerings considering people’s relationship with game studies as a field. betsy brey interviews Henry Jenkins about his experience of going from a highly visible game studies scholar to deliberately stepping away from the field. Reflecting on her own education and professionalization, Adrienne Shaw discusses how entangled game studies is with the fields of media and cultural studies. Victoria Braegger presents an interview with Kishonna Gray, who speaks to the significant exclusions that shape the field and, for better or worse, individual scholars’ experience of it. Christopher Paul’s chapter *“A Call Coming from Inside the House,”* critiques the limits of both his own work and the field he works in. Samuel Poirier-Poulin highlights the hegemony of English in the game studies canon and asks who gets left out of discourse because of it. Through an interview conducted by Douglas Schules, Kentaro Matsumoto places game studies

in Japan in relationship to semiotics, demonstrating a distinctive process of field formation. Alison Harvey reflects on how a lack of historicism and an inability to look across disciplinary boundaries undermines game studies research. Finally, Alisha Karabinus examines syllabi from university game courses to determine how course structures shape how we privilege and transmit knowledge.

These thirty-one contributions represent the first attempt at a historiography of game studies. Together they illuminate a field that is simultaneously vexed and vexing. But, that illumination is partial. There are candles not yet lit: There are more stories and histories than any single volume could collect. Our goal is not to pin game studies down and place it behind glass, after all. Fields are dynamic. They grow and change and shift, or they risk irrelevance. As those shifts continue, we hope this volume provides scholars with ample material to explore and cite in crafting new stories about what game studies is and could be, and we hope this volume can keep pushing us all to build a more inclusive games studies without a year one, without boundaries, and without limits.

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I.

Institutions and Infrastructure

The Past, Present, and Future of Game Studies: An Interview with Janet H. Murray

Bianca Batti

Janet H. Murray is Ivan Allen College Dean's Professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at Georgia Tech, and Associate Dean for Research in Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts. She is the Director of the Prototyping eNarrative Lab¹ and the Digital Integrative Liberal Arts Center² at Georgia Tech. Her PhD is in English and American Language and Literature from Harvard University. She has been at Georgia Tech since 1999, serving as Director of Graduate Studies for the founding of the PhD in Digital Media. She taught the first course in Interactive Narrative at MIT in 1992, and the first courses in Game Design at Georgia Tech in the early 2000s. She is the author of *Hamlet on the Holodeck: the Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Free Press, 1997; MIT Press, 1998; updated MIT Press edition, 2017) and *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice* (MIT Press, 2011).

1 "The Prototyping eNarrative Lab (PeNLab)," *Georgia Tech*, <http://penlab.gatech.edu/>.

2 "Digital Integrative Liberal Arts Center (DILAC)," *Georgia Tech*, <https://dilac.iac.gatech.edu/>.

In the interview, I asked Murray to reflect on her journey toward and within the field of game studies. Our conversation traces Murray's work to articulate a "theory of media as shared attention" through pedagogy and scholarship that have centered game design as *cultural* practice. Murray also discusses the resistance she has faced in emphasizing cultural frameworks for game design — frameworks that counter the methodological limitations of ludo-essentialism and formalism — and reflects on the continuing impact of what she calls the "misogyny of the game community." Murray's reflections in this interview thus demonstrate how patriarchal hierarchies in game studies have historically empowered men who research and develop games while decentering women's praxis, labor, and expertise; her reflections simultaneously demonstrate how vital women's work continues to be in shaping equitable and innovative futures for game studies. In short, Murray's reflections shed light on how far we have come and how far we have to go.

Historicizing Murray's humanistic, transdisciplinary cultural frameworks for game design makes space for alternative approaches to games — approaches that have the potential to counter the epistemological gatekeeping and disciplinary siloing that result from formalistic, ludological, and masculinist hierarchies underpinning game studies. Further, our conversation is meant to render visible the (historically deprivileged) work of women in game studies. This interview is also meant to counter the erasure of women's labor and knowledge production by centering a historiography of Murray's experiences and contributions to game studies praxis. In all these ways, this interview actively historicizes women's past and present experiences in game studies, models generative collaborations between established and emerging scholars, and provides a framework for (re)imagining a more networked, equitable, and collaborative future for the field.

Bianca Batti: In the introduction of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, you describe yourself as "a teacher of humanities for the past twenty-five years in the world-class electronic toy shop of MIT, a

Victorian scholar, and an educational software designer.”³ You’re now a professor in the School of Literature, Media, and Communication at the Georgia Institute of Technology, but I was hoping we could back up a bit and talk about how you came to the study of games. In other words, I’d like to rework the book’s central question from “Where did game studies begin” to — where did it begin for you?

Janet H. Murray: In 1981 I had just had my second child and I was teaching part-time at MIT in the Experimental Study Group, which emphasized learner-centered education for particularly independent first-year students. I was the resident humanist, teaching Literature and Women’s Studies courses. I had taught one of the first Women’s Studies courses at Harvard as a grad student in the early 1970s and then again as a faculty member at MIT.

In the early 1980s, MIT was starting an institute-wide program in educational computing and as an educationally experimental program we got some of the first desktop machines. My students showed me two programs, *Zork* (Infocom, 1977), which was the MIT remake of *Adventure*, and *Eliza*, which was the first chatbot, made by Joe Weizenbaum, an AI researcher at MIT, in 1967.

I was a first-generation college student in my family and to earn money between college and grad school I took a systems programming job at IBM and was taught multiple programming languages. So when I saw *Zork* and *Eliza* I had a general understanding of the programming behind them. In graduate school I had done something which was unusual for Harvard at that time — insisted on studying a genre rather than a period as my specialty. My genre was the English novel, and my interest was in the process by which the narrative form evolved over a centuries-long tradition of practice. So when I saw *Zork* and *Eliza* I recognized them as a first stage in an emerging narrative genre

3 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1998), 2.

authored as potential interactions with programming code. I was charmed and intrigued by the craftsmanship, and thrilled to be witnessing the birth of an entirely new narrative format.

I went to my Dean to talk about how excited I was and he asked me to collaborate with some expert modern language teachers who were brilliant at inventing simulation frameworks and other gamelike structures for simulating conversation, and who were eager to use the interactive video technologies being developed at what was then the Architecture Machine Group—the group that later grew into MIT's Media Lab. We wound up collaborating with researchers from the AI lab as well.

In 1982 we got a million dollars from the Annenberg Foundation to explore what would now be called Serious Games for learning languages. We stayed away from calling them “games” however, thinking of them as exercises, simulations, or interactive narratives. Some of our projects were published as CD-ROMs by Yale University Press. Others were delivered over the web and used internally at MIT. The interactive video approach proved the most productive of the various computer modalities we experimented with, particularly interactive documentaries.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s I developed educational computing projects at MIT. I had a lab that continued to get grant funding for modern language projects and a Shakespeare project, and that eventually merged with an institute-wide lab where I also worked on some physics applications. Some of these projects were more game-like than others, but almost all of them were experimental forms of digital narrative.

In 1992, I taught the first course in interactive narrative at MIT (and perhaps the first such course anywhere, certainly one of the earliest). I was interested in more procedural approaches than the literary hypertext that was popular at that time. My students made chatbots and projects in Hypercard, and then web projects starting around 1995. In 1999 when I came to Georgia Tech, I introduced the same course within the graduate and undergraduate program. I also initiated the first game studies course at Georgia Tech, Game Design as a Cultural Process. I am teaching the Interactive Narrative course this semes-

ter — Fall 2020 — remotely because of the COVID epidemic, and it is a hybrid graduate/undergraduate course like the first one I taught in 1992, using Twine instead of HyperCard.

What games did we think of as interactive narratives back in the 1990s? Many of them are referenced in the first edition of my book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, which came out in 1997. The Infocom text-based games were very interesting to me, but the point and click adventure games like the *King's Quest* series were less so, which is sort of surprising to me now, looking back. The big turning point in recognizing the power of narrative combined with games was *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, Inc., 1993). But I remember being disappointed in it because it used too much unisequential (booklike) text backstory.

The first time I was aware of “Game Studies” (and I may not have heard that name for it at that time) was when I heard there were people from northern Europe attacking *Hamlet on the Holodeck* at a conference I had not attended. That was some time in the early 2000s when I had moved to Georgia Tech.

BB: In your experience as a researcher and educator of digital media, games, and interactive narratives, what boundaries do you believe have been drawn around game studies as a result of the ludology/narratology debate⁴? Have you seen any movement in these boundaries, or do you think they’ve stayed the same? Why do you think this “debate” still rages? How do you think game studies might have changed had this “debate” shaken out differently?

JHM: Game studies in the early 2000s was a northern European phenomenon trying to distinguish itself from the established departments that it grew out of, which were identified with

4 Janet H. Murray, “Janet Murray on Why Some Players and Critics Still Cannot Tolerate Narrative in Games,” *First Person Scholar*, May 18, 2017, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/janet-murray-on-why-some-players-and-critics-still-cannot-tolerate-narrative-in-games/>.

the methodology of narratology. The early Nordic game studies folks had real enemies in their senior faculty members who did not accept the legitimacy of studying games. They also had imaginary enemies in people who wrote about games in ways that connected them with other cultural forms, such as movies and literary texts, or viewed them as parts of our lived experience as social and cultural beings. A new field that draws from other fields has to define itself by inclusion and opposition, and it was somehow convenient for them to aim their animosity at Americans who were not actually narratologists (I can't to this day remember which is the *fabula*, or *spell syuzhet*,⁵ and I don't find those categories useful for the things I try to figure out about narrative structure).

The early game studies conferences were festivals of interdisciplinary inclusion—and confusion. But the most vocal proponents of the new field were invested in a purity ideology that rested on the exclusion of many modes of discourse. Ironically what they were advocating was a formalism for games that closely resembled the formalism of narratology for prose narratives. Their emphasis on formal structures was actually useful, as was the claim that games are their own discreet cultural form. That should not be underestimated. But such single-mindedness is obviously very limiting, and ludicrously so when it leads them to profess blindness to the rich layers of meaning that are part of such a culturally embedded, socially ubiquitous practice as games. So it is not so surprising that along with the formalist strictures came other forms of exclusion based on gender (women did not belong in the discourse), nationality (Americans were suspect), and the blanket denial of affective content

5 Hannah Wood, "Dynamic Syuzhets: Writing and Design Methods for Playable Stories," in *Interactive Storytelling: 10th International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling*, ed. Nuno Nunes, Ian Oakley, and Valentina Nisi (Springer, 2017). Wood explains on page 31 that *fabula* is "the raw material of a story" and *syuzhet* is "the way a story is organized."

(e.g., Espen Aarseth's absurd claim that Lara Croft was just a chess piece).⁶

This combative atmosphere made it less fun to go to the conferences and impossible for many years to do peer review in a coherent manner. To my mind, this ludo-essentialism also led to confused thinking, such as Jesper Juul's claim, still taken seriously, that the mechanics are the "real" part of games, as if they can be isolated from other forms of symbolic communication.

BB: If you're comfortable sharing, have these boundaries — particularly those drawn by ludologists that deprive cultural and narrative analyses of games — impacted the trajectory of your own work? How has your experience with gatekeeping and boundaries impacted your thoughts about game studies? What do you think game studies can do better, and what do you think are the stakes of such evolution?

JHM: I was positively influenced by the claims of game studies in that it helped me to articulate a theory of media as shared attention. When I realized that games were indeed a separate cultural form worth focusing on, and that they could be non-verbal and therefore precede language, I realized that our attraction to games is a building block of cognition and social connection. This helped me articulate a theory of media as shared attention.⁷

The misogyny of the game community helped to empower my own colleagues in their misogynistic treatment of women within my own unit. This has made it hard to retain women in my department and it has also impeded my work by forcing me to confront multiple specific instances of unfair treatment of

6 Janet H. Murray, "The Last Word on Ludology vs Narratology," keynote, Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), Vancouver, CA, June 17, 2005, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335541373_The_Last_Word_on_Ludology_v_Narratology_in_Game_Studies.

7 Janet H. Murray, "Toward a Cultural Theory of Gaming: Digital Games and Co-evolution of Media, Mind and Culture," *Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 (2006): 185–202, and Janet H. Murray, *Inventing the Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as a Cultural Practice* (MIT Press, 2011).

myself and others. For example, when I pointed out that our graduate admissions committee was producing an exclusively male student body (after years of more equal numbers when the process was led by women rather than men) and offered links to articles on implicit bias, one of my colleagues asked the chair to forbid me from sending him emails on the subject. Worse yet, the chair actually conveyed this request to me. I was also excluded from invitations to early Foundations of Games conferences which came through Microsoft reps to the Computer Science department in favor of much less experienced male colleagues. This is the sort of thing that is the norm for women in academia and which I have experienced in one form or another across my career. At MIT and Georgia Tech I have often been the only woman or one of proportionately very few women in the room, so game studies has not been all that different.

The ludologists' claims against *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, that critics should be forbidden to treat the experience of *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1985) as an emotional engagement with symbolic resonance was always absurd and is indefensible today when we routinely use videogames as shorthand for cultural experiences, like saying we are playing whack-a-mole with demanding emails. And yet people still take it seriously as if there was something obviously wrong with my reporting that two people I knew experienced *Tetris* as a model of their overwhelmed life in the 1990s. The hostile tone and personal targeting of the attack on me in the initial issue of *Game Studies*, based on this observation, now seems like a small foretaste of the vituperations against feminist scholars in the GamerGate era. I definitely experienced and continue to experience casual denigration of my work based on the misogyny and general cultural denial of the early ludologists.⁸

8 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, rev. ed. (MIT Press, 2017), and Murray, "Why Some Players and Critics."

BB: I'd also like to talk about your research and the ways your work has helped shape game studies. There's a particular sentiment from *Hamlet on the Holodeck* that has always resonated with me: "I learned from the feminist movement that some truths about the world are beyond the reach of a particular art form at a particular moment in time. Before the novel could tell the stories of women who did not wind up either happily married or dead, it would have to change in form as well as in content."⁹ This statement reminds me of the ways your work equally centers content and form, game and story, technology and humans, the embodied and the digital. I was wondering if you might speak to how feminism has influenced your humanistic approach to design.

JHM: I want to say that feminism has influenced my approach to design both profoundly and not enough. I went to graduate school in the late 1960s and was a member of multiple women's groups, starting with a "consciousness raising" group at Harvard, and then multiple groups of professionally allied women — academics and then writers — through the 1970s and into the 1980s and, in reunions lasting through 1990s, in the very leftist environment of Cambridge, Massachusetts. When my daughter was little she asked for Barbie dolls and it caused a great moral and political crisis, and I asked my friend Marilyn French who had written a famous feminist novel about academia (*The Women's Room*¹⁰) and she advised me that "the only thing children remember is deprivation," so I reluctantly accepted some hand-me-down Barbies. Some time after, my husband overheard her playing with them; "Time to go to your women's group," she was saying. So that was my first encounter with feminism repurposing play structures.

I also taught one of the first women's studies courses at Harvard as a grad student ("Heroines of English Fiction") and then again as a young faculty member at MIT in the early 1970s. My

9 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 4.

10 Marilyn French, *The Women's Room* (Summit Books, 1977).

thesis was on a feminist male writer, George Meredith, and my first book was a feminist anthology of closely edited historical documents, *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth Century England*.¹¹ I also co-edited the Routledge edition of the *Englishwomen's Review of Social and Historical Questions*, which ran for over 40 years as the magazine of record of English feminism on everything but suffrage. And I brought to Oxford University Press and edited the reprint edition of Mary Taylor's *Miss Miles*, a passionately feminist novel by Charlotte Brontë's best friend.¹² In all of this work I was investigating the interplay between changing cultural values and changing narrative forms. For example, Taylor's novel is organized around women's friendships because, as she complained in letters to Brontë, she did not know how to get the man — meaning heterosexual romance — into it.

But when I discovered the possibility of what I then called "computers as a literary medium" in the early 1980s I saw that as a compartmentalized investigation, separate from my feminist scholarship and teaching. The overlap was in that underlying question: how will we use this form to capture and share human experience in ways that we could not capture and share in older formats? I have been concerned throughout my career with making the medium more expressive and coherent. I have appreciated explicitly feminist approaches to that practice but I guess I would say that my own research interests often lie at a different level of abstraction.

In some ways I had more than enough to do as a feminist to fight misogyny and sexism in my professional life as an administrator since coming to Georgia Tech. It's possible that I have thought of my intellectual life since the 1980s as a respite from that struggle. I think that there may be a generational difference with my younger colleagues in digital humanities, who might

11 Janet H. Murray, *Strong-Minded Women and Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England* (Pantheon Books, 1982).

12 Mary Taylor, *Miss Miles, or, A Tale of Yorkshire Life 60 Years Ago* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

feel freer to integrate those parts of themselves, or might do it more organically because they grew up accustomed to seeing the world through a feminist lens, while my generation had to fight a bit harder to assert it.

At the same time I have definitely felt an affinity to the work of feminist game scholars and designers, including especially Celia Pearce, Tracy Fullerton, Clara Fernández-Vara; to women scholars such as T.L. Taylor, Katherine Isbister, Suzanne Scott, Laine Nooney; to women practitioners such as Emily Short, Mitu Khandakar, Anna Anthropy; and to the more computational women working at the intersection of artificial intelligence and games like Kate Compton, Anne Sullivan, and Gillian Smith. In related non-game feminist work, I find much that is relevant and useful in the design insights of Nonny de la Pena, the pioneer of documentary VR, and in Lauren Klein and Catherine D'Ignazio, who have been defining new principles of “data feminism.”

The work that I have done in game design that has been most explicitly feminist would be my elaboration of an alternative to the ubiquitous male quest archetype as the basis of storytelling. I proposed instead a parameterized narrative based on a woman choosing between two men, tracing this pattern from Helen of Troy through *Sex in the City*, all reinterpreted in a way that stresses the woman's agency. I proposed this as an AI framework, and I also developed a few iterations of the idea as a Vladimir Propp-like story-generation system with students in my PeN-Lab, broadening it out into non-hetero-normative versions as we expanded the concept.¹³

BB: Your recent article, “Virtual/Reality: How to Tell the Difference,” also has me thinking a lot about your humanistic approach to design. In the article, you discuss VR and the metaverse, and

13 Janet H. Murray, “A Tale of Two Boyfriends: A Literary Abstraction Strategy for Creating Meaningful Character Variation,” in *Interactive Digital Narrative: History, Theory and Practice*, ed. Gabriele Ferri et al. (Routledge, 2015).

I'm particularly struck by your discussion of magical thinking: "To expect that technology alone — whether faster machines or higher resolution or new ways of projecting images on the retina — will somehow instantly create credible virtual worlds is to indulge in magical thinking."¹⁴

For me, magical thinking problematically seems to assume that technology and technological advancement are somehow removed from human creation and design. And what's more is that, as you say, magical thinking can often be mistaken for "valid technological judgement." Can you comment on the dangers of magical thinking in game studies? How have you seen magical thinking manifest in the study of games, and what do you think game studies scholars can do better when studying games?

JHM: I think there is a belief in the games industry that more technology = more immersion. Sometimes this is echoed in academia, especially with the introduction of a new modality. The willingness to think that virtual reality experiences are intrinsically more empathetic than films or books is a good example of this.

Gamification discourse also leans toward magical thinking when researchers assume that adding non-intrinsic rewards will increase motivation.

Some writers fall into the trap of attributing magical transformational effects to games. The fallacy here is forgetting that all cultural behavior is a form of game, in that it is based on the intrinsic pleasure of synchronizing our behavior with other conscious humans. If games could save the world they would have done so already. That said, computer-based games are providing important building blocks of social connection and cognitive complexity that are adaptive for twenty-first-century problems, especially those situations that must be understood as multi-causal and that appear different from multiple angles.

14 Janet H. Murray, "Virtual/Reality: How to Tell the Difference," *Journal of Digital Culture* 19, no. 1 (2020): 22.

But we will not gain these benefits with a single new platform or a specific well-meaning global game. We have to build up structures of representation and genres of expression over long periods of time.

BB: Something else that strikes me about your arguments in “Virtual/Reality: How to Tell the Difference” are the implications magical thinking has for the ways we think about bodies. In the article, you argue that magical thinking about VR in particular has encouraged “belief in the inevitability of a future migration away from our biological bodies and into a computer-generated world.”¹⁵ And you similarly contend that “philosophers of consciousness [... who are] captivated by the possibility of a VR-based reality”¹⁶ are irresponsible when they consider VR “casually as ‘an interesting and pleasant’ welcome substitute for the actual world we live in.”¹⁷ I’d love to hear more about your thoughts on how magical thinking’s centering of technology deprives bodies and their existence in the world. What do you think we lose when game studies’ magical thinking loses sight of bodily existences?

JHM: We live and die and suffer and find joy as embodied beings. With the infatuation with computation that has marked the past four decades has come a theme of the promise of escape from mortality through merger with the machine. This is partly what is behind the desire to see games as non-representational non-narrative systems, as pure symbol manipulation machines that can put us in what Natasha Schüll calls the “zone” of the gambler enthralled to the casino machine. We long to escape the narrative arc of our lives with its inevitable end and live in a timeless now. We long to move through the world without friction, like an avatar in a virtual world. These are understandable but toxic desires, made the more tempting and the more lethal as

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22.

¹⁷ Ibid.

the physical world threatens us with wildfires, hurricanes, and global pandemics.

BB: I'd also like to discuss your work leading the Prototyping eNarrative Lab (PeN Lab) at Georgia Tech.¹⁸ Could you talk some more about your work with students in the PeN Lab and your efforts to mentor emerging games scholars? What have you found valuable about mentoring students in their work at the PeN Lab? And based on your experience in the lab, what do you think mentorship means for the future of game studies? What kinds of mentorship are needed to move the field forward? What do you believe mentorship should look like?

JHM: The advantage of working in a sustained manner on multi-year design problems is that you can build up a community of practice, giving students who might only be in a master's program for 2 years the chance to work on a well-designed problem with a past and future. A good example of a problem in narrative game design that we have worked on in iterative projects across almost 20 years now is a master's project made by a student of mine who has recently become quite famous for her comedy work. Sarah Cooper produced an interactive narrative masters project called "Reliving Last Night" in 2001 that very skillfully motivated replay by setting up clever parameters by which the same encounter could go in multiple directions. She did the original interface and we later ported it twice to improve upon the mechanic by which interactors could make choices. In 2011, when the iPad was introduced, we invented a third interface.¹⁹ And for the past few semesters we have been working on another port of this interface, which will include an authoring template so that students in my lab and in my undergrad/grad course in Interactive Narrative can use the same structure to

18 "Prototypes," *PeNLab*, <https://penlab.gatech.edu>.

19 "Reliving Last Night," *PeNLab*, <http://penlab.gatech.edu/2011/05/17/reliving-last-night/>.

make their own parameterized stories that will be able to emulate the satisfying parallelism of Cooper's project.

At the personal level, mentorship within a university program provides the opportunity to encourage students to put their skills and energy to purposes that they define for themselves. It is the privilege of helping to develop individual creativity within the common enterprise.

Stepping back to a wider perspective, I think that new genres of interactive expression hold the promise of making us smarter and more connected. It is easy to see ways in which digital media have been used for anti-social purposes, and those are problems that have to be addressed. But those problems should not lead us to lose sight of the privilege of living at this moment when a new medium of expression has come into human hands, and when we have the rewarding task of developing the conventions and genres that will allow us to expand our cognitive powers and to capture and share more complex and flexible visions of the world. Study within a university offers us the opportunity to be reminded of the higher purpose of collectively inventing and refining a new medium of human expression. Studying game design within a university involves the making and critiquing of single artifacts within larger historical, cultural, and social contexts.

BB: And finally, because you put so much work into mentoring emerging scholars, I'd love to hear more about what you're hoping emerging game studies scholars will do for the field? What kinds of game studies praxis are you hoping emerging scholars of games will engage in to shape the future of the field?

JHM: I think the women scholars and practitioners I mentioned earlier — Celia Pearce, Tracy Fullerton, Clara Fernández-Vara, T.L. Taylor, Katherine Isbister, Natasha Schüll, Suzanne Scott, Nassim Parvin, Laine Nooney, Emily Short, Mitu Khandakar, Anna Anthropy, Kate Compton, Anne Sullivan, Gillian Smith, Nonny de la Pena, Lauren Klein, and Catherine D'Ignazio — have set a standard for sophistication in the combination of social

awareness and design inventiveness in game studies and adjacent fields. I would add to this group Gonzalo Frasca, Hartmut Koenitz, Lindsay Grace, Paolo Pedercini, and Chaim Gingold, among others. I am glad you asked me this question because it has made me aware that there are a lot of scholars and designers working in different nodes of game studies and game studies-related areas, all of whom expect their work to reflect progressive social values and all of whom draw design inspiration from cross-genre sources. It's clear to me that the future of the field lies in this intersection of pressing cultural themes with design invention.

The scholars and practitioners who interest me the most are of course the ones whose work intersects with interactive narrative design, and it is clear that questions of narrative form will remain part of the mainstream of game studies. And I have been heartened by the establishment of professional structures that prioritize narrative over games, which I think is a necessary counterbalance to the game studies framework. I want to see people asking not only "What do narrative structures bring to games?" but also "What do game mechanics offer to interactive narrative?"²⁰

BB: These are such great scholars and practitioners to note when considering the future of game studies. And since this interview is a collaborative space between the two of us — an established scholar and a junior one — I'd love to contribute to our collective network of citations. I also want to highlight the work of scholars and practitioners like TreaAndrea Russworm, Kishonna Gray, Jennifer Malkowski, Elizabeth LaPenseé, Adrienne Shaw, Irene Chien, Stephanie Jennings, Nina Huntemann, Lisa Nakamura, Shira Chess, and Mia Consalvo. Indeed, this interview, to me, signifies and provides a model for a productive collabora-

20 Janet H. Murray, "Research into Interactive Digital Narrative: A Kaleidoscopic View," paper presented at the International Conference on Interactive Digital Storytelling (ICIDS), Dublin, Ireland, December 2018, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-04028-4_1.

tive relationship among game studies scholars, and I think an important manifestation of such work resides in collaborative citational practices. Thanks so much for such a fruitful conversation!

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Young Scholars, and Old Debates: Why the Ludology Versus Narratology “Debate” Cannot Be Forgotten

Emma Vossen

My warnings about narrativism and theoretical colonialism might seem unduly harsh and even militant. Why not let the matter resolve itself, through scholarly, logical dialogue? The reason for this vigilance, however, is based on numbers. The sheer number of students trained in film and literary studies will ensure that the slanted and crude misapplication of “narrative” theory to games will continue and probably overwhelm game scholarship for a long time to come. As long as vast numbers of journals and supervisors from traditional narrative studies continue to sanction dissertations and papers that take the narrativity of games for granted and confuse the story-game hybrids with games in general, good, critical scholarship on games will be outnumbered by incompetence, and this is a problem for all involved.

— Espen Aarseth, “Genre Trouble”¹

¹ Espen Aarseth, “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (MIT Press, 2004), 45.

The Personal, Political, and Positional

In the above epigraph, Espen Aarseth lists the issues he worries game studies will face in the coming years. This quotation is from his 2004 essay “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation,” which was published in the popular game studies textbook *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Eight years post “Genre Trouble,” in 2012, I began my PhD, working amongst a large cohort of grad students at the University of Waterloo. At that time, almost everyone I knew studying games (especially the few women) was getting a PhD in English. We were taught about hypertext and other “story-game hybrids,”² we were directed to use the tools and theories we already had at our disposal to analyze games as texts, and in 2018, I defended a PhD dissertation focusing on the importance of culture and representation in games in an English department. In “Genre Trouble,” Aarseth is especially concerned about students from English and Film who would misapply their existing methods and “overwhelm game scholarship for a long time to come.” I am one of the young scholars that Aarseth warned you about in 2004, and this is my “slanted,” “crude,” and “incompetent” scholarship.

When reading “Genre Trouble” as an impressionable young scholar, I could not help but identify my work as everything that Aarseth was rallying against. “Genre Trouble” specifically and the ludology versus narratology debate more broadly, taught me as a grad student that there was a “right way” and a “wrong way” to study games, and I felt positive that I must be doing it wrong.³

² Ibid.

³ For those lucky people who don’t already know, the “ludology versus narratology debate” is what game scholars call the ongoing, controversial, now twenty-year-old discussion around what methods and theories should be used to study games. To put it in very simple terms the “debate” is mainly over whether the importance of narrative was/is overstated and overstudied in comparison to “ludology” or gameplay. This sounds simple, but as I am about to explain, it is much more complicated and politically fraught than that.

As an English major, as someone interested in examinations of culture and gender, and as someone who enjoyed the work of scholars like Janet H. Murray and Henry Jenkins, how could I think I was the rare narrative scholar that someone like Aaseth would think was getting it right?

They say history is written by the victors, which is why I think the fact that I am someone of little scholarly importance, someone who was part of game studies for just over ten years with a PhD and no academic job, is, frankly, quite important. I have nothing to gain by writing this chapter other than a desire to leave game studies in a better state than I found it. In the tradition of historiography, this chapter examines not only how the history of the ludology versus narratology debate has been recorded but also how that history has been reinterpreted and felt by subsequent generations. What lives on in game studies today is not what “actually” happened but instead the impact of the debate, the debate as it was felt, interpreted, and passed on. The aim of this examination, and in a way this whole volume of essays and interviews, is to demonstrate the lasting impact of competing and marginalized histories as opposed to perpetuating the myth that game studies has a singular history, a canon, a “year one,” or a grounding “debate.”⁴

While I can’t blame anyone in the field for not wanting to talk about it, insisting that the debate is unimportant or should be forgotten only helps to perpetuate the harmful misconcep-

4 2001 was by no means “year one” of game studies, *even if* we ignore the history of play studies and analog game studies and only focus on digital games. Colette Weil wrote her thesis “A Study of Two Game Centers and the Profile of Their Patrons” about gender and player motivations in 1980, and Mary Ann Buckles wrote her PhD dissertation “Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame ‘Adventure’” in 1985. These women were doing game studies work for more than *twenty-one years* before Espen Aarseth declared 2001 to be “year one” in Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>; Colette Weil, “A Study of Two Game Centers and the Profile of Their Patrons” (PhD diss., San Jose State University, 1980); and Mary Ann Buckles, “Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame ‘Adventure’” (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1985).

tions forwarded by the debates themselves. A desire to ignore the debate only furthers a cycle in which false information, and contextless narratives, are passed on. Many young scholars are often confused about what exactly happened, as many senior scholars are unwilling to “get into it.” Because of this, young scholars either have to take what they read in books like *First Person* at face value or, like me, they have to figure it out on their own. Either way, young scholars in game studies end up drawing their own conclusions about if the debate indicates they do or do not belong in the field. In my experience, more often than not, it is women and queer people who conclude that they do not belong in game studies. Many chapters and interviews in this book, beyond my own, demonstrate this. From my perspective, as someone who spent over a decade in game studies but never felt a real sense of belonging in the field, the ludology versus narratology debate is the story of how the work and opinions of a few men (who used similar theories and methods) were canonized and overstated, and therefore other games-related work (intentionally or not) was marginalized to the fringes of the field. It is only by continuously discussing the failures of these early debates that we can address the harms and move on as a field.

I have previously argued that game studies exists within the larger landscape of games culture and therefore exhibits many of the same problems. Much like games culture, game studies is unwelcoming and inaccessible to marginalized people, but with all the additional gatekeeping that is endemic to academia.⁵ This is especially clear when you examine the impact of the ludology versus narratology debate. This chapter presents an analysis of both the discourse and culture surrounding the ludology versus narratology debates from 2001 to 2021 to showcase the effects

5 See my description of “game studies capital” in Emma Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018), 210–13. I build on the concept of “gamer capital” by applying the model specifically to the cultural capital circulated in game studies.

these debates are still having on scholars today.⁶ Central to this analysis are my experiences struggling to understand these “old” debates as first a grad student and later a young, underemployed scholar. Almost twenty-five years after Aarseth claimed it was “Computer Game Studies, Year One” and over twenty years post “Genre Trouble,” I insist that game studies is and must be made up of literally anyone who is studying games or play, despite what you might have heard elsewhere.

What is “Real Game Studies”?

In 2014, as I studied for my PhD comprehensive exams, I grappled with the combative and unwelcoming history of game studies while I also struggled against increasing harassment from GamerGate and other conservative groups.⁷ For the first two years of my PhD, I swore up and down that I would never, *ever* be a part of game studies. Despite writing about games, taking classes on games, and even taking comprehensive exams that included game studies, I refused to consider game studies as my potential disciplinary home for years. This reluctance was grounded in a belief that my writing about games wasn’t “real” game studies, according to what I had read and been told by my peers.⁸

6 Someone of any age could be a “young” games scholar if they are new to the field. While I believe these debates affected most people in game studies negatively, I am particularly interested in the effects on grad students, the untenured, and other precarious scholars.

7 See Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming,” for a deep dive into these experiences and how they affected myself and other scholars who worked at the middle-state game studies publication *First Person Scholar* (not to be confused with the book *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*).

8 I think it’s important to note here that the person I’m describing in this narrative is not the person I am today. The past decade gave me confidence and self-assurance that I did not have during my PhD. Grad school is a time of great insecurity in which we are easily swayed in our opinions and research directions. It is a time when we are influenced and mentored. At the beginning of a PhD, small comments can change an entire research trajectory. What may seem like sticks and stones to a senior scholar are

When I described what interested me about games (the intersections between identity, play, and culture), peers and experienced scholars told me that it sounded more like I was interested in gender studies or cultural studies, obviously separate from game studies. I constantly heard about what game studies was not and rarely heard about what it *was*. The work placed in front of me as “real” game studies was uninteresting to me at best, if not offensive.⁹ Therefore, I assumed there was no place for someone like me in game studies. This dynamic is caused by disciplinary gatekeeping (both intentional and not) that scholars have been calling out for years, long before I began studying games. For example, Marinka Copier argued in 2003 that what may seem like “deciding which methodologies and theories should be used” or “constructing boundaries between game studies articles that are conceived as scientific and non-scientific” is determining “who can be a game researcher and decide the above and who cannot.”¹⁰

When you are an early-career scholar, and someone senior to you explains that so and so is the most important scholar in the field, or that someone else isn’t part of the field at all, you believe them. I was told very clearly that the most important voices in game studies were people like Aarseth and Ian Bogost and that I might be more interested in the works of people who are doing great work that was “not really” game studies like T.L. Taylor¹¹

branches and boulders to grad students. Eventually, enough of these blockades will completely alter a field.

- 9 Aarseth’s assertion that “the dimensions of Lara Croft’s body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don’t even see her body, but see through it and past it” did not make me feel as if any analysis of gender in games I had to offer would be appreciated by the game studies community. Aarseth, “Genre Trouble,” 48.
- 10 Marinka Copier, “The Other Game Researcher: Participating in and Watching the Construction of Boundaries in Game Studies,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2003: Level Up*, <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/35>.
- 11 If you are mind-blown that anyone could think someone as prolific as Taylor could be described as not part of game studies, see Kishonna Gray’s interview in this volume for commentary on her experiences at DiGRA the year when Taylor was Keynote.

or Adrienne Shaw.¹² These passing comments convinced me my work was “not really” game studies either. Much of what is and isn’t game studies is self-taught, or more often peer-taught, in much the same way that we learn who “is” and who “isn’t” a gamer within the space of games culture. At no point did this feel more true than when I was trying to wrap my head around the ludology versus narratology debate.

What Exactly Is a Ludologist?

In *First Person*, Noah Wardrip-Fruin introduces ludology by saying that the ludologists’ “image of the field of computer game studies is significantly different from that found in literature or film departments, the popular press, or media industry conferences.”¹³ Wardrip-Fruin explains that Aarseth was primarily focused on “the texts themselves” and not the cultural context as the ludologists did not want to be “held back” by the trappings of other disciplines.¹⁴ The ludology versus narratology debate was, therefore, about the proper versus the improper way to study games, and ludology defined itself largely by what it wasn’t. In fact, Aarseth claimed that “only by asking ourselves what games are not, or what they need not be, can we find out what they really are.”¹⁵ His concern was that if we examined games as critical texts that can tell stories we would “have very little chance of finding out what is unique about them.”¹⁶

12 If you are shocked that someone as influential as Shaw could be considered an outsider, please see Shaw’s chapter in this volume that discusses these disciplinary boundaries from their perspective.

13 Noah Wardrip-Fruin, “Ludology,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (MIT Press, 2004), 35.

14 Ibid.

15 Espen Aarseth, “Espen Aarseth Responds in Turn,” *Electronic Book Review*, May 21, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/espen-aarseth-responds-in-turn/>.

16 Ibid.

Instead of simply examining games the way he wanted and letting others do the same, Aarseth continually emphasized that if this approach was not adopted, it would be to the peril of the entire discipline, concluding, “We still know surprisingly little about what the play-element in games is. If we skirt this issue in favor of the cultural and textual aspects of games, our field will remain hollow.”¹⁷ What complicates matters further is that Aarseth had also just founded the first game studies disciplinary journal (*Game Studies*) and declared that year (2001) the first year of the discipline.¹⁸ Even though the ludologists may have been outnumbered by people studying games from a cultural or textual perspective overall, within “game studies” specifically the opinions and approaches of ludologists become overstated and overemphasized.

What Exactly Is a Narratologist?

After reading essays by the ludologists in *First Person*, I attempted to find the other side of the debate. I couldn’t find it in *First Person*, so I looked elsewhere for anyone raging against ludology or insisting that narratology was the only right way to study games. But not only could I not find any “narratologists” making a claim on the position, but I also couldn’t find anyone holding up the other side of the “debate” at all. Stuart Moulthrop writes in *First Person* (in a section hilariously titled “Play Nicely”) that ludology and narratology are not “antithetical,” suggesting that Aarseth probably has more in common with Murray and other supposed “narratologists” than he thinks.¹⁹ Moulthrop approached the debate not as a war but as a misunderstanding of the work being done by theorists like Murray, Brenda Laurel,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”

¹⁹ In his interview in this volume, Aarseth positions himself as someone who started out studying text and narrative, culminating in his book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, before moving on to studying games.

and Sherry Turkle.²⁰ Murray has a chapter in *First Person*, but her research does not discuss or defend her supposed “narratology” position.²¹ Jenkins also has a chapter where he responds to the debate (which he describes as a “blood feud”) by offering not the other side but “a middle-ground position between the ludologists and the narratologists.”²² Jenkins discusses the debate with levity that contrasts the seriousness of the arguments made by the ludologists quite dramatically.²³ The alleged narratologists used humor as a tactic to deal with being cast as the villain in an ideological war they didn’t want to fight.

After finishing *First Person*, I found a 2005 DiGRA talk by Murray titled “The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology” in which Murray forecasts my own confusion, saying that “the students flooding our graduate and undergraduate programs” should not continue to be “confused by the appearance of an either/or choice between games and stories.”²⁴ She explains that this crucial “other” side of the debate that I was looking for, that she was supposedly part of, did not actually exist. In her opinion, there were no self-declared “narratologists” in game studies²⁵

20 Stuart Moulthrop, “From Work to Play: Molecular Culture in the Time of Deadly Games,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (MIT Press, 2004), 47.

21 Janet H. Murray, “From Game-Story to Cyberdrama,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (MIT Press, 2004).

22 Henry Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (MIT Press, 2004), 119.

23 See Jenkins’s interview in this volume, in which he discusses the experience of being invited by Aarseth to a European conference to discuss games only to discover that he was being “cast” as a “narratologist” and that the ludologist conference goers were “gunning for” him. He reflects that he didn’t know ludology existed previous to that time.

24 Janet H. Murray, “The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology,” *Inventing the Medium*, June 28, 2013, <https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/>.

25 Ibid. At this point I need to point out that while narratology is a field in literary studies in which narratologists are obviously very real, Murray was discussing the idea of “narratologists” in the game studies context specifically.

and the term was a straw man created by ludologists to control the discourse of the field.²⁶ In her slides from the talk,²⁷ Murray argues that the ludologists used the term narratologist to cover “anyone discussing games as cultural, dramatic, narrative, psychological, emotional or otherwise semiotic experiences.”²⁸ In other words: most game scholars.

Before Murray’s “last word” Gonzalo Frasca also argued that the debate was not a debate so much as a series of misunderstandings at DiGRA 2003.²⁹ In his talk entitled “Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes From a Debate that Never Took Place,” he attempted to address the misconceptions that the debate had created up until that point, including how “ludology” had two vastly different definitions.³⁰ When my peers used the word “ludology,” they were referring to a side of a debate, as they had learned in *First Person*, whereas Frasca originally intended the term “ludology” to mean “the study of games,” full stop.³¹ Frasca points out that he himself and all ludologists also studied narrative in some capacity and “love stories too.” This was why it was so strange that so much of the writing I found myself reading as a graduate student was so hostile toward these “other” schol-

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. Even if you have read Murray’s “Last Word,” I encourage you to check out the slides as well, which are hilarious and demonstrate the levity and humor with which the “narratologists” engaged in this debate.

28 Ibid.

29 Gonzalo Frasca, “Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes from a Debate That Never Took Place,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2003: Level Up*, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/05163.01125.pdf>.

30 Ludology, as a term, was not coined by any game scholar but it was brought into game studies by Frasca in his 1999 publication “Ludology meets Narratology” in which he proposes “ludology” to be the name for the yet undefined field of game studies. Around this time he started a research blog called www.ludology.org, not to be confused with Jesper Juul’s research blog “The Ludologist.” Gonzalo Frasca, “Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video)games and Narrative,” 1999, <https://ludology.typepad.com/weblog/articles/ludology.htm>.

31 Gonzalo, “Ludologists Love Stories, Too.”

ars — these scholars were actually just their colleagues who were not part of the ludologist “in” group.

In his interview in this volume, Aareseth emphasizes how he feels that the ludologists were often misinterpreted and misunderstood. The “truth” for those who were part of the birth of this debate seems not to be what was said at conferences or published in books or journals, but how they felt about these interactions themselves. In the end, all we are left with, all that is “real,” all these years later, is how this debate made (and makes) people feel. For people like Aareseth and Frasca, it seems to be a series of misunderstandings that were overblown in which, as Aareseth puts it, “there was no animosity.”³² But based on my reading around the debate, and many of the interviews and chapters in this book, to other people, it seemed that there was (or is) *substantial* animosity. Calling it a “misunderstanding” really downplays all the groundwork that was set out by the ludologists to create this culture that is actively interpreted as hostile to so many. If most people are misunderstanding you, repeatedly gleaning the same “wrong” conclusions from your writing, the problem is not with their reading but with your ability to properly and clearly communicate your position.

Furthermore, if the debate was just, as Frasca put it, a “serious misunderstanding,” then why was I, a graduate student, taught that this was the founding debate of our field? If, in Frasca’s opinion, a ludologist is simply “a game scholar” regardless of “his or her position on narrative and games,” then how did the term become something that felt exclusionary to so many?³³ While it seems that the term “ludologist” took on a life of its own that goes well beyond what the members of the original ludology gang intended, I don’t think that means that the original ludologists are not at fault, as they did, very clearly create the “us versus them” paradigm that started this “misunderstanding” in the first place.

32 As stated in Cody Mejeur’s interview with Aareseth in this volume.

33 Gonzalo, “Ludologists Love Stories, Too.”

First Person and the Colonization Question

As I mentioned before, *First Person* was included in the pre-determined list of texts that I read for my PhD comprehensive exam in media studies. But, it took many more years and a lot of outside research to develop my current understanding of the “debate.” Perhaps the ludology versus narratology debate would have waned in importance or become forgotten over the years, but instead, it was established as central to future scholars in large part because of its importance as a framing structure within *First Person*.

For example, in his introduction to ludology and narratology in *First Person*, Markku Eskelinen sets up a combative paradigm, writing that game studies is “very open to intrusions and colonization from the already organized scholarly tribes” and “resisting and beating them is the goal of our first survival game.”³⁴ This fraught metaphor creates an “us versus them” dynamic in which most young scholars are positioned as “them.” If those of us with degrees in literature, media, film, or theater must be beaten back for the safety of the field, how could we possibly feel that we belong? In “Genre Trouble” Aarseth wrote, “As with any land rush, the respect for local culture and history is minimal, while the belief in one’s own tradition, tools, and competence is unflinching. Computer game studies is virgin soil, ready to be plotted and plowed by the machineries of cultural and textual studies.” Now that I know more about the history of game studies, I can see the deep roots of our discipline extending back decades before *First Person*. Therefore, game studies was not, in any way shape or form, “virgin soil.” This knowledge makes these warnings about potential colonization seem even more ill-founded. Were the “founders” of game studies not simply men who gave a

34 Markku Eskelinen, “Towards Computer Game Studies,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (MIT Press, 2004), 36.

name to a place that already existed, where people were already working, and called it theirs?³⁵

As I established previously, game studies is often not unlike games culture. Graeme Kirkpatrick has argued that the gatekeeping of games culture as we now know it started properly when the contemporary definitions of “gameplay” and “gamer” came into being in the late 1980s,³⁶ as journalism became centered on an ideal gamer who “was the arbiter of great ‘gameplay’ who quickly became the center of gaming discourse.”³⁷ Between 1987–1988, games writing started to contrast this “young male gamer” to a “feminized, weak player.”³⁸ These long and heated discussions of “true” gamer identity have been part of the discourse of games culture since at least 1987. In other words, “gamer,” like “game studies,” was defined not by what it was but by what it was not. The only way to maintain these liminal identities is by gatekeeping who gets to belong.

When the idea of “game studies” as opposed to scholars studying games and play across fields came into being around 2001, the gatekeeping of who should be allowed to write about and analyze games began to intensify as well. I cannot help but bring

35 Note that while I am using their own language to point out the flaws in this logic, I am not arguing that “they were the real colonizers,” as I think that it is inappropriate to use colonization as a metaphor to discuss disciplinary boundaries, full stop. It disconnects the term from the real violence that has been and is still being committed against colonized people, such as the Palestinian people currently facing a genocide perpetrated by Israel with the support of both the current (as of summer 2024) American and Canadian governments. I believe watering down the term colonization and or decolonization is harmful to movements that are seeking to free, return land to, and redistribute power to Indigenous and colonized people.

36 Obviously women were also excluded from gaming spaces before this time, but there was a shift in strategy and reasoning in the ’80s and ’90s. For an exploration of how gatekeeping in games and other fantasy media has evolved over the past 100 years, see Emma Vossen, “There and Back Again: Tolkien, Gamers, and the Remediation of Exclusion through Fantasy Media,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 37–65.

37 Graeme Kirkpatrick, “How Gaming Became Sexist: A Study of UK Gaming Magazines 1981–1995,” *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 4 (2017): 459–60.

38 *Ibid.*, 462.

up the comparison here between the perceived underdog status of the ludologist, and the perceived underdog status of contemporary gamers who don't want "politics" in their games or game reviews.³⁹ Both seem to feel games are under attack by an outside force that is talking about games the "wrong" way, is overstating arguments about representation, is focusing on narratives, and, of course, includes many women. In neither "debate" did both "sides" feel they were participating. As Chess and Shaw explain when discussing GamerGate's belief that game studies was part of a larger conspiracy by "social justice warriors" to take over games:

these specific conspiracy theories tap into a long history, both inside and outside academic departments, of treating feminist scholarship as unscientific (e.g., dividing up academics and feminists), ideological (assuming all other research is neutral), and frivolous (distracting from important research on games that should be done).⁴⁰

All these strategies can be seen on full display in the ludology versus narratology debate.

Contemporary Battles in Ludology versus Narratology

Bianca Batti and Alisha Karabinus have addressed how these "debates" affect women in game studies in their response to Bogost's viral article "Video Games Are Better Without Stories."⁴¹ Batti and Karabinus explain that there is "a fantasy of

39 Vossen, "There and Back Again."

40 Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw, "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 1 (2015): 216.

41 Bogost argued that "the best interactive stories are still worse than even middling books and films. That's a problem to be ignored rather than solved." The article laid out the terms of the classic debate in an accessible way, making no mention of the terms "ludology" or "narratology." This caused the debate to play out across the internet in a way I've never seen

male power” that allows Bogost and other high-profile men in game studies to believe that they are “the arbiter of truth and knowledge,” and this results in a type of “epistemological gatekeeping” in which a few powerful men get to decide “not just whose games get to count as games, but whose study of them then gets to count as legitimate and valid as well.”⁴² Batti and Karabinus acknowledge a type of male power fantasy fueled by overconfidence, just as Kirkpatrick described in broader games culture.

Furthermore, there is a palpable frustration that many scholars can’t perform scholarship the way that Bogost has. While young, straight, cis, white, male game scholars may aspire to his career path, the rest of us aren’t rewarded for writing glib think pieces in *The Atlantic* meant to rile up the masses. We face harassment and pushback for even the simplest tweet. I’ve faced days or weeks of harassment after presenting totally non-controversial research at a conference, or for a single quote in a news article. Having the privilege to purposely create ire or debate is unthinkable.⁴³

any other academic debate explode online. Academics were restating their positions, while people outside of academia were discovering the debate for the first time and digging in. In this article, not only did Bogost not mention Murray’s “Last Word” article, he also made continued passing reference to Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck* without ever mentioning or citing Murray, a scholar at his own institution at the time. He instead linked to the Wikipedia article for “Holodeck.” Bogost’s impact on game studies and influence on games discourse cannot be overstated; at the time of writing (2024) he has over 100,000 followers on X (formerly Twitter). In comparison, DiGRA, game studies’ largest professional organization, has just over 1000. Ian Bogost, “Video Games Are Better Without Stories,” *The Atlantic*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/>; Murray, “Last Word”; and Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1997).

42 Bianca Batti and Alisha Karabinus, “A Dream of Embodied Experience: On Ian Bogost, Epistemological Gatekeeping, and the Holodeck,” *Not Your Mama’s Gamer*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.nymgamer.com/?p=16363>.

43 For example, in 2015 GamerGate flooded the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) conference hashtag on Twitter, harassing and attacking women who presented on totally unrelated topics, while ignoring men

In 2017, Murray also responded to Bogost's viral article by posting an excerpt on *First Person Scholar* from her re-released and updated version of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.⁴⁴ In this post she linked to her "Last Words" essay, and commented that the ludology versus narratology "controversy continues to flare up with surprising energy."⁴⁵ She also addressed the controversies in her interview in this volume saying that the "hostile tone and personal targeting of the attack on me in the initial issue of game studies" now appears to be "a small foretaste of the vituperations against feminist scholars in the GamerGate era."⁴⁶

Why the Debate Can Not be Unmade

The ludologists may have been, as Murray put it, "debating a phantom of their own creation,"⁴⁷ but many very real contemporary scholars are arguing with each other, not knowing or not caring that these debates were ill-founded. These attempts to control the field and determine what is proper to study are very effective. If you look at the Wikipedia article for game studies, it is dominated by the discussion of the debate, which is, for the most part, treated as a face-value debate with two sides. This is the most accessible way to learn about the debate, one that I'm sure many students do access. If game studies as a field has collectively "known" for over 20 years that this debate "never happened," then why do we still teach it to young scholars as

who presented about GamerGate directly. This demonstrated that not everyone faces the same risks or repercussions for their research. We have also seen that sometimes the harassment comes from within academia, such as when vocal Donald Trump supporter Adrian Cheok harassed feminist members of the audience who critiqued his highly inappropriate keynote presentation at the 2017 Foundations of Digital Games conference.

44 Janet H. Murray, "Janet Murray on Why Some Players and Critics Still Cannot Tolerate Narrative in Games," *First Person Scholar*, May 18, 2017, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/janet-murray-on-why-some-players-and-critics-still-cannot-tolerate-narrative-in-games/>.

45 Ibid.

46 See Bianca Batti's interview with Janet H. Murray in this volume.

47 Murray, "Last Word."

though it *did* happen? Why are we passing it down as legend instead of bullshit?

In part, I think the answer is that many people are taught the debate as it was recorded in books like *First Person*. They will never read Murray's "Last Word" or hear "the other" side because they aren't assigned the many articles by games scholars critiquing it. Furthermore, many senior scholars are sick of discussing the "debate" and don't want to spend time explaining it in all its complexity. I've seen senior scholars shut down entire conference theaters, saying simply, "we are not getting into that" and it's hard to blame them.⁴⁸ I am sick of it myself—I can't imagine how much worse that would be if I had been dealing with it since 2001.

Every time the debate is reopened without context, the discourse of the field is re-centered around those who started it, and those essays continue to be cited and continue to influence our ideas of what game studies is. In this vein, Gerald Voorhees argued in 2013 that these debates are not only a "methodological, or perspectival disagreement," but also "an effort to define and thereby control the nature of the field."⁴⁹ Ultimately Voorhees argued that we need to be cautious of the "false dilemma" that causes us to privilege the game over the player, the story over the procedures, or vice versa.⁵⁰ Similarly, Kevin Moberly argues that the ludologists established the boundaries of game studies by "locating Aarseth, Eskelinen, and other ludologists firmly at the center of the discourse."⁵¹ Moberly goes on to explain that,

48 Carly Kocurek has joked on Twitter that the debate is the game studies version of the infamous "We don't talk about the orangutan" story in American Literature (which I encourage you to google) and that this book you are reading now is all of us "talking about the 'orangutan'" in our field.

49 Gerald Voorhees, "Criticism and Control: Gameplay in the Space of Possibility," in *Ctrl-Alt-Play: Essays on Control in Video Gaming*, ed. Matthew Wysocki (McFarland, 2013), 9.

50 Ibid., 10.

51 Kevin Moberly, "Preemptive Strikes: Ludology Narratology, and Deterrence in Computer Game Studies," in *The Game Culture Reader*, ed. Jason C. Thompson and Marc A. Ouellette (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 163.

“Marxist and poststructuralist approaches” are not even “allowed to enter the contest”⁵² and I would add cultural and feminist approaches to that list. Bringing the ludology versus narratology debate back into the limelight without context, as Bogost did in 2017, means enforcing these norms and pouring fuel on a dying fire in an effort to recenter game studies discourse around the debate and the scholars who ignited it.

It’s important to establish again that, in *First Person*, immediately after claiming that narratologists are would-be invaders and colonizers, Eskelinen and Aarseth go on to make arguments *about games as a narrative medium*. Eskelinen’s essay discusses how time unfolds in narrative using narratological theories, and Aarseth goes on to discuss “story-game hybrids” in the genre of adventure games. Aarseth discusses the relationship between interactivity and narrative in games just like any other scholar studying similar texts. Why is it that when Aarseth examines narrative in video games it counts as game studies but when other people do this work it is “narrativism and theoretical colonialism”?⁵³

But I Was Promised a Debate!

As you can probably imagine, I didn’t like *First Person* much. While some contributions in the book are amazing, I found the structure of the book, in which scholars write statements and then another scholar responds to what they wrote, (and sometimes the original scholar even follows up) oddly reminiscent of toxic Twitter discourse.⁵⁴ Many of the essays in *First Person*,

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Aarseth, “Genre Trouble.”

⁵⁴ It’s worth noting that much of the work in *First Person* is also available through the *Electronic Book Review* (EBR), an online journal where scholars can stumble upon these arguments out of context. It’s also important to note that some of the responses on *ebr* are not actually in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, although they are responses to writing that is from within *First Person*. Confusing, I know.

especially the responses, make it seem like the most important thing is being right, even if it means doing away with collegiality completely. For example in “Markku Eskelinen’s response to Julian Raul Kucklich,”⁵⁵ Eskelinen responds to Kucklich, who was a grad student at the time, in terms no one could argue were professional. Kucklich’s 2004 essay was one of the first essays to present the sort of critiques of ludology that I am still trying to forward today.⁵⁶ Eskelinen says Kucklich does not “even deserve a proper reply” and goes on to say that the essay would be better suited to the “continuous amateur hour of Kucklich’s blog.”⁵⁷ He preempts his entire response by saying, “let me try to explain this like I would to a child.”⁵⁸ Amanda Philips highlights how the rhetoric around these debates often takes the form of “scholarly negging,” an attempt at “emotional manipulation that aims to trigger insecurity and leave the target more receptive” to flawed arguments.⁵⁹

Eskelinen claimed that he thinks the early ludologist debates were important (i.e., that they “worked”) because there were fewer researchers in 2004 than in 2001 trying to “take their favorite readymade theories off the shelf and project them blindly to computer games.”⁶⁰ This comment leads me to wonder if there really *were* more people learning how to discuss games “properly” by 2004, or if scholars simply left when they saw how incredibly rude, unwelcoming, and unprofessional game studies could be. How many voices, and how much great research and writing was lost to bullying, “negging,” and “debating” over the years?

55 Markku Eskelinen, “Markku Eskelinen’s Response to Julian Raul Kucklich,” *Electronic Book Review*, October 19, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/markku-eskelinens-response-to-julian-raul-kucklich/>.

56 Julian Raul Kucklich, “Julian Raul Kucklich Responds,” *Electronic Book Review*, June 24, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/julian-raul-kucklich-responds/>.

57 Eskelinen, “Markku Eskelinen’s Response.”

58 Ibid.

59 Amanda Phillips, “Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 12.

60 Eskelinen, “Markku Eskelinen’s Response.”

Not every response in *First Person* is like this, of course — many of them are well written and respectful. But to a young scholar, the book outlined a field ripe with not just disagreements but with membership policing, passive-aggressive and aggressive comments, and intense conflicts.

Who Is Left Out? Who Is Forgotten?

It is hard not to think of influential voices who ultimately left the academic space. Critics and writers like Anita Sarkeesian (*Feminist Frequency*) and Austin Walker (*Vice Games*, *Waypoint*) left academia to do their vital games-related criticism elsewhere. Hugo, Nebula, and Eisner Award-winning Science Fiction and Fantasy writer Dr. Nnedi Okorafor wrote a master's thesis entitled "Virtual Women: Female Characters in Video Games" in 1999 but is no longer working in the games and gender space in academia.⁶¹ For every Okorafor, Walker, and Sarkeesian there are hundreds of games scholars who left academia whose names you do not know.

Discussions of retention and the "pipeline problem" in the games industry are commonplace.⁶² But rarely do we acknowledge that game studies itself suffers from many of the same problems and that we are losing people from our "pipeline" as well. While game studies may initially seem diverse, that diversity is largely made up of grad students, people the field will likely not retain. While there are lots of people who are working hard to improve the experience of game studies for diverse individuals, that labor is frequently done by the marginalized themselves who get very little recognition for that work.⁶³ When

61 @Nnedi, *Twitter*, August 1, 2015, <https://twitter.com/Nnedi/status/627542731699568640>.

62 See Johanna Weststar and Marie-Josée Legault, "Women's Experiences on the Path to a Career in Game Development," in *Feminism in Play*, ed. Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

63 See Cody Mejeur, Mahli-Ann R. Butt, and Alayna Cole, "Feminist and Furious: Diversity Work(ers) Against Game Studies of Empire!," *Games*

we look at the larger “pipeline” we can see that we are training countless students in game studies methods but at the end of that journey, there are only a handful of jobs suitable for that training each year.

One way of measuring the impact of scholarly gatekeeping and leaking pipelines on women specifically is by examining how their work has been legitimized through textbooks and journals. For example, *The Game Design Reader* features 900 pages of important essays and has only three women contributors out of thirty-seven. The *Video Game Theory Reader* has only two women contributors out of eighteen.⁶⁴ While no study can tell us exactly how many women are “members” of the game studies community, Karabinus has conducted a gender analysis of three popular game studies journals that determined, for example, that only 22% of *Game Studies* authors were women during both periods examined (2001–2002 and 2015–2016); fourteen women as opposed to forty-six men.⁶⁵ Two of the fourteen articles counted were interviews conducted by a woman with male game designers, one woman of the fourteen was the third author with two men on an article. It is important to the future of our field that we retain a diversity of people, with a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives, a task that often feels impossible considering the state of both games culture and the academic job market.

The Future of Game Studies

This collection of essays and interviews didn’t exist when I was in grad school. *First Person* did. While I’m thankful for the inter-

and *Culture* 16, no. 3 (2021): 342–56.

64 I have my critiques about *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, but it actually does much better than many other anthologies at featuring the voices of many different women scholars, even if men are obviously featured more.

65 Alisha Karabinus, “We Are Building Histories: On the Need for Feminist Games Studies,” *Not Your Mama’s Gamer*, August 1, 2017, <http://www.nymgamer.com/?p=16637>.

sectional interdisciplinary feminist writing about games that I had at that time, what I really needed was *this book*. I needed something that validated what I was seeing and experiencing every day. If I could see that the researchers that I most admired felt (and had been explicitly told) that they were not part of game studies, and yet they did game studies anyway, then maybe I wouldn't have felt like it was my own fault that I didn't fit in. Reading the scholarship in this book ten years ago would have changed my entire experience of game studies. I would have had so much more evidence for the points that I often struggled to make in my work. I would have cited every single chapter and interview of this book in my dissertation.

I hope that the future of game studies looks completely different. I hope that marginalized scholars no longer have to fight to be accepted. I hope that people see the work we do has value, and not simply because we are being harassed for it. I hope the academy can see the value of scholarly work done through podcasts, YouTube videos, games, social media, and public-facing publications — anything beyond single-authored peer-reviewed journal articles. I hope that queer, cis, white women, like myself, are no longer seen as the pinnacle of “diversity.” I hope that game studies becomes a space that shrugs off the oppressive norms of academia instead of enshrining them. Most of all, I hope we can all finally accept that *all research about games and play of any kind should count as game studies*. These divisions between methods, departments, disciplines, and institutions are, at best, pointless and at worst, gatekeeping with irreversible consequences on the shape of our field.

Over the years that we have been writing and editing this book (2020–2025), I have rewritten these last few sentences many times based on where I was at in my job search. In most drafts, I assert that I will not be around to see the future of game studies. In one draft, I had some applications out and hoped that I could stay. In most, I've said that I hope that I'm happier somewhere else. Recently, I've taken a job doing research management, translation, and mobilization that I hope will become a satisfying and sustaining career, but the truth is, like most young

scholars, I have little say over my participation in the academy post-PhD. I'm surprised I even made it this far. Either way, I hope that game studies changes, and I hope that this chapter, this book, helps make that change.

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Why Are You Being an Ass on the Internet?

GamesNetwork, Communities, and History-Making

Jennifer deWinter and Gillian Smith

We come together—one of us from Humanities and Social Sciences, the other from Computer Science—to consider the role of the GamesNetwork listserv in creating and recording the emergent history of game studies and the futures lost from the list’s construction, moderation, and activity. GamesNetwork ostensibly exists to create a sense of community for an emergent discipline that has historically been multidisciplinary (not interdisciplinary)—one that researchers have approached from their own disciplinary methods, research questions, and values. GamesNetwork is an archived mailing list, meaning that all historical conversations are available online in an institutionally-affiliated repository. Because of this, new scholars and graduate students are often encouraged to look into that historical record, and future scholars are likely to have access to list archives as a primary source. The voices included in this community conversation create the histories that will be told around this emerging discipline and its potential formation or dissolution.

Histories are told by communities to make sense of what's happening in the moment, to define important questions, values, and research directions. History is always political, and who gets a voice in the politicization of history matters, as those voices determine what gets told and forefronted in the telling. GamesNetwork is meant to provide an open forum for a community to co-construct this history; however, the mailing list has a now-notorious toxic culture, such that we—and many others, especially those with marginalized identities—don't even want to claim it as a community.¹

To understand how the creators, users, and moderators have constructed the GamesNetwork listserv as a gatekeeping mechanism—both to the emergent field of game studies but also to home disciplinarity—we offer a critique of the actions, the voices, and the occasional outright vitriol that dominates this community space. There are list members who are, in the words of an anonymous junior scholar, “complete asses on the internet”—who drive people away through bullying behavior, such as posting hateful comments related to gender, race, and religion; belittling or scolding other list members; instigating flame wars; and antagonizing other community members. This behavior harms both individuals and the emerging discipline,

1 The irony, of course, is that the game industry has been called on to address toxic gamer culture even before the horrific disruption that GamerGate introduced. And game scholars were quick to critique toxic gamer culture, as seen in Mia Consalvo, “Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars,” *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* no. 1 (2012), <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/26289>, and Jennifer deWinter and Carly Kocurek, “Aw Fuck, I Got A Bitch on My Team!”: Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex,” in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (Indiana University Press, 2017). Yet we as game scholars look at the game industry as apart from us, wagging fingers and scolding the “industry” while forgetting that we are part of it (indeed, the games industry describes the academy as a growth area for jobs). Our students go into the industry. We collaborate with industry professionals. We create games for that same industry.

and deeply impacts the unfolding histories and potential futures for games scholarship.

Bread and Circuses: The Spectacle of Public Fights

We begin with three vignettes drawn from personal experiences. These vignettes — the first two as individual tales, the third a shared experience — are representative of the spectacular blowups for which GamesNetwork is now infamous, and which have long-term personal, professional, and disciplinary ramifications. We offer these vignettes as a reminder that histories are deeply embedded in people, communities, and identity.

Story 1: Men Behaving Badly

In 2011, a friend called me up: “Are you watching what’s unfolding on GamesNetwork?” I was not because I wasn’t a member yet. I want to be clear here: I had been doing game studies work, building educational games, and had worked in the game industry at one time. I just hadn’t joined this one listserv.

I quickly hied myself to my computer and joined. All the while, my text message alert was dinging non-stop. Apparently Ian Bogost was losing his shit. Miguel Sicart had just announced a course entitled “Against Procedurality,”² which seemed to call out Bogost’s influential book *Persuasive Games*,³ but was actually calling out the larger movement toward instrumentalizing games as a whole. I managed to join, mid fight, opening each message in macabre glee, watching a bunch of men whom I had never met behave like asses. I sipped my beer and texted in a group chat with friends, functionally live-tweeting this thread before I knew what live-tweeting was, and thoroughly enjoying what was happening from my dining room table. It was my own

2 Miguel Sicart, “PhD Course, Against Procedurality, IT University of Copenhagen, June 2011,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, March 22, 2011.

3 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (MIT Press, 2010).

bread and circus: a sports game that my friends and I all came together to watch as these leaders of their field battled it out.

A couple of years later, when that same friend invited me to be on a DiGRA panel with her, I firmly turned her down. No way. I watch this listserv — these are not my people. I stayed away until DiGRA went to Japan, and that's only because it co-convened with the international conference, Replaying Japan.

Story 2: “[T]he conversation no longer has scholarly merit or interest”⁴

Almost a decade later, in the aftermath of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings, a scholar based in New Zealand wrote a heartfelt request to the community for help making sense of the relationship between the shootings and video games (oft-demonized in popular media for “causing” mass violence.)⁵ In context, this was a completely reasonable request: the shooter live-streamed his mosque attacks on Facebook, glibly reminding viewers, “Remember lads, subscribe to PewDiePie,” referencing a famous YouTuber who makes Let’s Play videos of different games. Such an overt link to game culture right before a violent and deadly event links violence not just to games but game culture and online subcultures often found in 4chan and the like. Returning to this scholar, who is trying to make sense of what was happening within an intellectual community studying games and culture, the email to the list closed with a simple request: “I would ask — for both my sake and others — that the responses be sensitive to the situation.”

“Have you seen the latest nightmare on GamesNetwork?” a friend texted me. I had not. By now, I was filtering the mailing list to a rarely-checked folder; the bulk of the list traffic was

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- 4 The title of this section is a quotation from Amanda Phillips’s excellent interjection to what is colloquially known as the “Islamophobic blowup” on GamesNetwork. Amanda Phillips, “Re: Shootings and games culture,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, March 18, 2019.
 - 5 Robbie Fordyce, “Shootings and games culture,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, March 15, 2019.

conference calls for participation and job advertisements, much of it either disconnected from my own work within games such that it felt irrelevant, and the remainder a stressful reminder of the problematic academic mantra: “publish or perish.”

Already weary, I opened my email client to discover a torrent of emails, many of which were in fact not being at all “sensitive to the situation.” As an Islamophobic “debate” of Islam’s supposed inherent connection to violence ran completely unchecked, friends and colleagues sent distraught messages to group chats and commiserated in private social media groups. In the global political climate of 2019, these messages weren’t just gossipy delight in new drama — they were a manifestation of the despair felt by scholars with marginalized identities who justly worried about their safety at academic venues and whether they were welcome in their chosen profession and community.

Meanwhile, on the list, a graduate school friend attempted to explicitly call out what he recognized as bigotry, but ultimately fanned the flames. Another friend and colleague quit the mailing list in disgust after another scholar compared the *Quran* to Grand Theft Auto V, and a list administrator requested people stop posting to the thread due to its coverage of “highly sensitive topics.” One of the more pointed callouts to the lack of moderation and community reads thusly:

I can’t believe that comparing the Quran to GTA V is something that would be tolerated on an academic mailing list in 2019, and met with such a vague response from administration. Regardless, I really don’t want garbage like this in my inbox, and am happily unsubscribing from the list. Anyone expecting us to respect everyone’s views regardless just because we all go to the same conference is living in a world I don’t recognise.⁶

6 Mike Cook, “Re: Shootings and games culture,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, March 18, 2019.

I chose to stay on the list, mostly because I couldn't figure out how to unsubscribe from it. Though, I admit to also feeling a sense of morbid curiosity, and a sense that it was important to monitor the list as a proxy for bigoted sentiment among the community.

The list provides neither intellectual nor social connection for me, at this point. I still filter all content to a folder that goes unchecked until someone I personally know prompts me to read it again. The majority of scholars I know who attend the conferences advertised to this list are not subscribers. I find myself pulling ever so slightly away from games as part of my scholarly identity. It is no longer clear to me where, if anywhere, my full scholarly community resides on the internet.

Story 3: Professional Network or Dumpster Fire?

As mentors to graduate students, we are responsible for helping professionalize them to this emerging discipline of Games. We ask them to seek out opportunities for connection to other scholars through workshops and conferences, investigate avenues for publishing their future work, and imagine and plan for their future careers by seeking and analyzing today's job ads.

"How do I even find out about all these opportunities?" new PhD students typically ask in mentorship meetings. They continue, "I can find a lot of information about computer science conferences, but I don't think my work fits there." We discuss the difficulty of community-building in emerging disciplines, recalling the many different disciplines represented in their recent graduate seminar reading lists. And then, gingerly, we point students to the GamesNetwork mailing list: "there's a lot of CFPs and job ads on the mailing list."

"What's happening on GamesNetwork?! It's kind of a dumpster fire," one such graduate student asked, a few weeks after we encouraged them to join the list as a professional network. The student didn't know about the history of GamesNetwork: the spectacle, the fights, the polemics. And that new student joining the list and witnessing their first GamesNetwork blowup felt

confused, alarmed, and discouraged. Like most junior scholars, they were simply seeking a scholarly community beyond their own institution. The student felt alienated, as though they had walked into a convention center to discover only faceless CFP proselytizers and dysfunctional academic families continuously reliving their trauma through toxic arguments.

The “Big Tent”

These three anecdotes illustrate the central argument of this chapter: toxic online behavior in community forums drives people away, changing the profile of that community, the histories that scholars in the community explore, and the impact of those histories on the future evolution of scholarly work in game studies. In this chapter, we focus primarily on GamesNetwork, the listserv of DiGRA, not because it is the only forum for game studies, but because it is the most visible and open forum for those entering the field. Not disciplinarily bound, GamesNetwork is as close to a big tent as game studies has. Yet even here, within this “big tent” listserv for a “big tent” conference, people argue about whether it truly is the “big tent” because of discipline representation.

Tent Size and Statistics

The GamesNetwork list archive records its start in November of 2002, and the list materials are archived starting in 2003. As of July 27, 2020, the list had 2,156 members from a broad, international community, yet English remains the lingua franca of the list. To understand who is actively engaging in conversation, we listed everyone who posted on the GamesNetwork list from July 2019 to June 2020. We found that in the space of this year, 217 unique individuals (10% of list subscribers) posted to the list. We then searched their online profiles, publications, and news references to identify their self-represented gender. Of the 217 people, 142 of them presented male (65%), 53 female (24%), and 5 non-binary or queer (2%). 17 did not have a clear

indicator of gender identity in their public-facing, professional web presence. Such numbers start to paint a picture of how the GamesNetwork listserv reflects many of the problematic gender dynamics visible in the game industry writ large. According to the International Game Developers Association's *Developer Satisfaction Survey* 2021, which surveyed 803 active members of the game development industry, 61% of respondents identified as male (lower than the 71% who did so in the 2019 survey), 30% identified as female, and 8% identified as gender non-binary, gender fluid, genderqueer, or two-spirited.⁷

Even with these numbers, there is a prevailing sentiment shared by list administrators that GamesNetwork does not represent a discipline, as lots of people do not subscribe. In his 2017 article, Sebastian Deterding likens the rise and fall of "game studies" as a centralized concept to a "pyrrhic victory," arising to legitimize the academic engagement with games initially through critical mass but fracturing back into disciplines now that games are a legitimized area of study.⁸ The GamesNetwork, then, is a vestige of the rise of game studies. In many ways it continues to be the onboarding of new scholars interested in the study of games. Many members are scholars who might otherwise be isolated as the only person doing games in their unit or university, while others seek a broader professional network as in the case of our vignette's graduate student. Yet the very multidisciplinary nature of the list, the emergence of games studies as a legitimized field of study, and the political and public nature of what we study means that the same space that welcomes new scholars is also the space that turns people away.

7 Johanna Weststar et al., *Developer Satisfaction Survey, 2021: Summary Report* (International Game Developers Association, 2021), 11.

8 Sebastian Deterding, "The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 16 (2016): 521–43.

Statistical Fallacies and the Perception of a Big Circus Tent

Across thousands of email threads since GamesNetwork's inception, there have been several salient moments of either major list blowups or inflammatory language entering the professional network; for example:

- **2010:** Two separate discussions on religion in games, months apart, resulted in highly offensive offhanded comments shared on the list. In response to one member's May 2010 inquiry about representation of religion in games, a senior scholar replied: "There are Christian games. How about the muslim game of jihad freedom fighter?"⁹ On a November 2010 thread inquiring about existing scholarship on the use of games to evangelize Christianity, a respondent — seemingly misinterpreting the question — dismissed the notion of evangelism within games as impossible, referred to the need to "rescue" evangelical Christians from a cult, and angrily reacted to an incorrectly perceived threat of viewing games as valueless.

If your idea is to make traction on the gospel using computer games of any kind, I believe your efforts are unlikely to succeed. If your intention is to send in a rescue squad and grab some of the captives you might have a chance if you don't stay too long. They may even forgive you after decompression training. If you want to prove that video games are of no redeeming value and never will be (not that they couldn't be in principle) then don't waste your time.¹⁰

⁹ Brock Dubbels, "Re: Research project on games and religion," GAMESNETWORK mailing list, May 28, 2010.

¹⁰ Mike Dobson, "Re: Examples of preaching the gospel in online games?" GAMESNETWORK mailing list, November 5, 2010.

- 2011: A public posturing debate ensued. Sicart announced a PhD course, “Against Procedurality,” that implicitly critiqued Bogost’s book *Procedural Rhetoric* through its self-described focus on “explor[ing] the pitfalls of privileging formal systems as a conceptual lens.” The gist of this debate is summarized in the vignettes at the beginning of the chapter. The overall tone was well-captured in one near-immediate response to the course announcement: “But at least you won’t have a one-sided debate, huh? Oh wait, yes you will.”¹¹
- 2012: Game designer Eric Zimmerman wrote an article for a major industry publication titled “Jerked Around by the Magic Circle — Clearing the Air Ten Years Later” and shared it on the list claiming that academia was the “intended audience” for his essay.¹² This essay calls out several academics by name for arguing against what he perceives is a false extreme interpretation of the concept of the magic circle. The ensuing debate showcased one of the core tensions of the mailing list community: a perceived gulf between theory and practice. One member commented on the regularity of such incidents, “I’d have thunk we’d have learned something about these kinds of debates — about who can participate, about ensuring we have terms of reference, and the nature of appropriation/projection of view onto others.”¹³
- 2014–2015: A series of threads on the list responded to GamerGate in various ways: at first, trying to understand how DiGRA became embroiled in the conspiracy theories, and later with those who affiliated with GamerGate (including some junior academics) entering to “debate,” often effectively baiting an increasingly irate list population. Mid-2015, one list administrator responded to the ongoing argument

11 Ian Bogost, “Re: PhD Course, Against Procedurality, IT University of Copenhagen, June 2011,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, March 22, 2011.

12 Eric Zimmerman, “Jerked around by the Magic Circle,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, February 8, 2012.

13 Adam Parker, “Re: Jerked around by the Magic Circle,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, February 14, 2012.

with a call for people to move discussion off-list as a warning before significant list moderation, noting:

[T]he list is getting close to being ‘derailed’ which is why I’m making calls to take certain discussions off-list. Next step would be to start banning people which I’d really, really not like for us to have to do.¹⁴

- **2019:** The Christchurch incident was outlined above. In the response to the earnest email sent in the wake of the Christchurch shooting, a scholar wrote:

The crux of the matter is that both cultures -Gaming Culture == GTA V and Islamic Culture == Quran- have elements that trigger individuals to commit acts of violence. So the question is figuring out the fundamental building blocks of violence residing inside human biology in the first place.¹⁵

These are all flash in the pan moments, burning bright and then buried again under the constant posting of CFPS, book announcements, and requests for research. Some may dismiss these blowups as insignificant because they were infrequent and because only a tiny minority of list members contributed to them. Such dismissal ignores the importance and outsized impact of these blowups as highly salient events.

The “overestimation of the frequency of salient events” is the statistical concept that says humans will perceive events that stick out to them as more common than they actually are. Statisticians argue against this bias, noting that an analysis of data will disprove frequency estimation. And it is true that GamesNetwork does not blow up often — at no point are we arguing that

14 Jose P. Zagal, “(final warning) Discussing GG -> Please take it off list,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, July 14, 2015.

15 Selim Ozel, “Re: Shootings and games culture,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, March 17, 2019. Re: Shootings and games culture.

this is a continuous toxic community, the likes of which Thorsten Busch, Kelly Bodreau, and Mia Consalvo¹⁶; Emma Vossen¹⁷; or Amanda Phillips¹⁸ have previously written about gaming communities. But there is always the looming indication that the next blowup is around the corner.

In *Storytelling Genres*, Limor Shiponi posits that “Storytelling applications are answers to communal human needs. The community recognizes the answer storytelling carries for those needs and seeks the people who can carry the task of answering the demand. Applied storytelling is taking storytelling as is and applying it onto a human need.”¹⁹ While Shiponi is speaking directly about using stories to mobilize communities, the premise applies to established communities as well. And so, when the list does blow up and community members tell stories of it, the blowups leave a destructive path within the community. The humans in our community remember these blowups as salient events, imagine them to be more frequent than they truly are, and construct a narrative that centers them in their individual retellings of history.

As a result, GamesNetwork does not host much intellectual discussion at all; when attempts that are made to generate discussion have the potential to devolve to such an extreme, many scholars no longer see the list as a useful site for conversation. Much of the discussion on-list that is neither a CFP nor a toxic cesspool of “debate” are requests from scholars to round out a literature review, or asking an idle question about a research

16 Thorsten Busch, Kelly Boudreau, and Mia Consalvo, “Toxic Gamer Culture, Corporate Regulation, and Standards of Behavior among Players of Online Games,” in *Video Game Policy: Production, Distribution, and Consumption*, ed. Steven Conway and Jennifer deWinter (Routledge, 2015).

17 Emma Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018).

18 Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York University Press, 2020).

19 Limor Shiponi, “Storytelling Genres | Applied Storytelling,” *Limor Shiponi*, January 10, 2011, <http://www.limorshiponi.com/2011/01/storytelling-genres-applied-storytelling>.

area unknown to them; this typically results in a transactional exchange of citation sharing, often self-promoted, with limited engagement in generative, fruitful discussion.

“Stay in Your Lane”: The Failing Promise of Disciplinary Formation

The strength of GamesNetwork is that it brings together scholars from multiple disciplines to talk about games. It is one part of larger discursive structures that function in disciplinary formation, such as conferences (DiGRA, FDG), publications (*Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*), academic programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and professional organizations. Game studies has been in the process of becoming a discipline for twenty years now, while simultaneously it has resisted disciplinary formation in favor of treating games as the object of study from the safe (read: tenurable) vantage point of established traditions. Consider one scholar’s 2020 contribution to a contentious thread on GamesNetwork:

I do not venture to tell a psychologist how to do psychology. But I also ask for the reciprocal respect of a psychologist not telling me how to engage in narrative and image analysis [...] Folks should respect disciplinary differences, which includes staying in our respective lanes.²⁰

Picking up from contemporary culture’s polemical call to not engage in specialized knowledge for partisan political reasons, “stay in your lane” has become almost synonymous with “shut up and don’t engage.” Such a statement is strange, to say the least, in an academic community, which ostensibly is meant to flourish in cross-disciplinary exchange and critique.

Perhaps because both of us have spent our academic careers teaching in multidisciplinary game programs—both building

20 Kristin Bezio, “Re: Extremists in Video Game Communities,” GAMESNETWORK mailing list, August 7, 2020.

games and developing theories about games — we see the promise of disciplinary formation and argue for its establishment. One of us is trained in computer science, the other in communication and rhetoric, and we both work in a group that brings together computer scientists, learning scientists, artists, musicians, writers, designers, social scientists, and philosophers to co-advise student projects, collaborate on grants, and develop undergraduate and graduate programs. As Stuart Hall noted, articulation “is a theory of ‘no necessary belongingness,’ which requires us to think about the contingent, non-necessary connections between and among different social practices and social groups.”²¹ Through the articulation of disparate disciplines and different approaches, we are able to see affiliations between social practices and ideologies, we can interrogate newly visible structures, and we can imagine new ways of knowing and design. This dynamism is what attracts many scholars to game studies. It is certainly what we ask graduates from our programs to do when they enter interactive media and game industries. Staying in our lane, then, breaks the articulation, disallowing new movement in favor of old forms.

The irony is that we see this quotidian disciplinary policing arise in the absence of any other explicit moderation structure. List moderation could bring about not only a safe environment arising from shared and clearly espoused social values, but also an accompanying sense of community and fellowship necessary for supporting an emergent discipline. Instead, GamesNetwork has been slow to institute meaningful community standards in response to especially the most vulnerable voices in our community. Content moderation would require a clearly stated code of conduct.²² It would require someone with an authoritative voice to step in during those rare yet destructive online moments in

21 Stuart Hall, “Lecture 5. Marxist Structuralism,” in *Cultural Studies 1983: A Theoretical History*, ed. Jennifer Daryl Slack and Lawrence Grossberg (Duke University Press, 2016), 122.

22 Worth noting here is that it is the unpaid labor of often marginalized communities who typically answer the calls for moderation, such as Whitney Pow’s emails to the list that speak to a forthcoming code of conduct.

order to create a community that lives its stated values. Instead, GamesNetwork has created a multidisciplinary (rather than interdisciplinary, or even disciplinary) space that enables its membership to both explicitly and implicitly police their own disciplines against critique and encroachment. The movement away from GamesNetwork and into disciplinary communities makes sense within this ideological practice. Further, this type of gatekeeping has unintended consequences in setting a tone, in welcoming new members who are trying to find a place for their interests and research, and in imagining what we might be like when we are physically together.

Alternate Histories and Futures Lost

What happens to the field that emerges when scholars abandon the listserv that is linked, however loosely at this point, to DiGRA, one of the leading game studies-only conferences in the field? Marginalized voices become more marginalized within the big tent. A history of “games as a discipline” forms with GamesNetwork as part of its established record, a history that only a portion of the discipline writes for itself. The central narrative of research threads shrinks and homogenizes.

There are alternate histories, though—histories that are neither written nor preserved—found in the communities and conversations that have formed in the shadows of the GamesNetwork list. Group texts that started with “what has happened *this time*?” turn into peer mentorship communities. Social media groups, with strict privacy settings and invitation-only policies designed to protect marginalized communities, flourish as networking spaces. Discord servers, Slack channels, and other forms of more private communication siphon disillusioned members from the open-access, institutionally-affiliated, and archived mailing list to private spaces with no permanent record keeping. These invisible micro-communities arise where people go to have safety, find community, and talk about scholarship that is either ignored or attacked at the big tent.

And to be clear, many of these communities serve an important—even necessary—role in the current climate of game studies. Moderated and trusted-entry backchannels provide a professional network and supportive community for scholars whose identities are marginalized in society—both to share their work and to seek social support and advice for victims of “scholarly negging”:

Scholarly negging is a practice that keeps men in charge, in part by deflecting imposter syndrome preemptively onto those women and feminists arriving later and bearing witness to the way their perspectives, historically, have been regarded in the field. [...] It shares qualities with gaslighting, a type of manipulation in which one is made to question one’s own knowledge and experience; the ludologists’ deflection of well-documented eliminationist rhetoric onto sloppy reading practices is illustrative here.²³

Added to this is an academic effect that Lisa Duggan calls the “piranha feed” process, of displaying mastery or intellectual merit by denigrating and attacking others.²⁴ As such, the culture of GamesNetwork and the failure of the community to actively support marginalized scholars means that a potential history of the discipline in which such conversations can happen in the open will never be realized.

There are thus two alternate histories for GamesNetwork, each with an associated lost future. The first is a history in which the intellectual discussion of a vibrant community of marginalized scholars can safely occur in the open, archived for future historians to study and use to retell our discipline’s history. The second is a history in which a content-moderated list of otherwise professional discourse results in a clear record of a disci-

23 Amanda Phillips, “Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 27.

24 Lisa Duggan, “Academic Affect,” *Commie, Pinko, Queer*, January 17, 2022, <https://lisaduggan.substack.com/p/academic-affect>.

pline that cares for, nurtures, and protects its most marginalized members, and thus a future in which historians can retell a success story of a discipline that truly lived its espoused values of diversity, inclusion, and mutual respect. Instead, the intellectual discussion and concerns of a vibrant community of marginalized scholars will never be publicly seen, never archived, and never possible for a future historian to uncover and reconstruct.

Histories Tell of You Being An Ass On The Internet

Imagine being such a future historian, looking at the GamesNetwork as a historical archive to study the formation (or dissolution) of the discipline. Across the twenty years of GamesNetwork's history thus far, here are some observations that we can make about game studies:

- This is a male-dominated field.
- Game studies scholars resist interdisciplinarity and uphold disciplinary silos.
- The best scholars in the field are considered those who generate a lot of publications.
- There is room at the table for Islamophobic, misogynistic, and classist views.
- People who express discriminatory opinions or ideas are not sanctioned; rather, we see waves of people leaving the list as a form of resistance.
- Video game violence is a key issue in the community, with community consensus that games don't teach violence ...
- ... but games can and do teach everything else.
- Games are unquestionably a force for positive social change.
- The DiGRA conference is a big deal.
- Video game scholars are gamers, and it is important to be a gamer in order to be a games scholar.
- Narratology/ludology is still "the elephant in the room."
- Games scholarship is undiscoverable; thus newcomers to the field must crowdsource their literature review.

- The list is intertextual, as evidenced by constant apologies for crossposting.
- People posting know one another.
- Game scholars self-promote their work, no matter how tangential to the topic at hand.

This is the foundation of GamesNetwork. It is not what the creators of the list or its denizens intended necessarily, but it is the story told through its archives.

Now let's talk about what happens when you are an ass on the internet. We are using "you" really specifically here. We start the paper with "I," recognizing that the experience of communities is embodied and individual, but also shared through memetic storytelling. Sometimes these stories are told to laugh at the ridiculousness, sometimes to share trauma and form whisper networks, and sometimes because they were just so unbelievable and salient. In imagining alternative futures as we reflect on recorded histories, we move to "you," to agents who can affect change.

The first thing to note is the side-effect nature of listservs as occupying a strange middle space. GamesNetwork, for example, is less anonymous than an online forum, but distant compared to meeting people at a conference. You get to be a little distant. You get to forget that people are people. And no amount of content moderation fixes this middle space. In fact, the ambiguousness of listserv identities calls to mind a term that game studies folks love: liminality. Victor Turner's idea of the liminal is about the process of becoming, about the unformed potential that this process embodies.²⁵ If listservs are a place where scholars are liminal to people who do not know them, then it begs the question of what they are becoming.

Which brings us to the second point: when you are an ass on the internet, we assume that you are an ass in real life. Our iden-

25 Victor Turner, "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology," *Mediações: Revista de Ciências Sociais* 17, no. 2 (2012): 214–57.

tity (or eDentity to borrow from Stephanie Vie's terminology)²⁶ is crafted and engaging with your online identity. We think that we are engaging with who you are. And we are. What happens online is as real as what happens in the material world. So when we see you acting like an ass online, we avoid the places that you will be. We will avoid you. This is tricky for us to write because we are friends with people who have behaved badly online. But we are senior scholars in our own right, comfortable with our own expertises and with tenure, and likely these were our friends before there was evidence of bad, online, public behavior. Even so, there are people from GamesNetwork debacles that we both admit that we will avoid. Imagine how much more active avoidance strategies would be for junior and at risk scholars. One of the authors of this chapter didn't even go to a DiGRA conference until recently because it just didn't seem like a welcoming community, and only acquiesced when DiGRA co-convened with a different conference. Now we ask: what are the alternative histories and futures that might have happened if people felt welcomed to the larger community for which GamesNetwork is often their gateway?

Even harder to trace but important to mention here is the problem of "bad apples" in communities. Adapted from the idiom "one bad apple spoils the bunch," psychological research into bad apples indicates that people behaving badly has far reaching effects on the culture and community of the group. Angela de Oliveira, Rachel Croson, and Catherine Eckel conclude their study, noting,

'bad apples' harm the ability of groups to overcome the social dilemma through two mechanisms. First, they contribute less to the public good. Second, they reduce the contributions made by conditional cooperators, and this effect increases with the number of bad apples. These effects are not sensitive to information about the group composition. Together,

26 Stephanie Vie, *(E)dentity* (Fountainhead Press, 2011).

our results suggest that the negative impact of ‘bad apples’ is gradual rather than all-or-nothing.²⁷

We can see tangible reductions in contributions based on people leaving the list or joining other communities actively while lurking on GamesNetwork. And while Francesca Gino, Shahar Ayal, and Dan Ariely are discussing ethical behaviors in their psychological study of bad apples, their observation of healthy communities rings true here too: “Healthy work and social environments depend on the ability of individuals (e.g., leaders and other role models) to spread ethical norms and values, while reducing the attractiveness of unethical misconduct, either through appropriate sanctioning rules or through an ethical culture.”²⁸ The call is more pointed here: it’s not just avoiding being an ass on the internet; it is actively working to build, echo, reinforce, and champion ethical norms and values. It is to create an inclusive research community in which people can sit together alongside one another and do their disciplinary work or work together in interdisciplinary or emerging disciplinary research.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

Game studies is not immune to the social diseases that plague games culture writ large; we must contend with a history that includes #GamerGate, #1ReasonWhy, mass shootings, sexist workforces, racist workforces, and so forth. Toxicity permeates, whether in the form of meritocracy, as Christopher Paul writes about,²⁹ or masculinity, which Anastasia Salter and Bridget

27 Angela C.M. de Oliveira, Rachel T.A. Croson, and Catherine Eckel, “One Bad Apple? Heterogeneity and Information in Public Good Provision,” *Experimental Economics* 18 (2015): 131.

28 Francesca Gino, Shahar Ayal, and Dan Ariely, “Contagion and Differentiation in Unethical Behavior: The Effect of One Bad Apple on the Barrel,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 3 (2009): 397–98.

29 Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

Blodgett explore.³⁰ It's easy to point fingers at GDC,³¹ IGDA,³² Penny Arcade,³³ or a host of other community forums. But we are part of that discourse, and we host community forums that intersect here. Further, the voices included in the conversation create the histories that we have. History is always political, and who gets a voice in the politicization of the history (what gets told, what gets forefronted) matters. Histories are told by communities in order to make sense of what's happening in the moment, to define the community's important questions, values, and research directions. They also tell us when we are supported in the face of discrimination and threat.

We end this chapter with a simple call, best written by Amanda Phillips: "We need new and different stories, but we also need to learn how to tell these stories differently."³⁴ We would add to this that we need better historical records, representing all of the voices and ideas, to tell those stories. We need better communities to allow those histories to visibly unfold, rather than driving away the diversity of voices that could illuminate the possibilities of future research, engagement, and activism. And we need to remember that many of us are friends, and that we want to grow communities of friendship and camaraderie in what can otherwise be an alienating professional experience.

30 Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

31 Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher, "Growing Pains: Feminisms and Intergenerationality in Digital Games," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 648–62.

32 Jennifer deWinter and Carly Kocurek, "We Resign from Sexism and Games Effective Immediately: Positive Steps toward Gender Equality in Gaming Cultures," *FlowTV*, April 13, 2013, <http://flowtv.org/2013/04/we-resign-from-sexism-and-games-effective-immediately/>.

33 Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, "Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (2012): 401–16.

34 Phillips, "Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject," 29.

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Definitions and Misunderstandings in Game Studies: An Interview with Espen Aarseth

Cody Mejeur

Espen Aarseth is chair professor of game studies and dean of the School of Creative Media at City University of Hong Kong, and a member of the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters and Academia Europaea. From 2003 to 2024, he was professor and eventually head of the PhD School at the IT University of Copenhagen, where he also led what was formerly known as the Center for Computer Games Research, now the Center for Digital Play. He completed his doctorate at the University of Bergen, where he focused on digital media, electronic literature, and eventually games, and he served as professor there and co-founded the department of Digital Culture. He has served as the Editor-in-Chief of *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* since its founding in 2000. He recently directed the European Research Council's Advanced Grant project Making Sense of Games (MSG), which ran from 2016-2022.

Frequently referred to as a founding figure in game studies and a prominent ludologist (a label he contests here), he knows the arguments of the field well through firsthand experience and many publications, including the still frequently cited *Cybertext*:

Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.¹ As an early career game studies scholar studying narrative in games, I often found myself disagreeing strongly with Aarseth's claims about narrative because he and other scholars called ludologists (like Markku Eskelinen, Gonzalo Frasca, and Jesper Juul) seemed totally opposed to narrative in games or the idea that games have narratives. However I was also puzzled at how game studies scholars seemed to talk past each other about these topics, and to deliberately misread or dismiss each other's perspectives. As an established scholar with a prominent role in these early debates, Aarseth has an expert, insider perspective on how and why they happened as they did.

In this interview, we talk about Aarseth's work in game studies, including his perspective on the disagreements, tensions, and misunderstandings in the field, as well as his hopes for its interdisciplinary futures. We excavate the ideas and academic dynamics that fueled debates in game studies and have since mythologized the ludology vs. narratology fights as a clash that it both was and was not, depending on who you ask. Aarseth identifies key challenges for interdisciplinary fields like game studies, such as navigating relationships with larger fields and departments and translating across methods, terminologies, and languages. Finally, Aarseth discusses the growing international community for game studies and his excitement for new people, cultures, and ideas emerging to guide the field's continued development. With each of these topics, this interview provides a helpful frame for understanding the past, present, and future of game studies.

Cody Mejeur: Let's start at the beginning. Where did you get your start and what were your early interests in games? What drew you to studying games in the first place, given that it really wasn't something happening in academia at the time?

1 Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

Espen Aarseth: No, it wasn't. I think I got the idea around Christmas 1983, when I noticed this very interesting thing on a computer called *The Hobbit* (Beam Software, 1982), which was one of the first commercially successful adventure games. I wasn't trying to become something or get an occupation out of it. I was just trying to find out something. What is this thing? Is it literature? That was one of the first questions that I asked. Well, it's games. I became very fascinated with these things. And I thought to myself, okay, I'm going to start my university studies now, finished high school, and what can I study to understand these things? At that point, though, there were no game courses anywhere. At least none that I knew of.

So I looked around and there were a few things that I noticed. One was that these things were text-based. Computer linguistics was a new field at the University of Bergen, and I thought, maybe that is something I could use. I was also interested in perhaps making these things, or at least I didn't rule that out. So, let's study computer linguistics. But that was not a big success. I think I got a very average grade in that year of study, for many reasons. Maybe I was just too interested in computers at that point. I was also playing games and learning to program, and things like that. So, after that average year, I switched to literary theory and comparative literature because that would also be quite relevant. If we see these games as literature, what sort of literature is it? Can literary theories help us to understand what's going on? That was my second foray into trying to gather some useful methods and theories to understand it.

But the most useful course I took in university was the intro course in philosophy of science, where you learn the mechanics and sociology of how new fields are created. It's kind of a recipe: if you're not happy with the existing fields, what do you do? But then I got stuck in literary studies and continued studying literature because I realized at some point I could actually do a master's in studying these things. That was a revelation, too, you know. Suddenly there were people like Jon Lanestedt in Oslo writing theses on adventure games, and I realized one can actu-

ally do that, at least if you had a supervisor who agreed.² And I was lucky enough to have a supervisor who was completely uninterested in the topic, but was kind enough to help me by just accepting me as his master's thesis student. So that's how I started.

Of course by then I was focusing on texts as such, not just games. After starting with games, I was seeing all these weird kinds of literature that have existed for thousands of years, and they don't behave as we commonly expect print literature and books to behave. And I started to map these different forms of textual behavior. It was a comparative study of different kinds of text mechanics, which then eventually became my dissertation topic. And that became the book that people seem to cite.

Then, in the early '90s, I was finally getting back to games because then games became really interesting with 3D accelerated graphics and all that, like *Ultima Underworld* (Blue Sky Productions, 1992). Suddenly, you had those same worlds that you had in the text games, but now in 3D and you could explore them visually. And they were something else. They were strange. They were interesting. Then, at some point in the late '90s, I decided that I had to choose—make a choice now between games and everything else. I decided, let's do games. I think that if I had decided on just everything else, that would have been less work than doing games. But it was an interesting time. It was a happy time in the nineties. It was a period of endless optimism after the Berlin Wall was down and things were looking up. And there were all these new, fascinating technologies. So it was a good time to see what you can do and enjoy new opportunities, in academia as in culture and business.

CM: It almost feels quaint to look back on those days when people thought that the internet would bring democracy to the whole world.

2 Jon Lanestedt, "Episk Programvare—En Litterær Teksttype? [Epic software—A literary text type?]" (MA thesis, University of Oslo, 1989).

EA: Yes, I totally agree. And I was skeptical back then; I have it in writing. I wrote a report in 2002 for the Norwegian Power And Democracy Survey, which was a big historical, political, sociological, and cultural research project, where I actually pointed out that this internet thing, it's not going to be for democracy. It's going to be for whomever can use it for whatever purpose they want. It's like all technology. You can use it for anything as long as you master it. That's the thing. But that's also around the time when I decided to focus on game studies, and we started the *Game Studies* journal in the fall of 2000. It was a no-brainer to start game studies both as an organized field and as a journal. It was something that just had to be done, somebody had to do it.

CM: Can I ask you a little bit about that? Because that seems to relate to the philosophy of science course that you mentioned, too. Like we know that something like games needs to have a new field, or that something is missing in existing fields. What were some of the things that made you feel that way about game studies?

EA: I didn't even think that we needed it. I just knew this was going to happen. There will be game studies. This was when games really took off as a cultural phenomenon and as a commercial phenomenon. And that's when you know that others will be interested in funding the research, because there's money in it. Games had been around for thousands of years, but there hadn't been that much money in them except for gambling, of course. They have been a cultural underdog, but now the underdog is so big that it's no longer an underdog, it's just a really big dog. And then you have to deal with it in some way.

I was looking at parallels like film studies and thinking, it's perhaps too obscure, too narrow in its focus, too arcane, not speaking enough to the world outside. This was during the height of poststructuralism, and so I didn't want to see game studies become just another sort of sophisticated but not very communicative or interdisciplinary field. So for me, it was very

important that we could unite many perspectives. I saw it as an opportunity to have something like the study of architecture where you have a truly interdisciplinary combination of components and disciplines that can all contribute and talk to each other. This could be an opportunity to combine the humanities and natural sciences, and psychology for that matter. I wanted to stay curious rather than just focusing on one approach. And that was something I wanted to see game studies developed into. Of course, it's hard to do this in practice, and we didn't succeed in the journal to be truly interdisciplinary. That's impossible. But at least I think that the field has managed to keep a certain interdisciplinarity at its missing core, if you will.

I also want to remark on the difference between a field and a discipline. In the past I didn't always distinguish between the two terms, but I do now. There cannot be a game studies discipline in the narrow sense, that never made any sense to me. To make game studies a discipline with rigid boundaries is certainly something I have never strived for and never believed in. I always thought of game studies as an area study more than anything, like Middle East studies or similar, where you bring in a lot of different disciplines to bear on an empirical field. For me, it's an important distinction because some people have talked about game studies as its own discipline in a narrow sense. But I have never believed in that mission of the field at all. I don't think it's realistic. People in game studies will always come up with such different approaches that they will never be united in a discipline. So it's not even a question. It's just a bad idea.

CM: So in this same period where there are new technologies, games research is coming together, and it's increasingly looking like this is going to happen in some form, there was still a decent amount of institutional resistance to it, right? Including push-back on studying games from people in many different fields, universities, and organizations. Do you have a sense of what that resistance was or where it was coming from?

EA: Yeah. There are probably many, many causes. In the early days, when people started writing dissertations, you had an especially horrible case with Mary Ann Buckles at the University of California, San Diego, who wrote the first humanistic PhD on an adventure game.³ And she was completely devastated by the way that her thesis committee had responded to her work. It took a long time to get final approval, and she was so frustrated with the whole experience that she quit academia after that. She saw this phenomenon for the first time, something new. And she wanted to figure out, what is this? And then she didn't just apply a theory on it, she applied five different approaches to see what the most fruitful approaches would be. She applied traditional narratology, she interviewed players, and more. This was a highly sophisticated and very reflective approach.

And yet, here we are. She is gone from game studies because of the institutional resistance. It's still a real shame. So there you have the sort of professorial opposition to taking in anything which is not in their own interest or focus. They don't understand it. They don't want to know about it. It's a game. It's something trivial. It has to do with computers. Whichever one of these reasons it is, or maybe all of them. That is the sort of personal or interpersonal resistance you can meet from your fellow students or your teachers. They don't see the point.

And then there are more large-scale institutional resistances. Departments can be powerful institutional structures, and when I wrote my 2001 editorials, departments had had thirty years to study games in which they did nothing. Sometimes worse than nothing, as in Buckles's case, because they did not serve scholars of games well. It was time for a change. The amount of power your department has can vary from country to country; in the us, for example, I think departments have a lot of power in terms of determining what is a legitimate research area, say, for a PhD or Master's student. In Scandinavia, luckily for us, not so much. It is, or was, freer. We get PhD grants based on personal appli-

3 Mary Ann Buckles, "Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame 'Adventure'" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1985).

cations, in my case to the Norwegian Research Council, which was happy to support new interdisciplinary stuff, especially if it involved technology and humanities. This also helps explain some of the early successes of games studies in my part of the academic world. We had a much more liberal power structure.

CM: How have the resistances and supports for students studying games changed since then?

EA: Now, of course we also have an internet community of researchers, and I had that too. An online place where things could be discussed with peers, usually on email in those days. It was a great inspiration to meet engaging people online who were actually interested in discussing. In those days it wasn't games so much as it was electronic literature and digital media. But certainly, that was a help. It was also an eye-opener seeing how badly people sometimes behaved online, professionally, or, more accurately, unprofessionally. But at least it did take away the sting of that loneliness.

Ironically perhaps, I have never been on the GamesNetwork list, or any of the other social media game studies hubs. You could say that just speaks to my privilege of not having to be there for professional purposes. But it's also because I like to have a peace of mind. These fora should come with a warning, especially for younger scholars who don't yet fully know what being an academic is. Just learning that from a listserv, as I did, can be bad enough.

CM: It strikes me, in fields like digital humanities and game studies, that there's sort of a messiness and a fuzziness to fields like these. Interdisciplinarity that is, I think, really exciting, but that has its frustrations and miscommunications too. It can be really generative to have that sort of messy exchange, but off-putting at times, too.

EA: I agree, but not everyone thinks so. There's definitely some of us who like messiness and like interdisciplinarity and can deal

with people that are doing something different. As long as you can trust them as people, you can relate to them. And then there are others who are not comfortable in this fairly vague area in terms of rules and methods and how to do things. This is something that I've seen quite a lot in game studies, where you have, say, humanists who are looking at games as artifacts, objects, or texts, and then you have, say, social scientists who are looking at what players are doing. And how can you just look at the games and not what people are doing, or vice versa? It should be an open question whether you look at the texts themselves or the games themselves, or whether you look at what the players are doing or how they do it. I think this is one of the big tensions in our field, the tension between the social sciences approaches and the humanistic approaches, because we are not really looking at the same thing. And if we don't understand that we're not looking at the same thing, then we're in trouble. Because then you, especially if you are early career, will typically get served this, "you can't do that" message, which is not good for inter-disciplinarity.

I think that this is something that people coming into a media department often feel within that department. Or an English department, where you find both linguistics and literature. I believe it was C.S. Lewis who said about Tolkien when he first met him that he was told never to trust linguists and Catholics, and Tolkien was both.⁴ So this is nothing special for game studies. This is something very, very traditional for researchers in general. We don't trust those who are doing something differently, or those who we don't know what they're doing. That's not the way to do it. This sort of mentality is unfortunately common. It has nothing in particular to do with game studies, it is just business as usual in the academic world, I fear.

CM: *Cybertext*, as you mentioned earlier, is your most widely cited work, and still very widely cited today. Do you think about

4 C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1984), 205.

the book any differently now than you did when it first came out, or when you were thinking about it and writing it initially?

EA: When I was writing it, I was just bored with it, and I wanted to finish it. So I just finished it, and then I didn't think much more of it. I sent it off to Johns Hopkins, and they accepted it. I never really thought about changing it since. Twice since then they've come back and said, why don't you do a 2.0? And I said, no, I'm happy with it as it is. I don't think it needs a 2.0. I finished it 28 years ago, which is a long time ago. I handed it in the last working day before New Year's Eve in 1995, 15 minutes before the faculty office closed. That was it. And yes, people cite it, but I don't think people read it that much. It's probably cited much more than it's read. Not that I complain. But I think it's become sort of a weird touchstone. Something you have to cite because everyone else does, but you don't have to read it because nobody else does. And you can say whatever you want about it because nobody would catch it! Except for me, because I have read it. Sometimes, if I'm very foolish, I will look at what people say about it. And typically, I will go, okay, that's another one who didn't read it. Obviously, it's not a big concern, but it's kind of annoying sometimes, because it's being used in many strange ways to claim that I have said something which clearly is not in that book.

CM: Have there been any that stood out to you as being strange or unexpected, or even just wrong readings that come to mind right now?

EA: Yeah, but I don't want to focus on that. I don't want to shame people for misreading. When you reach a certain notoriety, enough people statistically will say weird things about you. And the only thing you must do is learn not to take it personally. So you have to just ignore it because if you didn't you would just spend your days as a stupid old fart who is preoccupied with your own navel, or what people think is your navel anyway. It's weird, because it's so entangled in the whole mythology of game

studies for some reason which has probably nothing to do with the book itself.

In that book I was applying narratology to games, though people cite it to say things about the exact opposite, which doesn't make sense.

CM: That does get to the thing that we're all sick of talking about, but also continually talk about: the narratology versus ludology sort-of debates.

EA: The funny thing is, I don't talk about it that often because nobody actually asks me any questions about it.

CM: This is a good opportunity then!

EA: I hope so. I'm not sure if it's a good opportunity or a bad opportunity, or if I should just shut up about it. That might be the smartest thing sometimes, you know, just don't say anything. I must admit, I think it's a bit weird. The whole narratology and ludology thing is supposedly about ludologists and narratologists, but it's not really because every ludologist or the people who get called ludologists, including myself—I never actually used the word back in the day—I didn't see a need for it and I didn't know what it was. Nobody knew what it was. But all those people who were called ludologists, all of them were using narrative theory. They were applying narrative theory to games. And they are portrayed as though they were against that, which to me makes no sense. Most likely there's another way of phrasing this that somebody else should phrase, but this is my phrasing of it. So people who use narratology applying it to games are ludologists and a ludologist is supposedly someone who was against applying narratology to games. That makes no sense, and there has to be a better explanation out there.

And there is. I've written about it.⁵ There might be other sociological explanations for this, but I think it's a stand-in for something else. I mean, there's something else going on and this has been framed to explain it, but it doesn't really explain what's going on. It's two different things scooped up in one: it's the critique of bad, uncritical applications of narratology to games on the one hand, and on the other, it's the idea that games are good or bad vehicles for storytelling. Those are two different questions that have been mashed together. And therefore, people are not able to untangle the question because it's really not one question. The two questions must be answered completely independently of each other. One is a practical question, what kind of games are used for storytelling? And the other is a theoretical question: is narratology a good theory to apply to these things? And how do you do that analysis? And what should you think about carefully when you bring an old set of concepts to a fairly new phenomenon? One is the question of aesthetics and criticism, and the other is a question of method.

But everybody loves a good fight, right? Even if it didn't take place in the way that people might think who weren't there. There's a lot of mythologizing about it, because when people aren't there, then how do they get their information? For me, it was a question of trying to emphasize that games are an interesting object of study. What I didn't think of was that the word "game" has at least two different meanings here, and I didn't account for that; I didn't see it coming. It's a business of confusion, basically.

When I used the word "game" back in that day, I wasn't really thinking about what you might now call narrative games, or ludo-narratives. That is what I then called hybrids between games and storytelling. I didn't call them games because I had a word for that, which was hybrid. So when I talked about a work like, say, *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001) or *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998), I would call it a hybrid, a hybrid between stories

5 Espen Aarseth, "Ludology," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, ed. Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (Routledge, 2014).

and games. And when I used the word “game,” I would think of chess, *Counter-Strike* (Valve, 2000), *Doom* (id Software, 1993), or maybe *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), you know, action or strategy games, that sort of thing. And I didn’t see that when other people were using the word “games,” they were just talking about the things that I would call hybrids. So in that sense, I would say that here was at least partly a misunderstanding. We were using one word to talk about two different things, and we thought we were talking about the same thing. So when people like me would say that games don’t really have stories, I would think that obviously *Counter-Strike* doesn’t have a story. It’s just a game in a virtual world where people are playing against another. But of course, if you’re talking about things like *Half-Life*, yes, there is a story. For me it has been a big, banal misunderstanding.

CM: From my perspective as someone who was just getting into game studies in the early 2010s, there was a lot of frustration reading about the debates some years later because it felt like the ludologists were saying, get your narrative out of our games, we don’t want that here. By that point I think there had been a good amount of mythologizing, misreading, and misunderstanding, and I had this image in my head of knockdown, drag-out fights with people throwing things at each other at conferences, or something like that.

EA: Yeah, right. And that didn’t happen. I was there at those conferences and there was never a single fight. It was very civil. At a conference in Atlanta in 1999, I was on a panel with Jay Bolter and Janet Murray, and we discussed games and narratives in a friendly way. There was no animosity. There was disagreement, of course. Which is a good thing. It’s how we learn something new. If we don’t disagree, we never get anywhere. But there was no ill will. There was no name-calling. It was just a conversation. And hopefully somebody found it interesting. There were people who were critical of other people’s approaches, but not fights on the level people imagined.

I also debated Henry Jenkins, and there was never any kind of animosity. I remember the first time we talked, I was giving a talk at MIT and remember that he was quite engaged by what I said. It was a very interesting discussion with other participants as well, Nick Montfort, for instance. But it was completely civil.

CM: That differs quite a bit from the common perception that continues to get built up about the arguments and disagreements.

EA: And that's the real problem. Because then there is this fear that if we touch this topic, we will have a big fight. Again! And it's a shame because there were never any good engagements clarifying what the problem was: that we basically used the same word for two different things and nobody realized that because nobody was engaging each other for the necessary amount of time on that subject. If one could just have sat down and properly had a good dialogue, then that should have been discoverable. Had I seen that, of course, I would have said something about it, but I guess I was a bit puzzled. And, to be honest, a bit bored. I thought it would go away but of course it didn't go away. It became a myth instead. As more and more people got into game studies, this myth just became bigger and bigger. And that surprised me too.

CM: Yeah, this is more a general observation, but it seems like the 2010s were the decade of things we thought would go away, but they didn't.

EA: Yeah, that's a good way of putting it. And so much happened in that first decade. So whatever happens in the 2010s, you can't just retroactively explain that by whatever happened in 2001. There's so much water under the bridge, I'm not even going to mention the hashtag [#GamerGate] and all that which was a much bigger crisis for the field, obviously.

CM: Do you see any connection there? Are you referring to GamerGate?

EA: Yeah. The thing we shall not name. There was this resistance to using the term because then you would attract its attention and then the sharks would sort of all zoom in. And they would crash the party or the conference. This was also something which I think we could have handled better in so many ways. It came as a big and nasty surprise. I was certainly not ready for it.

CM: Related to misunderstandings of terms and connections across fields, you've mentioned in some of your works the fear that film or literary studies might colonize game studies.⁶ And there's been some pushback on the use of the word colonize there, right? Can you reflect on that a bit?

EA: I can certainly say that there might be other words I could have used. I can see how in some cultures, it's a very contentious word to use on anything. But I just want to make one little amendment to what you said: I didn't talk about colonizing game studies. I talked about colonizing the study of games, which is a different thing. This was basically at the start where we didn't really have game studies. There wasn't a field to colonize, but there was an object of study to monopolize, or to claim as your own. And that was what I didn't want. I basically didn't want games to just become another form of literature, or another form of new or mass media. I wanted to have a fresh and central perspective on games. Of course, that is very problematic because what is games and how do you define games? But I just wanted a field where games would be the focus. And I thought that that could not be done if you just left it to say, film studies. In those days there were conferences where people would say, games are like movies only interactive. And by saying that, you don't really say much, right? Some games are like movies, other games are nothing like movies. You can use movies as a perspective, but you cannot subsume games under interactive movies.

6 Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, 2006).

So that's what I meant. It was the idea of games just becoming a subfield in an existing field. Maybe I should have said nothing because it wouldn't have happened anyway. Maybe it was just a kind of naive nightmare or unnecessary worry for me to have. But I did. We certainly saw that there were examples of games being relegated to sort of an inferior art that you could study with the tools of more "interesting" arts.

CM: That helps me understand a bit more what you meant by colonize. There was also the concern, similar to misunderstandings we've already talked about, that some people, myself included, read that as: we just don't want any other fields to have any input on what we're doing here. We want to shut that down. And coming in from different perspectives is colonizing.

EA: Yes, though that wasn't even what I said then because if you read my editorial in *Game Studies*, I basically state that everybody should study games from any perspective in any department.⁷ It's just too important to be left to a particular one of them. In the same text that people attack for doing that, I say the exact opposite, but it seems it is more important to attack one misinterpretation than to actually read the whole piece and look for nuances. Be that as it may, I appear to be a useful enemy to have. We all need somebody to kick off from.

What I wanted to avoid with the word colonizing was compartmentalizing games in existing departments. Game studies was, for me at least, the solution to this problem. It meant not ending up at the mercy of a professor, administrator, or department head in an existing department, people who would have very little interest in games, but would just be hopefully benevolent enough to let you live and teach that course. This was and is for me an institutional battle. It's nothing personal. People should do whatever they want. But if you want to have some sort of freedom of thought and economic independence

7 Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

in your workspace, then game studies is a solution to that in the sense that if you can have your own administrative units like a department, institute, or center, and that is so much better for you as a researcher than if you have to fight for resources and curricula with those who have their own priorities. Let's say that your department wants to prioritize journalism studies and programs. Why would they support your getting a new colleague in games when they can get that very important professorship in journalism, for instance? Game studies is the solution to the problem of being dependent on an existing bigger field.

CM: The questions of institutions, fields, and colonizing might also get at the differences between European and North American perspectives on game studies or maybe methods for doing game studies. Do you see any prominent differences between the two regions in how they're doing game studies or their focuses?

EA: The difference between European and North American game studies is a big question. So if I have a pet peeve about Americans, they think Europe is one place, when it is many different places. There's a myth of Europe in the US that says you can use the word Europe and that that exists as one entity. We don't use the word Europe like that. We use it perhaps as a sort of banner. If you look at European academia, it's very many different things in different countries. You have British traditions, French, Spanish, German, Greek traditions, and you have a Scandinavian academic culture. All of these are very different from each other. There isn't any kind of typical. If there is something that unites European academic cultures, and this is a paradox, it is imported from the US. It's basically *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and it provides us bad ideas or good ideas about how to conduct our business. And that's what we have in common. Anyway, that was my peeve rant.

There are so many interesting differences in Europe. We see in Europe, for instance, the conference series called CEEGS, Central Eastern European Game Studies. It started in 2014, and it's really a great place to be if you want to know what East Euro-

pean academics are doing with games. There are brilliant people there doing game studies, but you never met them before because they didn't have the resources that us westerners typically have to travel to conferences. Instead, you must go to them to learn something, and then you learn that they are really great scholars doing their own thing, largely invisible to the English-speaking hegemony, unfortunately. CEEGS has helped to change that.

I think we can see this as an empirical question. What are the differences in different academic cultures? This is something we need better metrics for: looking at what people are researching, what they are doing, seeing the connections between geography and research topics. There was a study from Melcer et al. that discovered that there are at least seven or eight core communities that study different aspects of games.⁸ And there are about 57 game research journals and then of course thousands of others where you now can publish games research. Some people might think that now game studies has exploded and has become too big and too diverse—that it's an expanding universe that drifts apart and maybe that wasn't what we wanted. But I don't care. It's good.

CM: It seems like one of the big things still to overcome in this big growth and especially the growth of different regional centers for game studies is the Anglocentrism of game studies. That's not just a game studies thing, that's an international research problem.

EA: Certainly. And it's certainly also a game studies problem. As I said, you people [USA] are the empire when it comes to academia. You create the tune that we march to, globally speaking. So the Americanization or the Anglo-Americanization, perhaps, of academia in general is a clear trend that has been

8 Edward Melcer et al., "Games Research Today: Analyzing the Academic Landscape 2000–2014," in *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (Foundations of Digital Games, 2015).

going on for at least 50 or 60 years. That is a huge responsibility, lots of power there. And this is also happening in game studies, of course, just like everywhere else. And of course, the main channel for this is the English language. Language politics in publishing is a huge problem for diversity and social justice. If you want people from all over the world to participate in game studies, then language is, for me, the largest obstacle. There are many obstacles, but language is perhaps the most monolithic, that we are so privileging of the English language.

This is a problem for all of us and certainly people who are not native speakers. As I said, I've published stuff in Norwegian that nobody has cited. And I shouldn't complain about citations and I don't. But it's very clear to me that if I write something in Norwegian, nobody cares. There's almost no one who's going to read it, at least not any kind of critical mass relevant to my career. So the only way to succeed is to write in English, or perhaps in a bigger language community like French, German, or Chinese.

We often forget how privileged we are in a certain sense if we speak English well. I should also include myself because coming from Norway, English is almost my first language. As editor of *Game Studies*, if I have one regret, it's why didn't I do something about that? Why aren't we better at helping non-English speakers to get published and read? We do have ways of dealing with inclusivity. We can keep conference fees free or very low, we can make sure publishing is free and the publications are free to access, as *Game Studies* does. So at least I've done that. But the lack of language support, that's my one regret as editor.

CM: Building on that work, what are some of your current interests, and where is your work going now? I remember seeing you present at a conference a few years ago on developing game ontologies and taxonomies, maybe some hermeneutical frameworks for games.⁹

9 Espen Aarseth and Pawel Grabarczyk, "An Ontological Meta-Model for Game Research," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2018: The Game is the Message*,

EA: Actually, that focus on ontologies is the first thing I went to when I started. What is this thing? What does it do? So that is my oldest research question, and I'm still doing it and I should stop now because I've been doing it for so long that if I do it for ten more years, it's not going to improve my results. I need to figure out something else to do, I think, because it's endless. I don't think you can define games. That's one of my tenets, and it's basically what Ludwig Wittgenstein said.¹⁰ I totally agree with him. Games are so different from each other that you cannot subsume them under one formal definition. And for me, as a games researcher, that's fine. That's just like a biologist who can't define life, but they're very much focused on, what is this stuff we call life? And so, I'm still very consumed with that question. How can we best describe these various things that we call games?

It's very important for a society to understand the differences between games. Otherwise, we get situations like that time in Greece some years ago when they banned online chess because they classified online games as gambling.¹¹ Understanding differences between games is absolutely crucial, and that's also what we do. Instead of just banning everything, you want to ban the bad things, or you want to regulate the problematic games and not the others. Games have so many connotations in terms of how they're supposedly bad, prone to violence, and all kinds of evil. So you need to figure out not just if this is a game, but what kind of a game it is. What are the consequences of this particular artifact? What are the features and traits in games that might make them something either good or bad or just ugly? That's something I've always been fascinated with and probably always will be.

<https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/973>.

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

11 David Trammell, "Greece Bans Video Games," *Nintendo World Report*, September 3, 2002, <http://www.nintendoworldreport.com/news/7715/greece-bans-video-games>.

These days, I'm also really happy about how the field is developing internationally. There's game studies research happening in Iran, Indonesia, and many other places, but we don't know as much about the work there because they don't have the money to invite people to come and see what they're doing, nor can they afford to come to us.¹² But the work is happening, and that's wonderful. I also take great inspiration from students—I'm not excited about what I'm doing, but what my students are doing.

I want to see more studies uncovering facts about games and players. Who plays? What do they play? We need better player studies and player demographics. That includes longitudinal and comparative studies—what are the games different populations are playing and watching, how much are they playing? What happens to people who play different sorts of games? Just think about this weird thing: males are doing so badly in school these days, compared to the other genders out there. Why is that? I would like to think it's not games, but can I really claim that? I can't. There is a big change in behavior over the last thirty years, and that parallels great changes in games and many other areas. When I was 15, we didn't have consoles. One of my friends had a Nintendo Game & Watch, which was fun to play for about ten minutes. But today, it's a very different story. What can explain this big gender difference in school performance? Can we rule out that gaming has something to do with that? I don't know, because we don't have longitudinal studies on these things. Maybe there's no cause for alarm. Hopefully not! But we need to know, and that's a challenge.

CM: You published a piece in 2019 that included your “play tips” for new game studies scholars.¹³ Do you have any other play tips

12 See Rasoul Bakhtiari, Farhad Seraji, and Zahra Habibzadeh, “Thematic Analysis of Game Researches Trends in Iran: Comparing with International Trends,” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4303229>, and Mark J.P. Wolf, ed., *Video Games around the World* (MIT Press, 2015).

13 Espen Aarseth, “Game Studies: How to Play—Ten Play-Tips for the Aspiring Game-Studies Scholar,” *Game Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019), <https://>

that you'd like to share, or things that you think new people getting into the field should think about?

EA: Yeah, that's a very good question. You know, they definitely need to understand the field and the history of it. That is important because there's all these tensions that they will wade into, and where do the tensions come from and how do they emerge? Especially now with social media, and also in game studies, there's unfortunately these toxic comments going around from time to time. Somebody new who didn't expect all this ad hominem could easily be scared off from the field. We academics also have echo chambers. And we don't have a good strategy for dealing with them.

Game studies is clearly a field now, but it takes a long time for a field to grow up. Maybe we haven't matured enough yet—probably not. What I really want to see are people doing things that I never expected. People taking the field in directions that are perhaps not even game studies anymore. I would really like to see game studies having spin-offs. We tried to do something like that with my European Research Council (ERC) project that just finished, the Making Sense of Games project, which was the field of character studies. We had a seminar where game characters were one aspect of a larger question: what is a character in general? Not just in games, literature, politics, media, or sports, but across all of those. Can we have a general theory of characters across or in between or independent of media?¹⁴ And if this is successful, I would say that this is something which game studies has helped to promote and it's no longer game studies and perhaps never was. So to me, having spin-offs like that would be a great measure of success for the field. That would be a nice benchmark for any field: to spawn new fields.

gamestudies.org/1902/articles/howtoplay.

14 Joleen Blom and James Phelan, eds., "Character and Character Studies," special issue, *Narrative* 30, no. 2 (2022).

CM: Are there any other things that you want to make sure to include?

EA: For me, it's a weird place to be in game studies, because people have these ideas about me because I was there and I did something 20-odd years ago, so it is like there's two of me. It's the person I am, and then the person or construct they talk about, even in keynotes. And it's weird, I must admit I never expected that. It's obviously a sign of some sort of success, but it's also something I will never get completely used to. It's certainly not something I wanted, but I have to live with it, I guess. I just look forward to what people will do with the field next.

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Redirecting Ludification: Dutch Game Studies and the Neoliberalization of Academia

Dennis Jansen

The Stakes of Ludification

Play is on the rise. It is common knowledge that the gaming industry is a multi-billion dollar enterprise that shows no signs of slowing its growth. It is also common knowledge that play is no longer contained within the boundaries of magic circles, be they analog or digital. Play now spills over into all facets of everyday life — we are witnessing a ludification of culture. Play has reached the university too, in more ways than one: game studies has become a relatively established interdisciplinary field, and the educational use of games and play is rising in popularity amongst faculty. The questions I wish to raise here concern precisely this *ludification of the university*. What shape does it take? What are its academic politics? And what is the role of game studies in the process?

At stake are both the future of the field and the university at large. To address the ludification of the university and game studies' role in it, I engage extensively with the work of Joost Raessens, the senior Dutch media scholar who popularized the

term “ludification.”¹ This is done in two parts: first, an investigation of the relationship between Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938) and Raessens’s article on “The Ludification of Culture” (2014), which was based on his inaugural lecture,² and then an excursion through Raessens’s work on serious games and the ways in which it is emblematic of the academic politics of game studies more broadly. This academic politics is marked by a certain disinclination to fully account for the role of military technoscience and contemporary capitalism in shaping digital play. After emerging from this close reading with a clearer view of the *concept of ludification* and the *instrumentalization of play* that it propagates, I offer a tentative analysis of the *process of ludification* as it has unfolded at Utrecht University over the past decade-and-a-half. My cursory glance at the interlinkage between the way that game studies was institutionalized in Utrecht—for instance, through a continued association with a multinational defense communications company—and the instrumentalization-oriented game scholarship that is typically prioritized there, culminates in a redirection of the theory of ludification to target the ongoing neoliberalization and technological acceleration of academia. Finally, I call for renewed attention to the academic politics of game studies, both in terms of how we approach our object of study and how we relate to academia itself.

Game Scholarship and Academic Politics

A brief elaboration on the double meaning of “academic politics” is warranted before I continue to this chapter’s case study.

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- 1 See for example Joost Raessens, “Playful Identities, or the Ludification of Culture,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 52–57; and Joost Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs et al. (meson press, 2014). It is significant that the term was featured prominently in the inaugural issue of *Games and Culture*, which was concerned with “why game studies now?” and related questions.
 - 2 Joost Raessens, *Homo Ludens 2.0: The Ludic Turn in Media Theory*, trans. Aleid Fokkema (Universiteit Utrecht, 2010).

The term initially signifies the theoretical and methodological politics of game studies, that is, the ideological configurations and implications of published scholarship which positions itself as part of the field. The ludology versus narratology issue has rightly been the typical starting point for critiques of game studies and its academic politics, positioning the rational ludologists against the dangerous narratologists, who allegedly aspired to nothing less than the “intellectual colonization” of game studies by literary and cultural theory.³ The trouble produced by this dispute continues to affect the rest of the field, severely limiting its intellectual possibility space to this day. It is no surprise, then, that some of the most critical early interventions on the subject of games come from writers who do not profile their body of work as being mainly within game studies.⁴ In addition to those who do not identify as game scholars, a sizeable portion of those who do is yet unprepared to confront the field’s ongoing complicity in Western imperialism and the exploitation of workers by the military-entertainment complex, and the political field of view of those scholars who rely on a continued association with game studies often remains problematically narrow.⁵ As I show below, this tendency is partially reproduced in the theory of ludification as well.

Equally important in this discussion are the politics of academia under capitalistic economies, in which academic success “hinges on the academic establishing an exchange-value by proving that her or his critical methodology, history, or theory is not only worth financial support but, in an era of a tight

3 Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York University Press, 2020), 52.

4 See for example Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003); Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

5 Toby Miller, “The Shameful Trinity: Game Studies, Empire, and the Cognitariat,” in *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games*, ed. Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock (Bloomsbury, 2012).

economy, worth it more than others are.”⁶ In other words, the success of an emerging field like game studies depends in part on establishing its institutional legitimacy within the university system. Heated differences of opinion between scholars, substantial or otherwise, are always to some extent struggles over reputation, resources, and sheer survival. What “theory game” were the early ludologists playing if not that of marking their own territory in order to secure a place for game studies, or their preferred version of it, within the academy?⁷ Conversely, we see that feminist and queer game scholars were preoccupied with establishing a means of survival for their comrades and their work inside the academic structures that were hostile to their very existence. It is they who use their positions to argue most fiercely for inclusivity, who call attention to precarity and abuse, and who urge their colleagues to #TransformDH and #CiteHerWork.⁸ For these academics, the politicization of academic life is an inevitability rather than a choice — their presence in game studies is already a political issue.⁹ The academic politics of game scholarship ought therefore to benefit all who are attempting to survive the university today, to be sure, but it should work

6 Janet Staiger, “The Politics of Film Canons,” *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1985): 18.

7 Patrick Crogan, “The Game Thing: Ludology and Other Theory Games,” *Media International Australia* 110, no. 1 (2004): 10–18, and Frans Mäyrä, “Game Culture Studies and the Politics of Scholarship: The Opposites and the Dialectic,” *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* 9 (2020): 11–31.

8 Moya Bailey et al., “Reflections on a Movement: #transformDH, Growing Up,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), and Kishonna L. Gray, “#CiteHerWork: Marginalizing Women in Academic and Journalistic Writing,” *Kishonna Gray*, December 28, 2015, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200812172137/https://www.kishonnagray.com/manifestmy-reality/citeherwork-marginalizing-women-in-academic-and-journalistic-writing>. See also, in this volume, Victoria Braegger’s interview with Kishonna Gray.

9 Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt et al., “Homo Includens: Surveying DiGRA’s Diversity,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4, no. 1 (2018): 67–104, and Emma Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018).

especially for those who were unable to avoid being politicized themselves in the first place.

The Ludic, Spilling Over

In “The Ludification of Culture,” Raessens writes: “Since the 1960s, when the word ‘ludic’ became popular to denote playful behaviour and fun objects — think for example of the Dutch counterculture movement Provo and the Situationist International [...] — playfulness has gradually become a central category of our culture.”¹⁰ This description and historical positioning of ludification resembles the manifestos for a “ludic century,” in which everyone becomes either a gamer or a game designer.¹¹ Raessens, for his part, rejects the idea of a century defined by games as an overgeneralization, but really, the two projects are very comparable in their scope. The nice thing about ludification is that all academic disciplines have something to do with it. After all, the phenomenon now “also turns up in those domains that once were considered the opposite of play.”¹² Raessens offers education, politics, and warfare as newly playful domains. In media studies especially, every subject and subfield is susceptible to a ludic turn, with game studies serving as the avant-garde. Nowadays, there are playful media, playful identities, and playful citizens.¹³ Nothing will be left untouched by the ludic.

Consider another history of ludification, more recent in origin: the ludification of the university. Following the end of the

¹⁰ Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” 94.

¹¹ McKenzie Wark, “A Ludic Century? Games, Aesthetics, the Twenty-First Century,” *Public Seminar*, November 22, 2013, <https://publicseminar.org/2013/11/a-ludic-century/>, and Eric Zimmerman, “Position Statement: Manifesto for a Ludic Century,” in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, ed. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (MIT Press, 2015).

¹² Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” 94.

¹³ Valerie Frissen et al., eds., *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures* (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), and René Glas et al., eds., *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

Game Research for Training and Entertainment (GATE) project about the potentials of gaming and simulation (2007–2012), Utrecht University began funding an institution-wide focus area for game research in 2014, with Raessens as one of its chairs. Game research in Utrecht occurs in multiple arenas, from the Humanities to Computing Sciences to Geosciences, and involves collaborations with many societal partners.¹⁴ Naturally, the university's fascination with games does not limit itself to scholarship. Individual courses, study programs at various levels, and week-long summer schools are dedicated to game studies, game technologies, and the ludification of culture. (These are mostly taught by left-leaning white men, including myself at the time of writing.) The Center for Game Research, which coordinates the eponymous focus area, recently founded its own company that “develops games for learning and research purposes” for clients within the university.¹⁵ A collaboration between the university's Copernicus Institute for Sustainable Development and Dutch game development studio IJsfontein has spawned *Utrecht 2040* (IJsfontein, 2019), a mobile, augmented-reality, serious game about local sustainability that all first-year bachelor students are eventually expected to play throughout their studies. Instrumentalization seems to dominate the university's thinking about what its relationship to games and play should be. What is the role of the instrumentalization of play in the theory of ludification, and what can this tell us about game studies and the university today?

Huizinga's Legacy

Both ludification and my analysis of it are situated in the European, specifically Dutch, branch of game studies. Raessens made much of his academic career at Utrecht University, where

14 “Projects - Game Research,” *Utrecht University*, <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/game-research/research/projects>.

15 “253Games - Game Research,” *Utrecht University*, <https://www.uu.nl/en/research/game-research/253games>.

he co-hosted the first conference of the Digital Games Research Association in 2003, has worked on multiple large-scale game research projects, and currently holds the chair of Media Theory in the Department of Media and Culture Studies. I myself have followed two graduate programs at that department between 2017 and 2020, both of which included courses that taught the ludification of culture. The concept of ludification itself has Dutch roots too, because Raessens's play theory is close to Huizinga's. Raessens takes up a familiar definition from *Homo Ludens*—play as a free activity, separate from ordinary life, occurring within specific boundaries, following a negotiated set of rules, et cetera—together with the equally familiar amendments from French sociologist Roger Caillois, who expanded Huizinga's general theory with a classification of the various types of games and play (competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo), which can be more formalized or more spontaneous in nature.¹⁶ Raessens, for his part, emphasizes especially the critique that Huizinga “fails to do justice to the ambiguity of play” by maintaining a separation between play's “holy earnest[ness]” and everyday life. He also offers his own addendum, concerning Huizinga's narrative of a cultural decline of play: “A major reason for the demise of play, [Huizinga] argues, is the rise of technology. Here I would defend the thesis [...] that] digital information and communication technologies have precisely enabled new forms of play.”¹⁷ The advent of these “new forms of play” that Huizinga neglected does not incite a more radical revision of Huizingan play theory. Raessens presents us instead with an optimistic mirror image of Huizinga's conservative pessimism.

With the benefit of hindsight, one can easily see how Huizinga's original argument was a product of its historical moment, as well as directly motivated by his personal politics.¹⁸ He was

16 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001).

17 Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” 102–3.

18 Pieter Geyl, “Huizinga as Accuser of His Age,” *History and Theory* 2, no. 3 (1963): 231–62, and Sven Lütticken, “Playtimes,” *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 125–40.

writing in response to the rise of fascism, while simultaneously resisting “the shameful misconception of Marxism [...] that economic forces and material interests determine the course of the world.” Of the nineteenth century, he writes that “the great currents of its thought, however looked at, were all inimical to the play-factor in social life. Neither liberalism nor socialism offered it any nourishment.”¹⁹ Whatever phenomena Huizinga chose (not) to see as play, presumably, was informed by his rejection of these movements. It is therefore easy to read his proclamation that “civilization arises and unfolds in and as play” as him sidelining historical materialism, a rhetorical strategy wherein play one-ups labor as humanity’s species-being.²⁰ Indeed, very little can be found on politico-economic matters throughout *Homo Ludens*. Historical wars, for instance, are discussed almost exclusively as forms of glorious agon, rather than as (also) conflicts of material interests between groups. This is not even to mention Huizinga’s romanticization of Ancient Greece and the medieval period, his anthropological racism concerning “primitive” cultures, and his self-defeating exclusion of play from everyday life.²¹ Consequently, important questions about the academic politics of the theory of ludification urgently assert themselves when Raessens chooses to largely adhere to Huizinga’s play-concept and not to interrogate the nature of his historical narrative too much.

The point of this exercise is not to engage in the academic game of countering Raessens’s line of thinking with a completely different one — I actually believe that his basic claims are true — nor to advocate a wholesale rejection of Huizinga. That said, we can observe some similar dynamics occurring in Huizinga’s and Raessens’s texts, even if the latter does not repudiate

19 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Routledge, 1949), 192.

20 Ibid., ix.

21 Robert Anchor, “History and Play: Johan Huizinga and His Critics,” *History and Theory* 17, no. 1 (1978): 63–93, and Jacques Ehrmann, “Homo Ludens Revisited,” trans. Cathy Lewis and Phil Lewis, *Yale French Studies*, no. 41 (1968): 31–57.

political economy altogether like the former does. According to Raessens, the ludic turn in media theory entails a unification of

the political analysis of media, paying attention to the struggle for power between producers and consumers and the impact of ludo-capitalism; the analysis of the “digital material” aspects of media such as they are studied in critical code studies and software studies, [...] and the philosophical analysis of play and media, the lines of flight and leaks in the system.²²

The avowed politics of the ludification theory are evidently progressive. Yet, although “the impact of ludo-capitalism” receives some attention, the critique of that impact is applied somewhat inconsistently. Take his repeated appeal to social media as exemplary sites of ludification, where “users can playfully construct identities that do not necessarily have any implications for real life.”²³ Even if users did construct identities separately from “real life,” and much internet scholarship has argued that this is not the case, their engagement with platforms still involves them in the generation of economic value and the incessant datafication of social relations—so there are definitely “implications for real life.”²⁴ Furthermore, while Raessens recognizes capital’s encroachment upon ludification, his frame of the “rules of ludo-capitalism” imposing “additional limitations” onto playful contexts gives the impression that play at some point existed separately from political economy, and that perhaps there are elements of the ludification process which yet escape ludo-capitalism.²⁵ But there is no reason to assume capitalist forces were not intimately involved with ludification from the very beginning. One need only glance at the history of digital games—which coincides almost precisely with that of

22 Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” 110.

23 Ibid., 105.

24 Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, eds., *Race after the Internet* (Routledge, 2012).

25 Raessens, “The Ludification of Culture,” 106n23.

ludification — to find that their origins lie in the American “military-industrial-academic complex” of the early Cold War, and that their global popularity is a product of their commodification by Silicon Valley entrepreneurs in the 1970s.²⁶ In Raessens’s account, these ambivalent aspects of digital play’s history, and thus of ludification’s history, remain in the background, implicitly *separate* from the process of ludification as we observe it today. The question of political economy then still comes across as quite marginal in Raessens, as it already was in Huizinga.

The Scope of Serious Game Research

A comparable trend can be found in Raessens’s work on the “political-ideological tendencies in serious games,” exemplified for him by titles like *Food Force* (United Nations World Food Programme, 2005) and *Darfur Is Dying* (Take Action Games, 2006).²⁷ Following the work of Sherry Turkle, Raessens argues that “players can either surrender to the seduction of *Food Force* and *Darfur is Dying* by interpreting the game more or less according to the encoded [...] ideological frames (simulation resignation),” or they can “understand these frames [...] by deconstructing the assumptions or frames that are built into the simulation (simulation understanding).”²⁸ Raessens indicates that the ideal scenario here is simulation understanding, when players experience a “moment of disavowal—or distancing—that is specific to games,” and thereby become able to identify and question the underlying assumptions of the aforementioned serious games.²⁹ This would allow for a con-

26 Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter, *Digital Play*, 85–86.

27 Joost Raessens, “Serious Games from an Apparatus Perspective,” in *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*, ed. Marianne van den Boomen et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 24.

28 Joost Raessens, “Playful Identity Politics: How Refugee Games Affect the Player’s Identity,” in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 254. See also Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996).

29 Raessens, “Serious Games,” 28.

structive — and fully instrumentalized — relationship between a game, conveying its message through procedural rhetoric, and its players, who engage with that message affirmatively to find its limitations. Raessens thus initially appears to align himself with Miguel Sicart's critique of the proceduralism of media theorists and game designers like Ian Bogost and Mary Flanagan. For Sicart, players rescue themselves from simulation resignation by confronting the embedded values of any given game with their own: "Against proceduralism an army of players stand and *play*, breaking the rules, misunderstanding the processes, appropriating the spaces of play and taking them somewhere else, where not even the designer can reach."³⁰ However, designers and theorists alike are not content to let the procedure be so easily derailed — according to Raessens, its derailment should simply be accounted for in advance. Simulation understanding, the "moment of disavowal" that Sicart sees as proceduralism's foil, would in fact complete the ludic procedure. In this way, the instrumentalization of play would continue unabated.

With that in mind, it is interesting to note how throughout his preliminary research Raessens consistently finds game critics and scholars, precisely the demographics one could reasonably expect a measure of "critical distance" from, overwhelmingly falling into simulation resignation when playing and reviewing *Food Force* and *Darfur Is Dying*. His later research on *Collapsus: The Energy Risk Conspiracy* (Pallotta, 2010) repeats this finding: resignation remains the dominant response among critics.³¹ When first confronted with these results, Raessens carefully questions whether "critical distance needs to exist in the first place," because, he writes, "It is of course a legitimate aspiration to teach children about hunger as *Food Force* intends to do."³² Later, he praises *Food Force* and *Darfur Is Dying* for their "clear

30 Miguel Sicart, "Against Proceduralism," *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap, original emphasis.

31 Joost Raessens, "Collapsus, or How to Make Players Become Ecological Citizens," in *The Playful Citizen: Civic Engagement in a Mediatized Culture*, ed. René Glas et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 99–100.

32 Raessens, "Serious Games," 32.

political agenda,” which in itself “can be considered an emancipating and liberating aspect.”³³ Yet, having a political agenda is hardly specific to serious games, and discussing political issues is certainly not the same as effecting liberation or emancipation. By the time his research has shifted to ecogames like *Collapsus*, Raessens is speaking in terms of a *potential* for the full instrumentalization of play: the game “*might* contribute to [...] making people reflect on the global and political implications of the energy transition and act accordingly.”³⁴ The goalposts for serious games’ success have moved from understanding to resignation. This makes sense from the perspective of academic politics, too: pointing to “potential” and “promising evidence” invites further research to demonstrate the relevance and value of one’s topic of choice — a strategy that has undeniably worked out well for many game researchers in the Netherlands.

That said, one could also contend that simulation understanding was never a broadly attainable goal to begin with. In one of his earliest texts on serious games, Raessens identifies four possible implications of games for their users’ relation to reality and the symbolic order. According to this four-part model, (serious) games may be experienced either as completely immersive virtual realities that can in turn be (1) utopian or (2) dystopian, as (3) “replicas of non-virtual life,” or as (4) “dramatic stages for reality construction.”³⁵ In that same text, he adds this crucial disclaimer: “Which of the ‘virtual’ tendencies become actualized is not directly inscribed in the game’s technical properties.”³⁶ The implication of this is that a discussion of the technologies that underlie serious games is unnecessary, because they have no direct impact on the games’ political or ideological properties,

33 Raessens, “Playful Identity Politics,” 256.

34 Raessens, “*Collapsus*,” 93, emphasis mine.

35 Raessens, “Serious Games,” 24. He takes this model from Caroline Pelletier, “Reconfiguring Interactivity, Agency and Pleasure in the Education and Computer Games Debate: Using Žižek’s Concept of Interpassivity to Analyse Educational Play,” *E-Learning and Digital Media* 2, no. 4 (2005): 317–26.

36 Raessens, “Serious Games,” 33.

nor on how any individual title constructs its relationship to actual reality. Raessens thus makes explicit an assumption that game scholarship often leaves unstated: that gaming software and hardware are inherently neutral media whose histories and materialities are of little consequence for understanding how we play and interpret them.³⁷ This introduces some difficulty, not least because it is on the basis of those same technologies that Raessens later theorized the revival of play across Western culture. All four virtualities seem to have been opened up simultaneously and equally, and the possibility that certain lines might be engraved more deeply than others through historical and technical developments receives no further consideration. The question of how digital play relates to the capitalistic systems within which it takes place and is studied does not arise. The frequent occurrence of simulation resignation is not investigated as a tendency that is bound to be prominent in a technological assemblage that has historically aimed for precisely that outcome due to its origins in wargaming and Cold War-era technoscience.³⁸ In addition to placing us at a theoretical impasse wherein we are stuck with an increasingly abstract “potential” of serious games’ persuasive power, then, the statement regarding their technical properties again allows their conditions of production to slip from our view.

This slipping from view occurs again when Raessens himself does not implicate serious games as such in the problems they are addressing. In his narrative about ludification, for instance, the ways that capitalist interests operate through and within (instead of acting upon) capitalistically produced playful media

37 One may point to some recent corrections of this trend, such as media archaeology, platform studies, and game studies’ material turn; see for example Thomas H. Apperley and Darshana Jayemanne, “Game Studies’ Material Turn,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2012): 5–25; Thomas H. Apperley and Jussi Parikka, “Platform Studies’ Epistemic Threshold,” *Games and Culture* 13, no. 4 (2018): 349–69; and Carly A. Kocurek, “Play, Things: Games, Materialism, and the Production of Culture,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 81 (2018): 66–69.

38 Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

are left largely unexplored. But what is marginal for Raessens needs to become central for game studies. *Food Force* and *Dar-fur Is Dying*, both arguably dealing with the consequences of colonialism and capitalist globalization, ought to be confronted with their use of simulation technologies that claim to help eradicate famine and war, even though they arose from and contribute to the systems that continue to produce these forms of structural violence. *Collapsus*, so concerned about the climate crisis, ought to be confronted with the contribution of game development and distribution cycles to ecological destruction and global warming.³⁹ If this is not done, one maintains the untenable perspective that serious games themselves somehow exist outside of the issues they address. In stepping away from this position, one opens up the possibility to investigate what kinds of relationships there are between gaming technologies and global capitalist crises, without needing to come to optimistic conclusions about serious games' positive effects or political relevance. The potential for play's instrumentalization is then not exclusively something to be *demonstrated* but something to be rigorously *questioned* at the same time. Rightly so, as Raessens himself will agree: "Professional serious game designers as well as serious game theorists [...] have an ethico-political responsibility when they make decisions about the ways in which they want to design serious games and construct theories about them."⁴⁰ What is at stake here, however, is what counts as

39 See for example Benjamin Abraham, *Digital Games After Climate Change* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), and Kieren Mayers et al., "The Carbon Footprint of Games Distribution," *Journal of Industrial Ecology* 19, no. 3 (2015): 402–15. Happily, such a critical confrontation with games' own complicity with the climate crisis can be found in Raessens's own more recent projects too, such as in Laura op de Beke et al., eds., *Ecogames: Playful Perspectives on the Climate Crisis* (Amsterdam University Press, 2024) and in the new Sustainable Transition for Europe's Game Industries (STRATEGIES) project, of which he is the coordinator and which is funded through the European Union's "Horizon Europe" initiative. These publications and projects came after my initial submission of this chapter, which is why I do not address them in the main text.

40 Raessens, "Serious Games," 33.

an ethico-politically responsible theorization of theory in relation not just to serious games, but to ludification more broadly.

Redirecting Ludification

When we take seriously the “ethico-political responsibility” that comes with the (de)construction of theory in game studies, it soon turns out that academia itself gets caught in the scope of critique too. What does this enable us to say about the ludification of the university? First off, it becomes possible to observe that the optimists have the upper hand. The serious game theorists and media scholars who seek to unlock the civic, educational, and medical potentials of digital play are winning grants and building successful academic careers. The funds they acquire, however, are not infrequently provided by or shared with private military suppliers, global tech conglomerates, and commercially driven pharmaceutical companies, and the resulting research tends not to question the existence of such entities. A key example of this in the Netherlands was the GATE project. This was a €19,000,000, five-year-long collaborative project that consisted of game scholars, prominent members of the local gaming industry, the Dutch Organization for Applied Scientific Research (specifically its “Defense, Security and Safety” and “Human Factors” divisions), and, notably, defense communications company Thales Group, which participated in a consortium that developed crisis response training simulations for Dutch mayors.⁴¹ Overall, the goals of the GATE project were to “substantially advance the state-of-the-art in gaming, simulation and virtual reality [for] creating highly effective entertainment products and experienced learning systems,” and at the

41 Mark Overmars, “The GATE Project: Game Research for Training and Entertainment,” in *Short Paper and Poster Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Conference on Computer Animation and Social Agents*, ed. Anton Nijholt et al. (Universiteit Twente, 2009), 105, and Josine van de Ven and Hester Stubbé, *Help! Over de ontwikkeling van een serious game als oefenmiddel voor burgemeesters om zich voor te bereiden op incidenten* (TNO, 2011).

same time to “increase the international research position by a unique combination of fundamental research and application development and to [create] a stimulating environment and a concentration of talent, best students and best professors.”⁴² The idea of “establishing an exchange value” cited earlier is here taken quite literally: in at least some ways, the project sought to cement its academic relevance by demonstrating its economic worth to the Dutch gaming industry—and recruited a commercial military collaborator to achieve that goal. In 2014, two years after the project ended, the Game Research focus area was instituted at Utrecht University. Thales and its subsidiary, serious game developer T-Exchange, remain regular partners for game research conducted under the focus area’s heading to this day, along with pharmaceutical companies and the Dutch national police. Inquiry into what these actors end up doing with the technological advancements they produce in collaboration with Dutch academia, after the research projects are over, seems to be of little importance on the research agenda. To be sure, the presence of scholarship that does attend to such questions is facilitated to a degree, but it is also regarded as the “critical note” instead of the naturally central concern. The relative dearth of literature being produced on the subject in the Netherlands is only the most immediately obvious way to confirm this.

Parallel to how the ludification of culture encompasses more than just the popularity of games in Western societies, the ludification of the university is a process that extends beyond the popularity of optimistic research and rhetoric about the potentials of serious gaming, and beyond the ethico-political difficulties that specific kind of research carries with it. At the level of the academic institution itself, for example, much more has happened that we could consider part of the ludification process. Think of academia’s ongoing neoliberalization, expressed as universities’ obedience to market forces that skew toward “professional and high-tech fields that service monopoly capitalism,”

42 “Project Information,” *GATE | Game Research for Training and Entertainment*, https://www2.projects.science.uu.nl/gate/page_85.html.

and as the creeping managerialism that favors “increased cost efficiency and attention to consumer and market demands” over stable labor conditions for faculty, staff, and students.⁴³ This managerial economization has brought to academia in the Netherlands and elsewhere a pervasive obsession with making “measurable” the worth of individual scholars and even entire departments, a “regime of indicator fetishism” that cares not about producing excellent scholarship but about “the tactically well thought-out and cleverly buffed-up *illusion* of excellence.”⁴⁴ The value of scholarship in the Dutch university has thus been effectively transcoded into numerical indicators, such as those we might find nowadays on Google Scholar pages — or on Twitter, one of the key examples of “playful media” in the language of ludification. Academics cooperate semi-voluntarily with this “technological acceleration” of university life by creating those pages in the first place, since they increase our chances of scoring high on the right indicators.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, especially for junior scholars, participating in self-branding exercises is all but mandatory. Those Altmetric stats won’t boost themselves!

The neoliberal regime is no longer simply imposed from on high through corporate overmanagement and right-wing austerity policy. It has been internalized and is being reproduced by academics every day, regardless of their personal “radicality” and political posturing. Even those who are struggling to survive within the system must work to uphold it in order to somehow reap its benefits. McKenzie Wark calls the world that results from this techno-accelerated neoliberal takeover “gamespace,” and writes:

43 Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, “The Neo-Liberal University,” *New Labor Forum*, no. 6 (2000): 76–77.

44 Willem Halffman and Hans Radder, “The Academic Manifesto: From an Occupied to a Public University,” trans. Ilse Evertse and Jan Evertse, *Minerva* 53, no. 2 (2015): 162.

45 Ingrid M. Hoofd, *Higher Education and Technological Acceleration: The Disintegration of University Teaching and Research* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Even critical theory, which once took its distance from damaged life, becomes another game. [...] *Your critical theory became hypocritical theory.* It is against everything in the whole wide world except the gamespace that made itself possible. But gamespace is now the very form of the world, and this world eluded your thought even as it brought home the glittering prizes. It is gamespace that won.⁴⁶

Gamespace engulfs the university when the academic game is sped up and forced into overdrive, when the panoptic affordances of performance measurement meet the threat of economic precarity. For lecturers on fixed-term contracts and Black, disabled, and queer staff, this is a constant presence.⁴⁷ The stakes are high and the rules unfair, and while the latter are supposed to make our work more “efficient,” all they really do is make our work worse. There is no time to do research unless one is able to pass the teaching load off to some underpaid temporary staff, no incentive to teach critical thought because we need to focus on teaching “employability skills,” and no chance to engage deeply with students’ work since they are merely here to obtain their diplomas within the allotted three years. Rosalind Gill summarizes the situation aptly: “All the time is ‘crunch time’ now.”⁴⁸

Ludification, Game Studies, and Hypocrisy

When Wark describes critical theory becoming *hypocritical* theory, theory that for all its righteous criticality neglects to examine its own conditions of production, a comparison with game studies is difficult to resist. As a field that is so attuned to the prominence of play and games in society, in whatever form, game studies has proven unable—or unwilling—to see the design of its own academic environment become increasingly

⁴⁶ Wark, *Gamer Theory*, §17, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The Academic Speed-Up,” *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, no. 4 (1999): 23–28.

⁴⁸ Rosalind Gill, “Academics, Cultural Workers and Critical Labour Studies,” *Journal of Cultural Economy* 7, no. 1 (2014): 15.

unbalanced, in favor of the military-entertainment complex and neoliberal administrators, in a variety of ways. Another hypocrisy is that game studies has itself participated in academia's unbalancing by boosting the instrumentalization of its object of study. The institutional legitimacy of game studies, in the Netherlands as elsewhere, was built by harnessing play as an *exchange value* rather than by engaging with the ideological and logistical developments that instrumentalization entails. In doing so, the field has produced only a limited frame of reference for critical inquiry into ludification and its systemic supporters, when precisely such inquiry is what is required of us.

Our discourse and our institutions can be different, however. The redirection of the theory of ludification might be one way of playing with the "institutional concept" of the university.⁴⁹ It turns our critical attention toward academic politics and the ethico-political responsibilities of scholarship. It could even be a method that helps us to change the process of ludification, find ways to rig the game in our favor instead of that of monopoly capitalists and tech giants. (Would this be another form of instrumentalization? Counter-instrumentalization, *counter-ludification*?⁵⁰) For now, we are still faced with the task of recognizing the process where we hardly did before, and adjusting our concepts accordingly.

49 Jacques Derrida, "Mochlos, or The Conflict of the Faculties," in *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy 2*, trans. Richard Rand and Amy Wygant (Stanford University Press, 2004), 102. Some argue that this critical attitude ends up reproducing the same structures that make academia such a hostile place. See, for example, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 101–15.

50 Daphne Dragona, "Counter-Gamification: Emerging Tactics and Practices Against the Rule of Numbers," in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs et al. (meson press, 2014).

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What Video Games Have Taught Us: Two Decades of Gaming and Learning

Kirk M. Lundblade

There was a small town located along the frontier between Russia and Poland; no one was ever quite sure to which it belonged. One day an official treaty was signed and not long after, surveyors arrived to draw a border. Some villagers approached them where they had set up their equipment on a nearby hill. “So where are we, Russia or Poland?” “According to our calculations, your village now begins exactly thirty-seven meters into Poland.” The villagers immediately began dancing for joy. “Why?” the surveyors asked. “What difference does it make?” “Don’t you know what this means?” they replied. “It means we’ll never have to endure another one of those terrible Russian winters!”

— David Graeber, *Debt*¹

¹ David Graeber, *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*, 3rd ed. (Melville House, 2011), 66. Mostly an aside in Graeber’s text, this quote provides an opportunity to consider how shifts in reified boundaries reflect and affect underlying lived realities. In the case of game studies, this work intends to examine how official proclamations of boundary shifts are reflected in pragmatic scholarship.

Histories of a field become as much about what is absent from or outside said field as they feature what is present or inside it, and its evolution over time can often be traced along the variance in objects of study, methodology, sites of publication, and the stated motivation for and importance of the research. In looking at the field of game studies, one such early area of contention and coherence is the importance of games for learning or education; here pedagogy served as a topic of crucial boundary discourse during game studies' early years. Combined with the early and enthusiastic promises for interdisciplinary scholarship which centered the third wave of game studies,² this period in the field's history represents what we might refer to as a flashpoint — a critical point where foundational boundary work focusing on games and learning helped to shape the future contours of the field. A deep dive into relevant work from this period — juxtaposed with the meta-analytical framing of key later works — will address how views of the field's past can and should shape its future.

While scholarship on the educational potential of games predates digital, video, and computer games,³ the emergence of digital games as a commercial and cultural force in the '90s and '00s coincided with a new wave of scholarship seeking to reimagine the pedagogical potential of games, with an obvious

2 This third wave corresponds with the revival of game studies in the '00s which is centered in this article; the first and second waves correspond to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' more anthropologically grounded studies, and the educationally centered resurgence of the 1970s. Given the focus of this article, I have chosen to highlight the tensions between these iterative and revivalist notions of the field throughout.

3 Throughout this article I will refer to scholarship on digital games more broadly as games research, research on games, or other related nomenclatural variants — this should be understood to be inclusive of what can be considered the first, second, third, and subsequent waves of game studies scholarship. The third wave of game studies in particular, following the rhetorical focus of the period's relevant scholarship, will be referred to as game studies. For an excellent second-wave review of games scholarship, see Donald R. Wentworth and Darrell R. Lewis, "A Review of Research on Instructional Games and Simulations in Social Studies Education," *Social Education* 37, no. 5 (1973): 432–40.

focus on new, popular, commercial games.⁴ This scholarship emerged from a variety of scholarly backgrounds, from traditional humanities disciplines such as English⁵ and history⁶ as well as traditional social science disciplines such as psychology.⁷ This broad array of scholarship also had to contend with what was perceived as an evolving medium, one whose potential was in flux, and thus current and past applicability was juxtaposed frequently with visions of future potential which frequently adopted a very particular form of utopian rhetoric.

In examining how scholarship on games and learning engaged and intersected with the different but emerging field of games studies, a crucial piece of the latter's boundary formation process can be brought to light. In particular, this work will focus on a pivotal piece of early scholarship — James Paul Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*⁸ — and examine how the gradual collision of his work with the nascent field of game studies reveals a crucial piece of the field's boundary formation process, and the purposes and pragmatic needs which drove those separate communities to briefly

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- 4 Tom Taylor, "Using the Simulation 'Civilization' in a World History Course," *History Computer Review* 10, no. 1 (1994): 11–16; Pierre Corbeil, "Learning from the Children," *Simulation & Gaming* 30, no. 2 (1999): 163–80; Peter van Emde Boas, "Games in the Classroom," in *OOPSLA'99 Workshop Report: Quest for Effective Classroom Examples* (ACM, 1999), 37; and Tom Taylor, "Historical Simulations and the Future of the Historical Narrative," *Journal of the Association for History and Computing* 6, no. 2 (2003), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.3310410.0006.203>.
 - 5 James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), and James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, rev. ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). This work calls special attention to the differences between these two versions; as such, all citations of Gee will indicate the appropriate date and page number for both editions.
 - 6 Corbeil, "Learning from the Children," 1999.
 - 7 Two dissertations, both directed by Sasha A. Barab, are notable here: Hakan Tuzun, "Motivating Learners in Educational Computer Games" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2004), and Kurt Squire, "Replaying History: Learning World History Through Playing Civilization III" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2004).
 - 8 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach* (2003 and 2007).

unite. Following this, a brief examination of contemporary meta-analyses of the field — along with a survey of recent works which reference Gee’s pivotal piece — will allow us to analyze a deep slice of this early history alongside later scholarship which takes a broad view of the field. Taken together, this analysis aims to show how reflective and exemplary meta-analytical work can be critiqued and usefully reframed in light of the field’s history and progression, and how discussions of the field’s past have shaped, and continue to shape, its future.

What Video Games Have to Teach Us: Gee’s Original Work

Gee’s monograph *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* was first published in 2003, with a revised and updated edition put out in 2007. His introduction traces the lines of the new field,⁹ as Gee describes an experience undoubtedly common to many adults at the time — playing video games first with his son; marveling at the focus, attention, and effort solicited and received; and then engaging with this newfound medium on his own. After extending a brief argument for video games as the product of “Darwinian”¹⁰ processes which produce successively improved pedagogies, Gee pivots to his disciplinary background and how his established work as a linguist serves as a base for his interrogation of video games as a medium for

9 While it is impossible to precisely determine whether or not Gee saw game studies as either an old but resurgent field or as a completely novel one (which is a relevant consideration given the position and framing of other early entrants), his scholarly writings provide several significant indicators toward the novel field perspective. First, in “Why Game Studies Now?” Gee repeatedly refers to video games as a new art form (thus aligning with the critical disjoint invoked by game studies contemporaries) without either acknowledging past game forms or by citing relevant scholarship. Given his (at the time) position at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (the same institution which games researcher Kurt Squire joined in 2003), Gee was well positioned alongside other games scholars with disciplinary backgrounds much closer to game studies’ second wave.

10 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach* (2007), 3.

teaching and learning.¹¹ These three moves — a personal reframing of commonplace beliefs about games, utopian advocacy for the potential of the medium,¹² and the necessary multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary frames being brought to bear — characterize much of the early literature in the field, with scholars such as Ian Bogost also structuring pivotal scholarship into this three-part sequence. This sequence serves a crucial rhetorical role: together, it takes the discussion of games out of a child's bedroom, into the wider culture, and then on to the academic classroom.¹³ Following these three moves, Gee offers up the chief contribution of his text, thirty-six principles of learning which he identifies in quality video games. A brief examination of these two editions and the work that bridged them will illus-

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- 11 James Paul Gee received his PhD in Linguistics in 1975 from Stanford University; by the time he published the pivotal monograph centered in this work he was well into the third decade of his scholarly career — during which he served in a wide variety of professional roles largely centering around linguistics, education, and psychology. He did not publish any scholarly works on the topic of digital games or game studies until the turn of the millennium. See “James Paul Gee: Biography,” *James Paul Gee*, <https://jamespaulgee.com/About>. Notably, motivations rooted in or even connected to game studies literature are completely absent from this legitimating process — both in the 2003 and 2007 editions.
- 12 I use Lyman Sargent's (1994) definition of utopianism as “social dreaming — the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live. *But not all are radical, for some people at any time dream of something basically familiar*” (3, emphasis mine). Gee, like other games scholars writing in the early period discussed throughout this article, combines broad interdisciplining rhetoric and an optimistic view of digital games' future that, I argue, falls under this definition. See Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1 (1994): 1–37.
- 13 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007), viii–xi. Here Bogost invoked the notions of triviality or childhood, and potential or likely maturation, to signal the first two moves, after which he centered his core term in the lengthy history of his primary field of study: rhetoric (thus signaling the third). Bogost substantiated all three moves with case studies throughout the rest of *Persuasive Games*.

trate with more precision how this work entered into the field of game studies.

While Gee's introduction is largely devoted to performing these legitimating moves, the efforts toward cultural and scholarly legitimation are reflected in the underlying framing of the entire text. In particular, this framing evokes a singular thematic lens: a gaze directed only at the future possibility of digital games, evoking a thematic vision of impressive and inevitable potential. Futuristic and utopian, this theme of pedagogical potential itself carries a number of distinct characteristics. First, his introduction lays bare the full force of this approach:

First, while I talk a good deal about actual video games, I really intend to be discussing the *potential* of video games. The games get better and more sophisticated all the time and at a rapid pace. Much of what I have to say here will simply get "truer" as the games get yet better.¹⁴

The improvement of games is also taken as inevitable, as Gee frames the improvement of games' pedagogical efficacy within a Darwinian process that links pedagogy and sales in a 1:1 relationship which ensures successively more skillful game pedagogies.¹⁵ This pseudo-Hegelian model of games as a medium undergirds all of the subsequent principles,¹⁶ suffusing them with a casual optimism which elides possible difficulties in favor of potential benefits. How, exactly, is this improvement guaranteed? Gee's argument in this case is just as telling:

14 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach* (2003), 9, and (2007), 10.

15 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach* (2003), 6, and (2007), 4.

16 That is, as a model which aligns with a particular common interpretation of Hegelian philosophy that itself ties the emergence and progression of Georg W.F. Hegel's world spirit toward a sort of rational unity as inevitable (as a sort of absolute necessity). While interpretations of Hegel's positions vary, I use the term here to emphasize the underlying philosophy of inevitable progression toward a sort of rational outcome that is undergirding Gee's claims.

If a game has poor learning principles built into its design, then it won't get learned or played and won't sell well. In the end, then, video games represent a process — thanks to what Marx called the “creativity of capitalism” — that leads to better and better designs for good learning and, indeed, good learning of hard and challenging things.¹⁷

Darwinian indeed. In fact, it's worth pausing a moment here to unpack this justification. First, while Gee does a great deal of work establishing what he means by *learning*, what does he mean by *good*? According to Gee, this is not a moral good per se; an illustrative substitution would instead be *efficient* or *effective*. This efficacy is, then, a legitimating argument founded upon an entirely amoral potential. That alone is worth unpacking, but a wider view of his text prompts a more immediate consideration: namely, explicit commentary here must be juxtaposed alongside the overall framing of the work, wherein the examples used throughout are — almost without exception — framed as prosocial or positive.¹⁸ The implicit message here, one which has been picked up on by scholars looking back on this work, is the prosocial and downright utopian framing provided by the rest of the text.¹⁹ While Gee's framing does not formally qualify under

17 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach* (2007), 4. A variant of this quote appears in the 2003 edition on page 6.

18 In fact, when Gee addresses two major veins of criticism (issues of gender and of violence), he does so largely to dismiss them; he either explains how they have already been refuted, or how they will likely be resolved through this iterative, inevitable improvement. See chapter one in Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach*.

19 Prosocial in the sense that the progression of games toward a perfected educational medium is implicitly framed as positive and socially beneficial. Note that, in his meta-analysis and history of the field of game studies, Deterding (2017) refers to Gee's work with the descriptor “utopian.” While other scholars do center his hedging and caveats, they are centered as such only in contrast to Gee's contemporaries. For an example of a more contemporary centering of this language, see Benjamin Abraham, “Video Game Visions of Climate Futures: ARMA 3 and Implications for Games and Persuasion,” *Games and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2018): 71–91. For an example of utopian rhetoric from one of Gee's

a scholarly definition of utopian,²⁰ clearly the combined implicit framing and previously discussed futuristic optimism have colloquially evoked such an image in his readers; thus, I use the term utopian here largely to center this tension in Gee's work. This utopianism, of course, is tied to his invocation of amoral good (efficiency) and capitalism, which must also be addressed.

Gee's invocation of Marx here is quite deliberate and telling. In an impressive bit of rhetorical maneuvering, Marxist critiques of pedagogy under capitalism are redirected instead to bolster the predictive vision for the medium. The circle is completed by Gee's contemporaries, who complement his argument for legitimacy with one centered on the disjoint between education and labor market needs in a contemporary capitalist paradigm.²¹ Together they argue capitalism inevitably improves the tools (games) which can train laborers that are proficient in capital's new labor needs. While the idea of capitalist products training workers in capitalist values is unsurprising,²² what is notable here is the way this cycle is invoked in order to encourage and legitimize the study and adoption of these products. Here, capi-

contemporaries in this period of digital games scholarship, see Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

- 20 For a breakdown of a scholarly definition of utopianism, see Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited." As discussed previously, Gee's work broadly aligns with Sargent's definition of utopianism — but with one key caveat. For Sargent, utopian literature requires the explicit invocation of a possible future which must be worked toward (or away from); it forms a hypothetical *ought* to contrast with the lived *is*. Gee's indirect invocation of the future is, in its invocations of inevitable iterative improvement, largely as inevitable as gravity itself. The broader interdisciplining rhetoric surrounding this imagined future unequivocally aligns with this narrower definitional facet, so I still apply the term utopian here.
- 21 For an example of this usage, see Kurt D. Squire and Levi Giovanetto, "The Higher Education of Gaming," *E-Learning and Digital Media* 5, no. 1 (2008): 2–28. This disjoint is driven by the emergence of what Lemke, whom Squire and Giovanetto quote directly, calls fast capitalism; see J.L. Lemke, "Metamedia Literacy: Transforming Meanings and Media," in *Handbook of Literacy and Technology: Transformations in a Post-Typographic World*, ed. David Reinking et al. (Routledge, 1998).
- 22 Note that students here are already framed as workers.

talism is the source of value which encourages scholarly inquiry itself; it also serves as a herald of the digital games' distinctiveness, with the so-called creativity of capitalism invoked as a sort of divine spirit which alights on the anointed medium as a sign of pecuniary favor.²³ Thus, for Gee, the underlying legitimacy of games is evoked through a futuristic, utopian lens which views digital games as distinctive in a socially constructed and high-ontological manner rooted in formal attributes tied to the blessings of contemporary capitalism; this tantalizing future is framed as inevitable—and though it comes with no explicit assessments as to its beneficial or malicious nature, it is buttressed solely by a host of glowing, positive examples. All this considered, it's hard not to view the invocation of Marx here as the scholarly equivalent of defiling a gravesite.

This 2003 vision for digital games found some thematic resonance within the emerging field of game studies—indeed, the same forces at work in games and learning scholarship can be clearly seen operating in the wider world of games scholarship. While lacking the ardor for capitalism, much of this early scholarship does show thematic parallels to Gee's work—with utopian optimism founded upon an underlying argument for distinctiveness. Nowhere is this more clear than in the founding issue of *Game Studies*, wherein Espen Aarseth invoked a form of disruptive innovation to differentiate and highlight games:

To some of us, computer games are already a phenomenon of greater cultural importance than, say movies, or perhaps even sports. Seen from 2001, the potential cultural role(s) of computer games in the future is practically unfathomable [...]. In [multiplayer games] the aesthetic and the social are integrated parts, and *this could be regarded as the great-*

23 By inference, this favor has been withdrawn from preexisting media forms (as this iterative improvement is invoked within an argument for distinctiveness). *Pecunia vult!*

*est innovation in audience structure since the invention of the choir, thousands of years ago.*²⁴

For Aarseth, the potential for digital games as a collective object of study was founded upon a distinctive break between games and preexisting media forms, and therefore the primary referent to the medium's antecedent forms is only through the size of the discontinuity itself. This asserted high-ontological uniqueness also extends to the field, which was nobly tasked with "[collecting] the scattered writing on games"²⁵ from the ruins of the old field of game studies — which itself "barely exists"²⁶ — to then "[unite] aesthetic, cultural and technical design aspects in a single discipline."²⁷ This, then, was the (re)formation of game studies: a shining discipline on a hill. It is in this context — with a clear shared purpose and overlapping thematic vision — that Gee and this reimaged field begin to intersect. While Gee and Aarseth share many of these legitimating utopian rhetorics, the invocations of capitalist value found in Gee's argument is notably absent from Aarseth's — a fault line that has clear consequences for our present analysis of the field.

Toward Game Studies: Gee at the Border of Game Studies and Games Research

Between 2003 and 2007, this shared legitimating discourse of the object of games brought James Paul Gee into the sphere of game studies the field, where he quickly picked up the second objective of this legitimating discourse — to establish the field itself. Gee entered this conversation via an article published in the first issue of *Games and Culture*, explicitly extending his legitimating arguments for the medium with comparable arguments for

²⁴ Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies."

²⁵ Jesper Juul, "The Repeatedly Lost Art of Studying Games," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-review/>.

²⁶ Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies."

²⁷ Ibid.

the field²⁸—arguments which are here framed in terms of the popular debate over video games’ status as art.²⁹ This advocacy for game studies foregrounds the revised edition of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*.³⁰

In 2007, Gee’s revised edition was released, addressing two major gaps in the original work. First, the 2003 edition used as exemplars exclusively single-player games sold as discrete products.³¹ Second, while Gee developed extensive connections between the new study of games and preexisting work on literacy, learning, and language, his original work cites little scholarship which specifically addresses digital games. The revised edition addressed this gap, adding new scholarship on digital games drawn from within and without game studies. This addition largely served to create the first scholarly bridge

28 James Paul Gee, “Why Game Studies Now?,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 58–61.

29 This popular debate was largely ignited and sustained by film critic Roger Ebert, whose proclamations on the subject from 2005 to 2010 spurred and sustained innumerable discussions regarding art, games, and Ebert himself. For a scholarly overview of the debate, see Felan Parker, “Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 3 (2018): 77–100.

30 Expanded citation in the revised edition came from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and addressed a wide constellation of topoi. Added was work on the connection between video games and violence, economies in gaming, gender, game design, game communities, and games and learning. This augments Gee’s previous sources which directly addressed digital games, all of which are non-scholarly works. For the two editions compared here, see Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach* (2003 and 2007).

31 The primary focused titles are: *Pikmin* (Nintendo EAD, 2001), *Arcanum: Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura* (Troika Games, 2001), *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000), the *Tomb Raider* series, and *Sonic Adventure 2* (Sonic Team USA, 2001). Less focused, but still present, are *American McGee’s Alice* (Rogue Entertainment, 2000), *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter Studios, 2001), and *System Shock 2* (Irrational Games and Looking Glass Studios, 1999). All of these titles fit the single player, game-as-discrete-product model described here. It is also worth noting that these discrete, structured examples are invoked entirely alongside examples of structured educational environments (i.e., what we would formally recognize as classrooms).

between Gee's arguments and extant scholarship on games. The utopian theme was further extended here, as the revised edition foregrounded only two distinct critiques of digital games: the debated connections between games and both violence and gender.³² The acknowledgement of critique here did not subvert the legitimating discourse in which the book engaged; to the contrary, it served largely to reinforce the defensive arguments along discursive fronts already inflamed in popular discourse.

This snapshot of Gee's work — from thematic and discursive alignment, through explicit participation in legitimating discourse, to structural revisions acknowledging games scholarship emerging within the broader spectrum of digital games research — suggests an arc toward the methodological heterogeneity espoused by Aarseth at the foundation of game studies. Limited exploration here suggests that other scholars — like Gee — who initially shared the goal of legitimizing the study of games progressed along a similar track, initially performing distinct and identifiable rhetorical moves to situate themselves in this discourse while incorporating a utopian, inevitable vision of the possibility of the medium.³³ In the case of Gee, this con-

32 For an overview of the "violence and digital games" line of games scholarship, see Malte Elson and Christopher J. Ferguson, "Twenty-Five Years of Research on Violence in Digital Games and Aggression: Empirical Evidence, Perspectives, and a Debate Gone Astray," *European Psychologist* 19, no. 1 (2014): 33–46. For a look at gender and digital games, see Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

33 While there is a multitude of excellent scholarship which could be considered here, I want to briefly consider the illustrative case of Kurt Squire, who followed a similar trajectory to Gee. Squire's early work was also published in game studies, and quickly moved away from game studies toward venues and theoretical frameworks more rooted in an educational psychologist's disciplinary context. Squire's early collaborative work with Henry Jenkins exhibits a greater degree of interdisciplinarity than Gee's, and thus fits more closely within Deterding's overall thesis that game studies as a field achieved a sort of pyrrhic victory which resulted in the field's collapse. The case of Gee is examined in this article not to wholly debunk this thesis, but to provide contrasting examples from which we can glean some fresh insights. See Squire and Giovanetto, "The Higher

tinued into what, under an emic lens,³⁴ constitutes a strong connection to game studies — explicitly evoking the new field while advocating for both it and the objects of study. The trajectory, then, is one toward increasing interdisciplinarity as the foundation of a growing field. While this initial foray provides us an opportunity for thick description of this phase of game studies' development, we must turn to the contemporary history of the field in order to place this phase in context.

Assessing the Field: Locating Gee's Work via Contemporary Meta-Analyses

Within the context of more contemporary reflective work, the trajectory suggested by this snapshot is entirely inverted. Relevant analyses addressing both game studies and the wider domain of games research characterize this wider domain as predominantly fragmented, with this diagnosis providing ample ground for such scholarship to call into question Aarseth's integratory, interdisciplinary call with which we are familiar. Focused work, aimed specifically at the history of game studies, underscores the unfulfilled nature of this call; Sebastian Deterding's key analysis of the field frames its history as a "pyrrhic victory" in which the field has fallen victim to its own legitimating efforts,³⁵ allowing scholars to return to their home disciplines

Education of Gaming," and Kurt Squire, "Cultural Framing of Computer/Video Games," *Game Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 13.

- 34 Emic discourse is an anthropological approach which focuses on how those who self-identify as members construe its identity to each other. For background on my use of this term, see Thomas N. Headland, "Introduction: A Dialogue between Kenneth Pike and Marvin Harris on Emics and Etics," in *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, ed. Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, and Marvin Harris (Sage, 1990).
- 35 Sebastian Deterding, "The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 521–43. The use of the "pyrrhic" here is both loaded and well-tailored to the community this work was published with; *Games and Culture* likely had a significant readership familiar with the detailed martial history of the term.

and continue studying games. Viewed as such, the resulting contraction of game studies represents not just a lack of fulfillment, but a regression away from the initial interdisciplinary call.³⁶

But—turning to a key question for this work—we must assess the interdisciplinarity of Gee’s work during this formative period; in doing so we must also ask if the borderline running between game studies and games and learning really did shift during Gee’s time? These questions matter: fields are socially constituted by the actors that characterize them, and characterizations of contraction, decline, and pyrrhic success will shift our understanding of the field that exists today.³⁷ A full answer to this broader question would entail examining each and every community of games research scholars that, at one point, brushed up against the field of game studies; even here, examining only one stretch of the border, I intend only to use the example of Gee to highlight cases where less has changed than we may have thought. In particular, I’d like to suggest that the case study examined above does not precisely match the trajectory characterized by Sebastian Deterding—a pyrrhic victory which led directly to the field’s ultimate contraction down to its present form.³⁸ Gee’s work instead represents a crucial early piece of boundary formation, with thematic coherence, goal alignment, and cross-citation engagement serving to solidify—rather than shift—the boundaries of the newly forming field of game studies.

36 For more about how this call directly affected the path of contemporary game scholars, see Adrienne Shaw’s chapter in this volume “Is it All Just Cultural Studies? One Scholar’s Journey into Media and Game Studies,” and Emma Vossen’s chapter in this volume, “Young Scholars, and Old Debates: Why the Ludology versus Narratology Debate Can Not Be Forgotten.”

37 Framings of decline are often bundled with advocacy for a new area of work, and in many cases it is difficult to argue this advocacy does not in some way motivate the initial framing. Aarseth’s and Juul’s initial framings of game studies—contrasted against the decline or collapse of the previous iteration of the field—is an illustrative example.

38 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

Key to my argument here are detailed notions of interdisciplinarity. Borrowing from Julie Klein,³⁹ we can assess interdisciplinarity in terms of scope — from narrow to broad⁴⁰ — and in terms of subtype — methodological, theoretical, instrumental, or critical.⁴¹ This broad typology is itself located between two other forms of disciplinary collaboration: multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity.⁴² Applying this to the two versions of Gee's monograph, we can clearly see the multidisciplinary approach at work: the addition of game studies sources and referents is not tied to substantive changes to any chapters,⁴³ but is largely added through new endnote sources providing extraneous background reading on topics already promoted and addressed from a highly disciplinary context. The motivated utopian approach also suggests a reach toward instrumental interdisciplinarity, where the inclusion of game studies literature is done not for the purpose of improving the methods or theories developed, but to support the instrumental purpose of legitimizing games research in general. The scope, in Klein's terms, remains as disciplinarily siloed as the original edition; the slightest move toward interdisciplinarity can be found in the expanded variety of games used as example objects of study,⁴⁴ but this is notably not followed by any work to integrate these

39 Julie Thompson Klein, *Interdisciplining Digital Humanities: Boundary Work in an Emerging Field* (University of Michigan Press, 2015).

40 With scope here measured as the relative compatibility of two disciplines' methods and knowledge structures.

41 Instrumental interdisciplinarity "typically aims at creating a product or meeting a designated pragmatic need" (Klein, *Interdisciplining Digital Humanities*, 18). This, I argue, most closely matches the context of Gee's early work.

42 According to Klein in *Interdisciplining Digital Humanities*, multidisciplinary is "characterized by the juxtaposition of separate disciplinary inputs" (15); on the opposite (and far more aspirational end), transdisciplinarity "transcends the narrow scope of disciplinary worldviews through an overarching synthesis" (20).

43 Save the last chapter, which is a special case that has been previously addressed in this article. *Ibid.*, 15.

44 With early game studies literature — such as Aarseth's call — locating much of the distinctiveness and legitimacy in multiplayer games, it's no surprise

examples. So, then, this snapshot of Gee's games scholarship suggests a shoring up process; a surface-level multidisciplinary engagement largely confined to (and motivated by) the instrumental goals of legitimizing the study of games and the game studies itself. To complete our analysis, though, it is necessary to turn from Gee's move toward game studies, and turn to how contemporary game studies work looks back at Gee.

The View from Inside: James Paul Gee in Contemporary Game Studies Venues

Examination of the manner in which recent scholarship — particularly in scholarly venues aligned with game studies — handles and references Gee's work is revealing. Within the journals *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*, and *Eludamos*, contemporary usage of and reference to Gee splits along what are essentially disciplinary lines:⁴⁵ scholars aligned with education, psychology, and informatics used Gee predominantly to characterize the novel affordances of the medium which motivate and inform the research;⁴⁶ some scholars integrated his work more fully by invoking his core terminology as a lens;⁴⁷ or other scholars drew

that Gee devotes special attention to updating his lone chapter on the subject.

- 45 The slight exceptions to this are the meta-analyses which take games scholarship or game studies as their objects of study — for these studies, Gee's scholarship is used solely for datapoints. For an example, see Paul Martin, "The Intellectual Structure of Game Research," *Game Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1801/articles/paul_martin.
- 46 Karen Schrier, "Designing Games for Moral Learning and Knowledge Building," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2019): 306–43.
- 47 Anthony Pellicone and June Ahn, "Building Worlds: A Connective Ethnography of Play in Minecraft," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2018): 440–58; Juho Kahila et al., "Children's Experiences on Learning the 21st-Century Skills with Digital Games," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 6 (2020): 685–706; and Vittorio Marone, "From Discussion Forum to Discursive Studio: Learning and Creativity in Design-Oriented Affinity Spaces," *Games and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2015): 81–105. Pellicone and Ahn use the concept of an affinity space as the organizing theoretical lens for ethnographic work, while Kahila et al. are more aligned with Gee's general

out subsets of his original principles to either integrate with more recent work in these scholars' home disciplines,⁴⁸ or to directly inform the design of serious games.⁴⁹ Scholarship drawing on a humanistic tradition tied to the field of game studies, however, incorporated Gee in extraordinarily limited ways. One notable example serves to clearly illustrate my point: Benjamin Abraham's recent work on digital games and climate change uses Gee's monograph as an entry point for an exploration of the player's role in the learning process; this by itself is quite ordinary. What is interesting is how Gee's work is framed in Abraham's larger argument — as considerably less utopian and grandiose than Gee's own contemporaries. Specifically, Abraham points out how Gee's acknowledgment of the active role taken by players "is an important caveat often critically lacking from some of the more evangelical theories of how games create meaning and can effect change. It underscores the individual's active engagement, while crucially leaving room for the mystifying operation of ideology."⁵⁰ Here, Gee's nod toward the agency of the player is highlighted largely in contrast to a larger body of work which elides and erases this question more than Gee himself does.

This framing is illustrative, and it thus provides the point on which this work pivots to its ultimate conclusion: that game studies as a field has moved so far from the futuristic, utopian,

focus on social aspects of play and learning evoked in community settings. Marone draws broadly upon Gee's work, but focuses on his concept of design grammar to characterize how players develop expertise — within affinity spaces — relevant to game design.

48 Stephen J. Aguilar, Caitlin Holman, and Barry J. Fishman, "Game-Inspired Design: Empirical Evidence in Support of Gameful Learning Environments," *Games and Culture* 13, no. 1 (2018): 44–70, and Margarida Romero, Mireia Usart, and Michela Ott, "Can Serious Games Contribute to Developing and Sustaining 21st Century Skills?," *Games and Culture* 10, no. 2 (2015): 148–77.

49 Dan Staines, Paul Formosa, and Malcolm Ryan, "Morality Play: A Model for Developing Games of Moral Expertise," *Games and Culture* 14, no. 4 (2019): 410–29.

50 Abraham, "Video Game Visions of Climate Futures," 80.

and evangelical framing undergirding Gee's early scholarship that his work can only be reconciled or made relevant when it is deliberately contrasted with his more emphatic and extreme contemporaries. I have already explored how Gee's alliance with game studies came to be — first via a shared desire to legitimize games as an object of study, and secondly (and distantly) via a shared desire to legitimize the field of game studies itself; leveraging Klein's invaluable grammar, we then see the nod to game studies (and its incorporation within the revised edition's works cited) for what it was: a form of instrumental multidisciplinary at best. With the distance between Gee and the field thus characterized, the arc of the field (relative to Gee and the broader domain he is a part of) comes into focus: the shared thematic vision of those early years, so critical to both strains of legitimating discourse, is no longer a required (or at least heavily incentivized) framing for both communities. Shifting to the present, we can see that one of these scholarly communities — game studies — has discarded this positioning, while games research largely has not. Thus, the gap. So, what does that mean for game studies? What does that say about the field in this current moment? Did the field really suffer a pyrrhic victory?

Pyrrhic Victories in Question: Observations on the History of Game Studies

The phrase “pyrrhic victory” largely serves to center loss: winning the battle while losing the war.⁵¹ Strategic failure and tactical success, hand in hand. This is a framing preserved in contemporary historical games, which procedurally signal its insufficiency via diminished reward.⁵² While this is a supremely

51 The martial framing also begs the question: Who (or what) was on the opposing side of that war? Some notion of underlying, superficial multidisciplinary seems to be the implied opponent here, but as I've argued, I don't think the early boundary work ever set the field up to achieve this with games and learning.

52 Games such as *Total War: Attila* (Creative Assembly, 2015) — an entry in the popular *Total War* series of (sometimes) historical games — feature

important framing for the mass loss of human life endemic to war, when applied to interdisciplinarity the importance of this framing becomes less readily apparent. In the context of our field, it centers the failure to accomplish the grandiose transdisciplinary goal rooted in game studies' foundational literature. I will agree: the failure to achieve this lofty goal — itself rooted in the utopian framing of the time — is worth investigating. But what if we also paid attention to what was gained? It is worth pausing and reflecting upon how the field's ability to discard this utopian vision has enabled the material and critical turns which have produced so much fruitful scholarship — scholarship which centers real, foundational issues tied to the study of games and people that play them — topics (and whole subjects) erased and elided in the field's earlier evangelical zeal.

What is clear here is that game studies, as a field, cannot — and should not try to — go back. If we take scholarly fields to be socially constructed entities, then our continued conversations on the past, present, and future of the field can serve as a critical fulcrum upon which the field itself is balanced. Rather than center a failure rooted in a fundamental divide, narrowing our focus and tipping us toward a distant and likely unobtainable goal, instead centering the instructive arc away from evangelical zeal and youthful possibility and toward the real and grounded concerns in our subject matter is something to be highlighted and celebrated. Efforts toward interdisciplinarity which do not center such considerations aren't interdisciplinary at all — they are merely a form of appeasement. We are not Justinian, forever gazing upon the lost center of our world — doomed, like Pyrrhus, to watch small successes only buy ultimate failure. What video games have taught us — what Gee's invaluable interactions with the field have taught us — is that game studies itself has learned and matured greatly, and that the distance between our field and other fields in games research is not the result of collective strategic oversight — a blunder we must forever atone for — but a result of that maturation itself.

decreased rewards from successful battles that are categorized as pyrrhic.

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Video or Digital? Exploring the Use of Terminology and Connected Approaches in the History of Game Studies

Jasper van Vught and Joris Veerbeek

The Inclusion and Exclusion Politics of Building an Academic Field

Establishing and growing an academic field is a highly competitive game. It is a game in which scholars with opposing approaches, thematic and object-specific interests, ideologies, and methodologies are continuously vying for academic legitimacy and thereby control of the field and its boundaries.¹ The game isn't necessarily fair (think about the Matheus effect²), nor is it solely a contest for the best verifiable and transparent intellectual output, as success also depends largely on social and political factors (e.g., career concerns; student, market, or politi-

1 Scott Frickel and Neil Gross, "A General Theory of Scientific/Intellectual Movements," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 2 (2005): 204–32.

2 The Matheus effect states that academic recognition (e.g., in terms of funding, prizes, citations, etc.) is skewed toward the more established scholars.

cal opportunities; available resources; a social infrastructure).³ Nevertheless, the “winners” of the game still determine the dominant discourse of the field and inadvertently marginalize scholarship that falls outside the scope of their interests.

Game studies as an academic field is no different. Emma Vossen describes in detail her personal experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the field and ties these into larger issues of toxicity in gaming culture.⁴ She shows how the academic boundary work that was done in the early days of game studies was not only focused on methodological and thematic differentiation (the proper way to study games) but also on differentiating the proper object of study (i.e., “real games”⁵ deserving of academic scrutiny). As such, certain scholars gain prestige and certain scholarship becomes legitimized while other scholars don’t feel like they belong in the field.⁶

Studying the outcomes of these field-building-games in terms of dominant topics therefore not only gives an overview of the historical trends, periods, and transitions of game studies. Such topics also provide insights into the inclusion and exclusion politics of the field, laying bare the topics that attract the most interest in game studies and identifying which topics fall by the wayside. This information can help to make our commu-

3 Frickel and Gross, “A General Theory,” and Donald C. Hambrick and Ming-Jer Chen, “New Academic Fields as Admittance-Seeking Social Movements: The Case of Strategic Management,” *The Academy of Management Review* 33, no. 1 (2008): 32–54.

4 Emma Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018).

5 Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games: What’s Legitimate and What’s Not in Contemporary Videogames* (MIT Press, 2019).

6 Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming” shows how game studies, as a kind of academic fandom, also appears to lay claims to what a proper player should be — portraying a certain level of gaming capital. This throws up additional hurdles especially for female scholars who have traditionally had more difficulties gaining this gaming capital.

nity more considerate of other approaches and potentially even reinvigorate the interdisciplinary ambitions of our field.⁷

In this chapter, we do just that. Through several computational text analyses, we aim to map the trends in game studies over the years in a corpus of all the research articles published from 1999 onwards from a variety of journals within the field.⁸ Our approach here is twofold. First, we use a keyword analysis on the corpus to identify in which contexts authors study and refer to “games.” The way we refer to games (e.g., digital, video, or computer) is of specific interest to us here since, following George Lakoff’s⁹ understanding of terms as radial categories, terms highlight certain characteristics of our objects of study and downplay others. As such, terms direct us in the games we study and what we study about them, and consequently play a big part in justifying certain approaches over others. Secondly, we build upon similar endeavors in other disciplines¹⁰ and employ Latent Dirichlet Allocation¹¹ to map the dissemination of different themes and approaches — or “topics” — within the field of game studies.

In what follows, we first position our analysis within earlier attempts at mapping the trends in game studies. We broadly identify three levels (macro-, meso-, and micro-) at which game studies has been mapped so far and show how our attempt can

7 Sebastian Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 521–43.

8 *Games and Culture*, *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, *Simulation & Gaming*, *Game Studies*, *Eludamos*, *ToDIGRA*, and *Loading...*

9 George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About the Mind* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

10 David Hall, Daniel Jurafsky, and Christopher D. Manning, “Studying the History of Ideas Using Topic Models,” *Proceedings of the 2008 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing* (Association for Computational Linguistics, 2008), 363–71, and Elizabeth Callaway et al., “The Push and Pull of Digital Humanities: Topic Modeling the “What is digital humanities?” Genre,” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (2020), <https://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/14/1/000450/000450.html>.

11 David M. Blei, Andrew Y. Ng, and Michael I. Jordan, “Latent Dirichlet Allocation,” *The Journal of Machine Learning Research* 3 (2003): 993–1022.

best be considered as a micro-mapping of concrete datasets in the “subcommunity of game studies”¹² to make more meso-level claims on the dominant themes over time. We then provide a detailed explanation of our methods used and argue for the benefit of the combinations of distant and close readings for our field. We finally present our findings: Starting off with an overview of prominent terms used over the years, we then delve into the themes that have seen increased or waning interest in this time, and finally connect those themes to the most prominent terms we use for our object of study.

Earlier Attempts at Mapping Game Studies

Over the years there have been many attempts at identifying historical trends in game studies. Roughly speaking, these attempts can be divided into three different levels: macro-, meso-, and micro-. At a macro-level we see claims about broader historical periods, generations, or epistemic shifts. Joost Raessens¹³ and Dyer-Witthorff and de Peuter¹⁴ for instance see game studies going through three distinct periods of scholarship: 1) *the pre-history of game studies*, or *the condemnatory phase*, that roughly started with the arrival of the first video games and was dominated by effect studies; 2) *game studies as an independent field*, or the *celebratory phase*, which started with Aarseth’s¹⁵ famous disciplinary flag planting in the first issue of *Game Studies* and was largely shaped around “defining the formal aspects” of games (i.e., rule systems, structures, and interactivity) while holding other approaches at bay; and finally, 3) *game studies as an interdisciplinary field*, or *the critical phase*, the period we

12 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

13 Joost Raessens, “Game Studies,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Klaus Bruhn Jensen et al. (Wiley, 2016).

14 Nick Dyer-Witthorff and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

15 Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001). <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

are currently in, which acknowledges that games are shaped by and shape their broader social, political, economic, and cultural contexts, and therefore require a broader range of approaches.

These macro-overviews are of course very useful in outlining the broader evolution of the field and are likely to ring familiar to those in the game studies community. However, they are also problematic for two reasons. First of all, these overviews are based on the emic experiences of those observing these shifts, and have no basis in concrete data (e.g., publications) other than some illustrative examples. This of course means that there is a great risk of confirmation bias in these overviews. Secondly, Karl Popper¹⁶ and different postmodernists have taught us to be wary of such grand or totalizing narratives because they oversimplify a much more chaotic and complex history of ideas, and they risk being employed as truth to support academic or even political ideologies (e.g., consciously or unconsciously marginalizing or ignoring strands of research because they don't fit the narrative of an academic contribution).

The meso-level mappings of the shifting thematic and methodological interests in game studies go some way toward tackling these problems. While there are still many anecdotal meso-level claims on dominant schools of thought,¹⁷ rhetorical frames of analyses,¹⁸ general approaches,¹⁹ or types of analysis in game studies,²⁰ we can also find mapping attempts informed by actual data. Melcer et al.²¹ do a keyword cluster analysis of the metadata of articles in 21 journals and 27 conferences in games studies

16 Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Routledge, 2011).

17 Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction* (Routledge, 2016).

18 Lars Konzack, "Rhetorics of Computer and Video Game Research," in *The Players' Realm: Studies on the Culture of Video Games and Gaming*, ed. J. Patrick Williams and Jonas Heide Smith (McFarland, 2007).

19 Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, "Introduction," in *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, ed. Joost Raessens and Jeffrey H. Goldstein (MIT Press, 2005).

20 Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca, *Understanding Video Games*.

21 Edward Melcer et al., "Games Research Today: Analyzing the Academic Landscape, 2000–2014," *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference*

to finally provide support for the more anecdotal understanding that game studies are separated into two schools of thought: one more technical and design-focused, one more reflexive and focused on aesthetic game qualities and play experiences. Paul Martin²² does a keyword co-occurrence analysis, a co-citation analysis, and a burst analysis to refine Melcer et al.'s observed division and show when key research themes emerged. Similarly, Carter et al.²³ manually code 178 papers from the *CHI proceedings* to come up with four "research paradigms" making up the game studies side of human-computer-interaction. And finally, Bragge and Storgard²⁴ text-mine search hits from the *ISI Web of Science* to map the dominant areas of science, countries, and institutions in which game-related research is done, as well as the most productive authors and the most used keywords.

These data-informed meso-level studies would indeed allow for a critical reflection on the actual inclusion and exclusion of certain topics or schools of thought, were it not for the fact that they often still lack in the level of detail or present game studies as a static rather than a dynamic landscape of different approaches. For example, Bragge and Storgard's²⁵ dataset spans so many different fields and has such broad focus points that their main conclusions do not become more detailed than that game research is mostly done in broad disciplines like the social sciences or health sciences using dominant keywords like video games, computer games, and adolescents. Similarly, the

on the Foundations of Digital Games (FDG, 2015), http://www.fdg2015.org/papers/fdg2015_paper_41.pdf.

22 Paul Martin, "The Intellectual Structure of Game Research," *Game Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018), https://gamestudies.org/1801/articles/paul_martin.

23 Marcus Carter et al., "Paradigms of Games Research in HCI: A Review of 10 Years of Research at CHI," in *CHI PLAY'14 First ACM SIGCHI Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 2014, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2658537.2658708>.

24 Johanna Bragge and Jan Storgårds, "Profiling Academic Research on Digital Games Using Text Mining Tools," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007: Situated Play*, 714–29.

25 Ibid.

corpora of Melcer et al.²⁶ and Martin²⁷ inevitably do not allow them to reflect on the nuances in different subcommunities and only lead to claims on very broad clusters of research (i.e., technological or reflexive, or effects and health versus education, social sciences/humanities, and technology). And while Carter et al.²⁸ do zoom in on two *HCI* conferences, they, like Mercer et al.,²⁹ still present the paradigms in this subcommunity as static rather than as dynamically evolving and vying for dominance over time.

The takeaway is that there is a benefit to zooming in, in terms of corpus selection (i.e., which journals to focus on) and specific focus points (i.e., what information to focus on). Here we draw inspiration from, and finally align our own research with, the more detailed micro-level mappings of game studies in terms of, for instance, most studied games and game genres, or scholar attitudes toward a specific topical game studies debate. For example, Coavoux, Boutet, and Zabban³⁰ focus their research on three core publication venues in game studies (*DiGRA*, *Games and Culture*, and *Game Studies*) and distill the referenced games, game genres, and dominant topics from the abstracts and meta-data of publications in these three venues. As a result, their findings are more fine-grained, showing how game studies have been focusing on a very limited scope of games. Elaborating on this study, Frome and Martin³¹ argue that looking at the whole articles published in *Games and Culture* and *Game Studies* from their first issues until September 2018 (instead of just the abstract and the metadata) paints a very different picture. While they acknowledge there is a core set

26 Melcer et al., "Game Research Today."

27 Martin, "The Intellectual Structure."

28 Carter et al., "Paradigms of Games Research."

29 Melcer et al., "Game Research Today."

30 Samuel Coavoux, Manuel Boutet, and Vinciane Zabban, "What We Know About Games: A Scientometric Approach to Game Studies in the 2000s," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 563–84.

31 Jonathan Frome and Paul Martin, "Describing the Game Studies Canon: A Game Citation Analysis," *Proceedings of DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*, <http://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/1112/1112>.

of cited games and game genres, they also see a trend toward more diversity in the corpus. Finally, Quandt et al.³² perform a survey study among members of three institutionalized communication studies communities focused on video games³³ to reveal common viewpoints on topical game studies debates. They show how the community is relatively homogeneous in its overall positive attitude toward the socially beneficial effects of games while having a more mixed attitude toward games' negative effects.

Focusing on a subset of the game research community is specifically important when studying the inclusion and exclusion politics of a field. Quandt et al.³⁴ note that appropriate scholarship in a field depends largely on the reference group that scholars relate to. So, the more focused and homogeneous the group is, the clearer the boundaries are for acceptable and desirable knowledge production. For that reason, we choose to focus our research on the evolution of dominant topics and use of terminology in the subcommunity of game studies within the umbrella interdisciplinary of game research.³⁵ As such, our research is best understood as a micro-level mapping attempt in terms of research focus and corpus selection, with a meso-level aim of distilling the evolution of themes in game studies to determine where the boundaries for appropriate scholarship are drawn.

Data

In order to gain insights into the way in which our terminology and choice of games may fit specific discourses and exclude others, we collected all research articles published from 1999

32 Thorsten Quandt et al., "Digital Games Research: A Survey Study on an Emerging Field and Its Prevalent Debates," *Journal of Communication* 65 (2015): 975–96.

33 DiGRA, ICA game studies interest group, and ECREA digital games working group.

34 Quandt et al., "Digital Games Research," 980.

35 Deterding, "The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies," 531.

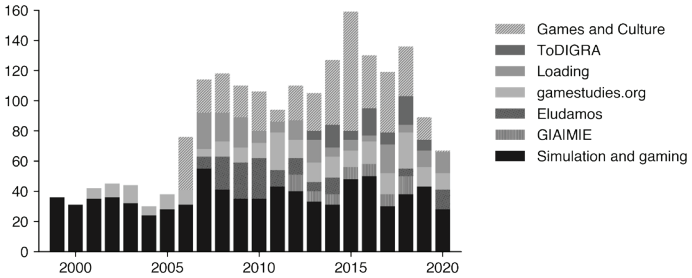


Fig. 8.1. The number of articles per year by journal.

Journal	Years	Articles	Tokens
Games and Culture	2006–2020	432	3,125,818
ToDIGRA	2013–2019	79	465,558
Loading	2007–2020	172	939,454
Game Studies	2001–2020	241	1,729,750
Eludamos	2007–2020	138	662,067
GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies	2012–2018	61	294,359
Simulation & Gaming	1999–2020	803	4,483,540

Table 8.1. Descriptive statistics of our corpus.

until the end of 2020³⁶ from seven journals within the field of game studies: *Games and Culture*, *ToDIGRA*, *Loading...*, *Game Studies*, *Eludamos*, *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, and *Simulation & Gaming*. These journals were selected based on their disciplinary alignment with game studies as a subdiscipline,³⁷ their more general focus on games and video games (as opposed to specific applications of games),³⁸ and their visibility and popularity within the community based on emic

³⁶ Most journals were collected between mid-September and early October, while the collection for *Loading...* and *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* was completed later, in mid-December.

³⁷ See “Games Research Journals,” Rachel Kowert, <https://rkowert.com/games-research-journals/>.

³⁸ See “Journals,” *The CUNY Games Network: A Center for Game-Based Learning*, <https://games.commonscs.cuny.edu/games-scholarship/journals/>.

experience. Computer science journals within the field of game studies were not included in our selection.

The full texts of the closed-access journals were collected using the so-called CrossRef Text and Data Mining API with a proxy of the university; the full texts of the open access journals were harvested through the web interface of those journals. In total, our collection consists of 1,926 articles, totaling to 11,700,546 tokens, which can be seen as a corpus of a relatively modest size. Table 8.1 shows *Simulation & Gaming* has the largest share in our collection; less than half (41%) of the articles in our corpus are published in this journal, followed by *Games and Culture*, which covers more than one fifth of our total collection. Figure 8.1 provides an overview of the number of articles for each year. Most articles in our collection are published after 2006, when new journals enter the field of game studies. After 2006, the number of articles in our collection is relatively stable, averaging about 100 articles, with 2015 as the year most articles in our collection are published. The two most recent years — 2019 and 2020 — contain relatively few articles, possibly due the fact that the website of the journals has yet not been updated to contain the full-texts of these articles.

Method

Our approach to mapping the field of game studies relies on two computational methods. First, to analyze the semantic associations of the word “game,” we look at its word neighbors (*collocations*): what words frequently occur in the context of “game” or “games”? We specifically analyze the words frequently appearing *left* of the word game. This means “computer game” and “digital game,” for example, are included in our analysis, while “game studies” and “game design” are not. We analyze the collocations using the so-called *lemmatized* versions of the articles, meaning that before running this analysis we first reduced all inflections to their root forms, so that all occurrences of “games” become “game,” “computers” becomes “computer,” and so forth. The Python package NLTK is used for analyzing the colloca-

of occurring within a certain topic, we could give this topic the label “education.” Documents, then, are represented as a distribution over *topics*. Figure 8.2 shows an example of a topic in our collection, where the size of the word indicates the probability of the word occurring in this topic. In this case, we gave this topic the label “Play experience.”

Our topic model is trained using MALLET through the wrapper in Gensim. We pre-processed our corpus using Spacy, and filtered out all the words that were not nouns, adjectives, or verbs. As LDA works worse on relatively long texts, we divided our articles into chunks of 1,000 tokens. Furthermore, LDA requires you to specify the number of topics. To decide on the number of topics, we ran multiple topic models (of 25, 50, 75, 100, and 200 topics), and hand-picked the number that resulted in the most sensible topics that were also indicative of distinctive approaches within the field of game studies, which turned out to be the model consisting of 50 topics.

We analyze the topic distributions outputted by our final model in multiple ways. First, we group the topics by the year of publication and look at the topics that either show the strongest decline or increase. Second, to analyze the relationship between terminology and themes, we compute the correlation of the topic proportions with the normalized frequencies of “video game,” “digital game,” and “computer game.” These three terms were chosen based on their frequency within the corpus.

While the foundation of our analysis is computational and quantitative, we do combine these techniques with a manual close reading as a means to further interpret and contextualize the results obtained by distant reading; as a way to assess the validity of results obtained using topic modeling.³⁹ More specifically, we try to add an in-depth layer to our analysis by not only looking at *which* topics increase or decrease, but also *what* specific articles are linked to them. This means that for each

39 Els Stronks, “De afstand tussen close en distant: Methoden en vraagstellingen in computationeel letterkundig onderzoek,” *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde* 129, no. 4 (2014): 205–14.

topic that plays an important role in our analysis, we look at the articles in which the proportion of that topic is highest. We then manually consult these articles to see not only *which* topics are discussed in the corpus, but also *how* these topics are discussed in the articles.

Some Expectations about Terminology Use

Over the years, the field of game studies has shown little interest in specific nomenclature, with authors using video games, computer games, digital games, and even games simpliciter interchangeably.⁴⁰ In general, the choice of label is rarely reflected upon, and when it is, the issue is often discarded as unimportant for a definition of the object of study because the labels in use cannot meaningfully point us to certain (essential) features.⁴¹

However, terms also help us understand a concept or object without necessarily having to characterize the things inherent to that concept or object.⁴² Drawing from Lakoff's⁴³ work in cognitive linguistics, we argue that lexical items like "video games" or "digital games" are radial categories that represent a set of related meanings which are conventionally structured "with respect to a composite prototype."⁴⁴ This means that we always understand our objects of study in relationship to, and often in

40 Chris Crawford, "Computer Games Versus Videogames," *The Journal of Computer Game Design* 5, no. 1 (1991); Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf, eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (Routledge, 2008), 6–8; and Espen Aarseth, "Just Games," *Game Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017), <https://gamestudies.org/2023/articles/justgames>.

41 Grant Tavinor, "The Definition of Videogames Revisited," paper presented at *The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*, Oslo, 2009, and Veli-Matti Karhulahti, "Defining the Videogame," *Game Studies* 15, no. 2 (2015), <https://gamestudies.org/1502/articles/karhulahti>.

42 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 115–25.

43 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.

44 Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 328.

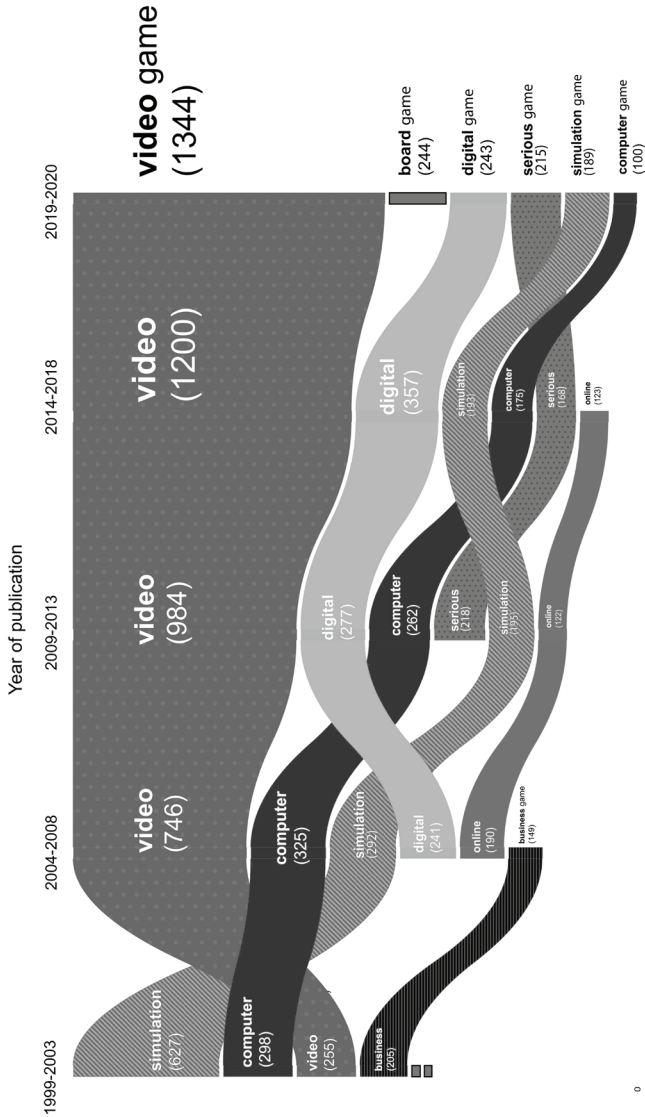


Fig. 8.3. The words that are used most before “game” or “games”; the number between brackets shows the relative frequency of the collocate per 1 million words.

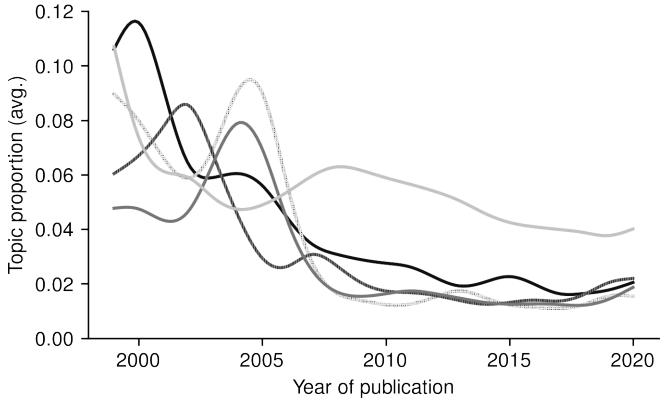


Fig. 8.4. Topics that are decreasing over the years.

- **Simulation modelling**
simulation model system decision process
- **General words**
people time work thing play
- **Business games**
business company market product simulation
- **Games in the classroom**
student simulation class teacher school
- **Team building games**
team project member organization exercise

similarity with, a core prototype, a kind of cognitive reference point which changes when our terminology changes.⁴⁵

Translating this to our field, we expect that terms can mark off a center of more prototypical games and approaches from a margin of games and approaches that are viewed as less representative of that category. For example, when “digital game” highlights the difference from, but also ancestry in non-digital or analog games (i.e., digital chess versus analog chess), we expect that research focusing on the transmedial characteristics of games will likely be more central to the study of digital games. Similarly, because the prefix video emphasizes the visual output of the medium, we expect research focusing on the representational characteristics of games to be more central when the research explicitly targets “video games.”

45 Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 41–42.

Topic label	Topic words	r
Game violence	video violence violent effect medium	0.33
Game Text Analysis	video videogame study work text	0.23
Console and arcade	video console nintendo platform arcade	0.19
Embodiment	body space experience world play	0.14
Game narrative	narrative story film medium character	0.12
Games in the household	child play adult video activity	0.10
Scholarship 2	press games http university york	0.10
Gamer culture	social practice culture cultural community	0.08
Queer studies	queer mass effect shepard sexuality	0.08
Gender studies	woman female gender male girl	0.08

Table 8.2. The topics that significantly correlate (after applying bonferroni correction) with the normalized frequency of “video game(s).”

Topic label	Topic words	r
Platform technology	digital computer technology medium gaming	0.34
Online social play	social play gamer online player	0.14
Scholarship 3	study research analysis datum researcher	0.13
Game Text Analysis	video videogame study work text	0.13
Gamer culture	social practice culture cultural community	0.11
Scholarship 2	press games http university york	0.08
Games in the household	child play adult video activity	0.08

Table 8.3. The topics that significantly correlate (after applying bonferroni correction for multiple testing) with the normalized frequency of “digital game(s).”

Topic label	Topic words	r
Platform technology	digital computer technology medium gaming	0.27
Game Text Analysis	video videogame study work text	0.22
Scholarship 2	press games http university york	0.17
Theory	term concept case process system	0.12
Embodiment	body space experience world play	0.09

Table 8.4. The topics that significantly correlate (after applying bonferroni correction) with the normalized frequency of “computer game(s).”

These were the types of expectations we wanted to put to the test when mapping the prominent terms used over the years. To get there, we first created an overview of prominent terms used per four-year period, starting in 1999 and ending in 2020 (see fig. 8.3), and also mapped these terms per journal to make sure we were accounting for possible editorial decisions on terminology use.⁴⁶ We then calculated which topics appear to be studied less and less in our field (see fig. 8.4) and which topics have seen a growing interest (see fig. 8.5). Finally, we combined topics with terminology use to test our hypothesis that the terms we use for our object of study also invite and justify specific types of scholarship (see ts. 8.2, 8.3, and 8.4).

Terminology Use over the Years

Our results show that, after an initial dominance of “simulation game” in the early days of the journal *Simulation & Gaming*, “video game” consistently tops the charts from the 2004–2008 period onwards, and its popularity only increases over the years (see the relative frequency in fig. 8.3). This dominance is consistent in all seven journals. Here, the initial rise of the term does not appear to be grounded in any deliberate academic attempt to delineate a specific category of objects (e.g., console games or games with visual output) but instead just aligns with dominant colloquial use.⁴⁷ As such, the term is likely to be in use as a broad nominal category describing a wide range of digitally mediated ludic objects which would also have helped its increasing use in the community. On top of that, we interpret this growing use of

46 In the end, we found very little difference per journal with the exception that “simulation game,” while in decline relatively speaking, has a rather consistent and persistent use in *Simulation & Gaming* in an absolute sense. Furthermore, “serious game,” which starts to appear from around 2009 onwards, also features most prominently in *Simulation & Gaming*. This makes sense because this journal is also the most multi-disciplinary one in our corpus, and the one most focused on applying games and simulations to other fields such as education, business, or medicine.

47 Tavinor, “The Definition of Videogames Revisited.”

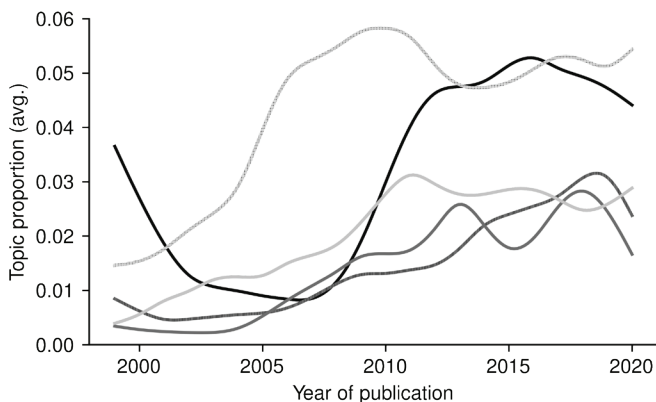


Fig. 8.5. Topics that are increasing over the years.

- Scholarship**
research author university article publication
- Gameplay**
player play gameplay experience level
- Storyworlds**
world life narrative choice bioshock
- Production studies**
industry production developer work indie
- Game Text Analysis**
video videogame study work text

“video games” as an example of path dependence.⁴⁸ This means that once specific vocabulary is in place in an academic discipline, that vocabulary persists due to a continuous affirmation of the terms, making it increasingly difficult to opt for new terminology.

This would also explain why the use of “computer game” has consistently been declining over the years. While computer game has certainly been in use as a more generic term, its historical use also has the term implicitly point to games played on a PC.⁴⁹ Given its historical use, it could well be that that implicit meaning becomes more notable once the more generic use of the term declines in favor of another generic term. In other

48 Coavoux, Boutet, and Zabban, “What We Know.”

49 Crawford, “Computer Games Versus Videogames.”

words, once the term “video game” comes to stand for the entire category of computerized ludic objects, using the term computer game must imply a deliberate decision to distinguish the object of study from the term most frequently used.

We also see the term “digital game” enter academic terminology from the 2004–2008 period onwards and take a prominent spot in the 2009–2013 and 2014–2018 periods. This increase appears to correlate with the foundation of the *Digital Game Research Association* in 2003 and its establishment as one of the core game studies venues in the years thereafter. Here, the term digital also seems to be a deliberate attempt at distinguishing the field’s object of study from analog games while at the same time carving out an inclusive field, open to the study of games on all types of digital platforms (console or PC). Interestingly, we see that “digital game” makes way for “board game” as the second most common term in the last year (2020) which implies that the game studies community is becoming more accepting of studies of analog games as opposed to just digital games.⁵⁰

Topics: The Rise and Fall of Prominent Themes

When switching our focus to the results of our topic analysis, we can see there is a clear decrease in publications on applied games of all sorts and sizes (see fig. 8.4) which also aligns with the decreasing use of terminology like “simulation game” (see fig. 8.3). For example, there is a decrease in the topic we have identified as “simulation modeling” which covers publications that deal with the complexities in simulating various real-world sociotechnical and economic processes. Similarly, there is clearly a waning interest in the topics we identified as “business games” and “team building games.” And finally, we also see a decrease in publications on “games in the classroom.”

We provide two explanations of the decreasing publications on these topics. First of all, it could be that publications on the application of games in business, team building, or classrooms

⁵⁰ Aarseth, “Just Games.”

still persist to some extent, but that authors are opting for different terminology. This appears to be supported by a sharp increase in the topic of “gamification” from 2010 onwards. Secondly, it appears that, as Sebastian Deterding argues, game studies are indeed experiencing an exodus of research that looks at games as instrumental to achieving some other (more noteworthy) cause.⁵¹ While the research still persists to some extent in *Simulation & Gaming*, overall, it appears to be flocking to other venues such as those focused on human computer interaction.⁵² As such Deterding’s argument about game studies becoming a subcommunity of humanities scholars, design scholars, and qualitative social scientists rings true here.⁵³ And, given that game scholars in the humanities have often criticized the application of games or game design elements in non-game contexts,⁵⁴ it seems logical that research into applied games is making way for research that is more focused on the study of intrinsic characteristics and values of game and play phenomena.

When looking at the increasing topics over the years (see fig. 8.5), we can make a couple of interesting observations. On the one hand, the gradually increasing interest in studying games as texts (“game text analysis”) seems to again confirm Deterding’s claim that game studies are increasingly becoming homogenous in their epistemological and methodological focus on the formal characteristics of games. On the other hand, the increased

51 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

52 See Carter et al., “Paradigms of Games Research,” who find operative or instrumental game research as one of the four research paradigms in Human–Computer Interaction (HCI).

53 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

54 Ian Bogost, “Persuasive Games: Exploitationware,” *Game Developer*, May 3, 2011, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/persuasive-games-exploitationware>; Ian Bogost, “Why Gamification is Bullshit,” in *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, ed. Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding (MIT Press, 2014); Daphne Dragona, “Counter-Gamification: Emerging Tactics and Practices against the Rule of Numbers,” in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs et al. (meson press, 2014); and Niklas Schrape, “Gamification and Governmentality,” in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs et al. (meson press, 2014).

publications on “gameplay” also suggest that the focus on games is becoming more supplemented with research into the experience of play or at least the increasing acknowledgement that games are sociocultural phenomena which can only be understood through the creative appropriative process of play.⁵⁵

At first, this appears to highlight an interesting dichotomy in game studies between those studying games and those studying players.⁵⁶ However, once we start looking into the articles in which the proportion of these topic words are the highest, such a clear distinction is hard to uphold. While certain publications that deal with the topic of gameplay definitely adopt a more player-centric approach to games,⁵⁷ others align more with a game-centric approach,⁵⁸ or even a game design approach.⁵⁹ This immediately shows the danger of relying completely on computational quantitative methods. While the topic model can pinpoint which word combinations occur often in the corpus, it cannot see in which contexts these topics are discussed. Here, it shows that the gameplay topic still covers too many different subtopics for us to be able to make any substantive claims on the increase of player studies in the field.

What we can be more certain about is the increasing interest in “storyworlds” and the increase of “production studies” approaches in our field, which suggests that, despite game stud-

55 Thomas M. Malaby, “Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games,” *Games and Culture* 2, no. 2 (2007): 95–113, and Miguel Sicart, “Against Procedurality,” *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011), https://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap.

56 Ian Bogost, “Videogames are a Mess,” *Ian Bogost*, September 3, 2009, http://bogost.com/writing/videogames_are_a_mess/.

57 Felan Parker, “The Significance of Jeep Tag: On Player-Imposed Rules in Video Games,” *Loading...* 2, no. 3 (2008), <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/44>, and Drew Davidson, “The Performance of Gameplay: Developing a Ludoliteracy,” *Eludamos* 5, no. 1 (2011): 1–3.

58 Alison Gazzard, “Unlocking the Gameworld: The Rewards of Space and Time in Videogames,” *Game Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011), https://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/gazzard_alison.

59 Eric Walsh, “Alive: A Case Study of the Design of an AI Conversation Simulator,” *Eludamos* 10, no. 1 (2020): 161–81.

ies becoming a more focused homogeneous discipline,⁶⁰ that discipline is still broadening its interest (also supported by the appearance of “board game” as one of the prominent recent keywords). The steady rise of research focused on “storyworlds” is interesting because that suggests that early attempts at discarding narratological research into games⁶¹ have been unsuccessful, and that there is increasing room for scholars interested in this topic.⁶² The increase of production studies publications also shows a broadening of the scope of research in our field. This focus aligns with observations of a material turn in game studies⁶³ in which there is increased attention for the political economy of games.⁶⁴

Topics and Terminology: Video Stands for Narrative, Queer, and Gender

Once we combine the topics with the terminology, a clear distinction between “video game” and “digital game” emerges. “Video game” correlates most significantly with the topics “game violence” and “game text analysis” (see t. 8.2), suggesting that the term “video game” is most prominently used in social scientific studies into game effects as well as humanist approaches to games as texts. On the other hand, “digital game” correlates most

60 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

61 Markku Eskelinen, “The Gaming Situation,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), and Espen Aarseth, “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation,” in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, 2004).

62 One might expect that this increased focus on “storyworlds” is further confirmed by the increasing interest in a textual analysis of games (“game text analysis”) given a possible overlap between these topics. However, our findings make it hard to support such a claim given the more ambiguous focus of the “game text analysis” topic (see the discussion of the topic “game text analysis” below, in this section).

63 Thomas H. Apperley and Darshana Jayemane, “Game Studies’ Material Turn,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2012): 5–26.

64 David B. Nieborg, and Joke Hermes, “What Is Game Studies Anyway?,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 131–47.

significantly with “platform technology” and “online social play” (t. 8.3), suggesting an ever so slight shift toward more platform- and technology-focused research. Finally, “computer game” correlates most significantly with “platform technology” and “game text analysis” (t. 8.4), suggesting that the term is used for both games as texts and games as technology.

Although the difference here is minimal, the distinction does become clearer once we start looking down the list of correlated topics. Of the ten topics under “video games,” four are (partly) focused on representational elements of games (“game text analysis,” “game narrative,” “queer studies,” and “gender studies”) while we only find “game text analysis” (the broadest and most ambiguous topic) one under “digital game” and “computer game.” While the correlation between some of these topics (“queer studies,” and “gender studies”) and the term “video game” is very weak, it is telling that these topics do not feature in the list of correlated topics under “digital game” or “computer game.” Furthermore, the one topic focused on the representational layer of games that does correlate with “digital game” and “computer game” (“game text analysis”) is still rather broad and ambiguous, constituting articles with (methodological approaches to) a broader conceptualization of video games as text (i.e., representation as well as ludic operation) as well as book reviews.

As noted before, we expected that the specific terms we use for our object of study would implicitly mark off a center of more justified topics of analysis from other topics that are less fitting for the term. Here, our expectations have been partly confirmed. Although the individual correlations are weak, we do see how the term “video game” invites scholarship on a wide variety of representational elements of games much more so than the terms “digital game” and “computer game” do. Similarly, “computer game” and “digital game” appear to invite scholarship that is more focused on the technological and medium-specific aspects of games, exemplified by Aarseth’s⁶⁵

65 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”

famous anti-narrative editorial which falls under the topic of “platform technology. However, a closer look at that topic also reveals a variety of other articles less representative of such a technology-specific approach, meaning that that correlation becomes more questionable.

Conclusion: Warning for the Pyrrhic Victory of Establishing an Homogenous Academic Field

In his provoking article “Against Game Studies,” Alex Gekker⁶⁶ gives various reasons why he’s become somewhat disillusioned with the field. He specifically points at some persistent binaries in the field⁶⁷ which gave way to limiting ontologies (on what constitutes a game), epistemologies (on what counts as valid knowledge of games), and methodologies (on how to study games). As he notes, these “ologies” can “regrettably function as a disciplining tool for who is — or is not — part of the field or which scholarship is accepted.”⁶⁸ According to Gekker,⁶⁹ it’s game studies’ navel-gazing that is to blame here. With its uniform focus⁷⁰ on studying the cultural meanings of an exclusionary canon of games,⁷¹ the field becomes increasingly unwelcoming to scholars that do not fit this focused perspective or do not have the proper gaming or game studies capital.⁷² This is something that is indeed painfully supported by Vossen’s auto-ethnographic account of being a female game scholar.⁷³

All of this serves as a warning for the pyrrhic victory of establishing game studies as a uniform subcommunity.⁷⁴ Although our results show a silver lining in an increasing diversity of stud-

66 Alex Gekker, “Against Game Studies,” *Media and Communication* 9, no. 1 (2021): 73–83.

67 Such as game/player, ludology/narratology, intent/meaning.

68 Gekker, “Against Game Studies,” 76.

69 Gekker, “Against Game Studies.”

70 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

71 Frome and Martin, “Describing the Game Studies Canon.”

72 Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming.”

73 Ibid.

74 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

ied topics in our field, in terms of increased attention for political economic issues, board games, and storyworlds, we still need to be more inclusive in the games we study, the authors we cite, and the approaches we take if we want to avoid becoming a network of tastemakers erecting stifling walls against “colonising attempts”⁷⁵ from other disciplines. According to our findings, this warning should also extend to our use of terminology.

As we’ve shown, the term “video game” is the more inclusive term, used in studies on games as technology as well as texts, and the broader context of play in terms of play experiences, platforms, and political economy. Especially the focus on the representational aspects of games is striking, which of course aligns with the visual emphasis of the prefix “video.” Whether this is a conscious decision on behalf of the game scholars writing about these issues is unknown. However, the sheer fact that the correlations with many of these representational elements (e.g., “queer studies,” “gender studies”) cannot be found for “digital game” or “computer game” does show that terms are not just hollow descriptive categories but point to a cognitive reference point of more fitting games and approaches, whether we’re aware of them or not.

While it is tempting to pin down the term “digital game” as the villain of the piece, focusing research on games as technology in line with the anti-theory of early ludologists,⁷⁶ our findings do not support that. The topic of “platform technology,” that “digital game” (and “computer game”) correlates with most, is simply too broad for such a claim.

We acknowledge of course that our study has some limitations. First of all, the articles in our collection are limited to the most recent decade, whereas, authors like Raessens⁷⁷ and Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter⁷⁸ (among others) have argued that the field has gone through significant changes before the start of

75 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”

76 Eskelinen, “The Gaming Situation.”

77 Raessens, “Game Studies.”

78 Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, *Games of Empire*.

this decade. Furthermore, monographs and other types of academic books aren't included in our selection, while these types of publications could be particularly important for highlighting new directions and approaches. In this context, future research could focus on a comparison between the approaches and topics discussed in books compared to academic articles. Methodologically, we employed LDA topic modeling which is, as we argued, a fruitful method to analyze what themes are frequently discussed within a certain collection of texts, but doesn't really (quantitatively) tell you *how* these themes or topics are discussed. Combining LDA with classification methods like stance detection could be a fruitful direction to explore in order to be able to structurally analyze what approaches are discussed in an affirmative or negotiated manner.

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Of Parents and Siblings, Disciplines and Debates: Game Studies as Media Culture Studies and the Possibility of Schools of Thought

Tobias Unterhuber

As often repeated, game studies is still a very young academic field. While early video game research, like Mary Ann Buckles's dissertation,¹ dates to the 1980s, research output intensified in the late 1990s.² Janet H. Murray's 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*³ presents one central starting point. But other, often forgotten inquiries into the field of games from the 1990s show that the interest in games research was already there. As an example, Florian Rötzer organized a conference on *Künstliche Spiele* (Arti-

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- 1 Mary Ann Buckles, "Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame 'Adventure'" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1985).
 - 2 Gundolf S. Freyermuth, *Games | Game Design | Game Studies: Eine Einführung* (transcript, 2015), 23, and Jaakko Stenros and Annakaisa Kultima, "On the Expanding Ludosphere," *Simulation & Gaming* 49, no. 3 (2018): 341.
 - 3 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1997).

ficial Games)⁴ in 1993 and published the conference proceedings under the title *Schöne neue Welten? Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Spielkultur*⁵ (*Brave New Worlds? Towards a New Culture of Game and Play*) in 1995. Both included a remarkable cast of researchers, among others Siegfried J. Schmidt, Sybille Krämer, Lev Manovich, Julian Nida-Rümelin, Masuyama, Bernd Guggenberger, Herbert W. Franke, and Scott Fisher. Espen Aarseth's "Year One" of game studies⁶ was not actually year one.⁷ However, he declared it that nonetheless. Aarseth's project of game studies as well as the ludology versus narratology debate were attempts to emancipate games research from its most obvious parental disciplines (e.g., literary and media studies). However, these disciplines were and are not as homogenous as Aarseth described. One example is the *Medienkulturwissenschaft* (media culture studies) paradigm formed in the late 1990s. Under this paradigm, game and literary studies would be better understood as siblings, not parents and children. Despite the effort to present game studies as something new, the field is informed by its own history and by the structures and debates of its parental or sibling disciplines. The field's structure, the categorization of research, and how researchers position themselves relative to other researchers are all informed by this family of fields. In addition, that family informs the organization of research groups on a micro-level. Hence this chapter asks, if there is common ground in smaller research groups which solidified into schools of thought — in the sense of a research approach shared and taught by a recognizable group of people, like reception theory of the Konstanz school in literary studies, or the Austrian schools of economics. Is it even possible for game studies to form such schools of thought? To show how the broader aspects

4 All translations of German terms or quotes are my own.

5 Florian Rötzer, ed., *Schöne neue Welten? Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Spielkultur* (Klaus Boer, 1995).

6 Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

7 Amanda Phillips, "Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field," *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 12–36.

of structures are connected and inform academic praxis, in this chapter I discuss the research group “Game Studies & Cultural Studies Colloquium Munich,” which I have been a part of, and whether it can be considered a school of thought. First, I need to recapitulate how the project of game studies started and how it positioned itself in relation to its parental disciplines, so that we can understand the structures and debates that gave rise to game studies.

The Specter of Game Studies, or: How to Wish a Field into Being

Game studies started out with two (per)formative acts of foundation:⁸ the declaration of a “year one,” and the ludology versus narratology debate. While Aarseth backed his claim up with the organization of international conferences and the implementation of graduate programs, his whole editorial can be better understood as a perlocutionary act. By declaring it, he was “[c]reating a New Discipline.”⁹ But establishing something new as new is based on the differentiation between the new and emerging and the old and established.

Using the problematic metaphor of “colonizers,” as he already did in *Cybertext*,¹⁰ he framed the established disciplines engaged in video game research as an invading and overpowering force to be fought back. Simultaneously, he claimed that no research had happened in these fields.¹¹ Aarseth here creates an often-overlooked paradox: Supposedly, established disciplines try to annex games but at the same time, they have not done any research.¹²

8 Tobias Unterhuber, “A Magic Dwells in Each Beginning? Game Studies, Its Rhetoric Rituals and The Myth of Being a Young Field,” in *The Magic of Games*, ed. Natalie Denk et al. (Donau-Universität Krems, 2022).

9 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”

10 Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 18.

11 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”

12 Aarseth, for instance, cites Buckles’s dissertation on multiple occasions in *Cybertext*.

Aarseth is not interested in an objective description of the situation of games research; research and its contents come second to the questions of institutionalization and funding. Game studies began as a field not because of common research interests and goals, but because researchers wanted their own place to do such research in the academic and university structures.

However, this was only the initial trick; the second followed in the form of the ludology versus narratology debate, which will continue to haunt introductory chapters and paragraphs of game studies books for years to come.¹³ Gonzalo Frasca,¹⁴ Jesper Juul,¹⁵ and Aarseth proposed this dichotomy with the same goal in mind: establishing a new field and refuting research from outside this field. Therefore they declared Murray's position as "narrativism"¹⁶ or a "Story-Game Ideology"¹⁷ while misinterpreting or misrepresenting it as an attempt to make games a "colony" of narrative critique.¹⁸ The debate has never been about different research perspectives. It was an extension of the quest to create a new field. Again, it is an act of foundation, of creating a field through distinction even if these distinctions are more invented than real or, as Murray commented, "a phantom of their own creation."¹⁹ This performative act has to be con-

13 See Emma Vossen's contribution to this volume.

14 Gonzalo Frasca, "Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and Differences between (Video)Games and Narrative," *Ludology.org*, 1999, <https://ludology.typepad.com/weblog/articles/ludology.htm>.

15 Jesper Juul, "Game Telling Stories? — A Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>.

16 Espen Aarseth, "Espen Aarseth Responds," *Electronic Book Review*, May 1, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/espen-aarseth-responds/>.

17 Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble," *Electronic Book Review*, May 21, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/genre-trouble/>.

18 Janet H. Murray, "Janet Murray Responds in Turn," *Electronic Book Review*, May 2, 2004, <http://electronicbookreview.com/essay/janet-murray-responds-in-turn/>.

19 Janet H. Murray, "The Last Word on Ludology v Narratology in Game Studies (2005)," *Inventing the Medium*, June 28, 2013, <https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/>.

stantly performed, which is one of the reasons why game studies must continuously refer to the debate. The debate is game studies' own specter.

To come back to the truism of game studies as a young field: All this effort aims to emancipate the field from its parents. But did it work? And what has that to do with the possibility of schools of thought in game studies?

Parents or Siblings? Media Culture Studies, Literary Studies, and Game Studies

Game studies programs are rare and so games research is still situated in the broader contexts of media, literary, ethnological, historiographical, or sociological institutions while using the self-description of game studies. On the one hand, academia is always slow to change, and creating a new field needs more than performative acts. The power to enact often lies with established fields and their biases about games also stand in the way. With budget cuts in the humanities, the creation of new departments or institutes is, with the exception of digital humanities initiatives, quite rare in general. On the other hand, I argue this situation is caused by the structure of the parental fields of game studies themselves, especially in the context of literary studies.

Aarseth, Juul, and others frame more established disciplines as homogenous approaches, especially in the case of narratology, which for them can be read as a short hand for media and literary studies interchangeably. Newer critiques of game studies as a field with a too narrow approach to its research object argue similarly. Sebastian Deterding for example sees the humanities-led approach to games as an impediment to true trans-disciplinary research in game studies.²⁰ Likewise, Alex Gekker describes game studies as "rather monolithic [...], with a strong

20 Sebastian Deterding, "The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 521–43.

emphasis on social science and humanities scholarship”.²¹ The problem with such critiques of game studies as a humanities discipline is they are lopsided, since humanities are a vast collection of distinctive ideas and not a narrow approach. What concrete commonalities do different disciplines like literary studies, philosophy, theology, geography, linguistics, study of religions, history, and area studies share? A multitude of different disciplines forms the loose metastructure of the humanities. Again, within each of these disciplines are multitudes of ideas and approaches. As Frans Mäyrä and Olli Sotamaa state, if we talk about game studies, “we are inevitably talking in plural.”²² Arguing that a humanities-informed approach is a narrow approach presumes a homogeneity that just does not exist. Examining the heterogeneity of the humanities might give us a better understanding of how game studies structures are informed by their parental disciplines and how these structures inform the kind of research scholars do. These structures include not only the macro-structure of disciplines but also the micro-structure of research groups and schools of thought.

Taking a closer look at Aarseth’s “colonizers,” literary studies, makes any kind of homogeneity even inside a field quite improbable. Literary studies, which in itself is actually a plethora of different but connected fields (German, English, French Literature, Comparative Literature, and so on) like others are shaped by *Methodenpluralismus* (a methodological and theoretical pluralism), “as there is little reason for an exclusive apodictic commitment to one method.”²³ However, these fields are not only composed of broad categories of frameworks like philology versus cultural studies but also a variety of different approaches:

21 Alex Gekker, “Against Game Studies,” *Media and Communication* 9, no. 1 (2021): 74.

22 Frans Mäyrä and Olli Sotamaa, “Need for Perspective: Introducing the Special Issue ‘Reflecting and Evaluating Game Studies,’” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 496.

23 Sabina Becker, “Literaturwissenschaftliche Methoden und Theorien,” in *Grundkurs Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Sabina Becker, Christian Hummel, and Gabriele Sander (Reclam, 2006), 221.

psychoanalytical, feminist, gender and queer studies, disability studies, critical race studies, postcolonial, discourse analytical, structuralist, formalist, poststructuralist, positivist, hermeneutic, socio-historical, systems-theoretic, and so on. Within and between these approaches, schools of thought are formed, often named after their “birthplaces” such as the Frankfurt school in philosophy, the Konstanz school in literary studies, or the Birmingham school in cultural studies. A *Methodenstreit* (method dispute) — sometimes as a cold, sometimes as a hot war — often accompanies this pluralism. Game studies was established in the midst of not only an ongoing method dispute but also a bigger factional dispute in literary studies and related fields. The question, especially among scholars of modern German literature, was twofold: How do we understand literature as a subject, especially in the context of the contemporary media system,²⁴ and how do we approach it? The two major issues were: Should we understand literary studies as a cultural studies approach, and should we understand literature as a medium.²⁵ The cultural turn and the medial turn²⁶ happened contemporaneously. This was especially important as, in German-speaking academia, media studies might be its own field but it often is situated within German departments. In this context, the idea of *Medienkulturwissenschaft*²⁷ formed in opposition to a more

24 Jörg Schönert, “Literaturwissenschaft – Kulturwissenschaft – Medienwissenschaft: Probleme der Wissenschaftsentwicklung,” in *Literaturwissenschaft: Kulturwissenschaft: Positionen, Themen, Perspektiven*, ed. Renate Glaser and Matthias Luserke (Westdeutscher Verlag, 1996), 196.

25 Oliver Jahraus, *Literatur als Medium: Sinnkonstitution und Subjekterfahrung zwischen Bewußtsein und Kommunikation* (Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2003).

26 Christoph Reinfandt, “Literatur als Medium,” in *Grenzen der Literatur: Zu Begriff und Phänomen des Literarischen*, ed. Simone Winko, Fotis Jannidis, and Gerhard Lauer (De Gruyter, 2009), 161.

27 I chose the translation “media culture studies” to emphasize that *Medienkulturwissenschaft* is not just a variant of cultural studies. In German there is not only a difference between *Kulturwissenschaft* (singular) and *Kulturwissenschaften* (plural), even though the differentiation is quite vague. See Silvia Serena Tschopp, “Kulturwissenschaft versus Kulturwissenschaften?,”

traditional understanding of the discipline. A philological understanding of literary studies fought these changes, fearing that literary studies would lose its genuine subject area, literature.²⁸ The debate brought to light how (and if) literary studies understood itself as an academic discipline. Advocates of media culture studies proposed to understand literary studies as a part of media culture studies “which uses interdisciplinarity, intermediality, interculturality and internationality as landmarks”²⁹ Even if opposed, the concept of media culture studies and the understanding of literature as a medium changed the relationship between literary studies and media studies into a reciprocal one. As Oliver Jahraus wrote, it did not only give literary theory a “media theoretical substantiation” but also a “literary theory extension of media theory”.³⁰

Such systematic determinations of the relationship between literature and medium/media on the basis of a conceptual notion of media have also permanently changed the relationship between literary studies and media studies. From a relationship of competition and demarcation, of hostile takeover and dissolution, a genuine contribution of literary studies to media studies has emerged.³¹

IASL 36, no. 2 (2011): 401–7. In addition, neither term is identical to the English term “cultural studies.” See Lutz Musner, “Kulturwissenschaften und Cultural Studies: Zwei ungleiche Geschwister?,” *KulturPoetik* 1, no. 2 (2001): 261–71. Moreover, a compound word in German can express different relations between its elements. Therefore, *Medienkulturwissenschaft* could mean studying the culture of media, the study of media and culture, or a combination of media studies and cultural studies simultaneously.

28 Oliver Jahraus, *Das Medienabenteuer: Aufsätze zur Medienkulturwissenschaft* (Königshausen & Neumann, 2017), 54–58.

29 Siegfried J. Schmidt, “Medienkulturwissenschaft,” in *Konzepte der Kulturwissenschaften. Theoretische Grundlagen, Ansätze, Perspektiven*, ed. Ansgar Nünning and Vera Nünning (Metzler, 2008), 353.

30 Jahraus, *Das Medienabenteuer*, 58.

31 Ibid.

What does that mean in relation to game studies? While literary studies can be seen as a parental discipline of game studies, in the context of a media culture studies framework they become more like siblings. Both are concerned with different types of media and their specific mediality but with an overarching perspective, which is not confined to topics of narratology, as Aarseth claims. The focus lies on “constellations and history of media-determined cultural contexts: media culture studies examines problems we have with the interaction of models of reality, cultural programs, and media systems in our culture,” as Schmidt puts it in his systems theory vocabulary.³² While in praxis the degree of institutionalization might be quite different because of existing hierarchies and because some might still look down upon games research, in theory the research fields themselves are equitable in the context of a broader media culture studies approach. This places game studies and literary studies in a paradoxical situation as the latter informs the first in its basic concepts and structure, and still game studies is not subsumed as a subfield or a singular research interest. Combining this position with the fact that games research has not just one parental discipline but many and is interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary itself, the idea of a “colonized” field becomes immensely oversimplified. But if we look closer at what literary studies is, especially in the context of media culture studies, we complicate the idea of a colonized field even further. For decades, literary studies has had a lopsided import-export trade of theory. While importing theories, concepts, and ideas from a multitude of disciplines and adapting them to the study of literature, literary studies seldom exports its own theories. This has led to the differentiation in the discipline between theory and literary theory. As Jonathan Culler puts it:

Theory in literary studies is not an account of the nature of literature or methods for its study [...]. It's a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define.

³² Schmidt, “Medienkulturwissenschaft,” 366.

[...] The most convenient designation of this miscellaneous genre is simply the nickname *theory*, which has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong. This is the simplest explanation of what makes something count as theory. Works regarded as theory *have* effects beyond their original field.³³

So literary studies itself has become an at least one-sided interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary project. The study of literature has become an intersection of different fields, ideas, methods and theories, which might have been the reason for the aforementioned crisis or method dispute in the field.³⁴ This transformation of literary studies might also have to do with a departure from “a normative concept of human nature” or “a philosophy of history” which as “stable meanings” were the basis of philology.³⁵ But the “corresponding symbolic patterns [of meaning in general] have fallen into crisis,” as Joachim Küppers argues.³⁶ Cultural studies approaches, “which no longer ask for the one truth, are reacting to this crisis. They are not its ‘cause’. They represent a re-rhetorization of our cultural products under the aspect of what is interesting.”³⁷

This situation might have become normalized in the last two decades but at the “birth” of game studies (1995–2005) these debates were at an all-time high. These conceptual and structural questions informed what game studies, at least in German-speaking humanities, has become. I argue that game studies has inherited not so much the *contents* of their parental fields but these basic structures and conceptions of what a research field even is. If we come back to Aarseth’s critique that games

33 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3, emphasis in original.

34 Oliver Jahraus, *Literaturtheorie: Theoretische und methodische Grundlagen der Literaturwissenschaft* (Francke, 2004), 10–14.

35 Joachim Küpper, “Kulturwissenschaft,” *Poetica* 41, nos. 1–2 (2009): 7.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

should not be treated like literature or film, this might mean not an argument for but against transdisciplinary approaches. But what has this to do with the possibilities of a game studies school of thought? The complex transformation of the concept of “fields” or “disciplines” does not only dissolve field boundaries or make them obsolete apart from organizational structures. It could also make, in academia, more traditional models of group formation on a micro-level, like schools of thoughts, a thing of the past. Combined with the short-term contracts of most academics (for example, a majority of researchers in Germany only has two-year contracts) the idea of a school of thought and the attendant stabilization of research methods, topics, and personnel in one place seems nearly impossible. While the labor situation of academics surely is a massive problem and a disaster for generations to come, the field might benefit from a lack of schools, as it stays more fluid and in pursuit of its goal of being transdisciplinary, even though Frans Mäyrä for example states that this was never a goal but a necessity.³⁸ As an example of how research groups might have a basic understanding in common but still have very diverse research interests, I examine the history of the research group I have been part of for over ten years.

When in Munich: The Kolloquium Game Studies & Kulturwissenschaften

The “Game Studies & Cultural Studies Colloquium Munich” started out as a seminar in Modern German Literature called *Computerspielphilologie* (“computer game philology”) at the institute for German philology at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. The course was led by Marcel Schellong and Gebhard Grelczak in the summer of 2009. For most students this was the first contact with games scholarship, so familiar topics like narratology were a focus in the course. Some students

38 Frans Mäyrä, “Getting into the Game: Multidisciplinary Game Studies,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, ed. Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (Routledge, 2009), 313.

showed their ongoing interest in research on games, so a year later, in the fall of 2010, Schellong and Grelczak founded the colloquium and extended invitations to interested students as “the German-language research and publication landscape is rather limited” and “to create a space where we can talk about the ‘state of the art’ and possible directions of future cultural studies game research.”³⁹ The colloquium decidedly did not focus on philosophical approaches to games but opened up to the fields of cultural studies and game studies alike. Topics were picked for a semester at the time and included aesthetics and ethics, gender, decision-making, virtuality, simulation, and many more. The rest of the institute mostly ignored the colloquium. Sometimes the idea of researching games was met with ridicule, sometimes with cautious interest. At the time of this writing, the colloquium has not been designated as an official research group and has no funding. Still, there has been interest in researching games among students and mostly younger researchers. Everyone was welcome to participate as a member or as a guest speaker, as flat hierarchies and equality of all participants were core to the idea of the colloquium. The group has met about once a month to discuss the semester topics by means of selected research literature since 2010. Every member of the colloquium could assume the responsibility for a session and thus set priorities in the discussed material and topics, giving talks and input for the rest. It has also been a space to present and discuss the member’s own research projects, ranging from drafts of papers to dissertations. Since the global COVID-19 pandemic, the colloquium has first been transformed into an online academic reading group and then into an international colloquium for researchers and students from Munich and Innsbruck.

The colloquium not only continued, it spawned another project. After half a year, as the cooperation proved fruitful and interesting, the idea of a publication was brought up. In the fall of 2011, with Grelczak and Schellong as editors-in-chief,

39 Gebhard Grelczak and Marcel Schellong, email to the author and other interested students, October 22, 2010.

Franziska Ascher, Robert Baumgartner, Andreas Schöffmann, Philipp Augat, Tobias Eder, and I founded the online journal *Paidia: Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung* (Journal for Games Research⁴⁰), the first German-language journal for game studies. At the outset, *Paidia*⁴¹ was a publication for colloquium members but rather quickly it became the central platform for German-language game studies research in general. This is important for a possible Munich school of thought as far as it shows that while the editorial team had its academic origin in literary studies, the research they adopted and published came from a broad field of research interests and institutional backgrounds. The approach to games for the colloquium and the journal alike followed the aforementioned idea of media culture studies with a focus on interdisciplinarity. In the first editorial, Schellong made this abundantly clear: *Paidia* focuses on games from a “media culture studies perspective” and is detached from “the narrow boundaries of a monodisciplinary approach.”⁴² This is also evident in the publications of colloquium members. For example, Grelczak, Schellong, Ascher, Schöffmann, Baumgartner, Maria Kutscherow, Mireya Schlegel, and I published and edited the volume *I’ll Remember This: Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel* (Function, Presentation and Changes of Decisions in Video Games⁴³) with contributions from a variety of fields. Also, the contributions of the colloquium members to this volume show that while they did research together on the topic they all were interested in different aspects. While Ascher focused on the change of how deci-

40 *Paidia: Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung*, <https://www.paidia.de>.

41 For an extended presentation of *Paidia*’s history, see Tobias Unterhuber, “Editorial: Deutschsprachige Game Studies 2011–2021: Eine Bilanz,” *Paidia – Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.paidia.de/editorial-deutschsprachige-game-studies-2011-2021-eine-bilanz/>.

42 Marcel Schellong and Gebhard Grelczak, “Editorial 2011,” *Paidia – Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung*, January 1, 2011, <https://www.paidia.de/editorial-2011/>.

43 Franziska Ascher et al., eds., *I’ll Remember This – Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel* (Werner Hülsbusch, 2016).

sions were presented in *The Witcher* series,⁴⁴ Schöffman focused on the relation of decisions and social interaction in games,⁴⁵ and Baumgartner on the relationship between procedurality and decisions.⁴⁶ Kutscherow wrote about morality and decisions in post-apocalyptic scenarios,⁴⁷ while Schellong wrote on the presentation of decision *dispositifs* in *The Stanley Parable*.⁴⁸ My own contribution in contrast focused on the connections between coming of age narratives, nostalgia, time manipulation, and media use in *Life Is Strange*.⁴⁹ Therefore, every member worked on a topic together, but there was no through line of research interests or methods. Just like in literary studies, a pluralism of methods and perspectives was the norm.

This is also evident with the three dissertations which came out of the colloquium. While Schöffmann wrote his thesis on

44 Franziska Ascher, "Preis der Neutralität: Die Witcher-Reihe als Seismograf des Decision Turns," in *I'll Remember This: Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel*, ed. Franziska Ascher et al. (Werner Hülsbusch, 2016).

45 Andreas Schöffmann, "And now you got this little girl to take care of': Entscheiden in simulierter sozialer Interaktion," in *I'll Remember This: Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel*, ed. Franziska Ascher et al. (Werner Hülsbusch, 2016).

46 Robert Baumgartner, "Alles, was Sie von nun an tun, kann und wird gegen Sie verwendet werden': Prozedurale Entscheidungslogik im Computerspiel," in *I'll Remember This: Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel*, ed. Franziska Ascher et al. (Werner Hülsbusch, 2016).

47 Maria Kutscherow, "Moral in der Apokalypse? Entscheidungen und Entscheidungssysteme in katastrophischen und (post-)apokalyptischen Computerspielen," in *I'll Remember This: Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel*, ed. Franziska Ascher et al. (Werner Hülsbusch, 2016).

48 Marcel Schellong, "'Sorry, but you're in my story now': Zankende Entscheidende und rivalisierende Entscheidungsdispositive in *The Stanley Parable*," in *I'll Remember This: Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel*, ed. Franziska Ascher et al. (Werner Hülsbusch, 2016).

49 Tobias Unterhuber, "'If only I could turn back time': Coming of Age, Nostalgie und die Macht der Medien in *Life Is Strange*," in *I'll Remember This: Funktion, Inszenierung und Wandel von Entscheidung im Computerspiel*, ed. Franziska Ascher et al. (Werner Hülsbusch, 2016).

the problems and chances to include games in schools from a didactic point of view,⁵⁰ Ascher's thesis drew parallels between structural agonality in CRPGs and Middle High German epics.⁵¹ Baumgartner again did research on the multimodal mediation of game worlds.⁵² The variety of topics shows that there is neither a traditional literary studies approach present in their research work nor a methodological or topical commonality. If there is something that defines all the research of the colloquium it is to focus on the specific mediality of games in contrast to other media, which goes hand in hand with the aforementioned understanding of media culture studies, and the openness toward theory in general and specifically theory from other fields, be it philosophy, pedagogy, cultural theory, medieval studies, or even neuroscience. If the colloquium therefore could be called a school of thought is rather doubtful.⁵³ A Munich school of game studies would just be another way to say media culture studies research in the area of game studies, which is not limited to the participants of the colloquium, Munich, or Germany, for that matter.

Conclusion

While this proposed and ultimately dismissed "Munich school" is just one example, I would argue that academic schools in game studies run against the idea of game studies as an interdisciplinary field and the open understanding of media culture research, which might follow field boundaries on an institu-

50 Andreas Schöffmann, *Digitale Spiele aus deutschdidaktischer Perspektive: Herausforderungen für den Deutschunterricht* (Metzler, 2021).

51 Franziska Ascher, *Erzählen im Imperativ: Zur strukturellen Agonalität von Rollenspielen und mittelhochdeutschen Epen* (transcript, 2021).

52 Robert Baumgartner, *Sinn(es)-Welten: Die Wirkungsästhetik von Computerspielwelten* (Springer, 2021).

53 It must be noted that, because both started as partially student projects, the colloquium and *Paidia* are projects with a ten-year-plus runtime; something which seems quite rare in a time of two-year contracts. Thus, the projects have at least a degree of stability, which might be the basis for a school.

tional level but not on a methodological or topical one. This is not a specific characteristic of game studies per se but might be, as shown, an inheritance from its parental disciplines. Through the changes in the way humanities research has been conducted since at least the 1990s, such schools of thought might in general be a thing of the past. To find common research interests and methodological commonalities simultaneously is rare since method pluralism and the diversification of research interests have changed the academic landscape substantially. But there might be another more mundane and materialistic reason, too. The founding and continuation of schools in academia need time and stability. With ever-shorter contracts and rampant precarity especially for post-doctoral research — a situation officials in Germany tried to sell as an advantage of the German research landscape and sarcastically called “a certain degree of flexibility”⁵⁴ — the parameters for forming new research traditions (like schools of thought) seem rather improbable. In contrast, larger academic institutions are often prone to over-stability and inertia. Institutionalization of new disciplines and fields, and the formation of research traditions and schools, are therefore impeded by two fronts: inflexible organizational structures and highly flexible working conditions. Situations may vary from country to country and from institution to institution, but the neoliberalization of academia is still on the rise.⁵⁵ So, while it might not be a bad thing that academic in-groups and tradition-making structures are not common under the contemporary paradigms of humanities research, the reasons on the practical side are not a cause for celebration.

54 @BMBF_Bund, *Twitter*, December 9, 2020, https://x.com/BMBF_Bund/status/1336692117079527424

55 See Dennis Jansen's contribution to this volume.

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II.

Alternative Origin Stories

Queering the Game Studies Canon: A Polemical Reading of Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games*

Bo Ruberg

The field of game studies is changing, as many scholars have noted, moving increasingly toward much-needed discussions of identity, culture, and power.¹ Part of this shift, along with a growing focus on topics like racism and sexism, has been the rise of queer game studies: a sub-field that explores the rich intersections between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) issues and video games, analog games, and play.² It is an area of research that is deeply important to me as both a game studies scholar and a queer human being. However, there is a kind of hand-wavey myth that we often tell about queer game studies, and about the place of LGBTQ+ issues in

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- 1 Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, "Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies," in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm (Indiana University Press, 2017), and TreaAndrea R. Russworm, "A Call to Action for Video Game Studies in an Age of Reanimated White Supremacy," *The Velvet Light Trap* 81 (2018): 73–76.
 - 2 Adrienne Shaw and Bo Ruberg, "Imagining Queer Game Studies," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), ix–xxxiv.

games more broadly (a myth that I myself have certainly been guilty of telling) — and that is the myth of *newness*.³ We talk as if queerness is something relatively new to come to games and, relatedly, relatively new to come to game studies: a sea change, a pivot, a hole in the history of the medium and the field that is now being filled, redressing the absences of the past and orienting us toward a queerer future.

This is an oversimplification though, as Todd Harper, Nicholas Taylor, and Meghan Blythe Adams point out in their essay, “Queer Game Studies: Young but Not New.”⁴ Yes, it is true that queer games research has been rapidly on the rise over the last five to ten years, as has queer game design.⁵ Yes, it is true that queer gaming events have taken form and grown greatly in visibility during this same period, and that topics like LGBTQ+ representation in AAA video games have become points of mainstream discourse. But also, queerness has been here all along. Video games have included queer content for decades, as work like the LGBTQ Games Archive, headed by Adrienne Shaw, has made clear.⁶ LGBTQ+ people have been developing games for just as long, evidenced by historiographic work like Whit Pow’s writing on trans designers Jamie Faye Fenton and Danielle Bunten Berry.⁷ In my own work, I often contend that the queer theoretical implications of video games have been present

3 Bo Ruberg, “Queerness and Video Games: Queer Game Studies and New Perspectives through Play,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 543–55.

4 Todd Harper, Nicholas Taylor, and Meghan Blythe Adams, “Queer Game Studies: Young but Not New,” in *Queerness in Play*, ed. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams, and Nicholas Taylor (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

5 Bo Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Duke University Press, 2020).

6 Bo Ruberg, “Creating an Archive of LGBTQ Video Game Content: An Interview with Adrienne Shaw,” *Camera Obscura* 32, no. 2 (2017): 165–173.

7 Whit Pow, “A Trans Historiography of Glitches and Errors,” *Feminist Media Histories* 7, no. 1 (2021): 197–230, and Whit Pow, “Outside of the Folder, the Box, the Archive: Moving toward a Reparative Video Game History,” *ROMchip: A Journal of Game Histories* 1, no. 1 (2019), <https://www.romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/76>.

since the advent of the medium itself. The relationship between queerness and games is paradoxical. It is vibrant and new, but also it is nothing new. It is the future of video games, but also it is video games' largely overlooked past.

Here, I address one particular piece of video games' queer past, and how ignoring that past has continued to affect the present. Namely, my aim is to unearth and confront the presence of queerness in the game studies canon: that emergently agreed upon set of texts that have come to be accepted as the foundation of game studies. These texts are taught time and again, cited time and again, and broadly considered the bedrock of conceptual thinking for how we make sense of games, play, and their meaning. Those of us who work in game studies — or even students who have taken an intro to game studies course — know this lineup. It includes all the usual suspects, from Espen Aarseth's 1997 *Cybertext*, to Jesper Juul's 2005 *Half-Real*, to Alexander Galloway's 2006 *Gaming*, to Ian Bogost's 2007 *Persuasive Games*.⁸ If this list seems strikingly white and strikingly male, this is no oversight; works from the same era by women scholars and scholars of color are typically sidelined in conceptualizations of the canon.⁹ Though game studies is commonly described as originating in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the game studies canon also claims as its own a series of works that far predate the founding of the field, including Johan Huizinga's 1938 *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games*, originally published in 1958 in French as *Les jeux et les hommes* and in 1961 in the now-standard English translation.¹⁰

8 Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (MIT Press, 2005); Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007).

9 Adrienne Shaw, "Are We There Yet? The Future of Critical Game Studies," keynote presentation, Critical Game Studies Symposium, 2016, Irvine, CA.

10 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Beacon Press, 1971); Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and*

It is the second of these two works — *Man, Play and Games* — that I focus on here. As many readers will already know, this book by Caillois (1913–1978), a French sociologist with early ties to surrealism, is a wide-reaching text about the nature of games and play.¹¹ The book simultaneously purports to draw from the traditions of numerous peoples from around the world while also engaging in a white, Euro-centric universalizing of play and its meaning.¹² As Marco Benoit Carbone, Paolo Ruffino, and Stéphane Massonet have rightly noted, *Man, Play and Games* is one of the most frequently referenced texts in game studies research.¹³ Typically, though certainly not always, scholarship that mentions Caillois's book does so in passing: a performative gesture that succinctly demonstrates that one is well-versed in the classics of game studies and that one's argument is grounded in the canonical writing of yore.¹⁴ For both individual authors of game studies scholarship and the field of game studies as a whole, *Man, Play and Games* and other works like it serve a legitimizing function. These works give the study of “illegitimate” cultural objects (i.e., games) seemingly respectable grounding in older scholarship — scholarship that itself claims to offer a historical survey of culture. In this way, these earlier works that have been taken up into the game studies canon lend contemporary scholarship on games the aura of an upstand-

Games, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001); and Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes* (Gallimard, 1958).

- 11 Claudine Frank, ed., *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader* (Duke University Press, 2003).
- 12 Galloway, *Gaming*, 21.
- 13 Marco Benoit Carbone, Paolo Ruffino, and Stéphane Massonet, “Introduction: The Other Caillois: The Many Masks of Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2017): 303–20.
- 14 Examples of game studies scholarship that engages writing in alternate or more nuanced ways include: Lars Kristensen and Ulf Wilhelmsson, “Roger Caillois and Marxism: A Game Studies Perspective,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2017): 381–400; Christopher Goetz, “Coin of Another Realm: Gaming’s Queer Economy,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018); and Enrico Gandolfi, “Beyond Diagonal Sciences: Applying Roger Caillois’s Concepts of Symmetry and Dissymmetry to *Journey*,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2017): 361–80.

ing, trustworthy domain whose seriousness is evidenced by the length of its history. *Man, Play and Games* helps game studies theorize games, but it also gives game studies a past.

Yet, despite its prominence within the game studies canon, there is much more to *Man, Play and Games* than the field has yet acknowledged. Specifically, as I demonstrate below, Caillois's text can be read as deeply queer. Scenes of non-normative gender and sexual expression permeate the book, which foregrounds a fundamental relationship between play and what we can describe (using more contemporary terminology) as queer pleasure. This becomes especially clear if we consider not just the English translation of the text but also Caillois's original *Les jeux et les hommes*. The uptake, integration, and spread of references to *Man, Play and Games* has its own history within game studies, beginning with Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's 2004 *Rules of Play*, which set a precedent for talking about Caillois's work through a focus on his taxonomies of play and games.¹⁵ Yet, these taxonomies represent only one aspect of his text. A far greater portion explores the transgressive desires associated with play, connecting games to ecstasy, repressed longings, and the disruption of gender norms. In the sections that follow, I first offer a queer re-reading of Caillois's book and then discuss the implications of this re-reading. My goal is not to salvage *Man, Play and Games* or reassert its value as part of the game studies canon. Instead, my primary purpose is to demonstrate how game studies has actively distanced itself from the queerness of the very texts it claims as foundational. I consider this a polemical reading because it serves, ultimately, as an indictment. Game studies has always been queer, it turns out, but the field has been built precisely on the work of disavowing that queerness.

15 Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2004).

Queer Pleasures in *Man, Play and Games*

Man, Play and Games contains many elements that we can identify as queer. Most prominent among these is the queerness of play, which lies at the heart of Caillois's text. In his opening chapter, "The Definition of Play," Caillois describes play in this way:

A characteristic of play, in fact, is that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art. At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point. Nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money [...]. As for the professionals — the boxers, cyclists, jockeys, or actors who earn their living in the ring, track, or hippodrome or on the stage, and who must think in terms of prize, salary, or title — it is clear that they are not players but workers. When they play, it is at some other game.¹⁶

At first glance, for a contemporary reader, this description of play appears to raise questions primarily about the divide between play and labor, or perhaps the divide between play and capitalism. The assertion that play produces no wealth and that play can be cleanly separated from work have both been contested by game studies scholars, who have demonstrated how the video game industry and professional play are indeed inextricably tied to the "accrual of capital" and the game of capitalism (that "other game" to which Caillois intriguing alludes).¹⁷ Yet, if we reconsider this passage from a queer perspective, other elements of Caillois's characterization of play come to the forefront. "Play is an occasion of pure waste," writes Caillois, echoing similar sentiments expressed by Georges Bataille in

¹⁶ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 5–6.

¹⁷ Tom Brock, "Roger Caillois and E-Sports: On the Problems of Treating Play as Work," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2017): 321–39.

his essay, “The Notion of Expenditure” — which has been taken up as a guiding text for queer game scholars and designers like Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas.¹⁸ To call play “an occasion of pure waste,” positioning it in opposition to work and wealth, is to situate it in the realm of queer failure and antinormativity: neither productive nor reproductive, refusing to contribute to society, lingering instead with its own useless pleasures.

Indeed, pleasure is central to *Man, Play and Games* — and the pleasure of play as Caillois describes it reads as distinctly queer. Caillois continues his description: “There is also no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement [...]. The player devotes himself spontaneously to the game, of his free will and for his pleasure [...]. It happens only when the players have a desire to play.”¹⁹ This too is a passage that has been often cited in game studies, with scholars either espousing or rightly pushing back on the depiction of play as always “free and voluntary.”²⁰ What I want to highlight in this passage, however, is Caillois’s emphasis on joy, amusement, desire, and above all pleasure (*plaisir* in the French original). Though pleasure is key to all forms of play, in Caillois’s estimation, the queerness of this pleasure is drawn out most explicitly in his description of *paideia*: freeform, imaginative play. Caillois describes *paideia*, one of his two main categories of play (along with *ludus*), as the stuff of “uncontrolled fantasy.”²¹ This notion of the “uncontrolled fantasy” cannot help but take on a sexual valence, calling to mind notions of repressed desire that have long been at the center of psychoanalytic theory. The “uncontrolled fantasy” also conjures up a general bacchanalian vision

18 Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), and Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas, “Queering Human-Game Relations: Exploring Queer Mechanics and Play,” *First Person Scholar*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/queering-human-game-relations/>.

19 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 6.

20 See, for example, Aaron Trammell, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 2023), 59.

21 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 3.

in which play becomes the realm of desires, indulgences, and pleasures that fall outside the normative structures of society.

For queer studies scholars, one word that Cailliois uses to characterize play has particular significance: *jouissance*. *Jouissance*, a notoriously untranslatable term that equates roughly to erotic ecstasy, has been much theorized, including by prominent figures from queer studies' own questionable canon.²² For queer theorists and psychoanalytic thinkers alike, *jouissance* represents pleasure to the point of transgression, an orgasm (whether symbolic or real) that bursts through the bounds of what is "normal" or "good" in sexuality. In *Man, Play and Games*, *jouissance* appears specifically in Cailliois's discussion of games in the category he terms *ilinx* — playful experiences of vertigo that trigger "a state of dizziness and disorder."²³ Referring to individuals who enjoy theme park rides, Cailliois writes: "The majority of them, before even recovering, are already hastening to the ticket booth in order to buy the right to again experience the same pleasurable torture."²⁴ This depiction of games of *ilinx* as eliciting "pleasurable torture" is queer enough in its own right, with its clear overtones of masochism and kink. However, if we look to the original French language text, we find another layer of queer implication. Here Cailliois writes that theme park goers buy "*le droit d'éprouver encore le même supplice, dont ils attendent une jouissance*" — that is, translated more literally, "the right to experience again the same torture, from which they expect to experience *jouissance*."²⁵ Cailliois continues, "It is necessary to use the word 'pleasure' [*jouissance*] because one hesitates to call such a transport a mere distraction, corresponding as it does more to a spasm than to an entertainment."²⁶ With this note, Cailliois makes the orgasmic overtones of his description explicit.

Of all the games that Cailliois presents, games of *ilinx* are seemingly the queerest: an entire category of game (one out of

22 Annamarie Jagose, *Orgasmology* (Duke University Press, 2013).

23 Cailliois, *Man, Play and Games*, 12.

24 Ibid., 26.

25 Ibid., 74.

26 Ibid., 26.

only four) dedicated to what Caillois describes as an “attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind,” a longing to seek “ecstasy.”²⁷ Yet, the explicit queerness of games of *ilinx*, as well as *paideia* as a mode of play, only serve to highlight the centrality of queer pleasures in Caillois’s discussion of games more broadly. Without these passages about *ilinx* and *paid-eia*, the erotic overtones of terms like “pleasure” as it appears throughout *Man, Play and Games* might remain plausibly deniable. Maybe, when Caillois writes “plaisir,” he just means fun? These passages reveal that that is far from true. The pleasure of play in *Man, Play and Games* is a sexual pleasure, and a queer sexual pleasure at that: one that does not fit within the tidy, reasonable, pragmatic boundaries of heteronormative enjoyment. Whether or not we agree that the pleasure of play is inherently queer is not really the issue here though. What matters for our present purposes is that, in Caillois’s own rendering, play is rooted in experiences that contemporary queer studies scholars would likely characterize as queer. Thus, reading Caillois’s work queerly does not represent some queer interpretive corruption of the text. *Man, Play and Games* is already a book about games and play in which both games and play are queer.

Undermining Heteronormativity through Play

The queerness of *Man, Play and Games* is complicated—but also extended—by the presence of passages in the text that seem to promote a presumed heteronormativity. These passages emerge even within Caillois’s discussions of particularly queer forms of play and games, like *paideia* and *ilinx*. For example, to illustrate supposed parallels between human play and animal play, Caillois presents a set of scenes in which apes and birds seemingly partake in games of *ilinx* to seduce potential mates. He writes: “The gibbon chooses a flexible branch and weighs it down until it unbends, thus projecting him into the air. He lands

²⁷ Ibid., 23, 24.

catch as catch can, and he endlessly repeats this useless exercise, inexplicable except in terms of its seductive quality. Birds especially love games of vertigo [...]. In the mating season they utilize this heroic flight in order to attract the female.”²⁸ These images have all the rhetorical trappings of a nature documentary, transforming a description of the behavior of animals into an essentializing parable of heterosexual human reproduction. In this way, this passage appears to place games of vertigo precisely in the realm of the heteronormative. Animals like apes and birds, Caillois seems to suggest, may appear to be playing for the sheer fearful delight of *jouissance* — an “occasion of pure waste” — but, in the end, their play serves a reproductive purpose. It is not only erotic, but also “seductive”: luring toward the presumed male player (whether the self-launching gibbon or the diving bird) a presumed female spectator (the gibbon seduced by this “useless exercise” or the bird attracted to a potential mate’s “heroic flight”). Play here is not, in fact, just the stuff of voluptuous panic. It is animal foreplay to the act that makes more animals.

In a seemingly similar passage, this one located in his chapter on “Revivals in the Modern World,” Caillois links games of *ilinx* to sexual interactions between humans. Here, Caillois discusses traveling fairs, which he describes as “world[s] of excited and noisy throngs, a debauch of color and light” — the word *débauche* (debauch) here heightening the erotic overtones of this scene.²⁹ While Caillois writes that all manner of games can be found at fairs, he says that “the dominant atmosphere is that of vertigo.”³⁰ He concludes his discussion of fairs by writing:

For those who are old enough, on the ridiculous little [bumper car] raceway, just as everywhere at the fair, on every panic-inducing machine, every terrifying ride where the effects of spinning and shivering with fear make bodies come

²⁸ Ibid., 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 133, and Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*, 260.

³⁰ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 134

closer together, there lingers, in a diffuse and insidious way, a different anguish, a different delight, which comes from searching for a sexual partner. Here, one leaves the realm of what could be called a game, strictly speaking.³¹

I want to linger with this passage for two reasons. The first is that, though it closely resembles Caillouis's earlier passage about the birds and the gibbons, it differs in important ways that undermine this new scene's potential heteronormativity. The second reason is that this passage, for which I have provided my own translation from the French above, differs in subtle yet important ways from the standard English text. In English, the text reads: "On every frightening ride, the effects of dizziness and terror are joined to produce an added diffuse and insidious anguish and delight, that of seeking a sexual liaison. At this point one leaves the realm of play as such."³² This translation loses the imagery, contained in the original French, of bodies that come together on theme park rides: riders scooting closer and closer as they ride roller coasters or bumper cars, huddled together in ecstatic pleasure, as their shoulders touch and the thrill-laced sexual tension builds between them. It is also notable that the English passage concludes by stating that theme park goers, in "seeking a sexual liaison," leave the realm of play. By contrast, the French states that they have left "the realm of what could be called a game, strictly speaking." More than mere semantics, this distinction matters. To say that sexual flirtations do not count as "play" suggests that play itself is not sexual. Yet, to say that such flirtations do not count as a "game, strictly speaking" suggests the opposite: games may be too rigid and uptight to accommodate that anguish and delight that comes with cruising a fair-ground, but play is capacious enough to encompass all manner of tantalizingly "diffuse and insidious" pleasures.

While this passage may initially call to mind scenes of heteronormative romance — like a straight couple on a Ferris wheel

31 Caillouis, *Les jeux et les hommes*, 265. Translation mine.

32 Caillouis, *Man, Play and Games*, 136.

or in the “tunnel of love” — such images are quickly shattered upon closer examination. The scenes that Caillois is describing do not take place on “romantic” rides but rather on “terrifying” and “panic-inducing” ones. Caillois also does not specify the genders of those “searching for sexual partners.” This ambiguity, coupled with his use of the term “sexual partner,” suggests not so much a straight mating ritual (to call back to the imagery of the birds and gibbons) as a queer hookup ritual, where people of various genders test the waters of each other’s sexual interests by clinging to one another suggestively on vertiginous theme park attractions. Thus, this anecdote simultaneously mirrors the earlier images of the reproducing animals and undermines it, suggesting that the point of *ilinx* all along — whether for animals or for humans — may only have been to experience an embodied delight that blurs fear and pleasure.

We can also see this tension between heteronormativity and its destabilization in the way that *Man, Play and Games* addresses gender. Consider Caillois’s discussion of the *négateur* (“nihilist” or *denier* in French), a figure much like Huizinga’s “spoilsport” who refuses to play a game on the grounds that its rules are arbitrary conventions and therefore meaningless.³³ Even more explicitly than with Huizinga’s spoilsport, the disruptive power of Caillois’s nihilist is associated with gender — specifically, the “ruining” of gender norms. Caillois describes the nihilist in this way:

The game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional, who refuses to play because the game is meaningless. His arguments are irrefutable. The game has no other but an intrinsic meaning. [...] The one who breaks up a game, the one who denounces the absurdity of the rules, now becomes the one who breaks the spell, who

33 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 7; Caillois, *Les Jeux et les hommes*, 38; and Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

brutally refuses to acquiesce in the proposed illusion, who reminds the boy that he is not really a detective, pirate, horse, or submarine, or reminds the little girl that she is not rocking a real baby or serving a real meal to real ladies on her miniature dishes.³⁴

As Caillois portrays “him” (though presumably the nihilist need not be a man), the nihilist “breaks the spell” of a game, pulling back the facade of pretense and revealing its inherent meaninglessness. The power of the nihilist does not only extend to games, however. Implicit in this passage are many parallels between the rule-space of a game and the rule-space of society, which is also bound by its own absurd, arbitrary conventions. Tellingly, when the nihilist “ruins” the game, he does so by disrupting the illusion of normative gender roles, as represented by gendered forms of play. The game at hand is the game of gender: the boy plays at being a pirate, the girl plays at caring for a baby. Yet the rules of this game are merely an “illusion.” In refusing to play along with these heteronormative roles, and moreover in destroying them by highlighting their constructedness, the nihilist has the power to upend gender essentialism itself. Thus, in *Man, Play and Games*, both the act of play and the act of deliberately not playing are imbued with queer potential. These are only some of the many ways that we can read queerness into Caillois’s text, drawing out the work’s queer elements while remaining conscious of their complications and contradictions.

Disavowing Queerness in the Game Studies Canon

Queer studies scholars frequently engage in a scholarly practice known as reparative reading. Reparative reading, a method originally articulated by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 2002 that has since been taken up widely across the study of literature and media, entails returning to a text that one might initially be tempted to deem problematic or even homophobic

34 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 7, 8–9.

and re-analyzing: “repairing” it, so to speak, by unearthing that object’s richness and complexity. Sedgwick calls this an “additive and accretive” process, one that does “better justice” to the object of analysis by taking a more expansive, generous approach to finding its queer meaning.³⁵ Though Sedgwick herself argues for a nuanced understanding of this method of repair, in effect “reparative reading” has come to shorthand a common queer studies practice of taking a piece of media or culture and recasting it as a positive queer object. Often, reparative reading is used to allow queer scholars to bring older works and “bad objects” back into the fold of queerness, demonstrating how they can be celebrated rather than dissected or dismissed. This genre of analysis commonly seeks to save what has come before, to find its value and give it new queer life.

Even as I argue that *Man, Play and Games* can be read as a queer text, I want to be clear that the analysis I am presenting is not a reparative reading — at least not in the sense that it attempts to recuperate or salvage something about the original work. I do not mean this analysis as an act of generosity toward Caillouis, nor am I particularly interested in legitimizing *Man, Play and Games* as a queer text. I admit that, as a scholar whose own entry point into studying play and sexuality came — years ago — through an interest in “perverse” work on the borders of French surrealism, I do have a certain soft spot for Caillouis’s book and its transgressive implications. After all, Caillouis was close friends and ongoing professional interlocutor with such figures as Bataille, a philosopher and pornographer writing in the tradition of the Marquis de Sade.³⁶ However, like Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*, Caillouis’s *Man, Play and Games* cannot be extricated from its deep ties to Orientalism and racism, as Tara Fickle argues compellingly in her book *Playing the Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (2019).³⁷ *Man,*

35 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 149, 150.

36 Frank, *The Edge of Surrealism*.

37 Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York University Press, 2020).

Play and Games neither requires nor merits recuperation. It still has plenty of proponents who teach and cite it without critical reflection; it continues to do the work of perpetuating discriminatory notions that have long sat at the heart of game studies. It demands our careful attention, but it does not need us to take care of it.

This is also not a recuperative reading of the broader game studies canon. *Man, Play and Games* holds a central place in this canon. In this way, it is both part of the canon and a stand-in for the canon itself. To an extent, drawing out the queerness in Caillois's text is a way to shed light on the queerness that already lies in the game studies canon as it has been so commonly taught, cited, and imagined. It is, for me, a way to argue for a profound shift in how we see this canon and its relationship to queerness. If *Man, Play and Games* is a queer book (which it is), then queerness has been in the game studies canon for as long as there has been such a canon. If *Man, Play and Games* has been highly influential for generations of work on games to follow (which it has), then that queerness has sent out its tendrils of influence through the earlier game studies work of the 1990s and 2000s up through the present. And if a queer reading of *Man, Play and Games* brings to the surface the queer erotics of writing on play (which it does), then a cascade of queer re-readings suddenly become possible. All manner of works from the game studies canon begin to sound queerer and queerer once we know how to listen. Despite the effort of certain camps within game studies to marginalize issues like gender, sexuality, and queerness precisely by focusing on seemingly conceptual texts like Caillois's, a queer reading of *Man, Play and Games* shows us that the game studies canon—and, by extension, game studies itself—has been queer all along.

Yet, my point in arguing for this reframing of the game studies canon is not to salvage it, making it once again relevant at a historical moment when game studies is (thankfully, finally, crucially) turning toward an engagement with issues of culture and power. Much to the contrary, my point is to indict that canon and the processes by which its dominance has been per-

petuated. As this reading of *Man, Play and Games* demonstrates, queerness has always been a critical part of the earlier texts taken up as the grounding for the contemporary field of game studies. Yet, game studies has also traditionally distanced itself from the very concerns at the heart of queerness: identity, discrimination, embodiment, and radical politics. That means that constructing the field of game studies has actually entailed not just a lack of engagement with queer topics but rather *an active disavowal of queerness*. Making the game studies canon “straight” — which is to say, making the canon of game studies appear to conform to a supposedly unmarked, default heteronormativity — has entailed intentionally sidestepping, overlooking, downplaying, and ignoring the queer elements of the texts that make up this canon. Thus, re-reading *Man, Play and Games* to resurface its queerness does not contribute to some larger project of repairing the game studies canon. Rather, it demonstrates, precisely through unearthing the queerness of the canon, just how broken game studies has been all along.

A Queer Genealogy of Game Studies

Conversations about how to handle the concept of the “canon” — whether to celebrate it, update it, or dismantle it — have occurred across disciplines. For game studies, too, there is value in establishing a set of counter-canons or possibly abolishing the canon entirely, embracing a more capacious and diffuse approach to citationality that finds kinship in fields outside the study of games or deliberately sidesteps engagement with those works that currently enjoy the spotlight, as Amanda Phillips models in their essay “Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject.”³⁸ The work I am presenting here exemplifies a different approach: changing the canon from within, drawing out the ways in which the game studies canon is not now and never has been what we imagine it to be. I myself take pleasure in this approach, not

38 Amanda Phillips, “Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 12–36.

because it is alone sufficient to redress the supposed absence of queerness in the history of game studies, but because it makes so many other “straight” canonical works into queer ones. In this way, a queer re-reading of Caillois becomes a starting point for what we might term a queer genealogy of game studies: a way of tracing the dominant intellectual through-lines of the field back to queerness, even as established game studies work has attempted to disavow its queer origins and implications. Suddenly, once *Man, Play and Games* becomes queer, so do so many other (often equally problematic) texts that have been deemed game studies canon. Again, this does not mean that we should retrospectively laud their newfound queerness. Rather, it means that we — and here I mean queer game studies scholars — have the opportunity to set new terms for what the canon means and why it matters.

Arguing for *Man, Play and Games* as a queer text also opens up other foundational works of game studies scholarship to queer readings. For instance, Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* contains multiple passages with direct references to non-reproductive sex. Sexually-charged language can be found in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, where Janet Murray discusses “fantasies of fictional worlds.”³⁹ *Cybertext* also contains queer imagery, such as when Aarseth describes interactive digital media as “cybernetic intercourse between the various part(icipant)s in the textual machine.”⁴⁰ Later work, like Miguel Sicart’s writing on play and the carnivalesque, which has clear ties to Caillois’s own writing on rituals and fairgrounds, can be reframed through queer pleasure.⁴¹ These are just a few examples of how exploring the queerness of *Man, Play and Games* might inspire us to find the unexpected queer echoes in other game studies works. What happens if we resurface that queerness? What sort of field does game studies become if it luxuriates in rather than attempting to

39 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1998), 98.

40 Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 19–20.

41 Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (MIT Press, 2014).

obscure its own intimate ties to queer desire? What new forms of scholarship and indeed activism might this new perspective inspire?

I want to conclude by drawing attention to what is, apparently, the radical act of engaging in this kind of queer re-reading of a canonical game studies text. The life of the piece you have just read has itself been curious and revealing. I embarked on this analysis in its original form all the way back in 2018. At the time, it struck me as one of the most traditional, academically “proper” endeavors a queer game studies scholar could undertake. As an academic whose training is originally in literature and theory, analyzing a mid-twentieth-century text written by a prominent French intellectual seemed to me so conservative an approach that it was almost indulgent: a close reader’s guilty pleasure. However, when I tried to publish this essay in game studies venues I found that it was received in quite the opposite way. It was seen not as too stuffy or dry or navel-gazey but rather as too insolent. Never before or since have I written a piece that was rejected so many times and under such twisting circumstances. It was accepted for one special issue and then given the boot because reviewers objected to it on principle; it was turned down from another special issue that was literally about taboo topics in game studies for being (I am taking the liberty of speculating) too taboo. Thank goodness for the editors of the present volume. Everyone else seems to think that a text as revered as *Man, Play and Games* is too sacred to desecrate with queer critique. It perhaps goes without saying that there is a deep undercurrent of anti-queer logic at work in this thinking. It’s all fun and games until someone argues that one of the very texts on which the field was founded has been queer all along.

So, this is my humble request: If this is what it looks like to disrespect game studies, let us keep disrespecting game studies. If this is what it looks like to perform illegitimate scholarship, let us keep performing illegitimate scholarship. Fellow queer scholars, find a canonical game studies text, slip your hand inside, root around in it, and emerge with a triumphant fistful of queer meaning. To hold the game studies canon as too sacred to read

queerly, to decry queer readings of these texts as anachronism, is itself a disavowal of queerness structured around a homophobic understanding of what is right and good and normal in our field. So, let us probe all the ways in which we, as queer people, find queer meaning in game studies texts. Let us be the ones who decide whether we reclaim them or discard them, whether we leave the canon behind or burn it down so that we can build something new from the ashes.

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Ken S. McAllister: Innovation, Collaboration, Humanities? Yes!

Judd Ethan Ruggill

Introduction

Ken S. McAllister is Professor of Public & Applied Humanities at the University of Arizona, where he serves as Associate Dean of Research & Program Innovation for the College of Humanities. He is also an affiliated faculty member of the Arizona Astrobiology Center, the Graduate Interdisciplinary Program in Second Language Acquisition & Teaching; the LGBTQ+ Institute; the College of Information Science; the Graduate Program in Rhetoric, Composition & the Teaching of English; and the Department of Teaching, Learning & Sociocultural Studies. In addition, Ken serves on the Boards of the Humanities Seminars Program and the University of Arizona Vertically Integrated Projects Program, and is a founding partner of CATalyst Studios, a campus-located maker lab accessible to all students, staff, and faculty interested in exploring immersive VR, augmented reality, 3D modeling and additive manufacturing, motion capture, Arduino and Raspberry Pi development, and other innovative tools for transdisciplinary scholars and teachers.

McAllister earned his PhD (1998), MA (1992), and BA (1989) from the University of Illinois, Chicago, where he specialized in the rhetoric of technology and worked as a programmer and database application developer. He has published and lectured widely on game history, culture, and preservation, and has served on more than sixty dissertation committees. An accomplished woodworker and carver, he has also been known to “play” the banjo from time to time.

In this interview, McAllister recounts coming to study games for a living, and how a career-threatening technology failure that wiped out a book project on miniaturization was actually a gift, creating the opportunity for him to write the first English-language book on the rhetoric of computer games and earn tenure in the process. In so doing, he recalls the inhospitable institutional and professional culture game studies scholars often encountered in the early days of the field (and sometimes still do), and the ways in which that culture provoked practicable and occasionally outlandish experiments in response. One of McAllister’s signature experiments from that era (and which continues today) is the Learning Games Initiative, a transdisciplinary, inter-institutional research group he co-founded in 1999 to study, teach with, and build games. McAllister shares the origins of the group and highlights its longest running project, the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive. The Archive is particularly noteworthy in the context of this volume for two reasons: it is one of the largest working collections of video game-related artifacts in the world dedicated to serving researchers interested in the material and cultural histories of games, and it is also a laboratory for the theory and practice of electronic game collection, preservation, and conservation. McAllister draws on the collaborative, collegial, and international approaches he has explored through the Initiative and its Archive to speak to the builders of future game studies programs. McAllister believes that every college and university will soon have such a program, and he offers a number of invaluable and hard won suggestions for best practices. It is a rare opportunity to hear from one of the pioneers of the field who is also

an experienced and shrewd administrator. If the purpose of this book is in part to explore what game studies could be, McAllister's suggestions are worth taking to heart.

Interview

Judd Ruggill: How did you come to games as an object of study?

Ken McAllister: Like a lot of game scholars today, I started studying games as a player: creating maps for *Pitfall!* (Activision, 1982), hacking the code of *Hunt the Wumpus* (Yob, 1973) to add new maze sections, exchanging survival techniques for *The Pit* (AW Electronics, 1982) on Usenet Newsgroups, and so on. In high school, I hung out in Peacock Alley, a seriously creepy arcade in the basement of a derelict shopping center on the southwest side of Chicago. We'd use the stopwatch feature on our cheap digital watches to time the moves for *Dragon's Lair* (Advanced Microcomputer Systems, 1983) — the back covers of our History and English class notebooks were covered with timing sequences that we'd use to help each other break through to new levels.

But the path to becoming a game scholar was more circuitous than this prehistory suggests. There wasn't a seamless transition from being a hardcore gamer to being a game scholar. There were no game design programs back in the 1980s. It really wasn't a thing to study computer games, or even board, card, or tabletop games, except when they were used to study some other subject: using games to study the psychology of decision making, or soldiers' reaction times — stuff like that.

Through college and graduate school, I hewed as closely to the study of games as I felt like my professors and advisors would allow, studying the connections between magic, language, and technology, the histories of industrial revolutions, the rise of artificial intelligence — anything that helped me think about the cultural complexities of computer games and the languages and technologies that gave rise to them. Looking back on things, this process of “going around the barn” ultimately helped give

me a distinctive approach to game studies, one that emphasizes critical technology studies, the art and craft of making, and an appreciation for the wonder and fear that technology so often inspires.

By the time I finished grad school and landed a job at the University of Arizona, I had more or less given up the thought that I could study games as a career.

I spent the first two years at Arizona getting acclimated to faculty life, and working on a book project about the rhetoric of miniaturization. By the late 1990s, many people had largely given up on the idea of artificial intelligence and were accepting what seemed to be the more achievable goal of developing expert systems and machine learning algorithms. My friend Rolf Nohr has written a brilliant book about the history of these systems and machine learning, documenting how, in effect, a cultural shift occurred once scientists realized that creating a working facsimile of a human brain was beyond their abilities.¹ This shift involved persuading everyday people that thinking more like a computer would be even better than having a machine that could think like a human. Super smart argument — and the truth of it surrounds us still.

Anyway, miniaturization was a big part of this shift and I was interested in documenting it. I started taking notes on the homebrew PC I'd built back in Chicago. It was a little aged, but I was planning on putting together a new machine once my new assistant professor paychecks started rolling in. (The latter never happened, of course — I learned pretty quickly that assistant professors in English Departments of state schools make only slightly more than grad student teachers.) So I kept plugging away on my increasingly antiquated gaming rig.

Sometime in the spring of 1999, a few friends and colleagues — grad students, faculty, and staff from different departments around the campus — started meeting up to talk about games “as objects of study” as you put it in your question. We'd

1 Rolf F. Nohr, *Unternehmensplanspiele 1955–1975: Die Herstellung unternehmerischer Rationalität im Spiel* (LIT Verlag, 2019).



LEARNING GAMES INITIATIVE

Fig. 11.1. The Learning Games Initiative.

meet, talk about the games we were playing and how they connected (or didn't) to different theories we were working with. This was the beginning of what became known as the Learning Games Initiative (see fig. 1).

At the time, I was taking advantage of being in a new state to hone my caving skills—a hobby I'd had since high school. As I wriggled my way into the famously closed Arizona caving community—cavers in this state are intensely conservation oriented and resist introducing new people (potential vandals all) to local wild caves—I discovered that unlike in the midwest, caves in the southwest often involve considerable rope work, often requiring complex rigging. I had no such skills, so when I learned that one of my grad students—Ron Scott—was an experienced climber, I asked him to show me the (literal) ropes.

Ron obliged, introducing me to another climbing buddy of his who was a graduate student elsewhere on campus: Judd Ruggill. The three of us, along with a growing list of other scholars, teachers, and techs—Jennifer deWinter, Ryan Moeller, Jason Thompson, Daniel Griffin, David Menchaca, Nick White, Hale Thomas, and others—were the crew that built the Learning

Games Initiative (LGI) and ended up taking it in all kinds of different directions. This was the backdrop against which I was working on my miniaturization manuscript.

About a year after LGI had gotten going—sometime in 2000—the completely imaginable and ironic happened: my hard drive crashed. When it did, it miniaturized into oblivion all my notes, detailed project outline, and rough draft of the first chapter. Despite having been an IT professional and counseled hundreds of people to always make digital and print backups, I had never done either. When the drive proved to be well and truly cooked, I went from being nicely situated on the P&T preparation timeline to being terrifyingly far behind.

My wife Rachel and I were scheduled to leave for vacation at the time and we debated whether or not we should go; I was going to need all the time I could find to reconstruct the book. Fortunately, Rachel convinced me that I could work in the car and that she'd take notes for me while I drove. So off we went, and true to her word, Rachel peppered me with questions and clarifications about miniaturization, helping me recollect my notes and arguments.

As road trips are wont to do, however, the opportunity to reflect on one's work revealed that I wasn't really in love with my project. Rachel noticed this before I did (or at least was able to give voice to it first). In a way done so skillfully that I didn't know it was happening, Rachel got me thinking about other topics I might be more engaged with, and observed that when I talked about how miniaturization had impacted the game industry, I got noticeably more interested in the project. She asked if it was worth considering the possibility of changing topics entirely and writing about the rhetoric of games instead of the rhetoric of miniaturization. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it was good idea on multiple levels: I had energy about the topic, very little scholarship had been done on the subject despite the fact that games were clearly an exploding cultural phenomenon, and I already had a community of scholars around me—the Learning Games Initiative crew—who would be eager to help me.



Fig. 11.2. Attitude notebook.

On a lark, Rachel bought me this funny little junior high school notebook that said “ATTITUDE” on the cover from Bode’s General Store in Abiquiu, New Mexico and challenged me to draft a table of contents to a book on the rhetoric of computer games (see fig. 11.2).

Over the next two weeks—at the picnic table outside the tent, at whatever local library we happened to be near, wherever I had a few spare minutes—I’d pull out what came to be personified on that trip as “Baditude” and work on the table of contents (see fig. 11.3). And then on short chapter summaries. And then on the outline to chapter 1.

That was the beginning of *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture* (University of Alabama Press), which was published in 2004—just in the nick of time to help me earn promotion and tenure. Along the way, a career in game studies somehow emerged, thanks in large measure to Rachel, and to all the folks in LGI who encouraged me to try making a go of studying games professionally. As I think back now on how I came

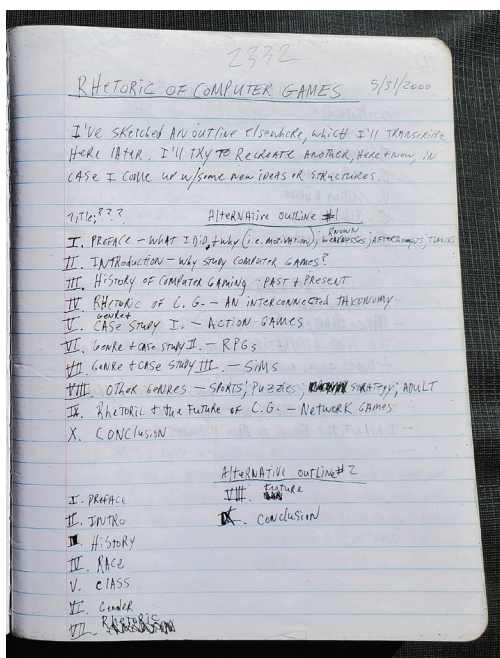


Fig. 11.3. Draft table of contents.

to games as an object of study, it occurs to me that it really was thanks to my friends that I pursued that idea.

JR: Not only was *Game Work* the first English-language book on the rhetoric of games, but it was published at a time when academic presses had yet to develop the level of interest in games they have today. What was it like writing about and then attempting to shop a book whose subject had no direct antecedents?

KM: The writing part was a blast for the most part. As you say, there was very little in the field of rhetorical studies that had been done on games, and only slightly more in media studies. But that's what made it so interesting to me. I quickly realized

that I would need to survey the wide variety of approaches to game studies that had begun to emerge in many different fields if I was going to understand how people were identifying computer games as meaning-making objects. There are some hilarious pages in *Baditude* where I listed as many fields as I could that either impacted games or that games impacted. Why I didn't quit the idea after realizing that games pretty much touched on dozens of disciplines, trades, and fields is, I suppose, a testament to the depth of the mania that was consuming me. I ended up reading work in the health sciences, government and public policy, technical fields like computer engineering, animation, and audio production, marketing and industry studies, shipping logistics, law, and so on. It was an amazing feeling to be writing about a topic that was clearly on its way to becoming naturalized in the global collective consciousness, like surfing a wave and seeing in a moment a single drop of water just before it disappears into the trough. That was part of the exigency I tried to convey in that book: now is the time to start studying games because the production/distribution/consumption symbiosis—what I called “the computer game complex”—will soon be so polished and interwoven that it will be exceedingly difficult to apprehend.

That was naive of course—the forces of cultural production are always already polished and interwoven—but the clumsiness of the making, marketing, and playing of computer games in the 1990s seemed (to me at least) like it afforded an opportunity for critical analysis that wouldn't likely stay put. And it didn't. But I don't know that it has really gotten harder; rather, there's just a lot more.

As for shopping a book around on game studies two decades ago, yeah, that was both dispiriting and scary. It was dispiriting because the rejections were always the same: “Great project but we don't have any place in our catalog for something like this—maybe next year.” It was scary because my tenure clock was winding down and even though I'd had a fairly good cushion of time between when I finished the manuscript and when I had to submit my tenure materials, the repeated “Maybe ...

Maybe ... Maybe ... No” responses from presses pretty soon gobbled up the cushion and put me in a very stressful situation. The apex of that roller coaster was when I finally landed a contract with Springer-Verlag—a very respected European trade press that had (and has) a great catalog of emerging media scholarship. I was so relieved, you can’t imagine. When I went to my department head to share the great news, he looked at the contract, frowned, and said, “This is no good. You’re going to have to tear this up and keep looking if you want tenure. You need to publish with a reputable *academic* press.” I consulted other senior faculty in the department and they all said the same thing. One colleague said, “It’s bad enough you’re writing about video games. You can’t expect the committees to forgive that *and* the fact that you’re publishing with a trade press too.”

So I called the editor at Springer-Verlag, explained the situation (which he was understandably annoyed by), and went back to approaching us university presses. I finally got lucky a few months later when I contacted a new acquisitions editor named Dan Waterman at the University of Alabama Press. Dan liked the project, helped me revise it for the press’s “Rhetoric, Culture, and Social Critique” series, and championed it to the Board of Directors. I heard later that my department’s promotion and tenure committee still struggled with recognizing the project as legitimate scholarship, but it was hard to deny someone with a book contract in hand from “a reputable academic press.”

JR: Did your game studies-based promotion/tenuring in 2004, the maturation of LGI, and the gently increasing simmer of the field of game studies at that time alter your institutional or professional positionality in any way (beyond the obvious job security associated with tenure, of course)?

KM: It’s never just one thing that changes our institutional positionality, but rather a confluence of circumstances. In my case, it was all the things you mentioned together that started boosting my profile institutionally and professionally. Getting tenured in game studies meant that I was suddenly available to department

heads and deans all over the country who needed an external reviewer for assistant professors seeking promotion and tenure with a game studies research profile. That professional obligation and honor continued at the next level when I was promoted to full professor several years later.

The LGI Research Archive (LGIRA) at that point had also begun to gain some notoriety locally and nationally. By 2004 we had already helped a number of libraries and galleries put on exhibits related to the history and design of games. We were becoming a go-to resource for borrowing unusual or rare objects related to the history of video games. Moreover we had been publishing heavily in the area of game history, cultural politics, and preservation, all of which put us on the call list of many news organizations and research institutions.

Ironically, one of the areas where we had — but then lost — a leadership edge was our expertise navigating institutional politics related to creating game studies infrastructure in higher education. By 2005 or 2006, there were 25 or 30 graduate students, faculty, and staff affiliated with LGI. These were people at the forefront of the emerging field of game studies and were at institutions not only throughout the US but around the world. Most of those people had either come up through LGI in Tucson or had been associated with the Tucson chapter through attendance at professional meetings like the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association Conference, the College Composition and Communication Conference, and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Conference. A few had gotten into the field by working directly in LGIRA itself while on sabbatical, research leave, or an internship. It was at this time that the other branches of LGIRA got started and the first regional directors were selected. To go back to my point about losing an opportunity, while we had made considerable strides in establishing a transdisciplinary multi-institutional collaborative research group, and had grown a substantial game collection, the one thing that we couldn't accomplish at the University of Arizona was the creation of a game studies program itself. LGIRA has in its holdings at least half a dozen proposals to University admin-

istrators foretelling the emerging prominence of game studies and game design, none of which were ultimately accepted. They were willing to let us create a few courses and gave us a space to house the archive — much appreciated and an institutional coup in its time — but nothing beyond that.

Thus for several years we regularly fielded inquiries from other institutions about how to start a game studies program while we had failed to achieve this ourselves. Their reasonable assumption was that because of all of the people and resources that LGI had produced, we must also be connected to a robust and institutionally supported game studies program. But while we were good at securing small grants and contributions to support internships, outreach programs, community events, research stipends, and to grow the collection, we were never — well, not until 2019 — able to convince a dean, provost, or president to invest in the future of our discipline.

As you might imagine, this became quite frustrating. On the national and international scene, LGI and its members and the Archive were becoming increasingly recognized. Locally however, we couldn't get traction beyond small investments, and certainly nothing substantial in an academic context. At one point we even tried to officially connect the Archive with the University library in order to make the collection more accessible to the campus community. We were told in no uncertain terms that an academic library was no place for video games.

It was these parochial roadblocks in the face of what was clearly becoming an exciting new field that spurred Judd Ruggill and I to undertake one of our most unusual schemes (and we've had a lot): we went out on the job market together as an academic couple. Our pitch was that we'd been active in helping create this new field, had in tow an exceptionally large and growing game archive, and had collaboratively built a network of game scholars that was considerable in its size, diversity, and institutional affiliation. We wrote in our application letters that for the price of two humanities scholars (i.e., cheap), a college or department could instantly become one of the top game studies programs in the country if not the world.

The results of this endeavor were fascinating. And sometimes disturbing. We went on a handful of interviews and while we were almost always received with enthusiasm and curiosity—like seeing your first wombat—no one wanted to take the risk of investing in the creation of a new department focused on game studies and design. Or at least they didn't want to do so with the likes of us. While that was certainly disappointing, what was troubling was the fact that some people couldn't see past the fact that two male colleagues were conducting a joint search without being romantically involved. At virtually every interview we went on, we were asked directly or indirectly why we were hiding our relationship in the enlightened twenty-first century. After one of our interviews, some of the people we met actually blogged about us, openly chastising us for hiding our relationship. To more than a few of our hosts, our unorthodox proposal to create a game studies program at a research institution was far less strange than that two same-sex, non-partnered colleagues were looking to find meaningful work together in the same place. We documented our search in a series of essays for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.²

So yes, my promotion and tenure, the maturation of LGI, and the gradual rise of the field of game studies did change things for me, but not at the rate I imagined was fitting. To me, it looked like I and my colleagues in LGI—and certainly elsewhere—were pioneering an important new field of inquiry in

2 Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister, "Game for Anything: Academic Couple Seeks Open-Minded Institution for Nontraditional Relationship," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 8, 2004, C3; Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister, "A Couple of Rare Birds: How Can You Summarize Two Scholarly Careers in a Single Two-page Cover Letter?," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 21, 2005, C3; Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister, "Team Job Interviews: Two Scholars in Game Studies Share What It's Like to Endure the Interview Gauntlet with a Partner," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 18, 2004, C1+; and Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister, "Game Over: A Couple of Game Studies Scholars, Who Aren't a Couple in the Romantic Sense, Come Up Short in Their Dual Job Search," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 24, 2005, C3.

the humanities. I felt such work warranted more than just casual interest; it warranted serious institutional investment. Instead what happened was that very slowly, the field emerged — PhDs were minted, courses created, faculty hires made, academic journals founded, industry-education partnerships formed, game design programs established, and so on. It's still emerging. In 2019 my colleagues and I in the Department of Public & Applied Humanities created the first game studies undergraduate degree track at the University of Arizona. Not *game design* — there are lots of those now because institutions see this technical degree as a fast track to the multi-billion dollar game industry for their students. Our program focuses specifically on the *study* of digital games as a medium and cultural force. It was a long time in coming; digital games have been shaping global culture for more than half a century, and we're only now able to formalize the study of this phenomenon.

A big question for some of us in the field is “why has it taken so long?” Compare this to the film industry: the film camera was invented around 1892, and by 1919 the Moscow Film School was created. USC's School of Cinematic Arts followed several years later. Television studies has arguably fared about the same as game studies, and is usually lumped in with other media studies tracks. In any case, the institutional reticence to energetically take up digital game studies is mystifying. I have no doubt that in another few decades, every college and university will have a game studies program of some sort. Again, not *game design* but *game studies*. It's just too impactful a global medium to sideline in an educational context for much longer.

JR: If every college/university is soon to have a game studies program of its own, what advice would you offer the builders of these programs? That is, looking back at game studies' history and your own experience helping make that history, which of the field's design details (unintentional though they might be) are worth developing? Which are better jettisoned? What hasn't been part of the game studies story but you hope will be?

KM: My first suggestion to builders of future programs is to conduct a two-part environmental scan. Part 1 aims to see if a game studies program is something that:

- local students actually want;
- local resources can support (e.g., through access to game archives, industry connections, eager administrative interest); and
- is justifiable in terms of students' career goals.

Part 2 of the environmental scan aims to suss out what programs are already available in the region that overlap with, or are adjacent to, the ideas for a new game studies program. Key considerations here are:

1. Other units on campus that study games such as academic departments (e.g., Media Studies, Computer Science, Information Studies, Business, Law, Music), student clubs, innovation spaces, and so on.
2. Regional points of overlap and adjacency such as area high schools, community colleges, vocational schools, other higher education institutions, and community programs.
3. National and international points of overlap such as other game studies programs, game archives, game industry outreach programs, and so on.

The purpose of Part 2 of the environmental scan is to identify points of competition (which are often best to avoid) and points of collaboration (which will inevitably make the program stronger and more sustainable).

Conducting this background research will make it possible for new program creators to identify the basic elements needed in a game studies program (often easy to miss with new programs in new disciplines), locate sites for program partnerships, and discover topical gaps that a new program could address and thus become a distinctive academic “destination.” It’ll also help ensure that students have access to the soundest academic foun-

dation and the widest possible variety of perspectives on game studies, two traits that will ultimately bear fruit when students enter the job market. Pragmatically, such an environmental scan will also lay the groundwork for the formal proposal an institution will likely require to justify the unorthodox curricular addition request.

It also bears mentioning that at the beginning of such a project, many people folks might encounter will probably need to be educated about the difference between “game studies” and “game development.” And unfortunately, some people, once the distinction has been made, will be much more interested in the latter than the former. The reasons for this are fairly self-evident: “game development” clearly points to a specific career path in a well-known (if not well-understood) global industry. “Game studies” on the other hand, will seem to many like humanities disciplines such as “French” or “History,” which is to say it will seem incautious (if not downright dumb) to pursue.

In my experience, the best way to combat this way of thinking is to become versed in the many competencies to which rigorous game studies curricula contribute: the capacity to think, write, and speak critically about digital media history and influence on society and community; the ability to analyze complex assemblages of images, sounds, stories, and interfaces; the ability to study the rise and fall of an industry and any of its component parts, from startup design studios to global manufacturing and distribution supply chains; the capacity to recognize intertexts at a glance and understand how such semiotic substrates both reflect and shape culture, policy, community, and family; an understanding of how complex industries always interpenetrate and rely upon other industries, often in global contexts and often in ways that require tremendous resources related to language and intercultural competence; and many others. The study of games is necessarily the study of the nexus between people, places, histories, aesthetics, cultures, and technologies. Consequently, students who study games will find themselves well equipped to pursue a variety of careers in the game industry of course, but also in fields related to commerce, law, educa-

tion, community development, international relations, finance, marketing, the arts, and dozens of other fields where an ability to see the connections between the local and global, and the past and the future, is valued.

As for which parts of the field are worth developing or jettisoning, I'm not sure I should presume to say. Every institution—and the communities it serves—is different. In the Learning Games Initiative, we have hubs at eight different universities, and the curricular and outreach programming at each is unique. This is why conducting an environmental scan is so important. The dictum “if you build it they will come” won't hold if what you build isn't what potential users want.

That said, there are two recommendations I can make that should serve anyone planning to build a game studies program: (1) create a solid partnership with one or more game archives, and (2) create partnerships with one or more game development studios. Connecting a program to a game archive like the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive makes it much easier for faculty and students to gain access to materials that would otherwise be expensive or difficult to secure for study. Game archives can help with research inquiries, deliver photographs and 3D scans, and sometimes ship actual artifacts to authorized scholars (including student scholars). Such enhanced access to research materials can make game studies not only more tangible and interesting, but also more likely to be accurate and nuanced.

The value of a game studies program partnering with game development studios is not to help students learn how to make games themselves or even necessarily to create a school-to-industry pipeline (though this can happen). Rather, industry partners will give both faculty and students in a game studies program access to people who know how the industry operates from the inside and in the moment. This can be a tremendous resource for people trying to work out, for example, the significance of manufacturing delays on the creative process, the impacts of social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter) on development decisions, and so on. Having industry people on

tap can make it possible for faculty in the program to quickly discover emerging industry trends worth covering in class, and for students to obtain project-related insider quotes and perspectives on their arguments that are from outside the academic echo chamber.

If I were going to say in a word what I think game studies programs need to cultivate from the outset, it would be “collaboration.” Digital games since their inception have been transdisciplinary and have involved multiple audiences. This fact has been amplified over the last 50+ years. It only makes sense, then, for game studies programs to be equally wide-ranging and polyvocal, a curricular design principle that *necessitates* a program’s connection to many other academic and support units, to other industries (not just the game industry but also manufacturing, music, finance, etc.), and to other similar programs. Such collaborations will strengthen the new programs people are trying to build and help make the discipline of game studies itself more diverse, comprehensive, and accessible.

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Re-Historicizing Game Studies with C.L.R. James

Cameron Kunzelman and Michael Lutz

I.

This essay is an exploration of an idea: what would be possible if we looked to C.L.R. James's 1963 autobiography *Beyond a Boundary* as a critical text in game studies? A memoir that combines James's personal and political development growing up in Trinidad under British colonial rule with an affectionate and assiduous history of cricket in the British Empire, *Beyond a Boundary* is a familiar text to scholars working in postcolonial and sport studies. Yet, perhaps because it is less concerned with the definitional or typological methods common in volumes closer to the core of the field, it has received little attention in game studies proper. Nevertheless, we argue James models a theorization of games and play that, when considered alongside roughly contemporary texts that have been fully incorporated into the game studies canon, underscores the chauvinistic assumptions built into midcentury game and play scholarship while also highlighting a path toward an alternate history of game studies, a game studies where careful and critical attention to issues of class, race, and identity are not new developments in a recently diversifying field, but the latent potential of an already

diverse field that has been limited by a narrow apprehension of its own history and scholarly mandate.

We approach this task through a comparative method that takes a sidelong view of the history of game studies and two of its central texts, Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) and Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games* (1958). Both of these texts are obligatory citations in the game studies canon, and one of the reasons for this is the way that they deal in abstractions. Huizinga sets out to delimit the play function in culture; Caillois produces a definite categorization of games that can be plotted on a spectrum from *ludus* (rules) to *paideia* (free play). These broad theorizations, which we will address at length later in this chapter, are transportable and easily referenceable within any given work of game studies precisely because they are abstractions that seemingly emanate from nowhere, part of a historical mode of scholarly production dedicated to the construction of "universal" systems of categorization. They are categorical truisms, a kind of theorization of play and games *ex nihilo* warranted only by ample, and scattered, reference to European history and world cultures.

If Huizinga's and Caillois's systems are able to move and be located everywhere because of their abstractions, then James's work in *Beyond a Boundary* seems relatively immobile precisely because of its lack of abstraction. The book is not a sweeping set of generalizations about how games and play operate, but instead it is a personal account of how James grew up in Trinidad and came to see how his relationships to culture, colonialism, capitalism, race, and cricket were all tied up in one another through personal and family anecdotes and histories. Contrasted to the two thinkers above, who were writing in the form of the European comparativist in the beginning of the twentieth century, James's biography foregoes explicit cross-cultural structuralism or claims to universal objectivity and, therefore, does not seem to be in the right genre for speaking to larger systems beyond his own life.

We have two ways of thinking through this genre problem. The first would be to consider how game studies might be com-

plicit in larger racial-cultural systems in which whiteness is able to gain purchase on abstraction and in which Blackness is associated only with the body, a paradigm which was fully conceived and delivered by Immanuel Kant and continues through to today.¹ The second would be to consider how gatekeeping around what abstraction looks like, and who gets to engage in theoretical abstraction, is a racialized problem across disciplines and modes. As Darby English writes about the abstraction of abstract expressionist painting, “the practice itself is type-cast with a stock role, largely filled by white heterosexual men who enjoyed a kind of cultural neutrality as a matter of social entitlement.”² This is obviously not a phenomenon that only happens within the painting world, and what English points to definitely occurs in the domain of game studies and its relation between schematic abstract theorizations of play and games and the embodied ways those abstractions come to rest in the physical world. We see the purchase that Huizinga and Caillois have on the theorization of games, and on developing abstracted and purportedly broadly applicable methods of analysis, to operate on a similar cultural neutrality that allows them to be deployed as authorities that speak from both everywhere—with ample examples from world cultures—and nowhere—with the god trick of universal neutrality—at once.

As the authors of this piece, we understand James as a theorist of play who engages in the knotty reality that is the relationship between play and politics. His delivery of his theory is not done through a systemic, table- or chart-oriented system, but rather through a form of analysis that sees a throughline between play, politics, and art that can be captured in historical and anecdotal moments. We see this as a valuable mode that operates within the parameters of what Grant Farred calls the “vernacular intellectual,” a figure who is able to grasp both the popular and the

1 Robert Bernasconi, “Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up: The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy,” *Radical Philosophy* 117 (2003): 13–22.

2 Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (MIT Press, 2007), 205.

political at once.³ It is undeniable that James produced a theory of play that is moveable and locatable beyond the circumstances delimited in the book, and as such he provides us with abstractions that are generalizable as a game studies method. However, it is the genre of his writing, and the assumption that the work of Black intellectuals is relevant only in cases where race is the central topic of discussion, that prevents game studies from engaging with him as directly as it does with Huizinga and Caillois.⁴

This piece is an attempt at correcting the past and the future by considering what might have happened if C.L.R. James took his rightful place in the canon of game studies. We do so by taking up the charge laid by Stuart Hall in 1992 to honor James by taking his “ideas seriously and debating them, extending them, quarreling with them, and making them live again.”⁵

II.

In *Homo Ludens* (1938) Dutch historian Johan Huizinga argues that play precedes all or most human social activity, first appearing as a result of language’s ability to “transcend” a deterministic material reality. By collectively agreeing through language that this field is a soccer pitch, or that a roll of these dice shall wholly determine the outcome of a wager, play emerges as an ability to perceive and assess a situation and then intentionally, collectively act as if it were otherwise. Huizinga’s conception of play has become condensed within the field of game studies as “the magic circle,” a phrase that bundles together his claims that play is a “free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’” with no attendant “material interest” outside

3 Grant Farred, *What’s My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

4 Current game studies research that resumes these debates about the place of the personal and vernacular can be seen in the work of scholars undertaking autoethnographic approaches; see Stephanie C. Jennings in this volume.

5 Stuart Hall, “C.L.R. James: A Portrait,” in *C.L.R. James’s Caribbean*, ed. Paget Henry and Paul Buhle (Duke University Press, 1992), 3.

“its own proper boundaries of time and space.”⁶ Yet despite the apparent disconnect from material reality, Huizinga positions play as the primordial force from which social reality emanates.⁷

Two decades later, French sociologist Roger Caillois (1958) would revisit Huizinga in his quest to map a structuralist typology of games that remains, like Huizinga’s magic circle, deeply influential in game studies. Criticizing Huizinga’s definition of play as both “too broad and too narrow,” he nevertheless agrees that play is, at its core, free and voluntary, and while games may involve goods or property changing hands, they are in themselves unproductive.⁸ But both thinkers also deploy universal theories of play to propose and essentialize ethnic, racial, and cultural distinctions. Huizinga, for example, claims “modern European languages” are more capable of systematically discussing “play” as a universal phenomenon while recognizing that any “game” or “contest” is only one potential site of play.⁹ The implicit conclusion is that, while all societies play, only those societies where people speak “modern European languages” are truly adequate to the task of play study. Similarly, Caillois claims Roman society was predominately ruled by a form of play he calls *ludus*—“a taste for gratuitous difficulty” represented by adherence to agonistic rules or principles in both play and social life, and which had a lasting positive effect on European cultures through instilling values of competition, accumulation, and progress.¹⁰ By distinction, Caillois explains, in “classical China,” play and thus society were determined by *wan*, a term he defines as “calm, patience, and idle speculation.”¹¹ As games and literature scholar Tara Fickle has pointed out, the division between an “active” Western society and a “passive” Eastern one

6 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 7.

7 *Ibid.*, 75.

8 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 4–5.

9 *Ibid.*, 28.

10 *Ibid.*, 27.

11 *Ibid.*, 33.

not only reproduces obvious Orientalist thinking, but also Caillois draws his sense of *wan* from a poor-quality Chinese-English dictionary compiled to facilitate mercantile administration in Hong Kong, thus underscoring how deeply Orientalism, imperialism, and cultural Othering are implicated in the game studies canon.¹²

Are there theories of play that, while roughly contemporary to Huizinga and Caillois, avoid the predisposition to a white, Eurocentric “view from nowhere,” and thus suggest alternatives for the field of game studies and its critical history?¹³ Our launching point for such speculation is *Beyond a Boundary* (1963), where Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James writes what is both a history of the game of cricket and a memoir of his life as a cricket fan. In early chapters, James discusses his boyhood love of both literature and sport and considers how they contributed to his intellectual and political development as a Black Marxist in the context of British imperialism. Like both Huizinga and Caillois, James considers play in Ancient Greek society, where young boys were trained in both literature and athletics, but his conclusion is markedly distinct in how it apprehends the social reality play produces:

If for them [the Greeks] games and poetry were ennobled by their roots in religion, my sense of conduct and morals came from my two, or rather my twin, preoccupations, and I suspect that it was not too different with a Greek boy. But he went out into a world for which his training had prepared him. There was no world for which I was fitted, least of all the one I was now to enter.¹⁴

12 Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York University Press, 2019), 127–29.

13 For an elaboration of this critique and an analysis of its systemic form, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

14 C.L.R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Duke University Press, 2013), 34.

James recognizes that both his literary curriculum and his sports are sites of colonial contact and control, tools geared toward maintaining British rule and white supremacy. And yet he finds in both avenues of resistance and self-determination, places where colonized subjects demand acknowledgement within the realm of allegedly universal pastimes that nevertheless exclude them by design.¹⁵ As Sylvia Wynter notes, the issue James raises — an issue almost wholly overlooked by both Huizinga and Caillois — is that of class distinction in play, and the concomitant struggle of “two modes of desire — that of the bourgeoisie and that of the popular forces: the bourgeoisie for whom sports were ‘mere entertainment,’ for whom play served as ‘recuperation’ from the *real work of labor*” and the contrasting “popular” impetus to see play as an “*alternative life-activity in its own right*.”¹⁶

Rather than sublimating race through gestures toward a universal play phenomenon, and in lieu of hierarchizing race through play, James puts these issues front and center as the cause and matter of sport. “[T]he clash of race, caste, and class did not retard but stimulated West Indian cricket,” he says, explaining the sport’s popularity with him and his peers as a consequence of how “social and political passions, denied normal outlets, expressed themselves so fiercely in cricket (and other games) precisely because they were games.”¹⁷ He notes that while “the British tradition soaked deep into me was that when you entered the sporting arena you left behind you the sordid compromises of everyday existence. Yet,” very much against the model of unproductivity, disinterest, or unseriousness we find

15 Manthia Diawara, “Englishness and Blackness: Cricket as Discourse on Colonialism,” *Callaloo* 13, no. 4 (1990): 837, and Douglas Hartmann, “What Can We Learn from Sport If We Take Sport Seriously as a Racial Force? Lessons from C. L. R. James’s *Beyond a Boundary*,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26, no. 3 (2003): 469.

16 Sylvia Wynter, “In Quest of Matthew Bondsman: Some Cultural Notes on the Jamesian Journey,” *Urgent Tasks* 12 (1981), paragraph 5, archived at: <http://www.sojournertruth.net/matthewbondsman.html>. Emphasis in original.

17 James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 66.

in Huizinga and Caillois, “for us to do that we would have had to divest ourselves of our skins.”¹⁸ Jamesian play is a form of production;¹⁹ it is not the simple containment and diffusion of social energy, and though it may have a didactic or ideological function, that function is not fully determined. Nor is play a situation where race is put aside or “doesn’t matter,” but it is an avenue for the collective articulation and recognition of identity, and therefore a space for rendering visible and therefore challenging racial and social hierarchies, as Kishonna Gray, David J. Leonard, André Brock, and others have so clearly argued in recent years.²⁰

Such a reorientation in thinking about play makes explicit for game studies something that has also become apparent in sport studies: play and the uses to which individuals, communities, and institutions wish to put it have histories, and they are inextricable from political and social concerns, including from both colonial projects and the work of racialization.²¹ Indeed, as Soraya Murray notes, the tendency to forego explicit “identity politics” in some versions of game studies, usually by focusing on “formal material” structures of games themselves, often turns out to reinscribe critical perspectives where concerns of race, class, or gender are implied to be unnecessary or beside

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Our sense of “production” here follows that developed by James S. Hans, who uses the term to describe not only traditional economic production, but the breadth of human activity in the world that encompasses both labor and play, which for him are co-constitutive facets of production. See James S. Hans, *The Play of the World* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 25–30.

²⁰ See André Brock, “‘When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong’: *Resident Evil 5*, Racial Representation, and Gamers,” *Games and Culture* 6, no. 5 (2011): 429–52; Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020); and David J. Leonard, “Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ it Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 83–88.

²¹ Laurent Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France* (University of California Press, 2010), and Hartmann, “What Can We Learn from Sport,” 474–76.

the point.²² Yet there are further benefits to a Jamesian theory of play aside from this corrective view on how play and identity intertwine, for in making his case James also connects play to other cultural forms like dramatic and performing arts with which game studies, and games in general, have had a fraught relationship.

To reiterate what is by this point a very musty question: can games be art? Well, it is no question for James whether or not cricket is an art form: he devotes an entire chapter to the subject, putting cricket and many other sports alongside performing arts like “the theatre, ballet, opera and the dance.”²³ This is not to say Huizinga or Caillois don’t consider art in their theories, or even specific examples like theater and dance. Nor do they ignore sport. Yet when they approach these topics, they are also committed to upholding traditional notions of “high” and “low” cultural production, and thus tend to envision established art forms as sophisticated alternatives to popular sports or other allegedly vulgar, juvenile, or primitive forms of play. For Huizinga this is accomplished through the binary of the serious versus the unserious, with social movements that are too “serious” (such as Marxism and critical literary developments like naturalism) doomed to fail because they lose touch with the fundamental, unserious force of play.²⁴ For Caillois, these distinctions are described by any given play-form’s affinity for *ludus* over *paideia*, with *ludus* being explicitly theorized as the sort of complex, rule-bound play appropriate to adults, opposed to the freeform “child’s play” of *paideia*. James asks for no such qualifications, recognizing that games and their audiences are heterogeneous; he even presages modern methodologies of reception and fan studies by insisting that cricket must have an audience, and thus “organized games and *the people who watch them*” are “integral” to the critic’s data set.²⁵

22 Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2018), 29.

23 James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 196.

24 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 192.

25 James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 195, original emphasis.

What would game studies look like today if it saw games and those who play them, from the beginning of the field's formation, as unquestionably meaningful interlocutors in a lineage of cultural forms and their associated publics? As objects and subjects that need not pass litmus tests to be deemed aesthetically or culturally relevant? How would early debates on ludology or narratology have changed — would they have occurred at all in a manner close to how we now remember them — if game studies followed James's lead to see systems of play as engines for the generation of personal, social, and cultural stories, of histories? In the spirit of the present volume, we offer these questions as prompts for thinking about not only the future of game studies, but also the unrealized histories of the discipline that are yet to be written. We do not have the space in this chapter to pursue them all, let alone any one of them to the fullest extent such questions warrant, but as a conclusion, the following section briefly considers what a retheorization of play informed by James's work affords us as game scholars.

III.

Selma James was married to C.L.R. James during the time he wrote *Beyond a Boundary*, and she was heavily involved in the proposal and editing of the book itself. In a retrospective essay on the book published in 2018, James explains that “the field of play that shaped [C.L.R. James] was the West Indies — a colonial society stratified by race and class.”²⁶ Describing the difficulty of writing something that can speak to that entire system, James explains that *Beyond a Boundary* is a book of “drawing out” connections between the social and the play of a game itself, ultimately culminating in a volume that tends away from “academia's fragmentation of reality” or its impulse to split

26 Selma James, “Confronting Imperial Boundaries,” in *Marxism, Colonialism, and Cricket: C.L.R. James's Beyond a Boundary*, ed. David Featherstone et al. (Duke University Press, 2019), 255.

lived worlds into splinters of analyzable data.²⁷ “How much can be hidden by fragmentation?” she asks. “What do we know of cricket, or anything, if it is severed from every other aspect of our life and struggle?”²⁸

A Jamesian game studies inflected through *Beyond a Boundary* would not look to easy demarcations within the study of games. Rather than splitting narrative and mechanical layers away from each other, as if they could exist in a vacuum, we would evaluate them as if they were a batter’s stroke; the hitting of the ball is secondary to the quality of its hit, the speed at which it happens, the way it fits into a history of this batter’s own strokes, and what the audience expects to see. It is nearly impossible to extract traditional lessons or bullet points from *Beyond a Boundary* due to its success at communicating that knotted nature of colonial life with the cricket match. Many times in the book, James will move effortlessly from thick descriptions of how a batter moves or how a fielder plays and into broad-based analysis of the political and social dimensions that surround the game. This is, again, a resistance to fragmentation and a stylistic choice to make it clear that one cannot slice the batter’s maneuver out of the system that produces it.

Writing in a particularly Marxist tone, and after analyzing the class- and color-based hierarchy of cricket in Trinidad, James specifically notes that he does not want to relive his memories of the game in order to exorcise them from his mind. “I would consider liberation from them a grievous loss, irreparable,” he writes. “I do not wish to be liberated from that past and, above all, I do not wish to be liberated from its future.”²⁹ To work with James in game studies, then, would require us to wrangle with specific historical formations within both games and the discourses of games, rigorously historicizing our work without attempting to cleave mechanics, narrative tropes, racial framings, or modes of production away from each other in

27 James, “Confronting Imperial Boundaries,” 256.

28 Ibid.

29 James, *Beyond a Boundary*, 59.

an attempt to gain precision or methodological certainty. For James to understand cricket, he had to try to hold the game as it was played, as it was thought, as it was written, and as it was viewed all in his hand at the same time, understanding that each was a processional movement happening in tandem with the other. The entire apparatus, from the colonial household to the imperial center, was a total work of art that was only fragmented as an analytic, not as a reality.

Another way that James asks us to transform the work we do in game studies is to understand the social function of individual players in the milieu where they find themselves. A significant portion of *Beyond a Boundary* is dedicated to specific historical players of cricket and the ways that their play patterns transcended or transformed the game around them. James accomplishes this task through a rigorous historicism that holds individual player accomplishments in tension with the political economy that made them possible or impossible. Holding these things in tension, both structural violence and the capability of play to detour around it or smash through it in certain circumstances, is critical in a world where games like cricket can be “a stage where selected individuals played representative roles with social significance.”³⁰ Recognizing both historical delimiting factors and individual’s capacities to intervene in those conditions in novel ways would allow for a more complex understanding of the player-game dyad that has dominated game studies.

In many ways, game studies has picked up these ideas recently in the wake of what Tara Fickle has called “a more syncretic” generation of game studies scholars.³¹ These researchers are interested less in delimited slices of games and more in the throughlines that connect the medium to other areas of culture and enliven it. While that is a heartening development, and certainly we see ourselves as a part of that generation, we believe that only makes it more important to find the appropriate allies from the history of game inquiry that have been erased, ignored, or found to be “improper” game studies scholars.

³⁰ Ibid., 66.

³¹ Fickle, *The Race Card*, 3.

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A Story or a Machine? Revisiting the Work of Bohuslav Blažek, the Czechoslovak Pioneer of Game Studies

Jaroslav Švelch

Around 2010, as I was knee-deep in collecting material for my dissertation about the history of computer games in Czechoslovakia, my advisor — a linguist with only passing interest in games — gave me a copy of *The Labyrinth of Computer Games*, a 1990 book by Bohuslav Blažek. I had known of Blažek's work on television but was not aware he had also written about games. I expected the book to be as outdated as its cover — a confusing collage of screenshots floating in outer space. At the time, I was familiar with recent Western game studies literature by the likes of Espen Aarseth, Henry Jenkins, Jesper Juul, Janet Murray, Ian Bogost, and Helen Kennedy, and I thought this book would be at best a time capsule — a piece of historiographical evidence. With great surprise, I discovered that the text featured not only commentary on 1980s gaming, but also nuggets of sophisticated theoretical discussion that had anticipated some of the formative questions of game studies. One section headline asked, quite literally, whether computer games were “stories or machines,” predating the so-called “ludology versus narratology” debate by

about a decade. Moreover, the book embodied an inclusive and interdisciplinary vision of games research that remains inspiring to this day.

In this chapter, I revisit Blažek's writings on computer games and situate them in the background of his intellectual biography and the historical context of late socialist Czechoslovakia, following Blažek's path to being one of the first humanistic scholars worldwide to write seriously on computer games. The chapter offers an alternative to the Western-centric and Anglo-Saxon histories of the intellectual inquiry into digital games and discusses the ways in which he anticipated questions posed by later game scholars. Unfortunately, I could not meet Blažek because he passed away in 2004. Besides his published output, I will therefore draw from interviews with Blažek's wife and sons, as well as published memories from his students and colleagues.

The Spy in between Disciplines

Bohuslav Blažek's intellectual career, like that of many other non-conformist artists and scholars in communist-era Czechoslovakia, was punctuated by bans and obstacles imposed by the oppressive regime. He was born in Prague in 1942 into a middle-class catholic family that appreciated artistic and intellectual pursuits.¹ His father ran a drugstore, and neither of his parents joined the communist party. Likely because of his family's bourgeois background, Blažek was not admitted to university education after finishing high school. He briefly trained as a telecommunications technician at a vocational school, where he participated in a theater group and a school magazine. Eventually, he was allowed to enroll at the Film and Television School

1 Biographical information based on personal email communication with Jiřina Olmrová, November 10, 2020, and September 8, 2021, as well as the following sources: Michal Illner, "Odešel sociální ekolog Bohuslav Blažek," *Sociologický časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 41, no. 1 (2005): 141–42, and Bohuslav Blažek, *Divadlo v proměně civilizace* (Pražská scéna/ Nakladatelství AMU, 2018). All quotes from Czech sources have been translated by me.

of the Academy of Performing Arts, where he graduated from dramaturgy. While he appreciated the lively environment of the film school, he felt that it did not satisfy him intellectually and went on to study philosophy and psychology at Charles University. Even there, he felt unfulfilled and often skipped lectures, showing up at exams with a list of books he studied on his own.

During the more liberal years of the late 1960s, he was involved in the country's progressive cultural scene, writing for newspapers and magazines, and finishing his first (and only) novel. After the Soviet invasion of 1968, he was, however, banned from publishing and almost the whole print run of his novel was destroyed. In the following two decades, he often struggled to find work; around the time that he married the psychologist Jiřina Olmrová in 1971, he toiled as a window cleaner. He intermittently worked for several research institutions, including the Institute of Landscape Ecology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and the Department of Complex Modeling at Sport-propag, a government agency tasked with developing sports infrastructure. The latter department's relative obscurity made it a short-lived haven for free-thinking intellectuals of the era. Thanks to his connections and work assignments, he had access to otherwise unavailable foreign literature. For periods of time, he worked as a freelance translator and — after his ban ended in 1978 — writer (see fig. 13.1). With Olmrová, he published books on child psychology and disabilities; on his own, he wrote on linguistics, scientific hoaxes, interior design, and computer games. He wrote extensively on theater, too, although his output on the topic is fragmentary. After the fall of the communist regime, he briefly published on media before moving on to social ecology and research of the Czech countryside.² Until his untimely

2 The published titles include, among others: Bohuslav Blažek, *Mezi vědou a nevědou* [Between Science and Non-Science] (Pressfoto, 1978); Bohuslav Blažek and Jiřina Olmrová, *Jaké děti nejsou* [What children are not like] (Mona Publishing, 1979); Bohuslav Blažek and Jiřina Olmrová, *Kráska a bolest: Úloha tvořivosti, umění a hry v životě trpících a postižených* [Beauty and pain: The role of creativity, art, and play in the life of the chronically ill and the disabled] (Panorama, 1985); Bohuslav Blažek, *Tváří v tvář*



Fig. 13.1. Bohuslav Blažek in the 1970s; photo courtesy of the Blažek family.

death, he supported progressive causes such as feminism and strove to write accessibly and engage in public dialogue even if it meant giving up a traditional academic career.

While Blažek's intellectual legacy may seem dauntingly eclectic, it is also heavily interconnected. To an extent, Blažek's relentless interdisciplinarity was borne out of his non-conformism. As a writer friend reportedly said of him, "he walked the world like a spy," unable to fit into a particular position in the society.³ These personal traits were compounded by the fact that he was denied a stable institutional background. He devoured

obrazovce [Facing the screen] (Sociological Publishing House SLON, 1995); and Bohuslav Blažek, *Venkovy – anamnéza, diagnóza, terapie* [Countrysides: anamnesis, diagnosis, therapy] (Era Publishing House, 2004).

3 Personal email communication with Jiřina Olmrová, November 10, 2020, and September 8, 2021.

academic literature from various disciplines; besides Czech and Slovak, he read in English, German, French, Polish, and Russian. He paid respects to authors as diverse as Niels Bohr, Erving Goffman, and Marshall McLuhan.⁴ There is, however, a unifying sentiment in his work, and that is the hope for a participatory and communal post-industrial society that will do away with Cartesian dualism, which he blamed for estranging people from nature and community. To an extent, this hope for unity stemmed from his catholic spirituality. In a revealing 1989 interview, he spoke of “a new universal structure that does not feature strict boundaries between the elevated observer and the lowly observed, but a softly fluid partnership.”⁵ He found parallels to his vision in the works of the catholic theologian Romano Guardini, as well as in the techno-optimism of Alvin Toffler and the new age utopianism of Marilyn Ferguson’s *The Aquarian Conspiracy*.

His disdain for hierarchies also manifested in his contempt for elitist culture and his enthusiasm for lowly cultural forms such as cabaret or computer games, somewhat reminiscent of Henry Jenkins. Starting in the 1970s, he railed against the cult of professional actors, arguing instead for participatory theater where anyone should be allowed to act—independently of Augusto Boal, who pursued similar ideas in Brazil.⁶ Blažek’s approach to games and play developed from his critique of theater; besides the more usual suspects such as Gregory Bateson, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Sherry Turkle, it was inspired by the psychology of Jean Piaget, by Russian literary scholars Mikhail Bakhtin and Olga Freidenberg, French sociologists Jean Cazeneuve and Jean Duvignaud, and the cultural anthropology of Margaret Mead and Claude Lévi-Strauss.⁷ Unlike many Western game scholars, Blažek only mentions Johan Huizinga in

4 Bohuslav Blažek, “Za teorií poznání (radostný nekrolog),” *Sociologický Časopis / Czech Sociological Review* 41, no. 1 (2005): 143–46.

5 Blažek, *Divadlo v proměně civilizace*, 225.

6 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. Charles A. McBride and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (Theatre Communications Group, 2014).

7 Blažek, *Divadlo v proměně civilizace*, 227.

passing and never quotes Roger Caillois. He does not consider play something that should be purified and protected by a magic circle, but rather a participatory principle that should permeate culture and society. In the 1989 interview mentioned above, he argued that ancient Greek culture created a rift between the players (actors) and the audience as well as between elected politicians and citizens. Inspired by so-called primitive cultures, he saw play as a way of bringing people closer to each other, and closer to nature.⁸

This approach to play also informed Blažek's work as a practitioner and facilitator of play. Together with his wife, he experimented with using play in therapeutic sessions with mentally disabled children. Over the years, the two of them devised a repertoire of "soft games" — informal and participatory activities they staged with their family, friends, or students, inspired by therapeutic approaches of Carl Rogers and by the New Games movement.⁹ In one of the games, *Strange Table Manners*, a family or a group of friends change the way they eat, for instance by dining at an upside down table. The point of the game was to discuss the social conventions of dining and rediscovering this banal activity with fresh eyes. This "soft," exploratory quality was also something that he looked for in computer games.

Games as Humanized Computing

Blažek's writing on microcomputers and computer games closely reflected his own user experience. Before micros, he had little interest in digital technology. He described mainframes as "grumpy golems" controlled by a technocratic elite of "vainglorious computer clergy."¹⁰ Microcomputers, on the other hand,

8 Ibid., 222–30.

9 Ibid.

10 Bohuslav Blažek, "Počítače a kultura," *Informace pro uživatele mikropočítačů* 1, no. 1 (Počítač přítel člověka) (1989): 8; Bohuslav Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her* (Mladá fronta, 1990), 35; and Bohuslav Blažek, "Bída naší vědy III: Několik trapných epizod," *Vesmír*, April 5, 1994, <https://vesmir.cz/cz/casopis/archiv-casopisu/1994/cislo-4/bida-nasi-vedy-iii.html>.

were friendly and accessible—only they were not available on the Czechoslovak market. Like many local enthusiasts, he asked a friend with a travel permit to import a computer for him, and in 1987, he acquired a Commodore 64. Blažek used the machine primarily for word processing—which he found incredibly empowering—and discovered games through his sons, who shared the micro with him and whom he often watched play. He connected to the local hobby scene and wrote a couple of articles for a hobby club newsletter. The Commodore 64 was then, however, a marginal platform in the country, which was otherwise dominated by the British-made Sinclair machines, and Blažek was probably unaware of the inventive local computer game production for the latter platform.

In 1987, Blažek started writing articles about microcomputers and games for mainstream magazines and newspapers. At the time, most of the writing on the topic consisted of programming primers, troubleshooting guides, and game walkthroughs. Instead, Blažek wrote enthusiastically about the cultural and educational benefits of computing, aiming to alleviate the fears of negative effects of computers and games on children. In his view, micros heralded a “humanistic revolution” in technology that would bring a more egalitarian society.¹¹ He saw them as facilitators of a new, qualitatively different, “culture of laymen,” who would use their machines to write, create graphics, and share ideas.¹² While his views might seem overly utopian today, they not only mirrored Anglo-American techno-optimism of the time but also provided a glimmer of hope under the stale and technocratic regime of late Soviet-era Czechoslovakia.

The Labyrinth of Computer Games was published in 1990 by the major publishing house Mladá fronta, but the manuscript had already been finished in the first quarter of 1989—just a few months before the Velvet Revolution, which brought the end of the one-party communist rule. Demonstrating the potential of

11 Bohuslav Blažek, “Spor o počítačové hry,” *Informace pro uživatele mikropočítačů* 1, no. 2 (Počítačové hry) (1989): 6.

12 Blažek, “Počítače a kultura,” 9.

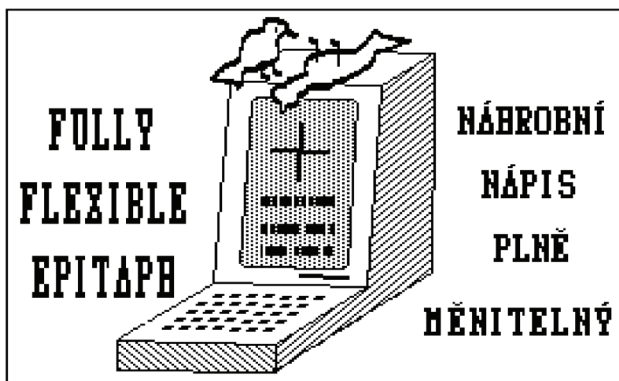


Fig. 13.2. *The Labyrinth of Computer Games* included cartoons inspired by some of the concepts introduced in the book and drawn by Blažek on the Commodore 64. This one illustrated micros' capacity to present personalized content.

micros to create a lay culture, Blažek typeset the whole book on his Commodore 64 using a font designed by his son Filip, who was fourteen at the time.¹³ While a popular rather than academic book (see fig. 13.2), it was peer-reviewed, a common practice for educational titles at the time. The volume is framed as a part of a larger debate about microcomputers, children, and education. Blažek delivered a scathing critique of the Czechoslovak computing education policies, which he likened to a “mass production line of little programmers.”¹⁴ Following the work of Jean Piaget’s disciple Seymour Papert, Blažek instead celebrated unsupervised, interactive experimentation with computers, in which the machine should be considered a partner rather than just “commanded and/or obeyed.”¹⁵

Many of the book’s arguments revolve around the distinction between “hard” and “soft” mastery introduced by Sherry

¹³ He did not, however, design the cover.

¹⁴ Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

Turkle, whose *The Second Self* Blažek read in a German translation. While hard mastery is “the imposition of will over the machine through the implementation of a plan,” soft mastery is more intuitive and interactive, and achieved through “arranging and rearranging [concrete] elements, working through new combinations.”¹⁶ Blažek connects the dichotomy to a larger conflict between “hard” (rational and industrialist) and “soft” (playful and artistic) worldviews and suggests that the micro-computer may “heal the fissure” and “create an opportunity for meeting and interplay” between these two poles.¹⁷

Computer games are, in his view, the ideal gateway to this new understanding of technology. According to Blažek, they humanize computing by introducing “bodily movement, touch, color, immediate sonic response, and last but not least aesthetic and emotional experiences.”¹⁸ Not all games provide the same benefit, however. Alluding to Turkle as well as to his own practice, he distinguishes between “hard” and “soft” games. A hard one — he gives an example of a simple racing game — has precise rules and the player can only perfect their performance within the given constraints. A soft game, on the other hand, presents “an overwhelming field of possibilities,” with the player acting as “not as a racer, but as a researcher — in the ideal case, a creator.”¹⁹ Writing about the obscure non-linear shoot-em-up *Mutants* (Denton Designs, 1987), for example, Blažek praised the “option to either join the chase for the highest score or just dodge bullets and curiously wander through cosmic levels,” which endows the game with “softness, meaning an opportunity for a significant creative input of the player.”²⁰ Although he clearly favors soft games over hard ones, he admits that even a hard game can be temporarily soft before the player discovers its rules. And while

16 Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, rev. ed. (MIT Press, 2005), 101–2.

17 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 154.

18 Ibid., 157–58.

19 Bohuslav Blažek, “Děti s počítači,” *Děti a my* 17, no. 4 (1987): 25.

20 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 72.

the two categories resemble Roger Caillois's concepts of *ludus* and *paidia*, Blažek was likely unaware of those.²¹

The Language of Computer Games

Bookended by the wider pedagogical and philosophical concerns is the central part of the book — Blažek's analysis of computer games as a medium.²² One of its goals is to counter the arguments of the "self-appointed protectors of the purity of our mother tongue" that computer games are primitive. With enthusiasm typical of his tirades against cultural conservatives, Blažek argues that computer games in fact possess a "multi-layered language overflowing with imagination."²³ Fascinated by the diversity and complexity of the titles he played, he sees games as an ever-changing form of culture that eludes stable definitions. To explain how games borrow from other media and from each other, Blažek draws from Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, but that is the only piece of literature he directly cites in this part.²⁴ While inductive in nature, his approach seems to owe more to European (post)-structuralist linguists and semioticians such as Louis Hjelmslev, Roland Barthes, or Yuri Lotman, all of whom he referred to elsewhere.²⁵

Blažek starts the chapter on the "language of computer games" by discussing whether games are stories or machines.²⁶

21 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001). A Czech translation of this book was published in 1998.

22 In the book itself, Blažek does not directly call computer games a medium, although this is implied in comparisons to film, which he calls "an older medium." An explicit formulation can be found in a later text: Blažek, *Tváří v tvář obrazovce*, 59.

23 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 118. In a later article, he even argued that the language of games is more complex than that of productivity software. Blažek, "Spor o počítačové hry."

24 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT Press, 1994).

25 Blažek, "Za teorií poznání (radostný nekrolog)."

26 In 1985, Mary Ann Buckles already hinted at the hybrid nature of computer games when mentioning that the interactive fiction game

Going through the games in his archive, he finds that games with a common theme (such as “medieval” or “oriental [sic]”) are often composed from entirely different “building blocks,” including gameplay and interface elements. He argues that games differ from each other primarily by the functions that they offer — like, for instance, consumer electronics products. The answer, then, is that games are “machines more so than stories,” anticipating Aarseth’s claim that a cybertext (a category also including most computer games) is “a machine for the production of variety of expression.”²⁷ Blažek further refines this statement in the following description of his two-tier model of computer game structure:

As we examined the mutual relationships between computer games and the ways in which new games come to life, it has become clear that we should distinguish between their two layers. The surface one, which usually gives the game its name, refers to its story, characters, or the environment in which it takes place. If we stuck to this layer of story, it would seem that computer games have their closest relatives among television programs: *Defender of the Crown* is a historical film, *Killed Until Dead* is a detective story, and *California Games* a sports broadcast.

Under this surface layer, which can be examined by asking what the game is about and what the pictures on the screen remind us of, there is a second layer, less conspicuous but also often discussed and likewise easily accessible: it consists of what we could call building blocks of game-machines. [...] Each of these elements is also about something; it is, how-

Adventure “is the fusion of the principles of competition, rules with make-believe, of winning or losing with reading.” She did not, however, directly address the tension between the two components. Mary Ann Buckles, “Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame ‘Adventure’” (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1985), 60.

27 Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 3.

ever, not a story fragment, but rather a component that provides a certain type of service.²⁸

The duality of “story, characters, or environment” and “building blocks of game-machines” resembles the fiction/rules dichotomy popularized by Juul in *Half-Real* or — even more closely — Frans Mäyrä’s distinction between a “core” of gameplay and a “shell” of a game’s representational aspects.²⁹ Blažek even warns that looking at the story level, “we are unable to discern what is new about computer games, and we classify them using categories meant for what preceded them,” echoing concerns that were expressed by David Myers around the same time, and more forcefully by Aarseth or Markku Eskelinen in 2001.³⁰ Does that mean that Blažek was a “ludologist”? There are several important differences. First, unlike Juul or Aarseth, Blažek does not pursue a technology-agnostic theory that would cover both digital and non-digital games — in fact, he rarely mentions the latter in the book. Second, while ludologists tend to see *rules* as the defining feature of games, Blažek does not distinguish rules from non-diegetic interface elements. In his ontology, an in-game time counter has the same status as its menu. His somewhat vaguely defined “building blocks” therefore appear closer to *affordances* from design theory, meaning the properties of technological systems that enable and encourage users’ actions.³¹

28 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 52. The games mentioned are *Defender of the Crown* (Master Designer Software, 1987), *Killed Until Dead* (Artech, 1986), and *California Games* (Epyx, 1987).

29 Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (MIT Press, 2005), and Frans Mäyrä, *An Introduction to Game Studies: Games in Culture* (SAGE, 2008), 18.

30 David Myers, “Chris Crawford and Computer Game Aesthetics,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 24, no. 2 (1990): 17–32; Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>; and Markku Eskelinen, “The Gaming Situation,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>.

31 William W. Gaver, “Technology Affordances,” in *CHI ’91: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (ACM, 1991), 79–84.

Comparing computer games to their console and arcade versions, Blažek claims that although the story layer seems identical, “the difference is abysmal and the similarity purely superficial.”³² He claims that console and arcade games are immutably baked in the machine’s hardware, while computer games “are gradually becoming full-fledged software,” which “beckons you to intervene and offers you tools do so, which are so user-friendly and entertaining that they become another game, or a metagame.”³³ His very early use of the term *metagame* refers mainly to construction kits and in-game editors, and aligns with his normative preference for soft, open-ended games.³⁴ As he did not see arcade and console games of the time offering those options, he summarily dismissed them as purely “consumerist.” His reasoning was likely inspired by McLuhan, who finds similar differences between film and television although they can both carry seemingly identical audiovisual content. While Blažek’s evaluation of the difference between computer and arcade gaming is outdated and biased, the very fact that he points out that each piece of hardware creates a completely different “communication situation” attests that he was interested in the context of play as much as formal properties of games.³⁵ In a later text, he highlighted the importance of discourse about computer games, writing that “as around any card or board game, there is conversation around computer games. It is almost as important as the game itself.”³⁶

Dissecting Games Alive

Surprisingly for a mass-market non-fiction book but understandably given his longstanding interest in epistemology,

32 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 54.

33 Ibid., 55. In Czech, he uses the word *metahra*, a direct equivalent of “metagame.”

34 Until the late 1980s, the term *metagame* was used almost exclusively in the fields of mathematic and economic game theory.

35 Blažek, *Tváří v tvář obrazovce*, 56.

36 Ibid., 57.

Blažek provides a detailed methodology for examining games. His first guiding principle is that games can only be “dissected alive.” He writes that unlike a film critic, a game analyst cannot afford the luxury of experiencing a work and then reflecting on it later. Playing a game provides the player with an experience of “individual images and key events” that is non-linear and discontinuous. To know a game, it must be interacted and experimented with—if a player-analyst plays the game too proficiently, for example, they should try to be “intentionally clumsy for a moment.” Blažek recommends approaching each game as a “minor research project.” He even provides a form (“a scholar’s questionnaire”) with a list of items that should be noted down, and a listing of a database program in BASIC to store and index the resulting data. Clearly, he believed that every player could (and should) be a game scholar.³⁷

The items on the list fall into several categories: credits, images, sounds, categorization, openers, propellers, and connectors. The inclusion of credits (and even “cracker credits,” as most games circulating in Czechoslovakia were cracked copies) reflects Blažek’s interest in paratextual elements of computer games. When analyzing images and sounds, Blažek stresses the need to explore the interactions with player input and pays attention to the layout of the game world; he also discusses the importance of intertextuality. By categorization, he means situating a title in existing thematic or generic categories, and therefore mapping its relationships to other games as well as other media texts. Propellers are described as elements that motivate and measure the player’s performance and are closest to what we would now call game mechanics; connectors (further divided into controllers and messengers) pertain to the game’s interface. Although he never states this explicitly, propellers and connectors, together with another category of openers (such as menus and in-game demo modes), likely correspond to the “building blocks of game-machines” from his two-tier model. While not nearly as detailed, Blažek’s methodological suggestions are not

37 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 85–87.

too far from guidelines given, for example, by Clara Fernández-Vara in her 2015 textbook of game analysis.³⁸

Loosely following this method, Blažek presents his own six case studies, which he calls “portraits,” each of which highlights a different aspect of the medium. In all six cases, the formal analysis is just a stepping-stone for further observations. In the passage about *Krakout* (Gremlin Graphics, 1987) — a clone of *Breakout* (Atari, 1976) — he crosses into phenomenology of play, admitting that formal analysis cannot account for player experience: “The concept of the game itself is not sufficient to make it successful. What is decisive is the execution of it, a certain charm of the game that cannot be explained by simply enumerating its elements.”³⁹ Himself an avid player of *Krakout*, he describes his experience of “ecstatic concentration” and “zen-like emptiness of the mind,” inviting a comparison to David Sudnow’s phenomenology of arcade gaming in 1983’s *Pilgrim in the Microworld*.⁴⁰

Writing of *Test Drive* (Distinctive Software, 1987), a driving game, he brings to the fore the tension between simulation and abstraction, noting that “a simulator must possess an extent of baroque illusionism. Simplification of everything would not suit it.” However, he admits that “some aspects of the simulated situation can, or even have to, be extremely schematized, or even left out — you will easily excuse not having to open the door with a handle or fasten your seatbelts.”⁴¹ This observation anticipates Angela Ndalani’s exploration of the neo-baroque nature of computer games, as well as Juul’s discussion of “a certain level of abstraction” that games employ when representing real-life activities or fictional settings.⁴²

38 Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (Routledge, 2015).

39 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 60.

40 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 63, and David Sudnow, *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (Warner Books, 1983).

41 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 77.

42 Angela Ndalani, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (MIT Press, 2004), and Jesper Juul, “A Certain Level of

While examining *California Games*—and *Winter Games* (Epyx, 1985), a previous installment in the series—he discusses humor in computer games, a topic that has been severely under-researched until relatively recently.⁴³ Pointing out the role of humor in alleviating player failure, he hails the introduction of comic fail animations as a groundbreaking moment in game design:

[T]he player is no longer motivated purely by performance but enjoys enacting these catastrophic variants. It might seem like a minor detail; however, it fundamentally shifts the social impact of games. Humor opens up a differently structured temporal perspective, in which you cease to be hounded and you move with newfound freedom. Humor induces a distance toward the events, which is however, not dispassionately cold.⁴⁴

While the book is in many ways a defense of computer games, Blažek does not pass up critique. He dedicates a whole chapter to the question of software piracy and decries the hoarding of pirated copies of games that he observed among some players, arguing that it leads to uninformed, consumerist use of the medium as opposed to the inquisitive and experimenting one that he promotes.⁴⁵ More interestingly, he criticizes the games' obsession with "incessant quantitative growth" and "quantitative comparisons of performance," which he describes as remnants of the industrial era that playfulness should replace.⁴⁶ This should not, however, be interpreted as a straight-up critique

Abstraction," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007: Situated Play*, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07312.29390.pdf>.

43 Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, Tomasz Z. Majkowski, and Jaroslav Švelch, eds., *Video Games and Comedy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 3.

44 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 82–83.

45 I discuss his critique of informal distribution in more detail in my monograph: Jaroslav Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (MIT Press, 2018).

46 Blažek, *Bludiště počítačových her*, 113, 157.

of neoliberalism. Throughout the book, Blažek's relationship to Western consumer culture remains ambivalent. He warns against mind-numbing consumerism but admires the ingenuity and creativity sparked by the free market. Over the years, he became more critical of what he called "pathologies" of Western capitalism, such as the advertising discourse or American conservative talk radio, which he decried as "aggressive pseudo-dialogue."⁴⁷ He also became more critical of computer games, which did not fully live up to his vision. In a text from 1991, he notes that "there is still too much old about them: we mostly remain their consumers, we habitually [acquire] more and more games to replace the ones we have 'used up,' we want to be astonished by the increasingly illusionist graphics and exotic ideas."⁴⁸ One can easily imagine that if Blažek was alive today, he would appreciate *Minecraft* but despise gamification and mainstream commercial titles.

Conclusion

Save for a few more short texts, Blažek's monograph on computer games was a one-off and became something of a footnote in his enormous oeuvre. Its appeal to the contemporary playing public was likely limited by the focus on the Commodore 64 at a time when most Czechoslovak players used Sinclair machines. In his obituaries and posthumous collections, it is mentioned as an example of his broad range of interests but never discussed in depth. Bar a few master's theses, no one had cited it in an academic text before I did so in 2010.⁴⁹ There are several possible reasons why the book has been so overlooked. It arrived at a time when the book market was crowded with titles that could be finally published after years of censorship. As a mass-market non-fiction book, it might have been considered non-academic and therefore not worth citing. Blažek himself died just as game

⁴⁷ Blažek, *Tváří v tvář obrazovce*, 24.

⁴⁸ Blažek, *Divadlo v proměně civilizace*, 146.

⁴⁹ According to Google Scholar data captured in February 2021.

studies was becoming an established discipline, missing the opportunity to revisit the topic and enter a dialogue with other scholars of games and play. While the language barrier has made Blažek's writing inaccessible to international audiences, local game scholars in the 2000s — just like myself — might have been caught in the peripheral mindset, believing that all the inspiring works of this new discipline must come from the West and forgetting to seek inspiration closer to home. It is likely that other texts from other countries and regions have been similarly overlooked.

Bohuslav Blažek nevertheless deserves a place among the pioneers of humanistic computer game research — alongside David Sudnow, Mary Ann Buckles, or David Myers. With Sudnow, he shares an interest in the kinesthetic aspect of games, but ultimately takes a more artifact-oriented, systematic approach. With Buckles, he shares the belief that computer games are complex and imaginative artifacts, although her 1985 dissertation focused much more on the literary aspects of games.⁵⁰ While Myers developed a semiotics of computer games concurrently with Blažek, it was less concerned with the structure of a game artifact and much more with the structure of playthrough.⁵¹ The differences between these authors can be explained not only by the different theories and methodologies they used, but also by the examples they worked with — arcade games in Sudnow's case, text adventures in Buckles's, and mostly strategy games in Myers's. Blažek's corpus was relatively wide, but did not, for example, include any text adventures, which might explain his lack of interest in story. The work of all these authors predated the 2001 launch of the *Game Studies* journal, which can be considered a beginning of game studies' disciplinary ambitions.⁵² While Myers continued researching games, Buckles, Sudnow, and Blažek soon pursued other interests or professions. Revis-

50 Buckles, "Interactive Fiction."

51 David Myers, "Computer Game Semiotics," *Play & Culture* 4, no. 4 (1991): 334–45.

52 Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies."

iting their works can reveal new potential directions in game studies as well as original views of the field itself.

Blažek's story/machine dualism as well as his two-tier model of computer games anticipated the work of "ludologist" scholars such as Juul and Aarseth. But rather than calling him a ludologist or proto-ludologist, I would argue that the similarity between his and the ludologists' models results from applying a certain analytical approach (structuralism) to a certain corpus of games (one that includes titles without apparent narrative, such as *Krakout*). The story/machine dualism's appearance in Blažek's book suggests that it is an idea that should not be associated with just one particular school of thought. Ludologist scholarship of the early 2000s has been criticized for limiting the scope of inquiry to formal features of games and excluding the inquiry into representation, ideologies, and gender.⁵³ Blažek, on the other hand, found value in formal analysis, but he used it as a means to an end rather than an end itself, invariably connecting games to their broader social and cultural context.

Barring some factual errors and hasty conclusions, much of the *Labyrinth of Computer Games* has stood the test of time and would not be out of place in today's game studies textbooks. It is coherent and comprehensive, offering a statement of purpose, a theoretical model, a methodology, and case studies. Despite writing in a country behind the Iron Curtain where gaming was a niche pastime, Blažek's interdisciplinary knowledge and restless inquisitiveness allowed him to imagine many of the future concerns of game scholarship. Blažek's vision of the field was, in many respects, inclusive. He explicitly mentioned or implicitly assumed the co-existence of formal analysis, critique, phe-

53 Esther MacCallum-Stewart, "'Take That, Bitches!' Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives," *Game Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014), <http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart>; Emma Vossen, "On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse" (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018); and Frans Mäyrä, "Game Culture Studies and the Politics of Scholarship: The Opposites and the Dialectic," *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* 1, no. 9 (2020), <https://www.gamejournal.it/game-culture/>.

nomenology, and sociology of play and player communities, as well as applied research into games and learning, and therapy through play. At the same time, he saw the study of games as a democratic endeavor open to any player. His book invites readers to become game scholars themselves and gives them a solid toolkit — as if Blažek was already passing the baton to those who would come after him.

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On the Political Function of Triflers and Spoilsports in Game Studies

Liam Mitchell

Conventional gameplay requires that players follow rules and aim for goals. Unconventional gameplay does not: cheats ignore rules, triflers ignore goals, and spoilsports ignore both. While cheating, trifling, and spoilsporting may be unconventional in this formal sense, they are perfectly common modes of gameplay: many players bend or break the rules, play for fun rather than to win, or try to ruin the game for others. Additionally, these formally unconventional modes of gameplay seem to be perennial preoccupations for those scholars concerned with the relationship between games and life, or with a political reading of games. Since the field's inception, game studies scholars have conceived of these unconventional modes of play in metonymical or indexical terms, turning cheats, triflers, and spoilsports into different kinds of social actors who trouble the laws and conventions of society in different ways. While cheats can at least imitate good citizens, since both attempt to "win" the various games that they play, spoilsports and triflers cannot.¹ Spoilsports — whether nihilists, trolls, griefers, or protesters — refuse

¹ On the social function of the cheat, see Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007) and Adam Douglas Lindberg,

to honour the institutions that create and maintain order, while triflers — whether artists, jesters, tricksters, or the mad — refuse the terms of victory that those same institutions establish.

In this chapter, I review four books that cast the trifter and spoilsport as agents of social change. While I begin with Johan Huizinga, whose argument about the spoilsport's ability to "shatter" the game world is foundational for the scholarship that followed, I focus on two late-twentieth century philosophers whose loosely related work has been pivotal for other fields but relatively neglected by game studies. Where Huizinga emphasizes the societal function of the spoilsport, Bernard Suits and James Carse call attention to the trifter, whose goal-agnostic gameplay works to reveal and play with rules and conventions rather than to straightforwardly overturn them.² I conclude by demonstrating the significance of Suits and Carse for contemporary game studies scholars, examining McKenzie Wark's deployment of the figure of the trifter in the digital context of twenty-first century "gamespace." By demonstrating the affinity between these texts, I resituate the figure of the trifter and the work of two philosophers in the field of game studies, arguing that both are significant and underutilized tools for those scholars interested in the political dimensions of gameplay.

Huizinga on Cheats and Spoilsports

Game studies scholars usually reference Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* for its articulation of the magic circle as a place and time set apart from the ordinary world "within which special rules obtain." Less frequently discussed are the subjects that immediately follow: cheats and spoilsports. Because rules establish order, cheats and spoilsports pose a serious threat to the magic circle: "as soon as the rules are

"Playing Badly: The Heroic Cheat and the Ethics of Play" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2018).

2 On the connection between Suits and Carse, see Robert E. Innis, "Philosophy and the Play of Life," *Focaal – European Journal of Anthropology* 37 (2001): 121–42.

transgressed the whole play-world collapses.”³ Cheats break the rules, but only in order to (appear to) win; they therefore “still acknowledge the magic circle” even as they transgress it. Spoil-sports, however, reject the game entirely, and to very different effect. Huizinga’s word choice here is significant: when cheats are caught, the play-world “collapses,” but when spoilsports withdraw from the game, the play-world “shatters.”⁴ It cannot be put back together.

It is because of this existential threat that society is “much more lenient [...] to the cheat than to the spoil-sport”: where the former must be punished, the latter “must be cast out.” Here, Huizinga intends for “society” to apply to the worlds of both inconsequential play and “high seriousness.”⁵ In the latter, spoilsports appear in the most consequential roles, as “apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc.”⁶ The apostate rejects their faith, revealing the arbitrariness of its tenets; the innovator rejects tradition, revealing the unreflective adherence to the tried and true; the conscientious objector rejects their state, revealing the limits of its authority.

The shattering of worlds is not a purely destructive act, however; by convincing others of the failings of the old order, spoilsports can create “a new community with rules of its own.”⁷ But

3 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Beacon Press, 1950), 10–11.

4 Ibid., 11. Roger Caillois similarly divides the cheat from the spoilsport, which he terms “nihilist”: “the cheat’s dishonesty does not destroy the game. The game is ruined by the nihilist who denounces the rules as absurd and conventional, who refuses to play because the game is meaningless. His arguments are irrefutable.” Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 7. While Caillois’s far-ranging writing is certainly political, and while he, like Huizinga, elsewhere connects nihilism to Nazism, he spends no more time in *Man, Play and Games* with the figure of the spoilsport or the nihilist. Roger Caillois “The Nature and Structure of Totalitarian Regimes,” in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudia Frank, trans. Camille Naish (Duke University Press, 2003).

5 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 12.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

Huizinga's assessment of the rule-breaking and -making potential of the spoilsport stops short of outright approval. Just as there are good and bad rules and good and bad social orders, there are more or less "civilized" ways for spoilsports to engage in their creative destruction. *Homo Ludens* concludes with an assessment of the "play-element in contemporary civilization," and here he outlines a number of concerns, some of which have been brought about by destructive spoilsports: the rejection of the liberal order of nation-states; the increasing drive of technologization; the professionalization of sports; even — in 1938! — the gamification of business.⁸ It is here that Huizinga is at his most political: he argues against what he generalizes as "puerilism," or "that blend of adolescence and barbarity" that has led to a "world-wide bastardization of culture."⁹ His more detailed description of puerilism suggests that he has Nazism foremost in mind.¹⁰

Huizinga devotes much of the final chapter to this particular threat to the international order. Comparing international law to the rules of a game, he argues that

the integrity of the system rests on a general willingness to keep to the rules. The moment that one or the other party withdraws from this tacit agreement the whole system of

8 "Business becomes play. This process goes so far that some of the great business concerns deliberately instil the play-spirit into their workers so as to step up production." Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 200.

9 *Ibid.*, 205.

10 This makes good sense considering Huizinga's biography and his other work: As rector of the University of Leiden in 1933, he barred a Nazi historian from visiting the university. See Willem Otterspeer, "Huizinga before the Abyss: The von Leers Incident at the University of Leiden, April 1933," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27, no. 3 (1997): 385. Three years later, he published *In the Shadow of Tomorrow: A Diagnosis of the Modern Distemper* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1936), a critique of modernity that ranged from Germany to the United States, again criticizing Schmitt (123–27). On the connection between these books, see Jason Hawreliak, "In the Shadow of Tomorrow: Huizinga on Play before *Homo Ludens*," *First Person Scholar*, April 16, 2014, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/johan-huizinga-in-the-shadow-of-tomorrow/>.

international law must, if only temporarily, collapse unless the remaining parties are strong enough to outlaw the “spoilsport.”¹¹

He then narrows his critique to one particular spoilsport, the Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt, whose writing threatened to replace the fragile international order with sovereign decisionism. The subjects of foremost concern for Huizinga in these pages are Schmitt’s *Ernstfall*, or the ever-present threat of combat that informs the international order, and his related friend-enemy distinction, according to which the enemy is a people that poses an existential threat to one’s nation and that must therefore be exterminated.¹²

Where Schmitt moves downwards, Huizinga reaches upwards: “[o]nly through an ethos that transcends the friend-foe relationship and recognizes a higher goal than the gratification of the self, the group or the nation will a political society pass beyond the ‘play’ of war to true seriousness.” Creative cultural change can take place only if the play-element is “pure.” Otherwise, cheats and spoilsports—now united rather than distinguished, perhaps given the seriousness of the threat of rule-breaking alone—will “shatter” civilization. It cannot withstand a challenge that dispenses with the play-element entirely. Limits of some form must be self-imposed and freely accepted, for this, Huizinga asserts, is the nature and ethos of play.¹³

What is Huizinga’s justification for this position, and where exactly does it leave play? Huizinga writes here in Kantian terms, referring not only to an ambiguous “ethos that transcends the friend-foe distinction” or to “true play,” whatever this might be, but to “the fixed, unmoving point that logic denies us[. . .] the sphere of ethics.”¹⁴ However, as Alexander Lambrow argues, Huizinga’s appeal to the Kantian transcendental under-

11 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 208.

12 Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, rev. ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26–32.

13 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 211.

14 *Ibid.*, 213.

mines his argument about the culture-creating force of play in two ways. First, by insisting that play remain within certain liberal, humanist boundaries — the “standards set up by reason, faith or humanity”¹⁵ — Huizinga fails to think through the fatal illiberal challenge of Schmitt’s *Ernstfall*.¹⁶ He is thereby unable to respond to it without descending to mere polemical rejection. More significantly, he is also unable to recognize the more radical potential of play. As Lambrow writes, “in differentiating between free play and moral seriousness [i.e., the transcendental realm of the ethical], Huizinga ignored much of play’s existential potentiality. For play is about more than the freedom of the imagination; it too is about the serious matters of ethics and political freedom.”¹⁷

It is hard to blame Huizinga for recoiling from Schmitt’s position. However, by condemning Schmitt as a spoilsport and nostalgically reminiscing on a time when war was conducted according to rules, Huizinga ultimately ignores the radical possibilities of both play and its refusal.

Suits on Triflers

If political concerns are the alpha and omega of Huizinga’s text, they seem, at least at first, to be irrelevant for Suits. Despite its subtitle, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia* has generally been regarded by game studies scholars as useful for its definition of game playing as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” and not much more.¹⁸ This is unfortu-

¹⁵ Ibid., 211.

¹⁶ On the legacy of Schmitt’s critique of liberalism, see the essays collected in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt* (Verso, 1999).

¹⁷ Alexander Lambrow, “The Seriousness of Play: Johan Huizinga and Carl Schmitt on Play and the Political,” *Games and Culture* 16, no. 7 (2021): 828.

¹⁸ This “portable” version of the definition appears in Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, illus. Frank Newfeld (Broadview Press, 2014), 43. On the general neglect of Suits in game studies, see Liam Mitchell, “Reconsidering *the Grasshopper*: On the Reception of Bernard Suits in Game Studies,” *Game Studies* 20, no. 3 (2020), http://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/mitchell_liam.

nate, both because *The Grasshopper* has assorted insights to offer the attentive reader and because a close reading of the book reveals that Suits is also concerned with the roles played by cheats and spoilsports with regard to social change. Additionally, Suits introduces a new figure to our list of player types: the trifter.

The Grasshopper takes the form of a Socratic dialogue between the titular Grasshopper and the ants Skepticus and Prudence. It begins with the death of the Grasshopper: having failed to prepare for the coming winter, he succumbs to the cold. Before his death, however, he recounts a strange dream “in which it is revealed to me [...] that everyone alive is in fact engaged in playing elaborate games, while at the same time believing themselves to be going about their ordinary affairs.”¹⁹ Skepticus then proposes to Prudence that they rehearse the previous summer’s dialogue in order to unravel the puzzle of the dream. In the third chapter, Skepticus recalls the Grasshopper’s four-part definition of game playing:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit the use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.²⁰

Skepticus, unconvinced, argues that the Grasshopper’s definition is too narrow:

Since many goals exist only because they are goals in *games* [I continued], it does not seem possible in these cases to identify a prelusory goal, that is, a goal which — in your words,

19 Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 11.

20 Ibid., 43.

Grasshopper — can be achieved “independently of the game in which it figures or may come to figure.” How can check-mate, for example, be achieved aside from a game of chess?²¹

To respond to the objection, the Grasshopper distinguishes between an individual “game of chess” and the broader “institution of chess,” putting together a four-part typology of players, triflers, cheats, and spoilsports in order to illustrate the difference.²²

The institution of the game relates the game to ordinary life, but the term is not precisely defined in the text. Other scholars’ interpretations of it²³ prompted Suits to furnish a definition: “[t]he institution of game *x* is a body of diverse meanings and practices that have in common the fact that all derive their being (that is, they are what they are) by being related, in one way or another, to game *x*.”²⁴ There are, in other words, a diverse, open-ended number of ways in which something might relate to a game:

there are a number of things that are lusory not simply by being *instances* of games but by being related to games in a variety of other ways, for example, by trifling with them, by cheating at them, by defining them, by isolating elements of them for examination (e.g., their prelusory goals), by teach-

21 Ibid., 48. Filip Kobiela expands helpfully on this objection in “The Ludic Background of Constitutive Rules in Bernard Suits,” *Argumenta* 4, no. 1 (2018): 125–37.

22 Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 49.

23 Heather Lee Logas, for instance, claims that the institution of a game “means the social conventions surrounding a particular game.” Heather Lee Logas, “Meta-Rules and Complicity in Brenda Braithwaite’s *Train*,” *Proceedings of DiGRA 2011: Think Design Play*, <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/11301.05058.pdf>. Angela J. Schneider and Robert B. Butcher, meanwhile, argue that the distinction between a game and its institution is akin to the distinction between a universal and a particular — “the game of chess and a game of chess.” Angela J. Schneider and Robert B. Butcher, “Pre-lusory Goals for Games: A Gambit Declined,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 24, no. 1 (1997): 41.

24 Bernard Suits, “Games and Their Institutions in *The Grasshopper*,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 33, no. 1 (2006): 4.

ing them, by training for them, and, of course, by playing them. These kinds of things taken together are what I mean by a game's institution.²⁵

Cheats and triflers are significant here because these "exasperating personalities," Suits writes, "are my *evidence* for the distinction between a game and its institution."²⁶ Players, cheats, triflers, and spoilsports engage differently with the game and its institution. Triflers are "quasi-players" who obey the game's rules but do not care about its objectives. When a chess player moves their pieces into an interesting pattern, then they are "not playing chess, although it is clear that [they are] operating within the institution of chess, for all [they are] doing is making chess moves."²⁷ Similarly, cheats disobey the game's rules but care very much about its objectives, so they too are engaging not with the game as such but with its institution. Spoilsports, by contrast, care not at all for the game or for its institution: they reject both. Therefore,

In summary it may be said that triflers recognize rules but not goals, cheats recognize goals but not rules, players recognize both rules and goals, and spoilsports recognize neither rules nor goals; and that while players acknowledge the claims of both the game and its institution, triflers and cheats acknowledge only institutional claims, and spoilsports acknowledge neither.²⁸

While these figures help the Grasshopper to defend his concept of the prelusory goal, and hence his definition of game playing, they are also significant for conceptualizing the relationship between games and life. As I have argued elsewhere, there is evidence in *The Grasshopper* and other publications that Suits

²⁵ Ibid., 5.

²⁶ Ibid., 3.

²⁷ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 49.

²⁸ Ibid., 51.

thinks about that relationship in political terms. His writing, as frequently ambivalent as it is analytical, asks readers to treat the non-definitional sections of the text as more than mere appendices to the apparently bloodless definition of gameplay. Curious parables connect the text to the world: when two retired army generals, bent on discovering a game without rules, find themselves locked in a mutually destructive stalemate, the reader might interpret the story as a commentary on the violence of rationality; when an imaginary Utopia of game playing collapses back into the world of work, the reader might draw conclusions about the fragility and changeability of the lines separating work from play, in-bounds from out-of-bounds, and even friend from enemy.²⁹

Without rehearsing these earlier arguments any further, I can point here to one further piece of evidence for Suits's concerns with the political: his expansive conception of the institution of the game, paired with the fluidity of his player categories, definitively situates all games in the real world. As "a body of diverse meanings and practices," the "institution" of a game necessarily connects the game to a broader social context that might not be obvious to casual players or observers. The fluidity of Suits's typology substantiates this claim. Cheats, triflers, and spoilsports rarely begin their ludic lives *as* cheats, triflers, and spoilsports. Rather, they usually begin as conventional

29 Mitchell, "Reconsidering *The Grasshopper*." Colleen Macklin offers a further commentary on the political character of Suits's description of Utopia. She invokes Suits while arguing that "games are queer because they provide us with a notably different way of looking at and living in the world," which is to say different from the utility-maximizing, purposive form that human activity is often forced to take. She therefore argues that Suits's Utopia — "the queer utopia" — may already be here. Additionally, she pushes Suits's definition of play in a playful direction, emphasizing the *pleasure* of playing: "to adopt the rules of the game not in order to achieve something 'useful' in the world, but to enjoy the inherent pleasures of play itself—to revel in playing games as 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.'" Colleen Macklin, "Finding the Queerness in Games," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 256–57.

players but then modify their relationship to the game's rules and goals for a variety of different reasons. Most speedrunners, for instance, play a video game conventionally at first, and only begin speedrunning it — introducing a new criterion for victory, and thereby trifling with it — when they have mastered the basics. Glitch-hunters — explorers who probe at a video game's boundaries — offer a more extreme example of the same process: they need to familiarize themselves with the game as a game before analyzing it as a technology.

So trifling is typically preceded by play. Players tend to engage first with what they take to be the game *qua* game, but then move outwards into the game *qua* institution, developing an appreciation for the complexity of the game and the extent to which it is embedded in society. Moreover, in resituating themselves within the game's institution, trifiers, cheats, and spoilsports necessarily conceptualize that institution differently, with spoilsports opposing the game and the entire institutional apparatus that maintains it, cheats wedding themselves to the game's objective and the institutional legitimization that corresponds to a recognized victory, and trifiers developing a more ambivalent and complicated relationship to the institution that supports the game's inviolable rules. Trifling in the form of speedrunning or glitch-hunting, for instance, means conceptualizing the game not as an ideal collection of metaphysical characteristics (rules, goals, attitudes, consequences) but as a fallible material artifact (code, cables, transistors, voltage) and an evolving social phenomenon (competitive, cooperative, dialogical, citational).³⁰ Different forms of trifling of course entail different relationships to a game's institution, since trifling is institutionally ambivalent, but all forms of trifling situate gameplay in a particular social and political context.

30 I expand on these and other forms of trifling in the fourth and fifth chapters of *Ludopolitics: Videogames against Control* (Zero Books, 2018).

Carse on Deviants and Artists

While it is certainly possible to use Suits's conception of the game's institution to situate gameplay in the materially, historically, and politically complicated world at large, Suits does not foreground this interpretation. Indeed, this is part of his rhetorical strategy. Neither does he focus much on the trifter, let alone any possible social functions that it might serve. Carse, on the other hand, provides a relational account of play in which games are explicitly connected to the broader world and in which spoilsports and triflers rub shoulders with deviants and artists—with “infinite players” who put fundamental social categories into play. Carse thus returns us to explicitly political concerns in a fashion reminiscent of Huizinga, albeit through a lens more theological than anthropological. It is perhaps because of this methodological difference that his *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* is generally underutilized in game studies.³¹ Because of both the text's philosophical register and its political employment of figures

31 *Finite and Infinite Games* is referenced in several game studies monographs, including Edward Castronova, *Life Is a Game: What Game Design Says about the Human Condition* (Bloomsbury, 2021); Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009); Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (Penguin Press, 2011); and Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (Elsevier/Morgan Kaufmann, 2008). However, these references are generally cursory. The same is the case with the field's journals, where the book is discussed briefly and then dropped: see, for instance, Vincenzo Idone Cassone, “Mimicking Gamers: Understanding Gamification through Roger Caillois,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 4 (2017): 340–60; Ivan Mosca, “+10! Gamification and deGamification,” *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* 1 (2012), https://www.gamejournal.it/plus10_gamification-and-degamification/; Ivan Mosca, “What Is It Like to Be a Player? The Qualia Revolution in Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 585–604; and Jaakko Stenros, “The Game Definition Game: A Review,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 499–520. Nathan Hulsey's *Games in Everyday Life: For Play* (Emerald Publishing, 2020), which employs Carse in a critique of gamification, is one notable exception to this rule.

roughly akin to spoilsports and triflers, namely deviants and artists, it is especially worth considering here.

The book begins by distinguishing finite games, which are spatially, temporally, and numerically bounded games that can be won, from infinite games, which are boundless and endless.³² The former are recognizable as games, though they also include gamelike institutions like schools and families. The latter are less recognizable as games, and they include phenomena as diverse as language, touch, and gardening. The basic opposition between finite and infinite ramifies endlessly, giving the book a dialectical momentum. Its early pages, for instance, cover familiar territory, but from an expanded perspective: Carse agrees with Huizinga regarding the immutability of the rules of a finite game, but he contrasts this immutability with the continually shifting terrain of an infinite game like language, wherein the rules must change during play so that play may continue and expand.³³ Carse discusses seriousness and playfulness, too, and here he again departs interestingly from Huizinga: where the finite player is seriously bent on winning, and thus hostile to contingency, the infinite player is playful, and thus open to a range of outcomes.³⁴

Throughout the text, Carse seems to prefer the infinite to the finite. Indeed, the opposition seems to entail an ethics of play discernable in further dialectical oppositions: finite players prefer the show of theatricality, while infinite players prefer the potentiality of drama; finite players hide their intentions to improve their odds of winning, while infinite players are vulnerable to the vicissitudes of chance; finite players aim for a sort of immortality via title, while infinite players content themselves with names and death.³⁵ It is difficult not to infer a set of moral injunctions on the basis of this existential philosophy:

32 James Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (Free Press, 1986), 3–7.

33 *Ibid.*, 9.

34 *Ibid.*, 15.

35 *Ibid.*, 17–25.

one should acknowledge and accept fate, allow others to be who they are, and act without foreknowledge.³⁶

These moral injunctions engender political ones, since “political realities do not precede, but follow from, the essential fluidity of our humanness.”³⁷ Indeed, Carse addresses political issues directly and normatively, using the fundamental distinction between finite and infinite play as a basis for judgment. Patriotism, for instance, is “the desire to contain all other finite games within itself”; in all its forms — “chauvinism, racism, sexism, nationalism, regionalism” — patriotism is thus not only “inherently belligerent,” but “inherently evil.”³⁸ Sovereignty, too, Carse finds problematic, and here he seems to agree with Schmitt: since “the law is powerful for persons only because they obey it,” law-makers and property-owners “must introduce a theatricality into their ownership sufficiently engaging that their opponents will live by its script.”³⁹

It is in the context of Carse’s existential philosophy and the moral and political injunctions that follow that he discusses figures almost directly analogous to the spoilsport and the trifter. Society, Carse claims, opposes or forbids deviancy because deviants violate scripts and threaten rules. Like spoilsports, deviants openly challenge the status quo, and in so doing open up new cultural possibilities — new worlds.⁴⁰ But Carse’s deviant differs slightly from Huizinga’s spoilsport because of the distinction that he makes between society and culture: society, which is “the sum of those relations that are under some form of public constraint,” is associated with finite play, while culture, which is “whatever we do with each other by undirected choice,” is asso-

36 Carse relies on existential philosophers throughout the text. In the section under consideration, for instance, he invokes Friedrich Nietzsche’s gaiety (“the infinite play of life is joyous”) and Martin Heidegger’s *Mitsein* (“[i]t is laughter *with* others”). *Ibid.*, 35.

37 *Ibid.*, 39.

38 *Ibid.*, 42, 57.

39 *Ibid.*, 48.

40 *Ibid.*, 43–44.

ciated with infinite play.⁴¹ As a grand finite game that includes many smaller games, society is structurally opposed to the modifications of rules, since such modifications threaten its theatricality, coherence, and self-justifying nature. Culture, on the other hand, requires deviancy, since deviancy has the potential to introduce significant variations to its rules and thereby evolve the infinite game.

Where Carse's deviant closely resembles the spoilsport, his artist loosely resembles the trifler. Carse spends more time on the artist, too, which is helpful, since his discussion of *poiētai* — “inventors, makers, storytellers, mythologists,” or any “makers of possibilities” — clarifies the general difference between his interpretation of these rules-agnostic figures and the interpretations of his predecessors.⁴² He alludes to Ezra Pound's notion of artists as “the antennae of the race,”⁴³ emphasizing their attunement to culture and creative change. Tuned to such a frequency, artists do not directly challenge society. Like triflers, they are disinterested in goals in general — but it is this very disinterest that makes them culturally significant: “[w]hat confounds a society is not serious opposition, but the lack of seriousness altogether.” However, unlike triflers, the play of artists is fundamentally unrelated to rules: artists *elide* authority, “ignor[ing] all lines whatsoever.”⁴⁴

The artist, unbound by the constraints of finite games, seems to exist in a world apart. Indeed, the ultimate political work of the artist is to put any and all boundaries back into play by engendering an awareness of this shifting fundament: artists “do not display their art so as to make it appear real; they display the real in a way that reveals it to be art.”⁴⁵ Here, Carse seems to be far removed from the ruled, numerical, goal-oriented world of games as they are normally conceived. His writing verges on

41 Ibid., 40.

42 Ibid., 53–55.

43 Quoted in Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Signet Books, 1964), xi.

44 Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*, 53–54.

45 Ibid., 63.

the transcendental. From this perspective, the general disinterest in his work shown by game studies makes sense. However, in describing the artist as a player of infinite games and finite play as a species of infinite play, Carse finds himself in the company of a handful of game studies scholars who situate gameplay in a complicated interplay of social, political, ethical, and linguistic structures. Recall that Carse's principal example of an infinite game is language, which enables and is enabled by continual play. Although Carse never mentions Jacques Derrida, his work seems connected: for Derrida, the field of language "is in effect that of *play*, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because [...] there is something missing from it."⁴⁶ In this Derridean reading of Carse, it is not so much that the finite is contained and enabled by the infinite, but that the finite and the infinite condition one another, and that the artist calls attention to this mutual conditioning.⁴⁷

Wark on Triflers and Gamespace

Wark is one of the few game studies scholars to offer a critical assessment of both Carse and Suits. This makes sense, since her work covers similarly political territory: *Gamer Theory* offers an interpretation of the contemporary world in terms of the logic of the video game.⁴⁸ Because everything has become so thoroughly digitized and gamified, we cannot help but interpret the world

46 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), 289. See also, Alexander Galloway *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), and Colin Milburn, *Mondo Nano: Fun and Games in the World of Digital Matter* (Duke University Press, 2015). Galloway and Milburn both quote from this part of Derrida's essay in their work.

47 Wark offers a slightly different reading: "play is a free movement that can engender more rigid structures. It is not the game that is the precondition of play, in other words, but play that is the condition of possibility of the game." McKenzie Wark, "Designer Playtime," *Rhizome Digest*, January 5, 2004, <http://archive.rhizome.org/digest/?msg=00095>.

48 McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2007), \$25.

as “a matrix of endlessly varying games—a gamespace—all reducible to the same principles, all producing the same kind of subject who belongs to this gamespace in the same way, as a gamer to a game.”⁴⁹

Since Wark’s gamespace resembles Carse’s society (and echoes some of Huizinga’s concerns about technologization to boot), readers might expect her to offer play as an alternative to totalization.⁵⁰ However, “[p]lay no longer functions as a foil for critical theory. The utopian dream of liberating play from the game, of a pure play beyond the game, merely opened the way for the extension of gamespace into every aspect of everyday life.”⁵¹ *Gamer Theory* posits the triumph of the finite game of society over the infinite game of culture, denying the appeal to a transcendental beyond.

While Wark only briefly references Carse in the text itself, she offers a commentary on his work in an endnote. Just as Lambrow criticizes Huizinga for his reality-defying transcendentalism, Wark criticizes Carse for his “theodicy.” His distinction between infinite/transcendent/good and finite/immanent/evil is untenable because it is impossible to disentangle the former from the latter, or even to confirm its existence: after all, in Carse’s text “the existence of infinite games is to be taken on faith.”⁵² Attempting to play infinite games instead of the finite games in which we are inescapably enmeshed is wrongheaded, so infinity should be placed in abeyance: “[i]f a gamer theory is to separate itself from a gamer theology, then the existence of an infinite game, of being, form, or spirit outside [gamespace] has

49 Ibid., §15.

50 Kenneth J. Gergen agrees on the resemblance between gamespace and society, referencing Carse and a concept quite close to gamespace in an argument on the “ludification of culture”: “play is not only becoming a central activity [in Western culture], but [...] increasingly serves as the organizing metaphor for human activity.” Kenneth J. Gergen, “Playland: Technology, Self, and Cultural Transformation,” in *Playful Identities: The Ludification of Digital Media Cultures*, ed. Valerie Frissen et al. (Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 70.

51 Wark, *Gamer Theory*, §16.

52 Ibid., §175n.

to be held in suspension while the gamer trifles within the finite game, whose existence is discovered in the act of gaming.”⁵³ Wark is not denying the possibility of the infinite game, but insisting that critical attention should be focused on the finite games that make up our lives.

Wark is proposing a method, too — one familiar not only from the Situationist *détournement* that she is known for analyzing,⁵⁴ but from Suits. If she is right — if the totalization of gamespace has made it impossible to put boundaries into play — then it is impossible for the artist to work in the elusive fashion that Carse describes. However, this does not mean that there is no role in gamespace for the artist, nor that there is no possibility for meaningful political change. Rather, art and politics become play *within* lines and boundaries rather than moves that *ignore* or *oppose* them. They take the form of trifling:

You do not play the game to win (or not just to win). You trifle with it — playing with style to understand the game as a form. You trifle with the game to understand the nature of gamespace as a world — as *the* world. You trifle with the game to discover in what way gamespace falls short of its self-proclaimed perfection.⁵⁵

It is not necessary for the artist to attain an external vantage point to make this discovery; indeed, “[t]he artist is now the insider who finds a new style of trifling within the game. The

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Wark writes about the Situationists not only in books like *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (Verso, 2013) but also the more general *A Hacker Manifesto* (Harvard University Press, 2004) and *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (Verso, 2019). It is not coincidental that *Gamer Theory*, like *A Hacker Manifesto*, shares the axiomatic style of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone Books, 1994), nor perhaps that Guy Debord, like Marcel Duchamp, turned from the study of society to the play of games. McKenzie Wark, “The Game of War: Debord as Strategist,” *Cabinet* 29 (2008), <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/29/wark.php>.

⁵⁵ Wark, *Gamer Theory*, §21.

artist as outsider is dead, for there is no outside from which to signal back across the border. The limit to the game has to be found from within.”⁵⁶ We cannot transcend certain limits, but this is no obstacle to discovering that gamespace is in fact imperfect, or that its ontological status “as *the world*” is provisional and changeable.

Triflers are liberated by their goal-agnostic orientation. Unconcerned with winning or producing, they can learn a game’s rules better than the gamewrights who designed them—or, more pertinently, the programmers who coded them. They routinely discover that these rules only appear to be inviolable—or, better, that they can be perverted despite their inviolability. Triflers create not in spite of conditions that seem hostile to creativity, but because of them. They are, like Carse’s *poiētai*, able to relativize boundaries. In fact, trifling, conceived in the sharply delimited context of gamespace, reintroduces the limitless horizon of infinite play, this time within societal boundaries rather than without. Trifling performs the work that Carse attributes to the infinite player, but in the context of a world comprised exclusively of finite games.

Gamer Theory, with its continual return to the trifter, could be read as a footnote to *The Grasshopper*—an explicitly aesthetic and political update to Suits’s text that takes digital media and fully consummated capitalism into account. Wark might agree: *The Grasshopper*, she writes, “is not just a classic work but a work of art in its own right.”⁵⁷ Channeling Suits and Carse, Wark demonstrates the general political valence of the trifter and the vital role they play in the context of gamespace, and in doing so, she makes the work of these philosophers more accessible to game studies scholars today.

In adopting and popularizing Suits and Carse, Wark’s work is particularly valuable for those scholars approaching games from an intentionally political perspective. This is not only because Suits, Carse, and Wark all discern political themes in game-

⁵⁶ Ibid., §98.

⁵⁷ Ibid., §40n.

play, or establish some merely structural connection between games and life. In establishing a general framework for thinking through the political entailments of things like trifling and spoilsporting, these scholars provide the field with an analytical lens for assessing the social significance of a wide range of ludic phenomena. And they insist on normative — often radical — claims about power, structure, agency, and justice. There is no shortage of game studies scholarship concerning particular political issues, which is a growing and welcome evolution of the field, but there is comparatively little scholarship that provides a broad normative and philosophical framework for thinking about games — particularly a framework that is also grounded in a thoroughgoing critique of the present.

It may be no coincidence that the monographs examined here share critical ambitions and a focus on unconventional modes of gameplay. From the work of Wark and early contemporaries like Alexander Galloway⁵⁸ to more recent scholarship from the likes of Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux⁵⁹ and Anne-Marie Schleiner,⁶⁰ the study of unconventional modes of gameplay always seems to open onto political terrain. The terms used for these modes vary; the authors last named prefer “counterplay,” “metagaming,” and “ludic mutation,” respectively. And the research that comes out of these subfields — not just *gamer theory*, as it were, but empirically grounded *games study* — varies too. But the many studies of these political, paratextual phenomena — all of these incidentally significant cultural expressions — relate to the figures of the trifter and the spoilsport.

58 Galloway, *Gaming*.

59 Stephanie Boluk and Patrick Lemieux, *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

60 Anne-Marie Schleiner, *The Player's Power to Change the Game: Ludic Mutation* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

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My Mother Was a Jump Rope Rhyme: A Game Studies That Might Have Been

Carly A. Kocurek

In and out the dusty bluebells
In and out the dusty bluebells
In and out the dusty bluebells
I am your master.

— Counting out rhyme,
collected by Iona and Peter Opie, 1951–1952¹

In her semiological critique of *Homo Ludens*, Margaret Carlisle Duncan argues that Huizinga's work betrays a fundamental elitism and naivete and that these characteristics have served to undermine play and leisure studies, the fields in which Huizinga had, at the time, exerted the greatest influence: "It is time for scholars to abandon their rapturous, childlike wonder in the face of play and to rid themselves of the dangerous belief — and this is a reworking of Huizinga's quote at the beginning of this paper — that true play discourse knows no propaganda; its aim

¹ "My Aunt Minnie Bought a Pinnie," by Iona and Peter Opie, CC BY-NC 4.0, Archive of Iona and Peter Opie, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, MS Opie 1 fol. 6r.

is in itself, and its familiar spirit is happy inspiration.”² As Carlisle Duncan suggests, children arguing over the rules of tag (the arguing, of course, being the best part of tag) know that games are complex negotiations of power systems, many of them drawn from the game’s material, political, and social contexts. As a famous example, Frederick W. Taylor, the founder of scientific management whose name is enshrined in the term Taylorism, spent his childhood attempting to wrest control of games from other children, seeking to control their very structure so that other children had to play on his terms or not at all.³ Awareness of these sometimes-subtle power dynamics has long been a central concern in play studies. However, in ways both large and small, game studies frequently stands separate from play studies. And we as a field continue to draw on Huizinga’s legacy for both good and ill, often replicating the failings that Carlisle Duncan first pointed out 40 years ago.

In this chapter, I imagine a game studies more closely aligned with play studies and cultural studies. In particular, I consider the key findings of researchers such as Carlisle Duncan, Miriam Forman-Brunell, Brenda Laurel, Kyra Gaunt, Vivian Gussin Paley, Linda Hughes, Maria Montessori, and Iona and Peter Opie. My goal here is not to offer a literature review but rather to interrogate how much the relative marginality of these thinkers in game studies reflects an entrenched masculinist impulse to devalue both women thinkers—as most of these scholars are women—and young girls and their concerns—as many of the thinkers here studied not just children, but girls. By engaging works such as Gaunt’s groundbreaking study of Black girls’ jump rope rhymes, and Forman-Brunell’s exhaustive research on dolls both as cultural artifacts and richly meaningful playthings, I suggest a reconceptualized game studies in which certain types of video games are not arbitrarily cleaved from the

2 Margaret Carlisle Duncan, “Play Discourse and the Rhetorical Turn: A Semiological Analysis of Homo Ludens,” *Play and Culture* 1 (1988): 28–42.

3 Judith A. Merkle, *Management and Ideology: The Legacy of the International Scientific Management Movement* (University of California Press, 1980), 35.

broadest study of leisure, play, and girlhood.⁴ Reconceptualizing game studies as a field more closely aligned with cultural studies enables a more direct engagement with games' profound political and cultural stakes. Games, like culture broadly, are *always already* political, and a turn toward the intellectual legacy of play studies presents a key reconfiguration of game studies' shared project. I am not proposing that all game studies be cultural studies but only that game studies as cultural studies can and should be a key area of inquiry in the field. If we do not consider games and gameplay in situ, we miss their true function, meaning, and power.

The Researcher in the Playground

Much of the early work on play focused on how children *should* play or how they might learn from play. Take, as an example, Maria Montessori's documentation of children's learning activities and the educational methods she advocated for. Montessori writes — often quite beautifully — about the games she advocates for and their effects. The Silence Game is among the most widely practiced of these today, and Montessori wrote of its importance and purpose in a way that makes explicit its spiritual undertones:

The satisfaction we give to this state of the soul is to call by name the child who is waiting and he comes to us; we call them all and they all come to us one by one; they move, they get up and come, seeking to make the least possible noise. The child who waits and hears himself called has accomplished a kind of cycle of satisfaction; he comes walking quietly on tip-toe so as not to make a noise.”⁵

4 Kyra D. Gaunt, *Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York University Press, 2006), and Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830–1930* (Yale University Press, 1998).

5 Maria Montessori, “About the Importance and the Nature of the Silence Game,” *AMI Communications* 1/2 (1976): 2–4.

In this, she suggests a uniform experience of a game that speaks to some essential part of the child. The game's intention is clear, but real children's actual experience of it is not. Worth noting is that Montessori's spiritual framing of the Silence Game would not conform to Huizinga's ideal of pure play, uncorrupted by instrumentation or objective, since the play here serves a purpose—connecting the child with the spiritual. Further, if you speak to children about their experiences playing this game and its ilk, they may not remember being called by the teacher at all, instead remembering the joy of playing in the classroom instead of working or assuming (correctly, at least in some cases, I'm sure) that the game was played not for spiritual benefit but rather to buy the teacher a few minutes of calm and quiet in an often raucous environment. Neither of those speaks to Montessori's ideals or intentions, but they do speak to children's real experiences of the game.

Those real experiences have long been the domain of folklorists. Rather than dictating how children ought to play to achieve particular value-driven ends dictated by adults, folklorists work to document children's own culture and folklore, games, songs, rhymes, and stories passed child-to-child. Iona and Peter Opie spent literally decades documenting children's rhymes, songs, and folklore in exacting detail. Even in the Opies's work, there is a clear disconnect between how children actually play and how they might summarize something for others—that is to say, even children would have a canonical version of a rhyme or song which they would describe when asked to provide information but would then often have other versions to deploy depending on context or use. This is not to say that a game as it *ought* to be played isn't interesting, but only that both that version and its permutations are interesting and that the gaps between them, and the specific contexts in which one version or another might be enacted, are interesting in their own right.

I opened this chapter with a fragment of a counting rhyme as documented by the Opies because the rhyme's mix of seeming nonsense and explicit reference to domination underscores what I think is so important about understanding games in a

context where the stakes are clear. Children jostle one another for social positioning, and they're often quite aware of the power machinations embedded in play, including games. These types of negotiations are not solely the domain of children at play and are exhibited through play and games across age and other demographic categories. Even simple counting out games like "My Aunt Minnie Bought a Pinnie" are far from rote. Kenneth Goldstein, for example, found that children's actual play of counting out games often involved careful adjustment by the players, rendering the games much more strategic than typically assumed.⁶ We can likely all think of games that people tend to play in ways other than they *should* play, with *Monopoly* being one famous example.⁷

That rules are malleable, that the game changes with every tweak of the rules, is well known among game designers and game studies scholars, but it's also well known by children. They seek dominance and subvert it, seizing control of the rules to gain advantage or, simply, to be in charge. Linda Hughes, in her dissertation on girls' games, found complex and sometimes surprising dynamics at play; while her study of foursquare, "Beyond the Rules of the Game: Why are Rooie Rules Nice?," first published in 1983, is well known due to its inclusion in *The Game Design Reader* in 2005, her larger body of work is not as widely known or invoked as it should be.⁸ Goldstein, Hughes, and other play researchers were part of the same research milieu as Brian Sutton-Smith, but in game studies, Sutton-Smith is often as far into play studies as researchers delve, and we lose

6 Kenneth Goldstein, "Strategy in Counting-Out: An Ethnographic Folklore Field Study," in *The Study of Games*, ed. Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith (Ishi Press International, 2015).

7 Simon Whistler, "What's Actually Supposed to Happen When You Land on Free Parking," *YouTube*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeowNXMn1og>.

8 Linda A. Hughes, "Beyond the Rules of the Game: Why Are Rooie Rules Nice?," in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, ed. Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman (MIT Press, 2005).

much understanding of games as social and cultural phenomena to this ignorance.

Play and games are both always embedded in cultural politics. The 1980s and 1990s saw a tremendous amount of work undertaken by feminist scholars who sought to reclaim and understand women's experiences, both historical and current. Miriam Forman-Brunell, for example, came to the study of play and girlhood because she saw dolls as a means to understanding women's history.⁹ Dolls, as Forman-Brunell argues, carry particular values and stories embedded, but these have changed and can change — and, girls are not passive consumers who use toys, including dolls, as intended by their designers (a point charmingly illustrated by Janet Murray's anecdote about her daughter sending Barbie to a women's group).¹⁰ Gussin Paley, working as an early childhood education researcher, also turned to the gender dynamics of children's play and playthings; her book, *Boys & Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner*, examines how kindergarteners' participation in play and fantasy enable them to work through their own complex understandings of gender and identity.¹¹ Children participate in culture, but they produce culture as well, and that culture both is and is not separate from that of adults.

If the kind of playground folklore the Opies studied seems historical and potentially irrelevant to game studies scholars, that is likely because too many of us are white. Jump rope rhymes, handclapping games, and cheers, as Kyra Gaunt argues, thrive as a cultural form carried and cultivated by Black girls. They also reflect and contribute to the musical and cultural traditions of African and African American people. Black girls are the creators and keepers of these games, which are passed, girl to girl and playground to playground. These games emerged in urban areas in the 1960s and spread throughout the us and

9 Forman-Brunell, *Made to Play House*, vix.

10 See Bianca Batti's "The Past, Present, and Future of Game Studies: An Interview with Janet Murray" in this volume.

11 Vivian Gussin Paley, *Boys & Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

beyond, but, as Gaunt points out, “The musical games black girls play are a unique and under-examined ethnographic site of black musical experience.”¹² They are also unique and under-examined ethnographic sites of Black *play* experience as well. That critical attention to racial and cultural specificity in popular forms is a key project of cultural studies and one that Black game scholars like Samantha Blackmon, Kishonna Gray, TreAndrea Russworm, and Aaron Trammell strive to address.¹³ Indeed, game studies has many oversights in terms of lived, culturally specific play experiences.

Female Trouble

Play is often eccentric — something that is readily apparent in review of Brenda Laurel’s work at Interval, which led to the founding of Purple Moon and which she documented extensively in talks and publications.¹⁴ Players — of games, and more generally — play for their own reasons and in their own way. They bring with them their own personalities, their own cultural and historical knowledge, their own concerns and experi-

12 Gaunt, *Games Black Girls Play*, 57.

13 Samantha Blackmon and Daniel J. Terrell, “Racing toward Representation: An Understanding of Racial Representation in Video Games,” in *Gaming Lives in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020); Kishonna L. Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* (Routledge, 2014); TreAndrea M. Russworm, “A Call to Action for Video Game Studies in an Age of Reanimated White Supremacy,” *Velvet Light Trap* 81 (2018): 73–77; TreAndrea M. Russworm, “Video Game History and the Fact of Blackness,” *ROMchip: A Journal of Game Histories* 1, no. 1 (2019), <https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/85>; TreAndrea M. Russworm and Samantha Blackmon, “Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 93–118; and Aaron Trammell, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 2023).

14 Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Pearson, 2013); Brenda Laurel, *Utopian Entrepreneur* (MIT Press, 2001); and Brenda Laurel, “Why Not Make Video Games for Girls?,” *TED*, February 1998, https://www.ted.com/talks/brenda_laurel_why_not_make_video_games_for_girls.

ences. This is as true for players of video games as it is for any other players.

To a great degree, play scholars like Iona and Peter Opie helped lay the groundwork for these types of studies. Certainly, Colette Weil Parinello in her MBA thesis and Laurel in her dissertation and subsequent books owe a debt as well to market research, and in particular to the influence of Atari market researcher Carol Kantor, who is widely considered the first video game market researcher and under whom Weil Parinello worked.¹⁵

But, whether that lineage is traced from the humanistic study and theorization of literature, as in Mary Ann Buckles's case, or theater, as in Laurel's case, or from folklore or from market research, the point stands: These are studies invested in the messy human aspects of play. These early video game studies came up parallel to a number of relevant works in play studies. Hughes completed her dissertation on girls' playground games in 1983, and Paley's study of gendered play among kindergarteners was published in 1984. Play studies and game studies diverged, and that divergence and subsequent siloing and specialization have been to the detriment of game studies.

Worth noting, too, is that all three of these works — the first dissertation in game studies penned by Buckles and two roughly contemporary works of similar focus and depth, one from Hughes, the other Paley — were produced by women. What might that say about the lineage and history of game studies? Or, what could it? What does it mean for Buckles to be frequently addressed but rarely engaged? Her arguments, about the literary and narrative power of games, specifically *Adventure*, and the potential for immersion presented by interactive stories, have

15 Bridget Hapner and Carly A. Kocurek, "(Re)Discovering the Rich History of Game User Research: An 'Undisciplined' Approach," in *Game Usability: Advice from Experts for Advancing UX Strategy and Practice in Videogames*, ed. Katherine Ibister and Celia Hodent (CRC Press, 2022), and Colette Weil, "A Study of Two Game Centers and Their Patrons" (MBA thesis, San Jose State University, 1980).

been borne up by subsequent work. But, somehow, the fact that Buckles wrote is framed as more important than *what* she wrote.

How can we understand video games as culture without understanding dolls? *Barbie Fashion Designer* cracked open the games for the girls market in the US, succeeding because it offered girls a play experience they found engaging and meaningful.¹⁶ Collecting mechanics are tied to consumerism, sure, but they're also tied to the modern history of dolls with their endless, branded accessories. Despite this, I could find only a single reference to Forman-Brunell's study of dolls in the entirety of the field, in Mary Flanagan's *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*.¹⁷ The book comes up regularly in studies of childhood and technology, but is almost nowhere in game studies.¹⁸ It's difficult not to conclude that the academic field, as the industry did for many years, has dismissed girls and their concerns as irrelevant, and, in doing so, has dismissed many women researchers and their work, too.

Conclusion

One of the foundational problems is that, for too many game developers and too many game studies scholars, girls' play is a foreign country. Sigmund Freud was famously baffled by women, seeing them as fundamentally inscrutable: *What does a woman want?*

So often researchers labor to argue that play and games are important and legitimate because they can be instrumentalized to some end or another, ranging from military training to typing skills, but play researchers have shown for decades that play is

16 Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, "An Interview with Nancie S. Martin (Mattel)," in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, ed. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (MIT Press, 1998).

17 Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009).

18 Sara M. Grimes, "Configuring the Child Player," *Science, Technology & Human Values* 40, no. 1 (2015): 126–148, and Carroll W. Pursell, *From Playgrounds to PlayStation: The Interaction of Technology and Play* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

always already important (a point where Huizinga and I might agree after all); as game studies scholars, we overlook this at our peril.

In many regards, the social sciences in the United States have, since World War I, made deliberate strides to seek legitimacy as scientific disciplines. In doing so, researchers migrated away from the push for social reform that had helped establish their disciplines, instead arguing for and aspiring to an ideal of scientific objectivity. Of course, this insistence on objectivity is in itself political, and a narrowing of acceptable research methods and research questions can also cause a narrowing of knowledge. But, perhaps, more importantly, the debate that raged between leading historians, anthropologists, and sociologists in the us during this period was not only one about research methods, but about *purpose*.¹⁹ In game studies we see similar clashes. The argument about research methods, about the schisms between the social sciences and humanities or the ties between humanities and science and engineering, is not merely an argument about how to produce knowledge — although such an argument would be important in its own right — but an argument about who is allowed to conduct research under the veil of legitimacy and what the very purpose of this intellectual endeavor is.

In the us, in particular, the legacy of that contentious debate a century ago has been to further entrench the legitimacy of the sciences and of both scientific and scientistic (meaning things that deliberately present as scientific without necessarily being science), often at the cost of the humanities and social sciences. Game studies, emerging as it did, in the decades after this discussion, is born of that legacy and imbricated in it. But, that scientistic vision of what knowledge counts has profound ramifications for whose cultural values and experiences are seen and understood and what is valued. If we must go digging for early examples of game studies, what does it mean that we find Huizinga, Sutton-Smith, and Caillois, but not, or at least, not to the

19 Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible: The American Debate Over Objectivity and Purpose, 1918–1941* (Duke University Press, 1994).

same extent, Hughes, Paley, and the Opies? If the games girls play fall out of the discussion of games, what have we internalized about whose play is legitimate and meaningful? And, how are we reinscribing existing inequalities and marginalizations?

I want a game studies of messy things and soft things. Of jump rope rhymes and girls who shift the rules to be nice, of connection and conflict, of community, of misremembered *Monopoly* rules. In short, I want a game studies that is human.²⁰

20 Some of my argument here extends earlier work arguing for the importance of materiality to understanding games and their cultural significance. Those interested might want to read: Carly A. Kocurek, "Play, Things: Games, Materialism, and the Production of Culture," *Velvet Light Trap* 81 (2018): 66–71.

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Reflecting on the Evolution of Intersectional Game Studies: An Interview with Lisa Nakamura

Sarah Christina Ganzon

Lisa Nakamura is the Gwendolyn Calvert Baker Collegiate Professor and the founding director of the Digital Studies Institute at the University of Michigan. She's been writing about race, gender, games, and digital media since 1994. Her works include: *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*¹ and *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*.² In *Cybertypes*, Nakamura interrogates how online spaces continually shape our perceptions and discussions of race, ethnicity, and identity. In her chapter "Head-Hunting on the Internet," she examined how players in *LambdaMOO* (Pavel Curtis, 1990) and other online roleplaying chat spaces replicate real-world stereotypes in the creation of their characters.³ Nakamura's early works, such as *Cybertypes*, provide some of the earliest foundational work on race and identity in games. *Cybertypes* and *Digitizing Race* are

1 Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).

2 Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

3 Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 31–60.

also early examples of intersectional feminist work in digital media.

Nakamura returns to interrogating discursive constructions of race in her journal article, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft.” In this piece, she criticizes the media coverage of Chinese gold farmers in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), highlighting the racist narrative space of *WoW*, the ways in which convergence culture replicated racist discourse in her analysis of *WoW* Machinima, and the ways post-race neoliberal capitalist player cultures replicated harmful racial stereotypes.⁴ In her essay “Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital,” written in the context of gendered harassment in game cultures of the 2010s, she argues how game cultures tailored around straight white men make interactions within player communities “hard-core” and complicates the notions of gamer capital especially taking into account intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.⁵ Finally, in her article “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture,” she traces the history of Indigenous women constructing some of the earliest semi-conductors, thus contextualizing how early hardware production created discourses on racialized labor and how through these discourses Indigenous women became inseparable from the platforms they helped create.⁶ These later works continue and complicate intersectional feminist theorizations and histories of games and game cultures.

4 Lisa Nakamura, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009): 128–44.

5 Lisa Nakamura, “Queer Female of Color: The Highest Difficulty Setting There Is? Gaming Rhetoric as Gender Capital,” *Ada* 1 (2012), <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/687bbc12-a07c-4d96-b314-79e0f55d79d5/content>.

6 Lisa Nakamura, “Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 919–41.

In this interview, Nakamura reflects on her experiences writing and teaching about digital culture, games, race, and gender — from her first publications in the '90s toward more contemporary work that sheds light on toxic cultures, digital labor, and narratives that render women of color invisible in media histories. In doing so, she provides a history of some of the earliest intersectional work in game studies and digital media. These reflections and histories told by one female scholar of color to another provide a window into the labor of intersectional work in game studies, how far we have come, and how far we have yet to go.

Sarah Christina Ganzon: What was it that first made you think about writing about games?

Lisa Nakamura: It was researching early chatrooms — MUDs and MOOs — in the mid-90s. And I wasn't a big videogame player in my younger days. My parents had a *Pong* game (Atari, 1972). I played that and enjoyed it, but it was not exactly a computer game. But I was really into the Internet and I fell into a place called *LambdaMOO*, which I feel like a disproportional amount of scholars my age wrote about — including Julien Dibbel⁷ and Judith Donath.⁸ So I didn't think about it as a game at the time, even though it was programmed and structured like a game. You created an avatar, wrote a self-description. You can program assets in the game. You could build yourself a house. In a way, it was a lot like *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011), only just words.

SCG: So you did not think about it as game studies then; how was it different researching, teaching, and writing about it in the '90s as compared to the 2000s, and then now?

7 Julien Dibbel, "A Rape in Cyberspace," *The Village Voice*, October 18, 2005, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2005/10/18/a-rape-in-cyberspace/>.

8 Judith Stefania Donath, "Inhabiting the Virtual City: The Design of Social Environments for Electronic Communities" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1997), 28.

LN: Yeah, I feel like the dichotomies in gaming have shifted over time. Initially, there were people who were interested in games as narrative. They were single player game scholars. Those people came from literature and they compared games to novels, often saying they were better. So the whole hypertext conversation — George Landow⁹ — and rhetoric, the way that Sherry Turkle¹⁰ wrote about online interaction as postmodern, I think, this idea that there is interactivity with the machine itself or with the program itself so that you could choose your path — that idea was exciting to literary scholars. And then there were people who were, I'd say, maybe half a generation behind who were looking at online gaming in a multiplayer way, as a social activity with other people, and trying to understand how the other people were, in a way, themselves the game. There isn't anything in *LambdaMOO* except other people and what other people have made. I was talking to a student who was researching *Omegle* (Leif K-Brooks, 2009), which I thought was so interesting, but she said *Omegle* has become popular again because of the pandemic. Which I thought, "Wow! How interesting!" In some ways, the gaming I was studying in the '90s was more like *Omegle* than it was like *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, Inc., 1993).

SG: Because of all the social factors?

LN: Yeah, talking to strangers who choose how to perform themselves and not having any control over who was around. There are now lots of instruments for controlling who you interact with — friends lists — you know, *LambdaMOO* did not have that. It was really more like a hotel lobby, which was what their premise was — the gathering area was a hotel lobby. Now the lobbying system is more like a kind of game match system that takes a lot of factors into account — what level you are, if you

9 George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 2–3.

10 Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Simon & Schuster, 1997), 17.

choose a faction — but early gaming was either interacting with the text or interacting with large groups of strangers. So, they're very different. But the field was so young. There was no distinction made between those two. I feel like those were parallel kinds of work that were happening somewhat under the rubric of game studies. I was always surprised when people saw me as a game scholar because I didn't see that as what I was doing.

SCG: So you didn't have to go through the process of defending your discipline to committees back then?

LN: I did my dissertation then. It was on literature. So I had nothing to defend in a way. Gatekeeping ideas wasn't even a thing people were doing in the mid-90s. When I was researching the first essay I ever wrote, which is probably still the most popular one I ever wrote,¹¹ it was when I was a grad student and my research skills weren't great. I mean, I was a grad student. But I could not find anything to quote. Very little. So I had to reach back to postcolonial literary theory. You know, Edward Said's *Orientalism*,¹² which was the common idiom of literary studies, cultural studies, and media studies. So yeah, there was no field. There was no game studies. There was no internet studies.

SCG: And also, as someone who has written the earliest intersectional work in — how would you call it — digital humanities, did it exist then?

LN: Digital humanities did exist, but it was mostly the preservation of canonical English texts, like William Blake. So digital humanities scholars were kind of hands-on digitizers. But they were interested in the implications of the tools, such as what Lev Manovich called transcoding¹³ — turning a physical object into

11 Lisa Nakamura, "Head-Hunting on the Internet: Identity Tourism, Avatars, and Racial Passing in Textual and Graphic Chat Spaces," in *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (Routledge, 2002).

12 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Penguin Books, 2003), 1–2.

13 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (MIT Press, 2002), 63–65.

a digital object — which is hard, and especially was back then. Capturing it was hard. Disseminating it was hard. Everything about it was hard. But that's still something that happens today. People think I do digital humanities. I'm interested in preservation and tool use, for sure, but I think it's more applying humanistic methods and theories to digital objects.

SCG: Oh yes. I was wondering though, if you encountered any pushback in your work, especially since you wrote about gender and race? And given that you wrote that kind of intersectional work that early?

LN: It was all pushback. Hardly anybody liked it, and a lot of people really hated it, and objected to it.

SCG: What were their reasons back then?

LN: Well, one was it was too critical of white people. The standards were very different then. So the notion that anyone would object to anyone on the internet was strange because it wasn't seen as a serious or important space — so, you know, everything goes — but there was also the notion that if you were choosing to expose yourself when you didn't have to, when you were letting your race or gender be known when it wasn't required, you were yourself responsible for anything that happened to you. And that attitude has persisted even up to five or six years ago, and that's a good twenty years of internet life. You know, this is an anonymous medium, right, before Facebook —

SCG: And before GamerGate —

LN: And before GamerGate! So, it's your decision. So if you go outside wearing that dress, if you choose to speak your foreign language, if you choose to eat smelly food, whatever, you are yourself responsible for your own victimization. It wasn't just the Internet. I think it was the prevailing idea of how difference should be managed by individuals, and this neoliberal idea that

if you have the ability to become less offensive to people — that’s your responsibility as well as your ability.

scg: Do you think GamerGate heightened those discussions that already existed, especially since GamerGate is something that spawned from gamer boys? So in a lot of ways, it was also happening on a smaller scale within institutions as well?

LN: That’s such a good question. I remember the first time *The New York Times* covered GamerGate, and it took them a while. Leigh Alexander,¹⁴ I feel, really broke that story. And she got a lot of pushback — oh my gosh. The title of her essay, which I am not sure if she even chose, was “Gamers’ Are Over.” It wasn’t a good choice of words. I don’t think journalists get to choose the titles of their stories. Editors do that actually. It is not an individual decision. Sometimes they change quickly because they are published quickly. But that was bait to all the really objectionable people who might have been somewhat sympathetic to Zoe Quinn. People who were not upset at her but were defensive of their own practices, because they themselves felt slightly dirty about engaging in them. Those were the people who were most reactive. So that polarized that discussion, even before it got into the *Times*. But it was quite interesting to see that *Times* readers were predominantly older, white, somewhat well-off — I mean, not a hundred percent but more so than say, *iog* readers or *Jezebel* readers — and were appalled at the behavior of these gamers, because it was a subculture that had gotten to be so toxic with people within it who didn’t realize how bad it was. I think a lot of gamers had distanced themselves from it, but still were somewhat ashamed and didn’t want anyone to associate them with it. Both groups had a lot of investment in hiding what was happening.

14 Leigh Alexander, “Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience: ‘Gamers’ Are Over,” *Game Developer*, August 28, 2014, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/-gamers-don-t-have-to-be-your-audience-gamers-are-over->.

The reaction to the *Times* was of complete horror: “Oh my gosh, is this what my kid is doing?” or “Oh my gosh, is this what Brother has been doing?” You know, we used to call them normies — the people outside gaming culture, but also the people outside what we know now as Far Right, radical Right, white supremacist groups, which had a lot of intersection. I think GamerGate made that apparent. So when the Capitol invasion happened, it was not surprising. Some of these people have been red-pilled already. There was such a cross section that people seemed to move seamlessly from one group to another — as one group was shut down or became delegitimized — and became radicalized. There’s a lot of writing in that now. It’s a great topic. And I think it would be great if someone researched the role of gaming culture and GamerGate in drawing those people in. It’s a movement and GamerGate is still an active hashtag. That’s amazing. When I was teaching my course called, “The Internet is a Trashfire,”¹⁵ we talked about Zoe Quinn’s autobiographies. And I asked people to follow the GamerGate hashtag. This was like five years ago. But I look at it even now. And there’s still activity on there.

SCG: This makes me think about your piece, “Queer Female of Color,”¹⁶ because a lot of the featured women in these gamer controversies were white women. So did you ever think about writing this piece as a similar reaction to these kinds of things?

LN: Yeah, that is the history of intersectionality. That, you know, something so egregiously misogynistic happens that even white women feel like they have to react in some way. And that’s great. But they often are not very plugged into women of color, immigrants, or other kinds of groups of women. And so then, they are sometimes called out or more often joined by people who

15 Lisa Nakamura, “The Internet is a Trash Fire. Here’s How to Fix It,” *TEDSalon: Brightline Initiative*, November 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_nakamura_the_internet_is_a_trash_fire_here_s_how_to_fix_it.

16 Nakamura, “Queer Female of Color.”

they don't know and feel somewhat alienated by. So a lot of the "cancel culture" conversation, I think is really people who are trying to do coalitional work but are challenged because of their own inexperience with diversity.

SCG: How, do you think, has your research shifted over the years?

LN: I think there's been a big shift from studying white people's reactions to images of women or just studying white people in general — which was the '90's work — to being more interested in women of color, specifically young women of color's use of media, digital media, and their constructive work in not just resisting or critiquing but building alternatives that are for a different future.

SCG: You were writing about the Navajo women making semi-conductors.¹⁷ Can you describe what writing that was like?

LN: Thanks for mentioning that article! I think that's often brought to the side of people looking at gaming stuff. One reason I wanted to write about platforms and material culture more is reading about the Foxconn suicides during the Xbox 360 launch. You know the Foxconn factories were working overtime to make the holiday deadlines sometime around 2010–2011? I don't remember the date of that launch, but it was really pumped up. People were super excited. Xbox was a hot device, and *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) was really trending. Gamers were really into this, and they pre-ordered everything. Ten people tried to jump off the factory building. Eventually, Foxconn put up nets, which was so silly and sad. People just had to shake their heads. There's another way to deal with this, which is called not working people to the end of their rope. And so, I thought about gaming's material consequences for women of color, because a lot of them were women of color, but also Chinese men, but how little of it

17 Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits."

seemed to matter to white Americans. This was happening. If you read about dairy workers in Idaho jumping off a silo, people would be really worried about their milk consumption or what it meant to buy cheese or something like that. But these were Chinese women in China.

SCG: Gosh, yeah. A lot of them immigrants as well!

LN: Totally. Immigrants. No support, immiserated, and very vulnerable people. So while people were using these games to live out their stereotypical fantasies of any kind, the human cost to that seems to be not written about as much. I wasn't able to do that research, because I don't speak Chinese and I'm not an ethnographic researcher, but other people did. Jack Qiu¹⁸ did; he wrote a book about people losing those fingers in those factories.¹⁹ Mike Daisey most famously did that podcast on the price of the Apple iPad about people being abused in factories.²⁰ It turned out he was lying about the whole thing, which was horrible. It was a sad ending. It was sad because he was kind of right. It discredited the story somewhat, but it's still the case that everything we own was probably made by an Asian woman somewhere.

SCG: Since these are histories that people tend to forget, what do you think are those forgotten histories in games specifically that need more critical attention?

18 Jack Linchuan Qiu, "Network Labor: Beyond the Shadow of Foxconn," in *Studying Mobile Media: Cultural Technologies, Mobile Communication, and the iPhone*, ed. Larissa Hjorth, Jean Burgess, and Ingrid Richardson (Routledge, 2012).

19 Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition* (University of Illinois Press, 2016), 81.

20 Mike Daisey, "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory," *This American Life* podcast, January 6, 2012, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/454/mr-daisey-and-the-apple-factory>.

LN: An ex-student of mine, Ergin Bulut, did an ethnography of a games studio in Champaign-Urbana, which was where he was going to school and where I was teaching. He was studying testers, which I think is a really interesting space.²¹ But there's all kinds of undercompensated or uncompensated labor that launched the industry, and it was expected that being able to play was its own reward. So you know, testers, beta players, people who make the devices but also people who had to break down and dispose of the devices. I think the market on used games does not get enough attention. I feel like the issue of representation on games has gotten a lot of attention.

SCG: Considering your research and a lot of feminist scholars tending to describe feminist history in terms of waves, do you think the wave metaphor applies to feminist game studies, feminist media studies, or even just digital cultures?

LN: I feel like certainly game studies does, and that feminist game studies is part of game studies' third wave. And still to me, very new. It was not uncommon to go to a games conference and see less than a quarter women. When I taught my first games course at Champaign in 2008, there was one woman in the class, and I had to beg her not to drop. But you know that's recent history. She said, "I've only played *Kingdom Hearts*. Do I belong in this class?"

SCG: Gosh, I still have those students —

LN: Right?! Have you seen a change since you've been teaching?

SCG: I only recently started teaching, but at least now, I would say a bulk of my students are women. But I find that a large and necessary part of that work is still that kind of emotional labor

21 Ergin Bulut, "Playboring in the Tester Pit: The Convergence of Precarity and the Degradation of Fun in Video Game Testing," *Television and New Media* 16, no. 3 (2015): 240–58.

of encouraging women. That moment where one goes, “It’s ok, if you’ve not played anything. It’s ok if you only borrowed your brother’s Atari”

LN: For sure! I think that *is* emotional labor, because you have to legitimize yourself differently as a woman, because men want to know, “Are you an elite player? Are you a hardcore player?” I think they still focus on those identities as a way of understanding themselves. When I taught literature classes, I’ve never had a student who said, “I’ve never read Shakespeare before. Do I belong in this class?” I mean, it’s a Shakespeare class, that’s why they’re there. They’ve never read it, so they want some help. Or you’re teaching a poetry class, and would that student say “I’ve never read poetry ...?” No! People assume you will show them how to do it. But with games, there’s this higher expectation. There’s this kind of gamer respectability politics around proficiency and immersion. That still hasn’t gone away.

SCG: Writing extensively, would you consider your work following these waves of feminism? You did mention following the third wave or even the fourth? Would you consider your work as following these periods of feminist game studies or feminist media studies, or something that goes against these periods, or deviates from them?

LN: Right now, AI and ethics are some of the hottest things in digital media. And it’s so dominated by women and women of color. Kate Crawford,²² Meredith Broussard,²³ Cathy O’Neil,²⁴ and danah boyd.²⁵ These are some people who have been work-

22 Kate Crawford, *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* (Yale University Press, 2021).

23 Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (MIT Press, 2019).

24 Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (Crown, 2016).

25 danah boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (Yale University Press, 2014).

ing for a while, and are starting to get recognized for their interventions in ethics and AI. And there's a feminist sensibility there, which does need to be called out specifically because the concern of ethics is a feminist concern. It's a concern with fairness, and that is not a concern that the digital media field had for a long time. And I think it's because part of it was sequestered in fields that are more critical fields, which have avoided the question of "is this good or bad" for a while, because it always worked against you. If you were trying to write about the Internet in the 2000s, people said, "Yeah, you know what about porn? What about the children? What about addiction?" You were forced into a position of needing to move the conversation away from simplistic good or bad, to "What does it mean to who and in what way?" Those were always the critical questions that we have.

So now, I think there's a kind of unpaid bill on "is it good or bad?" that's coming back in the form of feminist considerations around fairness and access to representation but also access to digital resources. So there is a wave, I feel, and it's got a lot to do with the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal. Because then, the public became widely supportive of throttling back the power of digital industry to make the rules. But I would say in some ways, gamers were way ahead of that. They were critical of the gaming industry ever since games started costing more than twenty dollars. But it was from a more consumer point of view. Gamers have strong consumer identities, I feel. And those became somewhat politicized. So I feel like Leigh Alexander was kinda paying the price for [the fact] that gamers were a "dissatisfied" readership anyway. But scholars always had different concerns than how much games cost. So you didn't get that experience of sixty hours of immersive technomasculine gameplay. But we would question the technomasculine part, not the sixty hours part.

SCG: With present conversations about #BlackLivesMatter or Anti-Asian hate, do you think these conversations would affect critical discussions of game studies moving forward?

LN: Oh yeah. I obsessively follow commenting sections in pretty much wherever I see them, but particularly in some of the gaming blogs like *Gamasutra* and *Kotaku*. I would always have my students follow one of those. You know, pick a topic, pick a hashtag and just follow it throughout the course of the semester to see how the conversation evolves. And those used to be massive conversations, with thousands of comments. People were piling in there, and they just had so much to say. I've seen a really hard shift away from racism in those comments, and away from sexism, where you know, guys you think who were quiet and would have been drowned out before being white knights or what have you, have felt a lot more empowered to speak out and say, "Dude, that's not okay!" I even noticed it in some of the car blogs that I follow, where you see slurs, especially ethnic slurs against Asians because people hate Japanese cars or they love them or whatever.

Truck people hate Japanese cars, but people who are into car modification love Japanese cars. But they have to share the same blog. That's like gaming. There are people who have their genre, in opposition to a different genre, for example *Call of Duty* people versus indie game people. They all have to use the same blogs. Or they used to anyway. It's gotten a little more granular now. You would see long conversations slamming Zoe Quinn or people saying women shouldn't be in gaming and just shut up, but then it turned around so fast. If you see people saying that, they get shut down very quick. But I feel as well, those people have been drawn in the red pill environment, so they've also chosen a more radicalized space than gaming. So as gaming has become less radical, toxic people have left it, but also it's become less toxic because radical people have left it — those kinds of radical people.

SCG: This makes me think about your piece on Glitch Racism.²⁶ Do you think these events of last year have made it more explicit than when you were writing about it?

LN: Yeah, I think so. You would have had to be completely living under a rock to not know about that change. And I'm still not sure how lasting that change is going to be and how games are going to react to it. I taught a course on virtual reality (VR), and that's still a gaming medium. People who are utopian proponents of VR, and that discourse about how VR is going to change everything and create empathy is exactly that kind of discourse of utopian games people a long time ago: "Oh, you can be in a woman's body, and know what it's like to be a woman" No! We will not.

And you know when you asked what areas of gaming needed to be developed, global gaming is clearly seldom being written about. Occasionally, you see a book on South America or on Asia. Dal Yong Jin²⁷ has written a book about Korean gaming culture.

SCG: And so many of them are in special issues.

LN: Yes, exactly! The special issues. It's like the one off. And then nothing for a year. And then another one, which is in a different field and very hard to find.

But one of the games I was going to teach was called *One Dark Night* (Emblematic Group, 2015) by Nonny De la Peña,²⁸ which used actual documentary audio from the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. So you hear gunshots, you hear screaming. And in the end, I couldn't teach it because I

26 Lisa Nakamura, "Glitch Racism: Networks as Actors within Vernacular Internet Theory," *Culture Digitally*, December 10, 2013, <https://culturedigitally.org/2013/12/glitch-racism-networks-as-actors-within-vernacular-internet-theory/>.

27 Dal Young Jin, *Korea's Online Gaming Empire* (MIT Press, 2010).

28 "One Dark Night," *Emblematic Group*, <https://emblematicgroup.com/experiences/virtual-reality-recreation-of-the-trayvon-martin-shooting/>.

had Black students. And no one should teach it, probably, unless you contextualize it really heavily, because it's very traumatizing. And VR is an intimate medium. I'm not going to say it is more or less intimate than others, but it's definitely intimate. Some people would say, "too soon." Or "Will we have a George Floyd game?" I'd say, never. But somebody would do it because they view it as helping people who don't understand to feel a different way. It does make you feel something, but I'm not sure that makes you different. Do you think there will be a George Floyd game?

SCG: I certainly hope not. Still, I am glad there's a lot of queer games scholarship that's done a lot of resistance to that, and a lot of work by people like Mattie Brice.²⁹

LN: [nods] Yeah, it's the queer games and trans games people. Bo Ruberg has an amazing chapter on empathy games in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*.³⁰ But people who have marginalized identities are very tired of these arguments. You know that "if I could commodify my body and my experience for you, maybe you would understand," but what is the direct benefit of understanding to people who are in those roles? I think Mattie did a great job explaining that, but it provides a consumable spectacle for other people, which is the foundation of what the internet has been in a lot of ways with regards to people of color.

SCG: Which leads to my last question: how do you think game studies could move forward?

LN: I think some voices that have been excluded from gaming scholarship but also gaming research are children. It's kind of an open secret that games that are adult games are children's games.

29 Mattie Brice, "Empathy Machine," *Mattie Brice*, June 30, 2016, <http://www.mattiebrice.com/empathy-machine/>.

30 Bo Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York University Press, 2019).

So *Call of Duty*, I know there's an age warning on every game. I know that no one pays attention. If you listen to the headset, it's little kids. I don't think anyone is talking to little kids about what it feels like to look at really sexualized or racialized images in those places. And do we engage in those narratives? And I'm really curious. There's a lot of speculation about what it does to kids' brains or how they then think about identity, but I haven't seen any research. I know it's hard to get Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals, and because children are a vulnerable category, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't know what they are getting out of it. And we're discounting a large number — maybe a quarter or two — of players. So if you're studying players and the culture that players create, I feel in the early days, what people were reading as toxicity or reading as hostility, was often just kids mimicking what adults were doing. Because there were literally no other models on how to behave.

The best research I've seen on that is Yasmin Kafai's work on *Whyville* (Numedeon, 1999).³¹ I still teach that, but I have not seen anything better. She looks at what kids post to a bulletin board about a learning game. I think it was a math learning game. And their experience with non-white bodies; there were a bunch of young girls who played these non-white bodies, because they wanted them.

So that's super interesting to me. Young people's resistant motivation to create alternatives in gaming, how they're just doing it and no one is paying any attention. I wrote about that a little in *Digitizing Race* about young Arab women trying to make different avatars,³² but I had the same problem. I wasn't able to actually talk to anybody, and I probably should not have done it without more training, because I didn't have it. I wasn't a skilled interviewer. I probably should have tried to collaborate with somebody who was, but I was trying to get this book out the door. But that would be such an opportunity, I feel. Youth

31 Yasmin B. Kafai, "World of Whyville: An Introduction to Tween Virtual Life," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2010): 3–22.

32 Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*.

who are not in the us context. What on earth are they making of these games? They can be localized for other industries, but they assume adult players. Does the industry know? Is that an open secret that they're not acknowledging?

Also, Americans tend to believe that their controversies are everyone's controversies. Are there GamerGates in other countries? I'm super curious. There could be, but no one's able to write about it for many reasons.

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Unveiling the Path: Seeing and Doing Game Studies from a Sámi Perspective

Outi Kaarina Laiti

While Indigenous studies and game studies do have existing crossovers on the global scale, especially in education and the context of Indigenous youth, research publications are still rare and Indigenous people underrepresented in game studies. Particularity the Indigenous Sámi people, traditionally located in the Sápmi region, which spans the northernmost parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia, need better representation in the field of game studies.

Since representation itself is important as a point of focus, in this chapter I explore from my Sámi perspective how the ways of building knowledge in Sámi culture impacts on seeing and doing game studies. Centering my Sámi voice, I discuss the ways in which Indigenous epistemologies can be present in game studies practice. I describe some of the crucial steps on the path that led me to a doctoral dissertation in the field of Sámi game studies. I call this process *unveiling the path*, and it is a way to employ Sámi methodologies in game studies. Unveiling the path, one layer at a time, continues a long line of Sámi *dutkama*

máttut, the forerunners of Sámi methodological thinking,¹ and explores the possibilities of seeing and doing game studies within this methodology. It is important to foreground Sámi methods both as a way to normalize them among Indigenous researchers and to strengthen them in relation to other Indigenous and non-Indigenous methods, thus making it possible for future dialogue to reshape game studies.

Lifting the Veil of Ignorance

I recently saw an inspirational quote: “One day you will tell your story of how you overcame what you went through, and it will be someone else’s survival guide.”²

This quote reminded me of the time when I first began reading studies that fully or partially employed Indigenous methods.³ While Indigenous methods are not necessarily bound to an Indigenous background, in this chapter I clarify the difference in using Indigenous methods from the inside as opposed to the outside. When reading studies that deploy an inside view, it felt as if I was reading survival guides, but with the sense of an empowered and resilient Indigenous presence. I learned that this presence had a name: Gerald Vizenor calls it *survivance*,⁴ and in game studies Indigenous games researcher and designer Elizabeth LaPensée defines *survivance* as the place where all the creative Indigenous work comes from.⁵ Sámi research has a sim-

1 Jelena Porsanger and Irja Seurujärvi-Kari, “Sámi dutkama máttut,” in *Indigenous Research Methodologies in Sámi and Global Contexts*, ed. Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen, Pigga Keskitalo, and Torjer Olsen (Brill, 2021).

2 The Female Lead, *Facebook*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/thefemalelead/posts/one-day-you-will-tell-your-story-of-how-youve-overcome-what-youre-going-through-/2619693888293833/>.

3 Marc. G. Stevenson, “Indigenous Knowledge in Environmental Assessment,” *Arctic* 3, no. 49 (1996): 278–91.

4 Gerald Robert Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999).

5 Elizabeth LaPensée, “Self-Determination in Indigenous Games,” in *Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities*, ed. Jentery Sayers (Routledge, 2017).

ilar term, somewhat akin to the meaning of survivance: *Birge-jupmi*.⁶ While mostly used in the field of education, in a wider perspective the term suggests an all-encompassing politics of living — “a holistic process of lifelong learning, for survival and for strengthening of one’s self-confidence.”⁷ Noticing this similarity was important to me personally because I was beginning my research journey in a not-so-common Sámi game studies framework, one in which I would have to walk most of the miles alone. So, I read what other Indigenous researchers had experienced and how they had pushed back with Indigenous methods. Later, I wrote my own survivance story,⁸ thus giving back in the spirit of Indigenous ways of knowing. My doctoral dissertation was the first study in the field of Sámi game studies. This is an autoethnographic description of how my research has reshaped game studies, and it is based on my field notes and reflections on the process.

I am a Sámi woman living in Finland who wrote and defended her doctoral dissertation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Publishing a dissertation during these peculiar times made me a part of a different minority: women wrote only one-third of the academic articles published during the pandemic.⁹ I cannot possibly name all the factors that made it possible for me to be in that minority, but I will name at least some of them. They are rooted in the Indigenous methodologies, and I call them *the fishing net of relationships* and *pan-epistemological collaboration*. Before exploring these ideas in more depth, I will reflect more on why it is important for me to write about these factors.

6 Aimo Aikio, *Olmmošhan gal birge – áššit mat ovddidit birgema* [Humans will get along – things that promote getting along] (CálliidLágádus, 2010).

7 Asta Balto and Gudrun Kuhmunen, *Máhttáhit – Re-Educate Them and Us! – Sámi Self-Determination, Nation-Building and Leadership* (CálliidLágádus, 2014), 63

8 Outi Laiti, “Old Ways of Knowing, New Ways of Playing — The Potential of Collaborative Game Design to Empower Indigenous Sámi” (PhD diss., University of Lapland, 2021).

9 Ana-Catarina Pinho-Gomes et al., “Where Are the Women? Gender Inequalities in COVID-19 Research Authorship,” *BMJ Global Health* 5, no. 7 (2020): e002922.

Before and during my research I read such books as Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Shawn Wilson's *Research Is Ceremony*,¹⁰ and Rauna Kuokkanen's *Boaris Dego Eana*.¹¹ I could describe my experience of personal enlightenment as the world seemed to make sense a little bit more after reading each book. Instead, I will write here about the emotional rollercoaster of the research process. Personally, I felt a sense of empowerment and pride, alternating with bouts of confusion, grief, and even anger when reading these texts. It started from "hey, this is me they are talking about," meaning, I finally encountered research texts that reflected my own experiences. Then, it plunged to the feeling that "this is too hard, there is just too much to consider," because every book or paper offered a plethora of comprehensive ethical guidelines. Finally, I ended up again at the point of saying, "look at all these people grinding, explaining, justifying," because every author repeated, with more or less patience, the right for sovereign Indigenous research. Finally, the main question I asked was, "Why didn't I know Indigenous research even existed?" Because I had not. At the same time, the Sámi people are among the most researched Indigenous people in the world,¹² but Indigenous-led research remains in the shadows.

The existing non-Indigenous research usually introduces Sámi people as the Indigenous people of Europe, focusing on facts, numbers, and demographics. In 2020, the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland published a report on Sámi representation in Finnish learning materials, stating that knowledge of Sámi people and culture in these materials is poor in quality and quantity, objectifying and filled with racist descrip-

10 Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood Publishing, 2008).

11 Rauna Kuokkanen, *Boaris dego eana: Eamiálbmogiid diehtu, filosofijat ja dutkan* [As old as the earth: Indigenous knowledge, philosophies and research] (CálliidLágádus, 2009).

12 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Zed Books, 1999).

tions.¹³ The materials present the Sámi as relics of the past, and the descriptions are aimed at non-Sámi readers. These descriptions have a background in the ethnographic gaze,¹⁴ with the idea of observing Sámi people being the contemporary legacy of an abundance of prior research. This means the research provides narrow and heavily limited cultural descriptions for non-Sámi students. It can also promote the otherness of Sámi students, who then feel insecure in talking about their culture because such observations do not fit into this false, predefined framework. Furthermore, as Sámi feminism researcher Vuokko Hirvonen points out, most of the research was created by observing or documenting the male members of Sámi communities,¹⁵ meaning that the image of Sámi culture is mostly based on non-Indigenous observations of how Sámi males view the culture.

On a global scale, LaPensée has forwarded the idea of sovereign games and supports self-determination of Indigenous peoples especially in game design,¹⁶ aiming for a safe space for Indigenous self-expression. The idea of self-expression in an Indigenous context involves “breaking the wheel” of narrow cultural descriptions made by observing cultures from the outside and empowering Indigenous people to express themselves as they see fit. However, this expression of Indigenous self-determination in video games could also extend to writing about these safe spaces as well, both in academic and non-

13 Tuuli Miettunen, *Report on Knowledge about the Saami People and Their Languages and Cultures in Learning Materials* (Publications of the Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020), 29.

14 The ethnographic gaze, most evident in the field of anthropology, has been especially problematic in the Indigenous context. The ethnographic gaze has been a tool employed when conducting fieldwork, where people who exist outside the cultural framework of the researcher are gazed at through “the lens.” This in turn leads to stereotyped observations and descriptions of “the other.” See Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

15 Vuokko Hirvonen, *Saamenmaan ääniä: Saamelaisen naisen tie kirjailijaksi* [Voices from the Sámi land: A Sámi woman’s road to authorship] (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999).

16 Elizabeth A. LaPensée, Outi Laiti, and Maize Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” *Games and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2021): 328–43.

academic environments. This is to say that an Indigenous safe space needs to extend beyond the space itself to encompass a broader context, and thereby to better ensure the safety of that space. The space cannot be safe if someone writes about it in an academic context and creates descriptions of “the other.” The notion of otherness in research manifests itself as descriptions that position groups of people outside the assumed ideal and in a lower position, somehow lacking a key component. While much research has been done on the Sámi, even schoolbooks are not free from descriptions of otherness. Wilson, an Indigenous epistemological theorist, states that some Indigenous people do not even recognize their own family members through such descriptions.¹⁷ Thus, the descriptions offer only glimpses of the past, but sometimes they are all that links us to the past, the times before colonization. As such, balancing between the known non-Indigenous research and the less known Indigenous research poses a challenge.

Returning to the previously mentioned Indigenous research methodology books, by Smith, Wilson, and Kuokkanen, each text states that Indigenous research still struggles to be taken seriously. This means that Indigenous researchers spend a great deal of time and energy convincing non-Indigenous communities of their validity and aiming their methodological talking points at non-Indigenous researchers. Thus, Indigenous research deploys scarce resources to reassure those outside the space of the methodological rigor underpinning such perspectives instead of supporting Indigenous scholars, especially those in the early stages of their research careers. A lack of guidance in Indigenous methodology may easily lead to misunderstandings, making Indigenous methods unknown and unpopular even among Indigenous researchers. Furthermore, if the available Indigenous studies prioritize non-Indigenous methods instead, then Indigenous scholars can end up using methods based on a different epistemology and never find out there is a choice. This was the first veil that needed to be lifted, the veil of ignorance.

17 Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*.

Lifting the veil of ignorance let me see the beginning of the path, a road similar to the one described in the novel *The Lord of the Rings*:

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,” he used to say. “You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no telling where you might be swept off to.”¹⁸

J.R.R. Tolkien’s road led Bilbo and Frodo Baggins to amazing and surprising adventures. At the beginning of the path, there is no adventure guarantee, but that can be seen as providing a sense of comforting ignorance, the notion that ignorance is bliss.

The Veil of Read-Only Knowledge Building

Since the existence of Indigenous methodologies can surprise even Indigenous scholars, the next veil I needed to lift was the lack of methodological guidance, or what I call *read-only knowledge building*. Read-only is a term used in computer science, in which the attributes of a file define how the marked file should be handled. The read-only notation flags the file available for opening and reading, but no other operations are allowed. Meagan Byrne has used the term in Indigenous game studies by stating that video games can be a safe space for Indigenous people when the games are flagged as “read-only.”¹⁹ In this framework, the flagging of the game protects Indigenous creativity from being exploited. In addition to designating a safe space, such video game environments guarantee that the digital content is

18 J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Allen & Unwin, 1954).

19 Meagan Byrne, “Read-Only Sacred Spaces: Indigenous Video Games as Space Safe from Vandalism and Theft,” *Medium*, September 25, 2021, <https://meagan-i-byrne.medium.com/read-only-sacred-spaces-indigenous-video-games-as-space-safe-from-vandalism-and-theft-55a0e3e30550>.

just as the designer made and intended it. However, the read-only label in Indigenous research marks it as untouchable. This can be a strength because the published research cannot then be changed; it must be presented as the author meant it. But such labeling it can also be a weakness. In practice, the primary learning opportunity realized when employing Indigenous methods in research is to read-only how others have done it. Historically, reading is not a part of the traditional Indigenous knowledge building toolbox in relation to communal discussions.²⁰ These communal discussions, in addition to intangible heritage, took a painful blow during the COVID-19 pandemic, which posed a serious threat to Indigenous people globally.²¹ When you are unable to meet with the members of your community, it poses a challenge for community-based knowledge building as well. However, to understand the problems involved in *read-only knowledge building* more fully, we need to look more closely at specific issues, for example at the interface between the Sámi research and education.

Hirvonen has stated that a Sámi author who is raised and nurtured — in other words educated — by storytelling, cannot suddenly transform themselves into someone else when writing.²² In the Indigenous Sámi context, non-linear Sámi storytelling is an educational tool that is culturally connected to the author's form of self-expression. It is at the very core of Sámi education. In Sámi culture, storytelling is a part of intangible cultural heritage,²³ the cradle for past, present, and future culture. What Hirvonen is hinting at is that one common expectation might be to turn the storytelling feature off in other settings, especially when addressing non-Sámi people. Even though storytelling is a cultural attribute that might not be understood in non-Indig-

20 Aikio, *Olmmošhan gal birge*.

21 "COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples," *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Social Inclusion*, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html>.

22 Hirvonen, *Saamenmaan ääniä*.

23 *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003).

enous communities, it is not a switch that can be turned on and off at will. It is possible that writing and publishing processes may erase some of its essential features from the text, such as the above-mentioned knowledge building through live discussions or storytelling, features that would help Indigenous scholars better understand the phenomenon in question but are impossible to capture on the page. In addition, Indigenous research publications may be the tangible outcomes of reshaping intangible heritage, even if they are not following cultural storytelling patterns. But can Indigenous research be correctly understood by Indigenous readers without storytelling or other knowledge building features? This is where communal guidance should enter into the picture, as such guidance complements *read-only knowledge building*.

There are other factors at play in the lack of support for Indigenous studies, like *Indigenous diaspora*,²⁴ living outside the traditional homelands and community for whatever reason. In the first chapter, I said that Sápmi, the Sámi region, is the traditional location and place of reference when defining Sámi people and Sámi identity. Sápmi as a region offers the Sámi connections to the land and certain livelihoods, but since not all Sámi are reindeer herders or salmon fishers, they might live elsewhere as well. However, reading and writing in an Indigenous context is a multidimensional act with a spectrum of consequences: from survivance to self-colonization. Therefore I let traditional storytelling come to the forefront throughout this chapter as well as in game research.²⁵ As Audra Simpson states, it must be a conscious decision not to speak or write in a way that is harmful to communities, their goals, and their future.²⁶

24 See Gregory D. Smithers, *The Cherokee Diaspora: An Indigenous History of Migration, Resettlement, and Identity* (Yale University Press, 2015).

25 Laiti, "Old Ways of Knowing, New Ways of Playing."

26 Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus, Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Duke University Press, 2014).

Against the Wind

The first two veils have to do with knowing about Indigenous research and learning about the opportunities that derive from adopting Indigenous methods. Before I unveil the path in more detail, I want to discuss the role of an Indigenous perspective in research. As I said before, I want to clarify the difference between using Indigenous methods from Indigenous versus non-Indigenous perspectives. The difference between the two is that Indigenous knowledge in research includes entire cultures, ways of conceptualizing the world, and sets of relationships.²⁷ When I first started employing Indigenous methodologies in research, stepping onto the path, it often resulted in a mixture of existing Indigenous methodological approaches as well as more localized practices,²⁸ meaning that I was not bound by Sámi research methods, as the relationships between Indigenous research methodologies and Sámi methodologies are parallel. Global Indigenous experiences are not isolated from each other;²⁹ they mark the path with a network of dialectic processes pointing the way from past generations of methodological thinkers to today's Indigenous scholars, and ultimately, to the larger world and global concerns. The difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars using Indigenous methods is that the latter do not walk on the path. Instead, they walk on a wide, multi-lane, smooth-surfaced road, described by Tolkien as lying next to the path. This divide is based on different epistemologies and the number of researchers employing them. Unlike the road, the path can be rocky, overgrown, or even smooth in places where more people have walked, but there are still fewer walkers. Thus, even after the path has been unveiled, the path ahead still needs to be more-or-less constantly repaired when moving forward.

²⁷ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*.

²⁸ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

²⁹ Michelle Bishop, "Don't Tell Me What to Do': Encountering Colonialism in the Academy and Pushing Back with Indigenous Autoethnography," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 34, no. 5 (2021): 367–78.

Both the smooth road and the rocky path are needed; Indigenous research methods in no way seek to belittle or dismiss other ways of building knowledge since all are heading in the same direction.³⁰ However, when it comes to research findings, the main benefits derive from where you stand. This is to say that you cannot build a better path when standing on the road, and if you are standing on the path, then there is no need to try to make the already-in-shape road any better. A dialogue can be created, which I discuss below, but suffice to say that reaching out from one place to another is not the best way to foster such dialogue.

As a researcher, I then faced aspects that I choose to call, to borrow from weather terminology, a sidewind, because they have the power to push Indigenous researchers off the path onto a road of self-colonization. First, there is the aspect of double communication. Indigenous researchers are evaluated by inner and outer factors, with the outer factors stemming from mainstream researchers and the inner factors from the community. As an Indigenous researcher, I position myself via the Sámi ethnonym on the margins of game studies and start the conversation from that vantage point. The double communication component means that I must address two types of audiences: Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. Non-Indigenous game scholars might see me as a Sámi activist. In turn, the Sámi community might see me as elitist or an activist because I write about Sámi issues instead of doing something “concrete” to fix the issues. When the community needs “breathing assistance” in the sense of revitalization efforts, or a cultural renaissance, then actions are valued over research.³¹ This means that ethnicity can diminish one’s credibility as a researcher, and a researcher status can diminish one’s credibility in the local community. In addition, Indigenous researchers may feel the pres-

30 Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*.

31 Saara Tervaniemi, “Kymmenen ongelmaa, jotka yhteisöään tutkiva saamelainen kohtaa” [Ten problems faced by a Sámi studying their community], *Koneen Säätiö*, September 17, 2020, <https://koneensaatio.fi/kymmenen-ongelmaa-jotka-yhteisoaan-tutkiva-saamelainen-kohtaa/>.

sure to mix and match methods from different epistemologies or to back up Indigenous methodologies with non-Indigenous methods. Finally, this side wind may blow from different directions, such as belittling Indigenous ways of doing research by referring to Indigenous methodology as just a bunch of stories lacking objectivity,³² and not viewing it as a rich, unique, and equally valid knowledge system. Most Indigenous researchers know how to handle these criticisms due to constant exposure to the wind, as well as many other weather conditions.³³

The Third Veil

My studies circle around empowerment in Indigenous game design and encouraging Indigenous developers, meaning that I create learning opportunities for Sámi to design and create games, enhancing Sámi game creation. Indigenous developers also create change by building a framework for the developers to create change. We can take a closer look at this framework through the concept of *the fishing net*³⁴ in Sámi research, referring to the grid of interwoven relationships, and for the purposes of this chapter the third veil to be lifted. First, though, a few words about relationality in Indigenous research before we take a closer look at the fishing net.

In the Indigenous research paradigm, Indigenous epistemology and ontology are built on relationships, with relational accountability being at the very core of Indigenous axiology.³⁵ There is no Indigenous research without the three Rs: respect, reciprocity, and responsibility.³⁶ Whether Indigenous or not, these terms also comprise the features of any healthy relation-

32 Vine Deloria, "Comfortable Fictions and the Struggle for Turf: An Essay Review of *The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies*," *American Indian Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1992): 397–410.

33 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

34 Porsanger and Seurujärvi-Kari, "Sámi dutkama máttut," 39.

35 Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 77.

36 Cora Weber-Pillwax, "What Is Indigenous Research?," *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 25, no. 2 (2001): 166–74.



Figure 17.1. The *lávvu*, a traditional Sámi tent, was one of the arenas of building knowledge and creating relationships (and games) during Sami Game Jam in 2018.

ship: respecting your relationship, being responsible in that relationship, and sustaining the dialectic of both giving and receiving. However, Indigenous researchers seek knowledge through relational accountability, meaning that research quality criteria like valid or invalid are just empty words in contrast to maintaining relations formed before, during, and after research. In other words, research creates a network of relationships, and the researcher continues nourishing those relations, and thus, fulfills the practice of relational accountability, or in more commonplace terminology, makes the research “valid.” For example, in the Sámi context I am a set of relationships — the self, the land I am connected to, and the community I belong to. Family is important in Sámi culture, and together these relations form a fishing net with hundreds of cells.³⁷ If I introduce myself inside the community, I will say something like, “my name is ‘grandparent’s community known name — mother’s community known name — my first name’ and my land is this,” describing

37 Porsanger and Seurujärvi-Kari, “Sámi dutkama máttut,” 39.

part of my family line, community connections, and relationship with the land.

Now, if I look at my research on developing Indigenous developers via game jamming, a rapid-paced game design event,³⁸ game jams are all about creating networks or relationships (see fig. 17.1).

Every jammer has their own fishing net that they bring to the event, and the organized game jam event sews these networks together, growing *the fishing net of relationships*. In the Indigenous framework, we help the fishing net grow larger when we nurture these relations. Now a person might wonder about the amount of work involved in this process of relationship nurturing: Would not it be easier to just collect data and leave? As said before, this kind of activity has been familiar in more scientific studies of the past, especially in the field of anthropology, in which Indigenous people around the world have long been objectified under the ethnographic gaze.³⁹ It is offensive and exploitative in many ways, especially when it creates relations and then breaks the fishing net. Instead, Indigenous research maintains the fishing net as one of its main goals. As Wilson says: “As all knowledge is cultural and based in a relational context, we therefore need a methodology and axiology that is accountable to the relationships that we form in our search for enlightenment.”⁴⁰ This means that the goal is authenticity over validity, communal goals over individualistic emphasis, and credibility over reliability: in short, the goal is to create and preserve a beautiful fishing net in good condition. I lifted the third veil when I walked the path and saw my fishing net growing. In Indigenous methodology, I am encouraged to define my own relations to my research topic, so that I could ultimately draw

38 Annakaisa Kultima, “Defining Game Jam,” in *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, eds. José P. Zagal, Esther MacCallum-Stewart, and Julian Togelius (Society for the Advancement of the Science of Digital Games, 2015).

39 Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.

40 Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 95.

my own conclusions.⁴¹ In game studies, this has meant from a personal standpoint using existing non-Indigenous research but still building on Indigenous knowledge. With this strategy, I have also chosen to employ data collecting methods outside the Indigenous methods, while still staying within the framework of the three Rs.

Although it is encouraged to walk your own walk, I want to introduce the communal aspect when walking *the path*. Some scholars may call it, for example, bridge building. However, in the light of colonial history, the bridge building connection brings to my mind the idea of the majority exploiting minorities. Next, I will explain why I decided to explore a pan-epistemological approach to collaboration rather than a bridge-building approach.

The Veil of Pan-Epistemological Collaboration

The grid of relationships, *the fishing net*, does have its limitations. I found myself wondering: Should all relationships be nurtured? How can one recognize those that do not follow the three Rs, to prevent exploitation? The truth is that only time will tell. I was one of the organizers of Sami Game Jam,⁴² a rapid game development event in the Sámi context in 2018. The Indigenous knowledge in this case concentrates more on relationality than on, for example, the tangible outcomes of the event, like the games produced. The event bound the participants together: Sámi people from near and far, and global game developers. Held eight years ago, the Sámi participants still report missing the Sami Game Jam event and the people. Some relationships have evolved more than others, and some did not necessarily evolve at all. Nevertheless, the relationships still exist. They might evolve when the time is right, or they might remain a part of event history. It is always an option to cut the network if it does not work.

⁴¹ Ibid., 94.

⁴² "Sami Game Jam," <https://saamigamejam.com/>.

In the history of anthropology especially, Sámi people have been positioned as an open-access community yielding open-access data. This has led to contemporary prejudices especially against non-Indigenous researchers. Some Sámi might say “no” to such research based on prior negative experiences. However, saying “yes” can also mean no, especially if the research goals remain unclear during the research process, and if they only result in statements that give false information.⁴³ This emphasizes the importance of including Indigenous researchers in non-Indigenous research projects with Indigenous communities, which then benefit by having a spokesperson who can navigate between the community and the project’s research goals. However, it is easy to forget when pursuing such collaboration that a Sámi researcher is also a member of the community and will prioritize community interests over non-Indigenous research goals. Relationality thus defines research collaboration since Indigenous researchers will not easily jeopardize their relationships with the community. By jeopardizing relationships, I mean cutting the fishing net around community relations, close to the personal relations at the fishing net’s core. My personal decision was to seek a way to collaborate with a minimal risk of losing any existing relationships. This was based on my personal reflection that working alone should be a choice, not a sidewind of fear along my path pushing me to work alone. I call it *pan-epistemological collaboration*, the veil of a respectful and reciprocal research-oriented relationship, where different epistemologies under Indigenous and non-Indigenous umbrellas can coexist. The prefix “pan,” a Greek loan meaning “all,” stands for the union of all branches in the groups defined by “epistemology,” the various theories of knowledge.

The starting point for my research collaboration was the Sami Game Jam and the relationships created there, especially with Annakaisa Kultima and Sabine Harrer. These relationships evolved via pan-epistemological collaboration through the Sámi

43 Tervaniemi, “Kymmenen ongelmaa, jotka yhteisöään tutkiva saamelainen kohtaa” [Ten problems faced by a Sámi studying their community].

educational concept of *gulahallan*,⁴⁴ creating a joint understanding through conversations based especially on listening as a way of understanding. We needed to discuss openly our aims and the question of relationality in research collaboration: How can we be sure that the research collaboration is a safe space for all participants before, during, and after the research process? Moreover, how do we support growth in these relationships between us and others? We sought answers to the three Rs before and during our joint research collaboration, but the real trick was that we never stopped doing so. Especially after every published piece, an article or any other type of publication, we reflected on our relationships through *gulahallan*. The picture of multiple paths with a shared goal is a result of these discussions.

Previously, I explained how Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers traverse different, yet parallel, routes in tandem: I walk my somewhat irregular path and right next to it lies a nicely paved road along which non-Indigenous researchers march, stroll, hike, and so forth. I also stated that it is not possible to build a better path when walking on the road. *Pan-epistemological collaboration* marks an alternative that builds relationship despite this rule. We were being true to the concept of reciprocity when we decided to walk together, side by side, on a predefined journey. We did not need to build a bridge between the routes; instead, dialogue was based on our current positions: *the path* or the road. Building a bridge between the two would mean a permanent connection, and *the path* would have more non-Indigenous walkers, causing the original hikers to stand in a line or switch to a parallel route. Whatever the result, the bridge building effort would easily turn into a sidewind, pushing Indigenous scholars toward self-colonization. The reciprocal approach does not need bridging, but occasional hand-holding is possible. When walking together, we supported each other by

44 See Else Målfrid Boine and Merete Saus, "Saamelaisten isien kasvatustrategioita" [Educational principles of Sámi fathers], in *Koulu ja pohjoisen pojat* [School and the boys in the North], ed. Anneli Lauriala (Lapin yliopistokustannus, 2012).

holding hands when there was a rough patch on one side of the route. An example of this hand holding was when I had to walk a personal grief journey during one of our research projects and both my fishing net and pan-epistemological collaboration carried me forward in those times.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to describe ways of seeing and doing game studies from a Sámi perspective, and possible future options. This was reflected through the process of unveiling the path, and especially through the concepts of a *fishing net of relations* and *pan-epistemological collaboration*. Each of the concepts is bound to the path and to each other, and their stories circle around in a way that is typical of Sámi storytelling.

I chose these concepts because I find it important to discuss how Indigenous and non-Indigenous game studies can form a dialogue without jeopardizing Indigenous sovereignty over research. Based on these concepts, I also think that using Indigenous methods is not limited to ethnicity per se; however, it is limited to following the core principals of Indigenous research, respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, and to completely understanding them. One solid sign of this type of understanding is pan-epistemological collaboration, where Indigenous researchers lead the methodological interpretation in research projects in which Indigenous involvement is an issue.

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Anthropology, Play Studies, and the Entanglements of Game Studies: Two Roads Diverged in an Ivory Wood

Laya Liebeseller and Josh Rivers

One of the great pitfalls of any endeavor is the temptation to think that no one has ever formulated similar concepts or advocated related approaches. Although I do not altogether subscribe to the rather pessimistic assertion in Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun, it must be admitted that many new things are different arrangements of old or known facts. In other words, most novel and creative work is based on appropriate rearrangement.

— J. Nina Lieberman, *Playfulness*¹

Forgotten Entanglements, Diverging Roads

Imagine, if you will, walking down a hallway lined with doors. The red and blue swirled carpet pushes back at your feet. People dressed in graphic t-shirts, jeans, knee-length skirts, and

¹ J. Nina Lieberman, *Playfulness: Its Relationship to Imagination and Creativity* (Academic Press, 1977), 7.

Converse loiter in the hall. Among them are the smattering of folks who thought to dress less casually, more comfortable in suit jackets, button-ups, dresses, and high heels. You find the room you are looking for. The chairs sit in neat little rows facing a stage or a podium. The ceiling reaches up like a cathedral, while the artificial walls which divvy up the space squeeze unnaturally. It smells clean but well used, and there is an echo of another speaker across the divider. Sitting down on the folding chair might feel new and nervous, or comfortable and safe. A person stands on the stage, diligently pretending not to be sweating. The audience observes, some attentive, others presenting attentiveness. After the first few minutes the speaker becomes comfortable. Their words fill the room. Their excitement shines through as they make their way to the main point. Unexpectedly, this excitement is taken up by the audience, the buzz in the room builds, and it becomes clear that something seemingly novel is coming.

When we hear a theorist in love with their work, excited at the new thought that has come to them, we become enthralled, enraptured, *entangled* in the web of their words, sharing their excitement for the possibility of a new truth. When we leave, our minds are filled with new thoughts, we urgently rush forward hoping, perhaps naively, that they are also new to the rest of the world. There is nothing wrong with this excitement, this fervor, these connections and entanglements, but in our haste to be the first we often forget that others have come before us.

The following chapter presents a case study of The Association of the Study of Play (TASP), an organization dedicated to the study of play across disciplinary boundaries since 1973, and their story of entanglement with and disentanglement from four-fields anthropology,² a discipline originating in the

2 Anthropology across the world is practiced differently. In much of America and Canada we practice four-field anthropology: in university we are trained in Cultural Anthropology (the study of those current living), Biological Anthropology (the study of the body), Linguistic Anthropology (the study of language in relation to community), and Archaeology (the study of the physical remnants of human past). Although the authors

United States that is purportedly dedicated to the holistic study of humanity. The reader might wonder what this has to do with game studies. Like the study of games, the study of play is a robust interdisciplinary field. Unlike game studies, the study of play never became its own discipline and, except for a few examples like the *American Journal of Play*, its interdisciplinarity is rarely referenced or fully realized. We use the historical relationship between the study of play, TASP, and anthropology to understand disciplinary (dis)entanglements. In thinking about and understanding the process of disciplinary entanglement we, as game studies theorists, will be better prepared to choose our entanglements wisely.

The history of play studies is longer lived and wider than we like to give it credit for in either anthropology or game studies. Johan Huizinga's work *Homo Ludens*³ and Roger Caillois's work *Man, Play and Games*⁴ are the two most notorious works used by those who write on games, with little to no reference to any others writing before Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play*.⁵ There is a breadth of work that goes unread and uncited in game studies, where we rely almost solely on the three works above. To date we, the authors, have not been able to find a work that discusses a broad history of play theory across disciplines or outside of a single organization that deeply engages in interdisciplinary dialogue. TASP, the Association of the Study of Play, is the case study of this paper because they have been dedicated to a cross-disciplinary understanding of play and yet are still underrepresented or entirely unheard of in disciplines like game studies; the authors' largest question is why. We don't have a

of this paper chose Cultural Anthropology, our knowledge of the other three fields is meant to broaden our understanding of what it means to be human both practically and theoretically.

- 3 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: Proeve ener bepaling van het spelelement der cultuur* (Wolters-Noordhoff, 1938).
- 4 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Free Press, 1961).
- 5 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 1997).

good answer, which is why we look to theories of entanglement and disentanglement to begin to understand.⁶

The Case Study of TA(A)SP

TASP was founded in 1973 by a small group of social scientists. The main drivers of its creation included Allan Tindall, Alyce Cheska, Kendall Blanchard, Brian Sutton-Smith, Helen Schwartzmann, David Lancy, and Claire Farrer, with a small group of 30 or so other scholars who joined them for their gathering in Minneapolis, Minnesota; they named themselves the Cultural Anthropology of Play Reprint Society. In 1974 they had their first official meeting in London, Ontario, and reorganized as The Association of the Anthropological Study of Play (TAASP).

In these formative years they produced scripts that deeply impacted anthropological thought on play, pushing the understanding of categorizations of work and play,⁷ problematizing the ideas of the “magic circle,”⁸ and consistently redefining play

6 Although we will not attempt to give a full history here, we do want to give our readers a place to begin on their own journey toward understanding play and the ways in which play interlinks with games. In anthropology, see Thomas M. Malaby, “Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience,” *New Literary History* 40, no. 1 (2009): 205–18. For a broader set of historical sources we also suggest Karl Groos, *The Play of Animals*, trans. Elizabeth L. Baldwin (Appleton, 1898); Gregory Bateson, “The Message, ‘This is Play,’” in *Group Process: Transactions of the Second Conference*, ed. Bertram Schaffner (Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 1955); Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground: Chasing, Catching, Seeking, Hunting, Racing, Duelling, Exerting, Daring, Guessing, Acting, Pretending* (Clarendon Press, 1969); Lieberman, *Playfulness*; and George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games Among the Shadows* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1990). It is important to note that for extensive reading on interdisciplinary play theory one need look no further than the TASP website, which contains extensive collections of newsletters and conference presentations dating back to 1974.

7 Phillip Stevens Jr., “Play and Work: A False Dichotomy?,” *Play & Culture Studies* 4 (1980): 316–24, and David F. Lancy, “Work as Play: The Kpelle Case,” *Play & Culture Studies* 4 (1980): 324–28.

8 Michael Salter, ed., *Play: Anthropological Perspectives* (Leisure Press, 1978).

itself.⁹ Through their conferences and their publications their work bridged gaps such as those between the playground, the sports arena, animal play, human play, educational games, cross-cultural play, adult play, child's play, and play in the workplace. These subsets of play theory rarely speak together, but within TAASP find a home in the same conversation.

In its early years, TAASP met at the American Anthropology Association's annual conference but it split off as it found itself less and less engaged in the anthropological conversations — often on kinship relations — happening in the hallways of this larger conference venue. More, TAASP wanted to pursue interdisciplinary conversations, so the move away from anthropology was a natural progression. In 1987, reflecting this interdisciplinarity, the organization changed its name to The Association for the Study of Play (TASP). According to their current president, Smita Mathur¹⁰ and a long-time dedicated member, Phillip Stevens Jr.,¹¹ this change in nomenclature was friendly and intended to be a gesture of inclusion and recognition of the society's growing and varied membership.

Over time, TASP created a web of entanglements with institutions like The Strong National Museum of Play, The Society for Cross-Cultural Research, and, more recently, with the International Play Association. In her interview, Mathur discussed what it takes to think through these entanglements and how they select what research is highlighted in their annual conference and newsletter. During her time as president, for example, she wanted to emphasize the practice of play and their connection to the IPA. Over time, she found that this led to a focus on practical applications of play, primarily in child's play and psychology. At the time of her interview, she discussed the process of refocusing the organization, attempting to include more

9 Brian Sutton-Smith, "Towards an Anthropology of Play," *Newsletter of the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play* 1, no. 2 (1974): 8–15.

10 Smita Mathur, "The History of The Association for the Study of Play," interview by Laya Liebeseller and Joshua W. Rivers, February 2, 2021.

11 Phillip Stevens Jr., "The History of The Association for the Study of Play," interview by Laya Liebeseller and Joshua W. Rivers, February 22, 2021.

theory and a larger variety of disciplinary foci. TASP's current project of refocusing shows that we never stop entangling and disentangling ourselves.¹²

Entanglement and Disciplinary Boundary-Making through Situational Adjustment

Understanding where boundaries are forged, lines are drawn, and categories are reified is key to understanding the shift that led TAASP to become TASP. While primarily pragmatic in its nature according to both founders and current association leadership, the nominative implications of removing the word anthropological from the association's name point to the existence of a disciplinary version of what Ian Hodder terms "entanglement," which he defines as "being caught up [with]."¹³ For Hodder, and for most who use actor-network theory and its notions of entanglement as an analytical lens, the term points to the invisible yet complicated connections between actors in an actor-network. These connections are messy¹⁴ and interwoven, with linking strands that hold strong and others that prove fragile. Where these entities engage with one another or draw on one another is where entanglement comes to be. In short, entanglement is the unlabeled and often unacknowledged yet visceral connection between multiple actors, be they human or not.

The rise of TAASP, its quick growth, and its marked shift from TAASP to TASP reveals how quickly and suddenly entanglements both come into being and cease to exist. Just as Thomas Kuhn¹⁵ describes some scientific revolutions as explosive and sudden, albeit often following periods of marked "stability" in the form of a resistance to change, so too are the entanglements

12 Mathur, "The History of The Association for the Study of Play."

13 Ian Hodder, "Human-Thing Entanglement: Towards an Integrated Archaeological Perspective," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17, no. 1 (2014): 164.

14 John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (Routledge, 2004).

15 Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (The University of Chicago Press, 1970).

that solidify and reify disciplinary boundaries subject to rapid change. While disciplines and institutions themselves may resist change at times, the entanglements in which they engage are merely purportedly stable enactments.¹⁶ Simultaneously, and as Hodder notes, these entanglements also “quickly cross space and time,” and “are thus subject to distant events.”¹⁷ Entanglements shift quickly and suddenly depending on the actors involved and their “being caught up with,” yet they also traverse temporality and distance. One abrupt shift in entanglements is seen in the shift of nomenclature on the part of the society now called the American Association of Biological Anthropologists (AABA).¹⁸ In its 2021 renaming, AABA simultaneously abruptly shifted its present-day nomenclature-based entanglements to locate itself closer to STEM-related fields,¹⁹ while also distancing itself from undeniably racist and eugenics-supportive work carried out in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. In this, the entanglement was both impacted by distant temporal events while also quickly crossing space and time. With the shift of the word “physical” to “biological,” this association’s name change highlights how rapidly such change can occur after a period of resistance, while also reminding us that entanglements are never “only now” but also always across time.

Stemming from a deep exploration by STS scholars of how humans have increasingly sought to portray ourselves as separate from nature, our burdened legacies of colonialism and racism, as well as from the material world in which we exist, the notion of “entanglement” serves to highlight that such disconnections, although sparked suddenly, often occur slowly and gradually.²⁰

16 Scott Hamilton, “Securing Ourselves from Ourselves? The Paradox of ‘Entanglement’ in the Anthropocene,” *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 68 (2017): 579–95.

17 Hodder, “Human-Thing Entanglement,” 164.

18 Caroline Snyder, “Cue the AABA Jokes: The American Association of Physical Anthropologists as a Case Study for the Changing Culture of Higher Academia” (honors thesis, Dickinson College, 2019), 362.

19 Ibid., 2.

20 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), and

Borrowed initially from interdisciplinary theorist and quantum physicist, Karen Barad, and applied to human's relations to nature, entanglement emphasized "humanity's enmeshment with, and hence its ethical responsibility towards, non-human forms of life."²¹ Central to the concept of entanglement, both in physics and as applied in this chapter, is the notion that to label two or more actors entangled is to already presuppose and create a connection between them. By virtue of being seen as potentially entangled actors, the actors are entangled. So too is the connection between TASP and the discipline of anthropology. While the entanglements have changed over time—initially growing, then gradually disentangling through changes in nomenclature—these two institutions are entangled in their existences through the very interrogation of their connection. Exploring this entanglement highlights how fields come to exist through the slow creation of entanglements with, and disentanglements from, other disciplines. By creating closeness to certain actors through the act of entanglement, institutions and fields of study also entangle themselves with the authority and "legitimacy" of these fields, thereby forging their own place within the broader landscape of scholarly work. It is in the disentanglement of fields from one another that disciplinary boundaries are established and, in the case of TASP, succinctly forgotten by the actors with whom they secured their existence through entanglement.

As Ayşe Zarakol notes, at the center of questions of entanglement, and of disciplinary making accordingly, are questions of security for entanglement is an endeavor of establishing ontological security, that is, it is rooted in the making of and knowing of what something is, be that something a human, institution, nation-state, or disciplinary actor.²² Analyzing the genesis of TAASP reveals their story as a network of actors studying play as a cultural form seeking to establish the organization's own

Hamilton, "Securing Ourselves *from* Ourselves."

21 Hamilton, "Securing Ourselves *from* Ourselves," 582.

22 Ayşe Zarakol, "States and Ontological Security: A Historical Rethinking," *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (2016): 48–68.

secure seat at the table within the wider world of scholarly work on anthropological and cultural dimensions of meaning making. Once TAASP secured itself as an institution in its own right and proceeded to become TASP by means of intersubjectively entangling with and then distancing themselves from anthropology, the association had largely established what Jennifer Mitzen calls a clear sense of self-certainty and routine to which a self can relate and from which it can derive meaning.²³ TASP had secured its existence through ontology. Looking at how TASP's entanglements faded into a place of being completely forgotten by the discipline of anthropology, it is clear that the burgeoning discipline of game studies ought to ask itself who it has entangled with and disentangled itself from while establishing its own ontological and scholarly security.

Returning to the tale of TAASP, the association drew heavily on Clifford Geertz's work with games and play to serve as a foundational pillar and primary entanglement between themselves and the broader field of anthropology.²⁴ While the nominative shift to TASP marks an apparent opening of the association to fields beyond anthropology, this entanglement with Geertz and the anthropological study of play he embodies remains strongly in place to this day, as seen in conference proceedings, publications, and the interviews cited in this chapter. The connection between TAASP and the broader discipline of anthropology was marked in the entanglement of their names, just as TASP as a professional society sought to entangle itself with the entire study of play through eschewing the word anthropology in its name.

As shown through its history and gradual shift from a specifically anthropological to a more broadly open association of play, TASP was originally founded as TAASP with aims of connecting the association, and thereby the field of Play Studies,

23 Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70.

24 Phillips Stevens Jr., "Forty Years at Play: What Have We Achieved," *Play & Culture Studies*, 13 (2016): 3–18.

to the broader discipline of anthropology, which had come to existence as its own discipline at the dawn of the twentieth century. TAASP's founders were mostly anthropologists who worked with ethnographic methodologies to answer their research questions. They entangled TAASP methodology with anthropology by virtue of asking similar methodological questions. Similarly, the initial work of TAASP was focused on exploring play in its cultural contexts and the universality of play, similar to how game studies looks to what is the same between games and what is different across the globe.²⁵ As TASP grew older, its audience grew wider, and the disciplinary entanglements of the society and its members grew more complex and wider ranging. Given Edward Norbeck's observation that anthropology dismissed the study of play as juvenile and unworthy of scientific research,²⁶ it follows that scholars in other disciplines and institutions who felt similarly rejected in their home disciplines for their interests in play gathered at TAASP, leading to TAASP's growth as an association entangled with myriad disciplines while itself working to establish the discipline of Play Studies. Ultimately, as discussed, TAASP became TASP in an effort to continue expanding its membership and focus, and exists to this day as an active arbiter of the study of play (particularly as it relates to children and psychology) through its conferences, publications, and awards.

Nevertheless, as with any discipline or institution, the entanglements of TASP continue to expand and grow. For example, in an effort to establish one potential "productive" future of the association and the study of play, Stevens has suggested a novel disciplinary entanglement, namely one with neuroscience,²⁷ again similar to some explorations in the world of game stud-

25 Edward Norbeck, "The Anthropological Study of Human Play," *Rice Institute Pamphlet — Rice University Studies* 60, no. 3 (1974), <https://hdl.handle.net/1911/63156>.

26 *Ibid.*, 267.

27 Phillips Stevens Jr., "Yes, We Need a Neuroscience of Play," *International Journal of Play* 9, no. 1 (2020): 160–69.

ies focused on the psychological aspects of games and players.²⁸ In many ways, this turn toward the neuroscience of play echoes a trend within broader studies of games and play, as well as within other humanities fields, to look to the hard sciences for answers because of the allure and promise of objectivity and the potential for greater research funding.²⁹ Just as TAASP initially entangled itself with anthropological methodologies because of their promise of acknowledgement within the academy, so too does Stevens propose entangling TASP and the study of play with neuroscience so as to produce work that is acknowledged and valued by the broader academy, thereby establishing the discipline of play studies as one worthy of recognition, clout, and institutional support.

While TASP serves as an example of quiet disentanglement from anthropology, and one that was seen as amicable and without ado, it is worth acknowledging that said disentanglement was never completed. That is to say, TASP is still connected to anthropology through its history and current membership, as Mathur conveyed to us in an interview.³⁰ Accordingly, while TASP is unheard of or even maligned within some anthropological departments, its work is wide-reaching and impactful. Highlighting the unspoken yet visceral nature of entanglement, this relationship between TASP and anthropology serves as a reminder that disciplinary boundaries are by their very nature arbitrary and often, but not always, rooted in methodological approaches. For although TAASP was ethnographically driven, and thereby deeply anthropological in methodological bent, so too is TASP ethnographically rooted even after becoming somewhat disentangled from anthropology. The manner in which institutions and disciplines entangle with one another is characteristic of the mess involved in what Sally Falk-Moore terms

28 Thomas Apperley and Darshana Jayemane, "Game Studies' Material Turn," *Westminster Papers* 9, no. 1 (2012): 5–25, and Celia Hodent, *The Gamer's Brain: How Neuroscience and UX Can Impact Video Game Design* (CRC Press, 2017).

29 Hodent, *The Gamer's Brain*, 2.

30 Mathur, "The History of The Association for the Study of Play."

“situational adjustments” or the realigning of an institution to the chaos inherent in the world around it.³¹ TAASP’s entanglement with anthropology was a situational adjustment to the context of its time and its disentanglement was yet another adjustment to its growing audience and interdisciplinary aims.

Acknowledging the situational adjustments that lead to the disciplinary entanglements between seemingly independent fields and disciplines is key to understanding the work that has come before and giving voice to researchers who may have been erased in the situational adjustment a field makes in order to establish itself as its own discipline. Accordingly, in contrast to Kuhn’s thoughts about the explosive nature of scientific “revolutions,” the concept of entanglement highlights the simultaneously explosive and slow-building nature of interdisciplinary endeavors that work to entangle themselves with actors so as to reify themselves as disciplines and fields of study unto themselves. Whereas for Kuhn scientific revolutions are sudden and due often to marked paradigm shifts, the notion of entanglement questions where said revolutions occur and how fields are themselves defined. Questioning the very existence of disciplinary boundaries, entanglements are webs of slow, gradual, and messy interconnections which simultaneously demonstrate rapid growth and severances. By utilizing a lens of disciplinary entanglement to understand the history of TASP, we stand to better understand the future of game studies while learning from the past. In doing so, game studies may yet avoid what Stevens observes in his own association’s present state, namely that, “the great majority of what we did from 1974 to the end of the last century is buried, unacknowledged—and a lot of it is being done again by contemporary scholars apparently unaware of the replication.”³²

31 Sally Falk-Moore, *Law as Process: An Anthropological Approach* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 50.

32 Stevens, “Forty Years at Play,” 6.

Entanglements with and around Game Studies

In 2017 we, the authors, began our PhD studies in anthropology. Josh specialized in understanding digitally mediated games and Laya focused her attention on in-person analog games. We both had a heavy focus on play and were directed to the seminal texts of play in our discipline. We believed, perhaps foolishly then, that we were relatively well read in play theory. We found copies of the 1976 and 1978 conference proceedings of an organization called The Anthropological Association of the Study of Play (TAASP). After asking other anthropologists, both in our department and elsewhere, about this organization in an attempt to better understand play's anthropological roots, we were curtly, yet firmly, told that TAASP was defunct. There was a seeming hush surrounding the history of the society, almost a sense of secrecy, and a suggestion that there had been some dramatic break, though no one knew the details. When we came together to write this piece, it was with the full intention of writing on the history of the disentanglement of anthropology and play studies as told through the narrative of TAASP's dissolution. Much to our surprise, and chagrin, a simple Google search revealed that TAASP was not defunct at all, but instead very much alive and thriving as TASP. Our focus turned away from writing on its dissolution to focus solely on the disentanglement. Given the narrative we had been told, we assumed that we may yet find answers to the assuredly explosive moment that led to the disentanglement of TASP and anthropology writ large.

Having scoured libraries, journals, archives, personal sources, and the extensive databases on the TASP website, we found no answers and instead turned to the anthropological method of narrative interviews. We began by conducting interviews with the current president of TASP, Smita Mathur, as well as long-time, leading member, Steven Philips, Jr.³³ In these interviews, we were surprised to discover that there were, in fact, no secrets

33 Mathur, "The History of The Association for the Study of Play," and Stevens Jr., "The History of The Association for the Study of Play."

to uncover. Instead, we learned that TASP had dropped “anthropology” from its name to be more inclusive of their membership, broadening their entanglements and reifying their commitment to interdisciplinarity. We know that once they met at the Annual American Anthropological conference, which brings together many anthropological disciplines each year, but that they started their own annual conference in the early 1980s. There is no evidence of a rift and despite our research we never found out where the rumors of said rift and disagreement began. In light of our findings, we came to the conclusion that the point of this chapter would need to change, becoming focused on TASP’s history and its broadening entanglements over time, with a cautionary tale mentioned here. Anthropology disentangled itself from play studies broadly. Though some anthropologists discuss it,³⁴ play does not and arguably has never been a recognized focus in anthropology, with many anthropologists shying away from any mention of it altogether, similar to how many anthropologists also shy away from studying games, be they digital or analog. It was this lack of acknowledgement that likely created or helped to propagate the rumors surrounding TASP, meanwhile leaving burgeoning anthropologists of play disconnected from and unaware of the seemingly thriving hub of interdisciplinary play studies that is TASP today.

The Association for the Study of Play (TASP) currently has both a vibrant and active membership, as well as a clear scholarly focus: the study of play. Nevertheless, and as Stevens aptly notes, outside of the association, “Play is being defined and re-defined,” and in key works about the study of play there is “no discussion of the work of TAASP, or our rationale for why there

34 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973); Benny Karpatschof, “Play, But Not Simply Play: The Anthropology of Play,” in *Children’s Play and Development: Cultural-Historical Perspectives*, ed. Ivy Schousboe and Ditte Winther-Lindqvist (Springer, 2013); Malaby, “Anthropology and Play”; Norbeck, “The Anthropological Study of Human Play”; and Sherry B. Ortner, *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering* (Princeton University Press, 1999).

should be an anthropological perspective.”³⁵ The current state of TASP and its scholars’ work as relatively unknown and unacknowledged, both within anthropology and within the network of actors that has secured itself the title “game studies” points to the role that disentanglement plays with regards to establishing disciplinary boundaries, while highlighting the dangers of letting certain entanglements stagnate or ignoring the importance of continuing to forge novel and interdisciplinary entanglements. “All of academia is fragmented,” Stevens asserts,³⁶ and it is this fragmentation that begs the question at hand for game studies, namely, where do our entanglements lay, both academically and institutionally? Who do scholars in the field cite and where is their work cited? Where do the boundaries of this ideally interdisciplinary endeavor begin and end for those within game studies, and where do those “outside” of the field see these boundaries, if they acknowledge the field at all? In understanding and interrogating the current state of game studies’ past, present, and future through these questions, we stand to better grasp the implications of the institutional choices that the actors that comprise the field have made, might make, and ought to make.

TASP unwittingly distanced itself from anthropology through its changed name and in an effort to expand its entanglements to a broader audience and world. In reaction, the discipline of anthropology disentangled itself, or sought to obfuscate its entanglement with TASP, according to a common perception in anthropology. This institutional forgetting of TASP is a form of erasure in and of itself. While several of TASP’s current leadership specifically mentioned that they were unaware of any explosive division or purposeful fissure between broader anthropological studies of play and the association, it was clear in our own institution that a number of play scholars within traditional anthropological departments certainly viewed TASP as either non-important or non-existent. This lack of awareness

35 Stevens, “Forty Years at Play,” 7.

36 Ibid.

highlights the slow process of disentanglement and the manner in which once entangled actors cease to be connected.

We can think of entanglement and disentanglement like yarn work. When we weave tapestry, knit a sweater, or crochet a blanket, we make purposeful knots. When Mathur discusses TASP's current project of refocusing intent, she and the other members of TASP are weaving these purposeful knots into the history of the organization.³⁷ When we forget the entanglements and disentanglements of the past or present, or are unaware of the entanglements we are creating now, our yarn becomes a mess, and we have to spend time undoing and redoing work already finished. Stevens makes this same point, suggesting that other disciplines grapple with similar issues: "Now, to be sure, other disciplines similarly complain about reinventing the wheel; and this may be an enduring, endemic problem in the humanities and social sciences today. But it's unfortunate, wasteful of time and resources, and obviously detrimental to progress."³⁸

Similarly, we suggest that game studies ought to contend with its own entanglements so as to consider the implications of the situational adjustments it makes as it vies for disciplinary legitimacy and ontological security. At the heart of such entanglements and disentanglements are questions of erasure and division, as well as cohesion, promotion, and growth. Looking to who scholars of game studies entangle with and disentangle from reveals insights into the ontological location that the field is attempting to establish for itself and the conversations its actors desire to take part in. Such stances are inherently telling as to what kind of a discipline game studies desires to be, as well as potential trajectories for what it may become.

While such answers may not yet exist, it is crucial to consider them for if an institution or entity's entanglements and disentanglements go unacknowledged, such action is likely to give rise to assumptions and narratives that are not rooted in the nuanced and messy location of boundary-making wherein

37 Mathur, "The History of The Association for the Study of Play."

38 Stevens, "Forty Years at Play," 6–7.

disciplines come to be. Instead, tales of explosive disjunctures such as the purported fissure between TASP and anthropology are spun up, work is subsequently ignored, its authors are forgotten, and the endeavors of those past are remade to the detriment of those who currently are. By engaging in a reckoning of its historical, present, and desired entanglements, game studies stands to avoid the struggle of being forgotten that TASP now faces while impacting both scholarship and game-making in meaningful ways through bringing nuance to the history of games, encouraging nuance in the present enactment of games, and realizing nuance in the future of games. Game studies is an incredibly interdisciplinary network of engaged actors and developing an understanding of its entanglements will serve to strengthen the field's past while ensuring its future.

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III.

Methods and Schisms

Autoethnographic Denial: The Disavowal of Game Studies' Most Fundamental Methodology and the Struggle for Its Realization

Stephanie C. Jennings

I. "We're living through history."

I recoil every time I hear the phrase. It's an abhorrent cliché for a time of so much suffering.

I was playing *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo, 2017) as history was unfolding: my life's final hours of innocence. It was Sunday morning, the Ides of March of 2020, shortly before Michigan went into lockdown. On Friday, I'd received an extension to finish my dissertation. I decided to reward myself with a few moments of solitude to roam with my favorite horse, sip some coffee, and think about how I'd hunker down. I considered calling my brother, asking him if he had toilet paper. But when I turned off the game to fetch my phone, I found too many missed calls from my mom.

I would never call my brother.

It didn't matter anymore whether he was supplied for lockdown or not.

All I could process was that I must tell my advisor what'd happened. More institutional extensions wouldn't come. My dissertation couldn't wait. I was going to have to finish, somehow.

Now that I'd lived through history, *Breath of the Wild* would be my last memory of peace.

II. Introduction

When video games started attracting scholarly attention, they immediately posed a problem. By necessitating performances from players, video games pulled researcher-players in far too close, entangling them with their objects of study. Methodological dilemmas abounded. How could scholars understand their positions in relation to these artifacts, which seemed to entail intimate forms of engagement that preceding media hadn't? If such intimacy was unavoidable, how were scholars to maintain standards of critical distance in their work? These questions have remained so troublesome throughout game studies history that they have become defining features of the field. Over the years, many scholars have suggested solutions. But too often, these have been forced intercessions. They've cleaved researcher-selves out of video games' coils and insisted that there was never anything important in that sizzling chasm, no matter how many sparks keep flying out of it.

Researchers' denials-of-self comes as no surprise. After all, by Western research standards, subjective knowledges are illegitimate. This is because Western research standards still revere the hoary binaries that split knowledge into intellectual-embodied, rational-emotional, or empirical-experiential. Many scholars still kneel before these divisions, despite decades of work that has emphasized their gendered, racialized, colonial, and imperial underpinnings, and despite the fundamental impossibility of making such divisions in the first place.¹ Adherence to these

1 I can't give an account within a single footnote that would do justice to this vast and important body of work, but to name a few: Donna J.

epistemic binaries has incited much scorn toward autoethnography, a reflexive methodology with which researchers analyze their own experiences. This has pressured scholars into avoiding its use entirely or else risk reprisals for their deviance from white, masculine research norms. Archana Pathak, for instance, recounts when a former colleague and dean dismissed her autoethnographic research as “merely ‘me-search,’” as “nothing more than an obvious extension of [her] dark body.”² Autoethnographers endure accusations of narcissism, laziness, and incompetence. Many academic journals won’t accept autoethnographies and many peer-reviewers believe it’s their duty to reject them.³ Autoethnographies don’t net the currencies that buy job security, promotion, and prestige: high citation counts,

Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99; Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 1990); and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (Zed Books, 2012).

- 2 Archana A. Pathak, “Opening My Voice, Claiming My Space: Theorizing the Possibilities of Postcolonial Approaches to Autoethnography,” *Journal of Research Practice* 6, no. 2. (2010): 3.
- 3 Autoethnographers have long sought to call attention to the delegitimization of autoethnographic work in the face of dominant academic conventions. Their efforts have, in fact, often taken the form of autoethnographies that detail their struggles to have their research published, chronicle dismissive commentary from editors and reviewers, and discuss the inappropriate evaluative criteria that reviewers often deploy to justify rejections. See, for example, Andrew C. Sparkes, “Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17 (2000): 21–43; Nicholas L. Holt, “Representation, Legitimation, and Autoethnography: An Autoethnographic Writing Story,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 1 (2003): 18–28; and Sarah Wall, “Easier Said Than Done: Writing an Autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 7, no. 1 (2008): 38–53. Based on my own experiences — and experiences that I’ve learned about from fellow autoethnographers — the same barriers to publication still persist in the present.

quantified impacts, or grant funding. For many scholars, shunning autoethnography is a matter of professional survival.

But shunning autoethnography has led to some odd methodological developments in game studies. And these, in turn, have hindered the field's understandings of video games: what they are, what they do, what they mean, and how they mean. Indeed, dogged denials-of-self have persisted despite autoethnography's centrality to game studies, both in its historical development and in the peculiarities of its research. As Torill Mortensen remarked in a May 2020 conversation on the GamesNetwork listerv: "considering the imperative to play in order to understand the game object, there is a certain autoethnographic aspect to almost all game analysis."⁴ The goal of this chapter is, then, to document the process of scholarly self-extraction and to contemplate its ramifications for the field's analytic approaches. However, my greater aim is to *re-center* autoethnography as a vital part of game studies history. I follow the tendrils of autoethnographic research that have always nourished the field, often beneath its surface—but now with ever-growing protuberance. Increasingly, video game scholars are cultivating fresh methodologies of experience-analysis. I chronicle how these contributions wax against all efforts to suppress them, asserting themselves as resistant knowledge projects⁵ and as *historical artifacts* of video games, gaming cultures, and the field of game studies.

III. The Missing Chapter

I kept the icon in my periphery, holding it at bay.

For three months, from November 2019 through January 2020, I'd played *The Binding of Isaac: Afterbirth+* (Nicalis, 2017) with obsessive zeal. Now I couldn't even look dead-on at its thumbnail on my PlayStation 4 homescreen.

4 GamesNetwork is the mailing list for the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), and thus serves as a communication conduit for many video game researchers across the world.

5 Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Duke University Press, 2019).

Let alone play the game. Let alone revise the chapter of my dissertation about it.

My dissertation: the development of a hybrid autoethnographic methodology for reading video game texts. It was based on my first publication, something I'd written early in my graduate school career. But in that initial publication, I'd never once mentioned autoethnography. I'd actually been adamant that it was textual analysis, *not* autoethnography. Even as a second-year PhD student, I'd internalized that autoethnography was something I needed to avoid. I didn't want to be associated with it.

Six years later, I would be utterly unprepared to get so entangled with a video game in my autoethnographic study — and to be so unable to safely distance myself from it — that even just looking at its icon would shred me apart. With a slew of endings that gesture toward the titular Isaac's self-inflicted demise, the game had come to bear on my life in ways I couldn't possibly expect when I started the project.

I put the chapter off for weeks, months, until I was days away from my defense and in crisis. But just opening the document touched off a terrible response: the world sliced itself in half, the pieces started to grind against and then slide away from each other, my vision blurred. *Isaac*, I thought, *Isaac crawls into a chest and locks himself in it and* —

Finally, I told my advisor that I couldn't do it. My dissertation would have to go without its penultimate chapter.

IV. Autoethnography and Video Game Analysis: Histories Interwoven and Frayed

The 1983 publication of David Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microworld* preceded the formation of game studies as an academic field by nearly two decades. A node of converging histories, the book is both an early example of video game analysis and an early example of autoethnography. Many scholars recognize Sudnow's prior book, *Ways of the Hand* — an account of the sociologist's endeavor to become a professional jazz pianist — as

a significant contribution to the emergence of self-observational research.⁶ Histories of autoethnography usually locate the first mentions of the methodology around this time period, concurring with the rise of identity politics⁷ and numerous “turns” in social scientific and humanities scholarship, including the postmodern turn⁸ and the self-reflexive turn.⁹ It is crucial to note, as Anderson does in a remark that prefigured Mortensen’s GamesNetwork comment, that there has “always been an autoethnographic element in qualitative sociological research.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, it wasn’t until the late 1980s that the term *autoethnography* gained traction to describe a distinct methodology “that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.”¹¹

Autoethnography, writes Norman Denzin, formed from a burgeoning awareness that “the ethnographer’s writing self *cannot not* be present, there is *no* objective space outside of the text.”¹² Decades later, scholars would make similar observations about video games: they are experiential, embodied performance texts, of which players — and, therefore, researcher-players — are integral, transformative, and inseparable parts.¹³ Indeed, as the field was taking shape throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, these were foundational and motivating assumptions of game studies research pertaining to multi-user dungeons (MUDs) and massively-multiplayer online role-

6 Leon Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (2006): 374–95.

7 Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

8 Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography.”

9 Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography* (Sage, 2014).

10 Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography,” 375.

11 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (2011): 273.

12 Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 26, emphasis in original.

13 For instance, see Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis* (Routledge, 2014).

playing games (MMORPGs), such as that of Mortensen,¹⁴ Lisbeth Klasturp,¹⁵ and Ragnhild Tronstad.¹⁶ These ideas were also fundamental concerns within efforts to complicate and adapt textual analytic methodologies for studies of video games, as in Diane Carr's ongoing work.¹⁷ These bodies of scholarship were, therefore, establishing precedents and methodologies for researchers to analyze their own play. For instance, in a striking account of how MUD players don't just consume texts but also "compose" them, Mortensen explained that "to study the use of the games, how they are realised into texts or experiences through the activity of playing, I have to study that process from the viewpoint of a player. To study logs from the game as texts afterwards is like studying a description of an event rather than being present at the event. The nature of the computer as a channel, a medium and an archive permits me to both participate and go back in 'history.'"¹⁸

As a precursor to this early game studies scholarship, *Pilgrim in the Microworld* is an exquisite expression of their interwoven understandings. In *Pilgrim in the Microworld*, Sudnow details his sensuous experiences while playing the Atari 2600 port of *Breakout* (Atari, 1978). His analysis employs a "naïve method" that carries an attitude of ceaseless wonder into his exploration of the taken-for-granted corporeal processes of learning a video game.¹⁹ Sudnow suggests that, throughout this process, video

14 Torill Mortensen, "Playing With Players: Potential Methodologies for MUDs," *Game Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/mortensen/>.

15 Lisbeth Klasturp, "A Poetics of Virtual Worlds," in *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference* (DAC, 2003).

16 Ragnhild Tronstad, "Performing the MUD Adventure," in *Digital Media Revisited*, ed. Gunnar Liestøl, Andrew Morrison, and Terje Rasmussen (MIT Press, 2003).

17 Diane Carr, "Textual Analysis, Digital Games, Zombies," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*.

18 Mortensen, "Playing With Players," §15.

19 Brendan Keogh, "Instantaneously Punctuated Picture-Music: Re-evaluating Videogame Expression through *Pilgrim in the Microworld*,"

game and player-body become incorporated with one another; the player becomes “interpictured” within the screen.²⁰ Yet, despite *Pilgrim in the Microworld*’s pivotal role in the origination of video game analysis, the field has largely ignored it. Brendan Keogh suggests that this oversight “is understandable when one considers that Sudnow’s work is almost exclusively descriptive, with only fleeting explicit proclamations about what his findings might mean for a broader cultural comprehension of video games.”²¹

However, *Pilgrim in the Microworld*’s devaluation is a predictable effect of numerous research traditions. Western academics have long held that the supreme purpose of research, and the ultimate metric of its worth, is the discovery of *generalizable* knowledge. But generalizability is an amorphous and shifting target, rife with misconceptions. Some qualitative researchers have proposed that we embrace plural forms of generalizability,²² such as the extrapolation of broader cultural import from a concrete example or the transferability of particular findings to multiple settings. Yet, generalizability is enmeshed with standards of scientificity. And these standards enshrine the expectation that generalizable knowledge must come from a disembodied view-from-nowhere that has expunged any vestiges of researcher influence.²³ Consequently, many academics understand generalizability strictly in terms of statistical probability and as “the prerogative of quantitative research.”²⁴ Qualitative research continues to struggle for legitimacy against attitudes that reify binaries of objectivity-or-subjectivity and that characterize qualitative methodologies as non-generalizable and

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies 25, nos. 5–6 (2019): 973.

20 Ibid., 974.

21 Ibid., 972.

22 Brett Smith, “Generalizability in Qualitative Research: Misunderstandings, Opportunities and Recommendations for the Sport and Exercise Sciences,” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 10, no. 1 (2017): 137–49.

23 Haraway, “Situated Knowledges.”

24 Janice M. Morse, “Qualitative Generalizability,” *Qualitative Health Research* 9, no. 1 (1999): 5–6.

therefore untrustworthy, irrelevant, biased, and lacking rigor.²⁵ Autoethnography, unsurprisingly, is prone to even more intense renditions of these criticisms from both quantitative and qualitative researchers alike.

Under the sway of these attitudes—and additionally, perhaps, other disciplines’ lingering condescension toward video games’ scholarly worth—many video game scholars have come to view their player-selves as antithetical to generalizability and scientificity, and therefore as problems to mitigate as much as possible. These trends started emerging early in the field’s establishment, at precisely the same time that numerous video game scholars—such as those I’ve mentioned above—were proposing methodologies with which researcher-players could read their own play.²⁶ For example, in an early investigation into field-appropriate methodologies, Espen Aarseth asserted that researchers must play video games in order to understand them. However, he also warned that “our own performance might not be the best source [of information about a game], especially when we are analyzing it ourselves.”²⁷ Interestingly, his essay nevertheless includes a narrated segment of his own playthrough of *Morrowind* (Bethesda, 2002) to make a general case against using walkthroughs and “other types of cheats” that “can easily ruin the game” and interfere with analysis.²⁸

Shortly thereafter, David Cameron and John Carroll addressed the “methodological dilemma” of researcher-player presence by suggesting a *performance narrative approach*.²⁹

25 Margaret Sandelowski, “‘To Be of Use’: Enhancing the Utility of Qualitative Research,” *Nursing Outlook* 45, no. 3 (1997): 125–32, and Smith, “Generalizability in Qualitative Research.”

26 It’s worth noting that most of the scholars conducting such research were women, thus reinforcing the point that the attempted invalidation of this research is a profoundly gendered process.

27 Espen Aarseth, “Playing Research: Methodological Approaches to Game Analysis,” in *Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference* (DAC, 2003), 7.

28 Aarseth, “Playing Research,” 5.

29 David Cameron and John Carroll, “‘The Story So Far...’: The Researcher as a Player in Game Analysis,” *Media International Australia* 110, no. 1 (2004):

Their idea of performance narrative emerges from the work of Denzin,³⁰ a renowned autoethnographer; and yet, Cameron and Carroll's approach discards autoethnographic epistemologies and approaches to narrativization. It holds instead to the conviction that observant-researcher and engrossed-player are incompatible positions, and thus proposes data collection methods that toggle between them in order to preserve standpoints for removed scrutiny. But, as their sample reading of *Resident Evil: Code Veronica X* (Capcom, 2001) demonstrates, the result is a confusing recitation that lurches between first-person ("we progressed into the next room") and third-person ("the authors started playing") narrations of play.³¹ Similar quirks pervade Seth Giddings and Helen W. Kennedy's "small-scale ethnography" of *Lego Star Wars* (Travelers' Tales, 2005).³² Like Cameron and Carroll, Giddings and Kennedy employ methods — such as video and sound capture — that they intend to rend appropriate separation between their playing and researching selves. These methods are therefore not only ways to gather and store data, but are also assurances of the analysis's validity. But the analysis then reports these play sessions in a strange jumble of first-person narration, dialogue transcripts, and abruptly detached third-person descriptions (e.g., "The player is delighted to play as a wookie and responds to the other player's avatar"³³).

In order to meet the standards of scientific writing, researchers "learn to eliminate editorial or subjective elements from their writing by writing in the third person or the passive voice and by using qualifiers [... They] subtract themselves, as much as pos-

62.

30 Norman K. Denzin, "Performance Texts," in *Representation and the Text: Reframing the Narrative Voice*, ed. William G. Tierney and Yvonna S. Lincoln (SUNY Press, 1997).

31 Cameron and Carroll, "The Story So Far...", 66.

32 Seth Giddings and Helen W. Kennedy, "Little Jesuses and *@#?-off Robots: On Cybernetics, Aesthetics, and Not Being Very Good at Lego Star Wars," in *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming: Essays on Cultural History, Theory, and Aesthetics*, ed. Melanie Swalwell and Jason Wilson (McFarland, 2008), 18.

33 Ibid., 23.

sible from the report.”³⁴ And yet, as Bart Simon, Kelly Boudreau, and Mark Silverman have observed, “it is clear that players understand their play in narrative terms” — personalized narratives are how video game players communicate their experiences.³⁵ The above examples show collisions of these impulses: at once to narrate one’s own embodied play, and at the same time to extricate oneself from that very narration to artificially force the conditions of scientific analysis. However, by insisting on the maintenance of neutral standpoints, they reinforce stigmas about experiential and affective knowledges as insufficient for generalizability and as unreliable for research. Distancing readers — by distancing the authors themselves — from the authors’ actions and emotions, they promulgate research practices that “confine inquiry to a limited range of researchable experiences represented in a narrow domain of recognizable texts.”³⁶

The fact remains, though, that “implicitly or otherwise, the context, subjectivity, and lived experience of the player-as-analyst informs [researchers’] interpretations” of the video games they play, no matter how hard they try to sanitize themselves from the texts under study.³⁷ In view of this fact, some scholars have simply concluded that “the play demanded of video games resists any notion of textuality,” leading to prevailing suspicions of not just autoethnography, but textual analysis as well.³⁸ Hence, textual analyses have made only sporadic appearances

34 Douglas Harper, “Small N’s and Community Case Studies,” in *What Is a Case? Exploring the Foundations of Social Inquiry*, ed. Charles Ragin and Howard S. Becker (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 155.

35 Bart Simon, Kelly Boudreau, and Mark Silverman, “Two Players: Biography and ‘Played Sociality’ in EverQuest,” *Game Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009): §13, http://gamestudies.org/0901/articles/simon_boudreau_silverman.

36 Arthur B. Bochner, “On First-Person Narrative Scholarship: Autoethnography as Acts of Meaning,” *Narrative Inquiry* 22, no. 1 (2012): 160.

37 Diane Carr, “Methodology, Representation, and Games,” *Games and Culture* 14, nos. 7–8 (2019): 711.

38 Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames* (MIT Press, 2018), 45.

in academic publications since the field's inception; and to the present, close reading is "still controversial work, both in academia and in the broader reaches of video-game culture."³⁹ The *too-closeness* of such readings has been controversial because it violates scientificity — because it, therefore, necessarily entails politicization. Close readings threaten "the boundaries around how 'acceptable' meaning is supposed to be made from video games," destabilizing dominant norms precisely by bringing the personal to bear on the texts they interpret.⁴⁰ Some parts of the field have condemned close readings on these very bases. At times, this has manifested as outright hostility, as in the well-documented case of scholars accusing Janet Murray of "interpretative violence"⁴¹ for her reading of *Tetris* (AcademySoft, 1984) as "a perfect enactment of the overtaken lives of Americans in the 1990s."⁴² At other times, it has manifested as doubt about whether meaning making is significant in video game play at all, as in Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron's minimization of the hermeneutic spiral in their "magic cycle" framework.⁴³ They dismiss the limitedness of their own inter-

39 Bo Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York University Press, 2019), 56.

40 Ibid., 58. At the same time, it's worth considering how *close reading* and textual analytic methods also have a similarly fraught history in the field from which they originated, literary studies. Indeed, the term *close reading* in literary studies doesn't represent a single method, but a set of highly variable practices, many of which do not consider the subjectivities of readers or critics-as-readers as contributing to the meanings of texts. For example, traditions of close reading such as formalism and New Criticism had been dominant for decades before approaches like those of reader-response criticism emerged to address their oversight of the roles of readers in constructing the meanings of literary works. See, for example, Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

41 Markku Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001): paragraph 29, <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>.

42 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (The Free Press, 1997).

43 Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron, "In the Frame of the Magic Cycle: The Circle(s) of Gameplay," in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, ed. Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (Routledge, 2008).

pretations after playing *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* (Activision, 2006), remarking that they didn't bother to "think about either female empowerment or gay issues, themes which the cast of superheroes could have alluded to."⁴⁴ They take this as evidence that interpretation — especially of the identity-oriented and therefore politicized kind — must be subordinate to other gaming activities.

But as this latter example shows, the field has propagated forms of scholarship in which individual researcher-players draw from their own situated play to make absolutist claims about games' intrinsic qualities and humans' relationships to them — even as it has decried research rooted in experiential knowledge. These projects risk moving beyond generalizability and into universalizability, a disposition that assumes "that there are fundamental characteristics and values which all human subjects and societies share."⁴⁵ An illustrative demonstration is Jesper Juul's book, *The Art of Failure*.⁴⁶ Juul begins by recounting his many botched attempts at the rhythm game, *Patapon* (Japan Studios, 2008). Despite his frustration, he returns to the game incessantly. It is from this experience that he derives his book's core maxim, the *paradox of failure*: although we avoid failure, we nevertheless seek out video games, which necessarily involve failure. Juul's personal experience is thus the basis for his universalizing claims about the nature of video games and of human beings. The consequence is, as Bo Ruberg observes, that Juul's book "establishes a framework of normative desires, one in which there is a 'normal' way of feeling (that success is good and failure is bad) and little room for deviations from that norm."⁴⁷ Moreover, it establishes a normative definition of video games that requires that they exhibit definitive win-or-lose outcomes in order to even be considered video games in the first place.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 31.

⁴⁶ Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (MIT Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 141.

This style of research has historically dominated the field, pursuant to a perceived directive to distill “some pure essence of ‘play’ at the heart of video games” by elucidating their shared, exceptional qualities.⁴⁸ But such research has been achievable only through autoethnographic denial—and only from the “unmarked” standpoints of white masculinity, which normativize their own values as the apolitical, universal essences of video games. As feminist epistemology has long critiqued, these same premises have underpinned the very notion of scientificity itself.⁴⁹ Further, as many video game scholars have asserted, any such effort to dictate quintessential video game qualities “is only ever an act of exclusion, of determining that certain works and experience of those works are invalid”⁵⁰ as part of projects to “define and thereby control the nature of the field.”⁵¹ As Bianca Batti and Alisha Karabinus have argued, such scholarship constitutes a type of epistemological gatekeeping, a “male power fantasy inherent in believing oneself to be the judge of what is good and right in games [...] not just whose games get to count as games, but whose study of them then gets to count as legitimate and valid as well.”⁵²

But the epistemological gatekeeping practices that de-legitimize autoethnography have pervaded the field well beyond these white, masculinist perspectives. They permeate the methodological training that scholars receive, dictating which methodologies to cultivate and which to let wither. Neglecting autoethnography in methodological primers has ensured that many video game scholars aren’t knowledgeable in the possibilities of its

48 Brendan Keogh, “Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games,” *Journal of Games Criticism* 1, no. 1 (2014): 5.

49 For example, see Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” and Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*

50 Keogh, “Across Worlds and Bodies,” 7.

51 Gerald Voorhees, “Criticism and Control: Gameplay in the Space of Possibility,” in *Ctrl-Alt-Play: Essays on Control in Video Gaming*, ed. Matthew Wysocki (McFarland, 2013), 9.

52 Bianca Batti and Alisha Karabinus, “A Dream of Embodied Experience: On Ian Bogost, Epistemological Gatekeeping, and the Holodeck,” *Not Your Mama’s Gamer*, May 1, 2017, §3, <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=16363>.

use — and therefore disdain it. The handbook *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, for instance, includes only a single paragraph on autoethnography.⁵³ Enclosed within a section that disputes equivalencies between the “systematic method” of ethnography and writing about “simple [personal] experience,” the paragraph offers no guidance to researchers who may want to conduct autoethnographic studies.⁵⁴ Instead, it dismisses autoethnography as a term all too often “used to mask a lack of method [...] rather than to pursue a legitimate course of study.”⁵⁵ This methodological spurn is disappointing, given Boellstorf et al.’s recognition that “Some virtual worlds scholars still criticize ethnographic research by claiming it is anecdotal or unscientific.”⁵⁶ And it is even more disappointing in light of the fact that all four of the handbook’s authors had previously published studies that drew heavily from their personal experiences in virtual environments.⁵⁷

In fact, video game scholars will often point to Celia Pearce and Artemesia’s *Communities of Play* and Bonnie Nardi’s *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* when asked to identify examples of gaming autoethnographies. Such assumptions persist despite both Pearce and Nardi’s declarations that their studies are ethnographies, *but not autoethnographies*. On the one hand, the perennial confusion may evince more generalized misunderstandings about autoethnography that saturate the field. But on the other hand, these methodological slippages are fraught outcomes

53 Tom Boellstorf, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

54 Ibid., 43.

55 Ibid., 44.

56 Ibid., 6.

57 Tom Boellstorf, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Bonnie Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (University of Michigan Press, 2010); Celia Pearce and Artemesia, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* (MIT Press, 2009); and T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (MIT Press, 2006).

of both books. Much like the other researcher-players we witnessed above, Pearce and Nardi struggle with their in-game involvement even as they strive to maintain the positions of distanced ethnographic observers. In *Communities of Play*, this tension even climaxes to a point of crisis. After Pearce allows a local newspaper to report on her early findings without the consent of the *Uru* (Cyan Worlds, 2003) community, its members turn against her. The group laments that Pearce's aloof scrutiny has caused her to misrepresent them. They determine that she cannot continue her fieldwork unless she begins participating as a member of their community. At first, the request confounds Pearce: "Wasn't I supposed to be detached, objective?"⁵⁸ But the situation requires her to modify her methods. Her solution is to adjust the traditional ethnographic technique of participant-observation into *participant-engagement* in order to "engage with the group while still maintaining some measure of analytical objectivity."⁵⁹ Realizing that her own study tilted more "toward the *participant* end of participant-observation," Nardi then adopts Pearce's *participant-engagement* when faced with similar quandaries in her research on *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004).⁶⁰ She realizes that she must become "just another player" in the course of her ethnography, given that she couldn't study "raiding guilds without playing as well as at least an average player and fully participating in raids."⁶¹ Nevertheless, even as participant-engagement rectifies certain inadequacies in traditional ethnographic methods for studies of virtual worlds, it also represents both authors' determinations to preserve social-scientific standards by diminishing their self-presence. Ultimately, what shapes both studies are each author's efforts to keep from focusing critical attention on their own play performances, experiences, and subjectivities.

58 Pearce and Artemesia, *Communities of Play*, 231.

59 Ibid., 210.

60 Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, 34.

61 Ibid.

Such efforts to sustain research conventions that diminish the player-self have had inadvertently obfuscatory effects in video games research. They've often confounded more than they've disclosed, producing murkiness and misalignments instead of the pristine decontamination that scientificity seems to promise. For instance, as I described in my earliest work, it's been rare for video game researchers to clarify their play activities as part of their methods, a habit that's attributable to their exertions to keep their analyses objective by keeping themselves out.⁶² Consequently, the field has just come to accept abundant methodological uncertainties about how analysts engaged with the video games they studied, what went into their playthroughs, and what comprised the texts that they read. And these uncertainties have had further detrimental impacts on the field. They, along with the prominence of prescriptive research that imposes hegemonic values about games, play, and people, have actually *limited* the field's understandings about video games. By treating the player-self as a problem to remove, and by negating researchers' inextricable involvement in the formation of video game texts, the field has failed to fully explore the implications of player presence as a fundamental feature of video games. To echo Keogh's points, it is for precisely these reasons that Sudnow's descriptive study now represents a vital intervention in the essentializing epistemologies that have come to dominate research on video games.⁶³ *Pilgrim in the Microworld's* methods — and the autoethnographic works that have been in game studies all along but have too often been pushed to the margins — show how the field can conceptualize video games differently and can imagine ways of studying them beyond imposed norms.

62 Stephanie C. Jennings, "Passion as Method: Subjectivity in Video Games Criticism," *Journal of Games Criticism* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1–18.

63 Keogh, "Instantaneously Punctuated Picture-Music."

V. Realizing Autoethnography: Experiential Methodologies across the Past, Present, and Future of Game Studies

At what point did I change my mind?

I hadn't wanted to be associated with autoethnography, but the associations came anyway. As I continued to write, and as others started to read and cite my work, "autoethnography" started to stick. I felt an initial urge to correct this — and then started wondering why. Why did I object to the possibility that what I was doing might be autoethnographic? I found that I didn't have an answer other than "because other scholars might not take me seriously." And that made me realize that I didn't actually know much about autoethnography.

So, I started to explore. I learned what autoethnography was, what it could do. I learned about how video game scholars had already used autoethnographic methods, and I began envisaging their generative potentials for future studies.

But no amount of learning could prepare me for the loss that I would endure, or the fact that the trauma from that loss would suffuse *The Binding of Isaac* so strongly that I couldn't even touch the game, let alone allow myself to go near enough to it to finish an autoethnographic study about it. Yet, even as I needed to cut a dissertation chapter to stop re-traumatizing myself, I also found that my autoethnographic work was a rare place where I could simply be with my pain.

Trauma is a pillar of autoethnographic research. Denzin meditates on writing about trauma within the first pages of *Interpretive Autoethnography*; it remains a consistent theme throughout the handbook, a testament to its centrality as autoethnographic subject matter.⁶⁴ Later, Denzin explains this importance with reference to Patricia Clough, who believes that contemporary experiments in autoethnographic writing are symptomatic of "the trauma culture of the teletechnological."⁶⁵ Clough empha-

64 Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*.

65 Patricia Ticineto Clough, "Comments on Setting Criteria for Experimental Writing," *Qualitative Inquiry* 6, no. 2 (2000): 287.

sizes that autoethnography has always been “closely connected to gender, race, family, nation, politics, capital, technology” and ensnared in debates about “writing, agency, self, subjectivity.”⁶⁶ But many newer autoethnographies have particularly focused on “trauma, on injuries, on troubled, repressed memories, inabilities to speak the past, the search for a new voice, shattered, damaged egos seeking new histories, new forms of agency.”⁶⁷ Clough sees these research trends as resulting from anxieties about new forms of subjectivity brought on by transnational capitalism and mutating media technologies.

Video game culture is, itself, a trauma culture. Perfectly encapsulating Clough’s observations, it has been ripe for autoethnographic pickings. First published as an essay in 1993, Julian Dibbell’s *My Tiny Life* is a superb illustration of these points — and it is yet another example of an autoethnographic analysis that predates the institutional establishment of game studies, but with influences that have rippled out across the field.⁶⁸ *My Tiny Life* examines the aftershocks that reverberated across LambdaMOO after one of its players sexually assaulted other members of the virtual community. Dibbell writes about the transformational effects of this trauma on himself and the denizens of LambdaMOO, admitting that the incident made him take virtual rape seriously in ways he might not have otherwise. Exemplifying the traumas that Clough enumerates, the book deals with issues of sexual violence, fraught negotiations of subjectivity brought on by virtual environments, and the dissolution of boundaries between public and private. When researching *My Tiny Life* for this chapter, I stumbled on some retrospective comments that Dibbell has made about the book on his website. He remarks, “I guess that’s ultimately why I think the best time to read *My Tiny Life* may be right now. Because in

66 Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 71.

67 Ibid., 72.

68 Julian Dibbell, *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World* (Holt, 1998).

the end it's history we live in, not the future." The post has no date. It doesn't really need one.

Over the years, online abuse has remained a major—even growing—subject of experiential-based work on video games and gaming culture. While not strictly an autoethnography, Kishonna Gray's *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live* opens with a narrated scene from a multiplayer video game when Gray's teammates heard her voice for the first time, identified her as a Black woman, and started to barrage her with racialized and gendered insults.⁶⁹ This personal story frames and motivates Gray's study, which highlights the oppressions that women and people of color experience in online gaming environments that construct them as deviant bodies. Indeed, gaming culture's racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism have spawned many forms of online abuse both within and beyond sites of play, including innumerable coordinated online harassment campaigns. As these campaigns have turned their attention toward video game scholars, autoethnography has proven a crucial methodology for chronicling and critically analyzing researchers' traumatic experiences of being subjected to violence because of their work—and, quite simply, just for being involved with video games at all.

Emma Vossen describes gaming's animosity toward anyone who is not a cis-het white male as an overriding cultural inaccessibility that crisscrosses video game design, spaces of play, gaming culture, and the field of game studies itself.⁷⁰ Autoethnography enables Vossen to punctuate her analysis with abundant, harrowing evidence from her own experiences: lifelong feelings of alienation from gaming; a humiliating incident of being ridiculed as a "typical girl gamer" at a male-dominated graduate student event; an introduction to game studies that included only scholarship from white men; vivid retellings of the threats

69 Kishonna L. Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* (Routledge, 2014).

70 Emma Vossen, "On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse" (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018).

with which she was bombarded after her work received international attention. Using autoethnography to “take up space” in the face of this cultural inaccessibility, Elyse Janish relays her return to video games in the wake of GamerGate.⁷¹ She reflects on an instant of self-doubt that occurred when she was presenting her work to an academic audience. The instant leads to epiphany: doubt, she realizes, is an insidious mechanism that abusers deploy to silence feminist scholars, but it’s also “what pushes us to ask questions, to double-check our work, to take a moment to consider before asserting a claim.”⁷² For Janish, autoethnography allows feminist scholars to work through their doubt, to share their experiences without essentializing them. Bianca Batti turns to autoethnography to trace connections between an experience of sexual violence from her childhood and her experience of “being slut-shamed, policed, and silenced by hostile members of the gaming community” after her feminist video game scholarship drew public notice.⁷³ Together, her stories function to locate video game culture within broader patterns of sexual violence, which in turn calls attention to their traumatizing implications and the need for further research interventions that disrupt video game culture and challenge game studies’ hegemonic epistemologies.

Batti’s autoethnography provides another recognition of the inextricability of researcher-selves from their video game play, but this time in a different register: “Play is our praxis. And our playful praxis, because it is so deeply embedded in the online, digital cultures we study, means that our praxis often occurs in public spaces. Feminist game studies work is public work.”⁷⁴ And because this work is public, and because video game culture answers justice-oriented work with violence, feminist video

71 Elyse Janish, “Shoot the Gun Inside: Doubt and Feminist Epistemology in Video Games,” in *Feminism in Play*, ed. Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

72 Ibid., 231.

73 Bianca Batti, “Worldbuilding in Feminist Game Studies: Toward a Methodology of Disruption” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2019), 135.

74 Ibid., 134.

game scholars face incredible risks in the research that they do. Risk is a constant theme across these autoethnographic works. For video game autoethnographers, especially those who have been marginalized, risk is perpetual and dispersed. It's present in the designed spaces in which we perform our play. It's present when our scholarship draws widespread scrutiny. It's present, too, in the likelihood that other scholars, reviewers, peers, and colleagues won't take it seriously; in the open sharing of personal — often previously private — stories about our histories; in the prospects of those stories being derided, rejected, or used against us. And it's always present in the possibilities of re-traumatization.

How, then, can prospective autoethnographers mitigate risks involved with studying a culture and using a methodology that is so deeply entrenched in trauma? When no amount of preparation can ever completely fortify us against fallouts and unknowns, what can possibly be done? How can video game scholars support one another in this work? And what responsibilities does the field have to address these risks — and to be accountable for its contributions to them?

To begin with, the field must continue the work of historicizing video games, autoethnographically-inflected methodologies, and their relationships to one another. By situating video games within vaster and more complex media histories, game studies scholars are more likely to recognize that video games' performativity isn't actually exceptional. Lusher understandings of gaming's prehistory that go beyond normative ideals of games and play help us to see the particularities of video game performance without essentializing them.⁷⁵ And these insights, in turn, show us that the entanglement of researcher-players in video game texts is not a new phenomenon, is not aberrant, and is not a *problem* that conventional notions of rigor can or should solve. Instead, they can channel our attention toward extant research practices that have already theorized media in ways

75 For instance, see Darshana Jayemanne, *Performativity in Art, Literature, and Videogames* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

that can inform our own approaches. Reader-response criticism, for example, has long acknowledged the integral presence of researchers' subjectivities within their interpretations of literary texts.⁷⁶ Greater awareness of this preceding, adjacent work can then make us more apt to appreciate the contributions of scholars who have already started adapting these methodologies for studying video games.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, historicizing autoethnography can debunk the stereotypes that discredit it as "simple personal experience." Autoethnography's purpose, Denzin stresses, has historically been "interventionist, seeking to give notice to those who may otherwise not be allowed to tell their story or who are denied a voice to speak."⁷⁸ As I mentioned earlier, autoethnography emerged out of multiple scholarly "turns" and these included the critical turns that began critiquing the colonialism of ethnography's methods, as well as its extractive, othering ways of generating knowledge. Moreover, autoethnography has consistently challenged scientific imperialism and has garnered recognition for its postcolonial possibilities.⁷⁹ Black feminist and critical race scholarship have further developed autoethnography and related methodologies like counterstory to reject notions of objective research and to assert that the "experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism."⁸⁰ Counterstory, for example, "functions through meth-

76 See Stanley Eugene Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (University of California Press, 1972), and Iser, *The Act of Reading*.

77 Nicholas Hanford, "Moments of Play: Uncovering the Performances of Videogames Play" (PhD diss., Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2017), and Tamer Thabet, *Video Game Narrative and Criticism: Playing the Story* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

78 Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, 72.

79 Pathak, "Opening My Voice, Claiming My Space," and Satoshi Toyosaki, "Toward De/Postcolonial Autoethnography: Critical Relationality with the Academic Second Persona," *Cultural Studies<->Critical Methodologies* 18, no. 1 (2017): 32–42.

80 Aja Y. Martinez, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* (National Council of Teachers of English, 2020), 3.

ods that empower the minoritized through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in standardized majoritarian methodologies.”⁸¹ As such, autoethnographic works can operate as parts of resistant knowledge projects⁸² that critique and aim to change social inequities. They do so by voicing the experiential knowledges of the marginalized without essentializing those experiences; by imbuing a sense of urgency in the need to confront injustice; and by creating opportunities for transformational resistance.

In game studies, scholars have been conducting interventionist autoethnographic projects in varied forms. The feminist works that we encountered above, for example, have elucidated women’s experiences of exclusion, sexism, and gendered violence in misogynistic domains of gaming culture. Jenny Sundén’s autoethnography about a love affair that took place within and outside of *World of Warcraft* (WoW) forged new directions for research on virtual worlds.⁸³ Observing that researchers rarely “admit to ever having been seduced” by the games they study, Sundén relates the story of how she started playing *WoW* with a woman she’d met at a bar.⁸⁴ Her queer, reflexive narrative from her situated experience manifests “a way of knowing cultures,” by “bring[ing] to the fore culturally marginalized sexualities and desires.”⁸⁵ At the same time, it challenges mainstream ethnographies by prompting questions about how research would change if scholars were more open about their motivations, drives, actions, and desires. As Sundén’s work demonstrates, an autoethnography doesn’t have to be traumatic to be interventionist. A recent article by TreaAndrea Russworm and Samantha Blackmon, for instance, uses a mixtape format that presents its research in a combination of music, interviews, and critical analysis that together serve as invitations “to *listen* to the

81 Ibid.

82 Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*.

83 Jenny Sundén, “Desires at Play: On Closeness and Epistemological Uncertainty,” *Games and Culture* 7, no. 2 (2012): 164–84.

84 Ibid., 165.

85 Ibid., 170.

individual and shared histories of Black women in the digital era.”⁸⁶ They include among their reasons for using a mixtape “the fact that Black women’s resistant contributions must be listened to in ways that are also attentive to the creative, joyful, and playful realities of such practices.”⁸⁷ The article is an invaluable contribution to the historicization of the field, as it provides first-person origin stories of Black women academics including Russworm, Blackmon, Anna Everett, Gabriela T. Richard, and Kishonna Gray.

Interventionist autoethnographies like these show us not only what game studies *has* been, but what it *could* become. They demand—as Russworm and Blackmon suggest—that we create a scholarly culture not just of asserting and declaring, but of *listening*. When we listen to these stories, we hear them necessitating cultural and institutional changes: changes in how we create and communicate knowledge, in how we study video games, in whose voices we prioritize, in what we value, in how we understand gaming culture and our relationships to it. Moreover, these histories and their recent developments tell us that autoethnographic methodologies are multiple and many—and can proliferate. They direct us, then, toward a future in which the field continues generating myriad examples of autoethnographic works and experiential methodologies. To be sure, the field already has many sources from which to draw ideas: Simon, Boudreau, and Silverman’s biographical methods for collaboratively exploring our memories of play.⁸⁸ Suggestions from Sundén⁸⁹ and Brown⁹⁰ about using autoethnography for studies of massively multiplayer online roleplaying games.

86 TreaAndrea M. Russworm and Samantha Blackmon, “Replaying Video Game History as a Mixtape of Black Feminist Thought,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 94. Emphasis in original.

87 *Ibid.*, 95.

88 Simon, Boudreau, and Silverman, “Two Players.”

89 Sundén, “Desires at Play.”

90 Ashley Brown, “Awkward: The Importance of Reflexivity in Using Ethnographic Methods,” in *Game Research Methods: An Overview*, ed. Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk (PETC Press, 2015).

McArthur's combination of autoethnography and actor-network theory to negotiate relationships between researcher-players and their avatars.⁹¹ Vossen's recent reading of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020), which connects her play to her experiences with the millennial housing crisis, and which thus emphasizes the potential for video games and autoethnographies about them to incite conversations around issues like class and economic precarity.⁹² To name just a few.

But as we look ahead to continue building from this vibrant history, there is still much work we have yet to do.

It seems like every few months, a particular conversation repeats on GamesNetwork anew: someone will ask for help locating resources about autoethnography. Occasionally, the asker doesn't seem familiar with the term autoethnography to begin with. Some answers will include a couple of helpful tips. But most answers seem baffled. On the one hand, this cycle does seem to suggest an unceasing, even growing interest in gaming autoethnographies. But on the other hand, it's a disappointing situation — and also unsurprising. As we have seen, there are rampant misunderstandings about autoethnography throughout the field, thanks to many determined efforts to disavow it in favor of dominant academic practices. This must change. It is vital that we provide more directions on *how* to conduct autoethnographies in future scholarship. It is vital that we support scholars who are interested in undertaking this work. It is vital that we listen to it, use it, cite it, validate it, and elevate it. These are the ways that the field, collectively, must mitigate and take responsibility for the risks of doing autoethnography.

As I finish writing this chapter just days away from the one-year anniversary of my brother's death and the outset of my sheltering-in-place against the COVID-19 pandemic, I find myself reflecting on the past and future of video game autoeth-

91 Victoria McArthur, "Making Ourselves Visible: Mobilizing Micro-Autoethnography in the Study of Self-Representation and Interface Affordances," *Loading...* 12, no. 19 (2019): 27–42.

92 Emma Vossen, "Tom Nook, Capitalist or Comrade? On Nook Discourse and the Millennial Housing Crisis," *Loading...* 13, no. 22 (2020): 109–34.

nographies. I wonder what role they may play after an extended period of mass casualty, compounding traumas, and huddling indoors in front of our screens. I wonder what the autoethnographies-to-come will tell us about the relationships between video games and human lives that developed during this time. No matter what they will say, they will be significant as *historical artifacts*. They will document lived experiences from this moment in history, well after many have forgotten or moved on.

This is one of autoethnography's most critical functions, and this is a value we must accord it: autoethnographies are, themselves, records of history. They can tell us about the corporeal sensations of learning to play *Breakout* on an Atari 2600 in the early 1980s. They can relay the terror that came with doing public feminist work before, during, and after GamerGate. They can archive the field's history with the self-narrated origin stories of Black women scholars. They can crystallize the ephemeral, temporally-situated fragments of our play, producing new meanings from our entanglements with video games in specific instances: like the implications of *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* for millennials caught in a protracted housing crisis, or the peace of *Breath of the Wild* as a means of navigating grief and loss.

We have yet to realize all that autoethnography can — and will — do for studies of video games and for the field's historical record keeping. But first, we must stop denying it, and embrace it as a defining feature of the field.

Acknowledgments

I would like to dedicate this chapter to my brother, David Jennings, who died in March 2020. The last time I “saw” him was his online status in my PlayStation friends list the night of his passing. Video games were always a central part of our sibling bond. There will never come a time that I won't miss talking with him about gaming. But I see this work as a way of carrying on those conversations in his memory.

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Gameography

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Down on Luck: Examining the Pervasive Merit- Based Logics in Game Studies

Michael Anthony DeAnda

I'm playing *Pokémon Red* (GameFreak, 1998 [US]), and I'm facing my rival, Blue, in the final battle of the Pokémon League. If I beat him, I become the Pokémon Champion. The two of us are down to our last pokémon, and my Ninetales, while at full health is at a type-disadvantage against his Blastoise, which only has a measly number of HP remaining. I select Quick Attack, and I begin celebrating as I can taste victory because this move gets priority and has a high chance of success. "NINETALES used QUICK ATTACK," I read, but there is no animation as I click through the text. "NINETALES's attack missed!" Blue's Blastoise finishes me off with a Hydro Pump, and my screen fades to black.

This "Gen 1 Miss Glitch" occurs in first generation Pokémon games because of how accuracy of moves is coded. The algorithm generates a number and modifies it with any stat changes accrued through battle. If it is less than 255, the move hits; greater or equal, it misses. Even moves with 100 percent accuracy have a $\frac{1}{256}$ chance of missing and is precisely why my Quick Attack failed. This is also an interesting ramification of

chance in games, where even strategy can be undermined by a randomizer.

Chance in games deals with an outcome of randomization, such as a coded algorithm, dice rolls, and shuffling cards, to name only a few examples. In some cases, chance offers a mechanic to complicate strategy and skill in games, often affording play between novice and seasoned players. For example, it adds uncertainty to games: the person in last place can get super lucky and rise to the top, or the high-leveled character can miss a roll and fail an attack. Yet, when isolated in games, chance creates an equal playing field: a coin toss between players establishes who wins. Games of pure chance are thus systems of perfect understanding because the probability for each outcome can be calculated. In the coin toss, each player has a 50 percent chance of winning. While chance is often placed in a false dichotomy with skill where skill is often privileged, chance invites us to rethink games and locate other pleasures at play. To turn back to first generation Pokémon, several streamers have attempted “no hit” runs of the game where if the player’s Pokémon is hit by a damaging move they must restart the game or fail. Such an interpretation of the game requires avoiding attacks and thus revels in the “Gen 1 Miss Glitch.”

In this chapter, I examine how game studies diminishes chance and privileges skill. I argue that such privileging prevents us from understanding chance in games in more meaningful ways. Rather, chance is often read as a game system that casts players in passive roles at the whim of fate and unyielding indiscrimination: a player can maximize stats but can still fail a coin toss, and so fate operates upon the player. Instead, focusing on skill perpetuates readings of games as meritocracies. Examining these tensions, I unpack how gaming culture deploys “balance” and “equality” to foreground skill, and labels these as “real games” while minimizing luck. This understanding of games reflects cultural beliefs of what is fair, right, and just. Specifically, one’s fame and fortune must be earned, or it is not properly deserved.

I begin by discussing how definitions of play primed game studies at a point of formalization to devalue chance. I then consider the focus on skill in game studies as a reflection of cultural beliefs that hard work pays off and gambling is deviant and lazy. Opening space to think about chance and gambling as game objects worth critical attention, I discuss how these offer interventions for rethinking what games are and who games are for.

Playing with Formalizing Game Studies

When arguing for why games necessitate critical scholarly attention, game studies leaned on play theory to establish itself as a field. For this chapter of the field's history, play was important because it provided the means to differentiate game studies from other fields like media studies and cultural studies. Games, as Miguel Sicart has said, are currently the privileged form of play.¹ In this section, I synthesize Amanda Phillips's study of the parallel between gaming culture and gaming scholarship — which is also a historiography of the formalization of game studies as a scholarly field — with Peter McDonald's revised reading of *Homo Ludens*, allowing me to think through how demarcating game studies has ramifications for what types of games deserve critical attention.

In “On Dickwolves and Killjoys: Feminism and Interpretive Violence in Gaming Communities,” Amanda Phillips locates how similar behaviors, which serve to protect games from the criticality of “feminist killjoys,” exist in both gaming culture and game studies.² Comparing gaming and academia, Phillips observes the discourse around both identity and hermeneutics, which allows them to locate the discursive moves used by gamers and scholars to define and guard what a game is. Specifically, they locate this scholarly discourse at the critical point of attempting to establish game studies as its own field of aca-

1 Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (MIT Press, 2014).

2 Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York University Press, 2020).

demic inquiry, different from other forms of media studies and cultural studies. For example, according to the introduction of the inaugural issue of *Game Studies*, “Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again.”³ Phillips critically responds to this framing of “resisting colonization,” underscoring it as a rhetorical gesture to stake territory, a move in the foundational essay that emphasizes competition and violence rather than synthesis, and yields “a debate that could not be amicably resolved.”⁴

Even though Phillips’s chapter does not focus on games of chance, they articulate how, from its establishment, game studies has been primed for exclusionary methods in deciding both what a game is and which games merit critical inquiry. Here, in order to underscore how much we are entrained to meritocracy, I want to echo that framing the formation of game studies in terms of resisting colonization accentuated competition in academia. Peter McDonald’s rereading of Johan Huizinga’s work furthers established problems of utilizing “Nature and Significance of Play,” the first chapter of *Homo Ludens*, as an empirical formalization of play. Against the backdrop of colonization, the empirical reading of Huizinga’s text in game studies establishes the borders of what constitutes play.

Foundational to the study of play and games,⁵ Johann Huizinga in the first chapter of *Homo Ludens* offers a definition of play as containing the following characteristics: removed from ordinary life; engaging and immersive; nothing is created or gained, including profit; structured and bound by rules; pro-

3 Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One.” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

4 Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*, 52.

5 Dennis Jansen’s chapter in this volume asks why Huizinga is considered so foundational to game studies. Additionally, Emma Vossen’s and Bo Ruberg’s chapters further emphasize the need to be critical of the lasting impact of developing scholarly canons.

motes social groupings delineated from ordinary reality.⁶ In game studies, this definition often gets shorthanded to his concept of the “magic circle,” the space that binds and distinguishes play from the ordinary world. Huizinga establishes this term for liminal play activities to isolate play in order to then argue that culture and civilization develop from play. McDonald points out that several gaming anthologies contain the first chapter of *Homo Ludens*, a move that helped establish the validity of play and games in scholarship and in the classroom but that also distilled Huizinga’s study to the book’s first chapter.⁷ Huizinga’s broader examinations between play and culture are lost as “Nature and Significance of Play” becomes a metonymy for *Homo Ludens* and for Huizinga’s scholarship more broadly. For games scholarship, “Nature and Significance of Play” provides a heuristic checklist to assess if something is play, a definition amenable for games.⁸ Harkening back to Phillips’s attention to how advocates for game studies framed the need for carving out this field through colonization, the application of “Nature and Significance of Play” in this way perpetuates such dynamics, demarcating “game” from “not game.” Ultimately, empirical readings of Huizinga determine whether something is a game and therefore worthy of critical inquiry.

Lack of attention to gambling in game studies exemplifies the myopia of only looking at the first chapter, which excludes the studies Huizinga later uses to discuss how culture develops from play. Often, scholars get caught up in using “The Nature and Significance of Play” as an algorithm and thus filter out gambling due to monetary gains. However, Huizinga engages gambling in *Homo Ludens*, most notably to discuss the murkiness between play and seriousness. He compares roulette (play) and stock exchange (work) to outline the fleeting “play spirit” and to demonstrate the connections between play and

6 Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Beacon Press, 1955).

7 Peter McDonald, “Homo Ludens: A Renewed Reading,” *American Journal of Play* 11, no. 2 (2019): 247–67.

8 McDonald, “Homo Ludens,” 249.

society.⁹ Both of these instances contain some aspect of analytical foresight—probability in roulette and market trends for stocks—and wager in hope of future fulfillment. Andrew Manno’s study of poker similarly exemplifies the connections between play and culture, beginning with the history of poker, how it gained popularity through iterations for broadcasting and online play, and the establishment and inculturation of “The Poker Mindset.”¹⁰ This is the enmeshing of a “winner-take-all” mentality with traditional masculinity and a neoliberal narrative of success focused on individualism and “bootstraps” effort. Alas, these broader discussions of play and culture in *Homo Ludens* are lost when Huizinga is distilled to only the opening chapter, a move that supports ludology and proceduralism rather than opening opportunities for synthesis. Recalling Phillips, the use of colonization when framing the need for game studies, per se, created schisms of what it meant to study games rather than seeking interdisciplinary connections, which has had lasting ramifications. For a field under an imagined encroachment, a binarism is at play here in which defending games continues to be important, so people do not confuse good, valuable games with bad objects. Several factors come into the equation of sorting the good from the bad.

Anxieties about gambling as deviant influence society’s understanding of chance-based games, often coding them as bad objects. Carly A. Kocurek identifies how the associations of coin-operated gambling with delinquency painted similar connotations for coin-op games.¹¹ She unpacks the murkiness between pinball and gambling by demonstrating their connected histories, such as the pure chance of pinball before the introduction of the player-operated flipper in 1947, and the

9 Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 52.

10 Andrew Manno, *Toxic Masculinity, Casino Capitalism, and America’s Favorite Card Game: The Poker Mindset* (Springer International Publishing, 2020).

11 Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 95.

prizes of money or free plays offered by some machines.¹² She notes that even with the introduction of flippers in 1947 and with the lifting of pinball bans in the 1970s, society upheld the idea that pinball was an unsavory activity because it encouraged gambling-like behavior and somehow caused delinquency.¹³ Thus games that seemingly promote gambling sit at a point of cultural anxiety. For game studies, this extends to an assumed fear, connected to the framework of colonization, that game scholarship will not be taken seriously for studying bad objects; in response, to gain prestige, it must seek valuable games to study. This further affords the ability, if not tasks scholars, to discredit games of chance as objects worth critical attention.

Skill and gambling, under which chance might be categorized, seemingly operate as one possible way to delineate good and bad objects. Manno demonstrates a prevalence of meritocracy in Western culture reflected within games through his concept of “Poker Mindset,” demonstrating how “all-in” and “winner-take-all” mentalities parallel structures of white male privilege. Here, he turns to study the alt-right and Donald Trump’s 2016 election as US president to showcase that calls for diversity and equity appear as attacks when a loss of privilege is understood as “an ethos of competition and perceived scarcity.”¹⁴ In a meritocracy, a system in which individuals are ranked because of their purported skill, resources are also distributed to those deserving because of the hard work and effort they have demonstrated.

The American Dream of the self-made person who pulls themselves up by their bootstraps is seated with meritocratic thinking: If someone just works hard enough, they can make it big. Manno states that if one accepts this thinking, they feel they deserve rewards because of their hard work, and those who they see as undeserving — such as the myth of affirmative action benefiting minorities or the myth that immigrants take American jobs — are perceived as threats to the system who unfairly

¹² Ibid., 96.

¹³ Ibid., 97

¹⁴ Manno, *The Poker Mindset*, 54.

benefit and take resources away from the deserving.¹⁵ However, Christopher A. Paul indicates that success in a meritocratic system encourages a lack of critical attention to the lucky breaks one might have had, or the privileged beginnings that contributed to the heights they reached.¹⁶ For example, those who see affirmative action as a threat do not attend to how recipients come from historically marginalized backgrounds; instead, meritocratic ideology enforces a mindset that people start at an equal playing field and then develop their skill through hard work. Interestingly, attending to the racist underpinnings of good and bad types of gambling, Tara Fickle discusses Asian American gamblers as model minorities when they embrace gambling as a way to pull themselves out of poverty and financial debt.¹⁷ Such acts, she articulates, are read as personal effort, not chance or national boon.¹⁸ So even when gambling is the reason for success, chance is downplayed in these narratives when gamblers show dedication and hard work to achieve status. Both Manno and Fickle identify that the bootstraps narrative supersedes the “lucky break” for how people think about winning jackpots. Where Phillip’s is critical of framing the need for the field of games studies through colonization, Fickle traces the colonizing and orientalist roots of Huizinga and Roger Caillois, foundational theorists of the field. Connecting Fickle’s and Phillip’s work, we see continued effects of the schism in games studies that emphasizes player activity and agency (the good objects of study) over passivity and gambling (boring or bad objects). Spotlighting skill in games affords the opportunity to position games as active tools for people to create and train to cultural ideologies, whereas focus on chance casts as players at the whims of the system. Thus, many cultural narratives associ-

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 9.

¹⁷ Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York University Press, 2018).

¹⁸ Fickle, *The Race Card*, 105.

ated with gambling and games alike reflect neoliberal values of hard work and dedication.

Skill Deserves Critical Attention, But What About Chance?

Games studies reflects a commitment to meritocracy in the privileging of skill. This is unsurprising because of the colonization framework used to carve game studies as its own field, articulating why games *merit* critical attention, and then attempting to weed out bad objects — deviant gambling — from good, worthy video games. In a meritocracy, that games train players highlights their value: they offer tools for people to learn, practice, and enrich skills. In this section, I discuss how skill and chance have been theorized in game studies, and I argue that this scholarship is so seated in meritocratic underpinnings that chance becomes a point of anxiety for culture and for studying games because it shores up holes by uncovering the “lucky breaks.” Furthermore, chance sits in opposition to hard work because, at the extreme, it nullifies one’s training (a coin toss), and, in a structure coexisting with skill, it creates uncertainty (a dice roll modified with stat bonus). Moments when chance overrides a player’s skills often result in frustration and players blaming the game for their loss.¹⁹

Competition, as studied in games, focuses on skill and training. Caillois emphasizes that *agon* (competition) requires maintaining fairness by demarcating the limits of play.²⁰ Here, all players enter the gamespace with the same skill levels, accepting constraints imposed upon them to account for other variables. An unwillingness to abide by these constraints corrupts the spirit of *agon*.²¹ Individualism largely influences Caillois’s articulation of competition, as each player is responsible for their own training and for their integrity regarding playing by the rules.²²

19 Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 38.

20 Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 15.

21 *Ibid.*, 46.

22 *Ibid.*, 18.

Brian Sutton-Smith unpacks competition through the “rhetoric of power,” citing Huizinga to affirm the civilizing power of contests, and elaborates that from these games emerge hierarchies “around which the society constructs its values.”²³ At the nexus between the individual and the social, competition is believed to serve to establish an order based on merit, assessed through one’s skill. Manno, Caillouis, and Sutton-Smith might agree that in gaming spaces, winning a competition becomes a reflection of a player’s character, showcasing their hard work through time and dedication to their training and their integrity of playing within the defined constraints.

Drawing from Caillouis, Sutton-Smith, and Manno, competition not only reflects the player, but the culture in which they are entrained. A merit-based contest assumes a meritocratic social order. In his study of competition mode in *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), Paul argues that ranking systems, such as high scores, in a meritocracy are designed to ensure toxicity because the system boils down players to a set of numbers that supposedly represents their true skill.²⁴ Here, meritocratic logic reinforces itself by rewarding top-tier players and instructing players at the bottom to train and do better to succeed.²⁵ Because this hierarchy depends on skill as a means of rising to the top, chance becomes a point of anxiety. *Alea* (chance), as Caillouis underscores, offers an analytical moment to think about birth privilege, comparing this to a lottery.²⁶ At birth, people inherit identities, economics, and prestige through their familial ties. Paul illuminates how meritocratic thinking ahistorically obfuscates the privileges of participants in a system, instead proffering that people have earned their success rather than gaining advantages or disadvantages from luck.²⁷ Birth, of course, plays a role here, entangling facets of identity

23 Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Harvard University Press, 2001), 71.

24 Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 27.

25 Ibid., 38.

26 Caillouis, *Man, Play and Games*, 111.

27 Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 9.

and social location including, but not limited to, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, ability, and class. Yet competitive games, as reflections of meritocratic ideology, largely do not account for the advantages associated with privilege.

The narrative of “deserving based on skill” leads to toxic game design practices. Paul unpacks meritocracy as the operating ideology informing gatekeeping practices in games and gaming culture, running rampant and becoming part of the natural order.²⁸ Paul identifies how level design practices encrypt meritocratic values by providing scaffolding through which a player can learn how to play, improve, and systematically “level up.”²⁹ “When we win, we praise our skill, but when we lose, we blame poor game design or inferior teammates.”³⁰ Such sentiment externalizes failure onto game design, and as a response, designers consider balance in terms of skill and difficulty in games, minimizing chance or including ways to modify games in an attempt to eradicate chance as part of gameplay. This creates an echo chamber feedback loop of privileging skill since chance is seen as a flaw.

“Flow” offers a distinct framework through which we can consider how game design cites—and camouflages the citation of—meritocracy. I draw from Paul to say that not all forms of difficulty or challenge in games are meritocratic, but games of skill will continue being meritocratic as long as they are designed toward rewarding talent and distributing resources among a hierarchy of players without attending to the present inequalities.³¹ Originally coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow helps us model the balance between the difficulty of a task and a person’s skill. When too difficult, the person finds the task frustrating, and tedious or boring if the task is too easy.³² Jenova Chen translates Csikszentmihalyi’s

28 Ibid., 91.

29 Ibid., 92.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 94.

32 Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper Perennial, 2009).

theory to games, articulating heuristics for keeping players in the flow state with the balance of skill and difficulty.³³ Several game design textbooks and analyses of level design further discuss designing for flow through skill-difficulty models.³⁴ For game design, flow offers a framework to challenge players as they develop their understanding of gameplay. Iterative design, as Paul asserts, allows designers to fine-tune the game flow so that “players feel challenged, engaged, and mad at themselves instead of the game when they fail.”³⁵ To this extent, the “story modes” or single-player options of games often serve as training grounds for players to practice for competitions because they teach players the intricacies of the mechanics of the game over a series of challenges that increase in difficulty and complexity.

Through his analysis of the *Mario Kart* series (Nintendo, 1992–2025), Paul identifies how players conceptualize “balance” and “fairness” regarding skill in competitive play. Here, players decry chance in games as interfering with skill-based competition. Notable examples are the items and levels in *Mario Kart* and the *Super Smash Bros* series. Competitive players argue these create too much variance, and the game options are thus banned or regulated in competitive play. Competitive gamers assert that *Super Smash Bros.* tournaments assess players on their ability to control their character rather than having a “lucky win” by using an item like the hammer, which often takes out characters in one or two blows. Another example of a “lucky win” would be caused by an environmental hazard. Tournament play thus removes these uncertain elements to emphasize the player’s use of their selected character to best others. To incorporate Paul’s

33 Jenova Chen, “Flow in Games (and Everything Else),” *Communications of the ACM* 50, no. 4 (2007): 31–34.

34 Tracy Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games* (CRC Press/Taylor & Francis, 2019); Rudolf Kremers, *Level Design: Concept, Theory, and Practice* (A.K. Peters, 2009); Scott Rogers, *Level Up! The Guide to Great Video Game Design* (Wiley, 2014); and Jesse Schell, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (Taylor & Francis, 2019).

35 Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 56.

discussion of the elimination of luck in games, what seems to be occurring is a disruption of flow through these instances where chance becomes blatantly apparent. Thus, chance in level design might create incongruencies in the flow state.

“Balance” in this context echoes flow theory through which the term is applied to a ratio of skill and difficulty. This is odd as games of pure chance are ideally unbiased, balanced, and give all an equal, or at least, a transparent, calculable opportunity to win — of course factors like manufacturing errors and wear can affect the outcome. Pure chance mechanics are systems of perfect understanding because calculating probability provides a way of assessing the likelihood one will win. For example, a coin toss will yield one of two outcomes: if you win on heads, you have a fifty percent chance of winning, as does the other player. Players’ skills have no effect on this gamble. But items in games such as *Mario Kart* are designed where chance operates to balance skill. In this series, the probability a player will receive an item from a box is determined by an algorithm calculated by a player’s distance from the frontrunner. The algorithm offers different distributions and items based on how far any racer is from the leader. This is why the racer in first place gets coins more often, while players toward the end have access to items like Bullet Bill, lightning bolts, and blue shells. Here, the designed chance offers a way to keep players at different skill levels engaged in the game, providing hope for even novice players to compete with those seasoned at the game. Removing these items, and selecting courses with limited hazards for tournaments thus underscores both meritocracy and gatekeeping in gaming culture.

Entangled in the discourse of competitive games is a gatekeeping practice to protect games as safe spaces for white cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied men.³⁶ Gender, here, operates

36 Jennifer deWinter and Carly A. Kocurek, “Aw Fuck, I Got a Bitch on My Team!’: Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex,” in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (Indiana University Press, 2017); Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*; Manno, *The*

to exclude both players and types of games. Huizinga, Caillois, and Sutton-Smith all link games of chance to practices associated with, but not limited to, ancient rituals, such as divination, fortune telling, superstition, and engaging with otherworldliness. Caillois, for example, argues that superstition perverts chance. Western thinking often feminizes rituals like divination and fortune telling.³⁷ Such coding serves to devalue women's methods of meaning-making by casting them as "perversions" or by trivializing them, simultaneously neglecting how these practices serve as methods for making sense of systemic structures.

Examining how play is gendered uncovers the pervasiveness of gender as a disciplining system. Competition and luck as studied thus conform to dichotomies that shaped by what Judith Butler calls the "heterosexual matrix," social fixity of masculinity to men, domination, and activity, and of femininity to women, submission, and passivity.³⁸ Greg Costikyan provides a blatantly clear citation of compulsory gender roles and the heterosexual matrix when referring to games involving more skill as "blue games" and games of pure chance as "pink games."³⁹ Here, pink games involve a passive player at the whims of fate.

Poker Mindset; Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*; Bo Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York University Press, 2019); and Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

- 37 Zeynep Kurtulus Korkman, "Feeling Labor: Commercial Divination and Commodified Intimacy in Turkey," *Gender & Society* 29, no. 2 (2015): 195–218; Laura Miller, "The Divination Arts in Girl Culture," in *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*, ed. Satsuki Kawano, Glenda S. Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long (University of Hawai'i Press, 2014); Laura Miller, "Japanese Tarot Cards," *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 24, no. 1 (2017): 1–28; and C. Nadia Seremetakis, "Divination, Media, and the Networked Body of Modernity," *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 2 (2009): 337–50.
- 38 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 2006).
- 39 Greg Costikyan, *Uncertainty in Games* (MIT Press, 2013), 73.

In contrast to the active competitor, several game scholars cast players in chance-based games as passive.⁴⁰ “Games are made to be conquered,” Paul says,⁴¹ a statement that emphasizes the player as doer. Through his concept of “The Poker Mind-set,” Manno underscores how values of traditional masculinity—wealth, status, aggression, daring, and stoicism—intimately shape the game, poker culture, and American culture at large. Situating poker at the intersections of games and gambling that intertwine with neoliberal capitalism, Manno articulates how gameplay synthesizes merit and performativity, creating spaces that revel in toxic masculinity. Paul’s study on meritocracy explicates that gaming culture reflects this “Poker Mind-set”: The common narrative between these studies is that players who are all-in and work hard will purportedly rise to the top.

In contrast, chance is largely theorized as happening upon the player, limiting the player’s agency. Here, a tense interpretation of resisting colonization shines light on the anxiety of a passive player in a game of chance: the game conquers the player. If the competitive player is encouraged to perform aspects of traditional—perhaps toxic—masculinity, then pure chance limits this agency. Being aggressive toward dice will not affect the outcome. Even if one flips the table, the dice will roll. Games of chance thus harken to cultural anxieties of castration and softened masculinities as players lack agency in these systems to carry out the charge of traditional masculinity. “Pink games,” according to Costikyan, remove the agency of players entirely (castration), making these games banal. Because these games are seen as boring and as situating players as passive, they merit no critical attention, a sentiment echoed by the people questioning Kate Bedford’s decision to study bingo. She even highlights how bingo players mock themselves and question why she even thought this game worthy of study,⁴² which resonates with com-

40 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, and Costikyan, *Uncertainty in Games*.

41 Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games*, 102.

42 Kate Bedford, *Bingo Capitalism: The Law and Political Economy of Everyday Gambling* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

mon feelings in studies of women's culture that women's work and entertainment are not worth critical attention.⁴³

Theories that closely inform the study and design of games have championed skill in games and have purposefully castigated or lost sight of chance, situating this in similar conflict as Phillips discusses: as debate rather than synthesis. After all, there are games where chance and skill coexist. Manno, for example, does not hide the betting aspects to poker, but he identifies how many consider it as a game of skill rather than a game of chance. For example, in 2012, a New Jersey judge ruled that poker is more a game of skill than one of chance.⁴⁴ While poker includes elements of chance, players focus on learning to master the game by reading opponents, strategizing to keep count of the deck, and controlling their own performances. Chance still plays a role in the cards players are dealt, and players can bluff and read one another in ways that create an interesting chance-skill dynamic. Yet others do not attend to the co-presence of skill and chance in games, and privilege skill at the expense of chance. Items in *Super Smash Bros.* and *Mario Kart* for example signify the lucky breaks for those who climb hierarchies in merit-based systems, and therefore make us confront the realities that the system is more complicated than we thought. It is easier to continue eliminating luck in games than to reimagine what chance brings to games and come to a meaningful synthesis.

Luck Sucks for Meritocratic Systems

Within a discipline that focuses so much on merit, chance becomes a point of anxiety for several reasons. One is that chance levels the playing field, resulting in the deterioration of merit. *Alea*, Caillois's term for luck and chance-based play,

43 James P. Spradley and Brenda J. Mann, *The Cocktail Waitress: Women's Work in a Man's World* (McGraw-Hill, 1975); Brenda Laurel, *Utopian Entrepreneur* (MIT Press, 2001); and Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

44 Manno, *The Poker Mindset*, 4.

opposes work.⁴⁵ One's training does not matter in a coin flip. Interestingly, scholarship on chance points out affectual pursuits of players and gamblers. Both Sutton-Smith and Caillois discuss gambling through this framework, citing hope as an operating affect. Caillois underscores how this hope can lead to addiction,⁴⁶ which contributes to marking games as bad objects. Sutton-Smith articulates that games of pure chance are specifically ways for society to give promise to its failures.⁴⁷ As such, systems that reward winners of chance-based games provide access to the upper levels of hierarchies in meritocracies that competitors diligently train to achieve. However, it can also be a quick downfall from the top to the bottom.

Gambling is another site that has and continues to study the affectual circuits between players and gaming mechanisms. The Center for Gaming Research at University of Nevada, Las Vegas is dedicated to studying gambling through frameworks of business, economics, social impact, and cultural and historical manifestations, and interestingly does not delineate between gaming and gambling. For example, David G. Schwartz, affiliated with the Center of Gaming Research, discussed several affective draws for players to gamble. He identified that not all players, especially casual gamblers, define the value of gambling as winning.⁴⁸ Rather, some, especially players on penny machines, know they are losing but their purpose is to lose as slowly as possible and be entertained while doing so.⁴⁹ This contrasts hope as the driving affect to gamble, instead emphasizing entertainment and leisure. Schwartz located the idea of being entertained while losing in sensory circuits as he traced iterations of gambling machines from analog to digital. For analog machines requiring coins, he cited players taking pleasure in the

45 Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 147.

46 Ibid., 32.

47 Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 71.

48 David G. Schwartz, "Seeking Value or Entertainment? The Evolution of Nevada Slot Hold, 1992–2009, and the Slot Players' Experience," *Occasional Paper Series 1* (2010): 8.

49 Ibid., 7.

motions of pulling the crank and hearing the coins “[clattering] happily into the tray in the event of a win.”⁵⁰ The move to digital slot machines erased the sensory experience of coins, but several gained popularity because of bonus rounds, video clips, and immersive design choices, like haptics, animation, and game feel.⁵¹ These studies demonstrate that players do not always operationalize chance to get ahead in the system but rather see other pleasures in chance games.

While gambling games might rattle meritocratic logic, they do not challenge capitalism and can therefore exist alongside, if not complementary to, *agon* in this structure, as Manno demonstrates through his study of poker culture. Through the tensions of competing masculinities Manno locates how the “Poker Mindset” reflects the American Dream, demonstrating a deeper link between this gambling game and “bootstraps” narratives that conform to, rather than being antithetical to, competition. Tara Fickle’s study further explicates how gambling helps amplify the neoliberal capitalism embedded in narratives of self-made, individual effort.⁵² Tellingly, whereas *alea* is often coded as feminine,⁵³ poker and other gambling games, as Fickle demonstrates, are coded as masculine and associated with traditional masculine values of wealth, power, risk, and control. Where these games involve chance, these mechanics are downplayed when studying these games to observe values that align with both capitalism and masculinity, perpetuating a fraught gendered matrix of passivity as feminine and activity as masculine. This harkens to studies that observe boys and men gate-keeping gaming spaces.⁵⁴ Importantly, “power” and “control”

⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.

⁵² Tara Fickle, “Against the Odds: From Model Minority to Model Majority,” in *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York University Press, 2018), 79–107.

⁵³ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*; Bedford, *Bingo Capitalism*; and Costikyan, *Uncertainty in Games*.

⁵⁴ Frances Shaw, “‘Bitch I Said Hi’: The Bye Felipe Campaign and Discursive Activism in Mobile Dating Apps,” *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016); deWinter and Kocurek, “Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the

here echo the rhetorics and values of *agon* in games. Counting cards is a method of forcing skill into a chance-based game but is also something for which people are banned from casinos.

Take a Chance on Chance: Some Opportunities for Game Studies

Having talked about the ways play, theory, and design neglect chance, I now conclude by pondering some opportunities to reincorporate chance in game studies. At the 2018 Queerness and Games Conference, Mattie Brice asked in her keynote address, “What might games look like if we developed a canon where tarot is revered the way we do *Super Mario Bros.*?”⁵⁵ Echoing her, I wonder what possibilities arise when uncovering games of chance historically and integrating them more meaningfully in our design and analysis. Tarot is an interesting play tool that can synthesize chance and play depending on the style of reading. For example, in some readings, the deck is shuffled, and cards are randomly laid out in a spread. The reader then uses their knowledge of the cards’ meanings and symbols to craft a narrative for the fortune. Another style encourages the questioner to pick out cards for the spread that look appealing to them before they are interpreted. In these situations, skill and chance operate together just as the reader and questioner do to create a narrative reflection. Back to the point of feminized work and hobbies not being considered worth critical attention, on the contrary tarot offers a method to seek counsel, to have moments of reflection, and to make sense of one’s life within systemic structures.

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman push back against the gendering of games in their study of uncertainty. Like Costikyan, they analyze different sources of uncertainty to reveal what these

Computer Game Complex”; Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*; Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (Springer, 2017).

55 Mattie Brice, “Past, Present, Future: Divining Our Playful Futures,” keynote lecture, Queerness in Games Conference, Concordia University, Montreal, September 30, 2018.

bring to play and games; however, they reach different conclusions about the appeal of games of chance. Analyzing *Chutes and Ladders* (Milton Bradley Company, 1943) through a lens of meaningful play, they emphasize the “mechanistic pleasure of inhabiting a game system and helping that system move forward by rolling dice, counting spaces, and moving your token” and “the uncertainty of knowing who will win and the struggle to finish first.”⁵⁶ The appeal of this game derives from two pleasures through the chutes and ladders themselves: By landing on these spaces, players enjoy the dynamic gestures of sliding their tokens along these paths, which simultaneously contributes to performative reversals of fate as players jump to different positions on the board. While this understanding of chance leans into proceduralist readings of games in that players carry out the gaming systems, Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman preemptively account for Sicart’s critique of procedurality⁵⁷ by locating the possible pleasures for players who agree to play from roles of limited agency. This relates back to Schwartz’s study of affective circuits at play in slot machines, which also points to fun gestures and sensory stimulation. These studies highlight a need for deeper analyses on what affects players seek with playing games of chance.

Importantly, further work on games of chance might continue to unpack the pleasures of relinquishing agency to help the system progress, and how the play spirit ebbs and flows in such moments of players performing functions to carry the game forward. Salen and Zimmerman highlight that even games of chance can engage affect. Together with Paul’s work, game studies and design might look toward luck to critically explore how games reflect arguments about privilege to explore emotional design. Paired with McKenzie Wark’s concept of algorithm, how algorithmic cultures in games reflect and recreate

56 Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2003), 179.

57 Miguel Sicart, “Against Procedurality,” *Game Studies* 11, no. 3 (2011), http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap.

the structures of day-to-day life,⁵⁸ and Bo Ruberg's concept of re-gamification, the practice through which games are purposefully designed to reflect social systems,⁵⁹ chance through form and affect affords an opportunity to design games that engage and critically reflect privilege, offering spaces to think through birthright and critique the "equal starting point" myth embedded in meritocracy. Such types of play might complicate how people think about luck and success. Fickle's work on Asian American gamblers as "model minorities" exemplifies how taking games of chance seriously helps identify racist ideologies perpetuated through games and gaming cultures.⁶⁰ Meaningful incorporation of chance in design and research might further shape socially engaged games and queer gaming.

Salen and Zimmerman lay the foundation by discussing pure chance as meaningful play for examining how such games create spaces for alternate pleasures. Mary Flanagan studies games of chance, locating their significance to ancient rituals and community. In her discussion of *E-awase*, an image-based matching game of the Kamakura period in Japan, she underscores social exchange as an important aspect of the game.⁶¹ Here, the game provides just enough structure to keep players engaged but not so much to be all consuming. Thus, players could converse. Games of chance point to opportunities for game studies to look beyond the procedural and diegetic operations of the games and consider ways communities deploy games for socializing and formation of community identity. Reimagining how we synthesize chance and skill in games will complicate the way we theorize and design games, but this journey requires that we uproot much of the foundations that gesture toward violence and colonization to meaningfully attend to such synthesis.

58 McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (Harvard University Press, 2007).

59 Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 114.

60 Fickle, *The Race Card*.

61 Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009), 74.

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The Separation of Analog and Digital Game Studies

Evan Torner

“[The] study of games cannot and should not be segregated into digital and non-digital,” wrote Espen Aarseth in the July 2017 issue of the journal *Game Studies*, “and for most of the field, in practice, as well as in theory, this has never been so.”¹ By writing these words, Aarseth sought to challenge perceptions that *Game Studies* — the journal he co-founded, which had openly committed itself to “computer game studies” in 2001 — was not *also* open to articles about non-digital, or analog games. Had they not, for example, published Joris Dormans’s early analysis of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) as semiotic systems?² Aarseth’s words struck me as genuine and heartfelt when he wrote them. Yet as co-founder and editor of the *Analog Game Studies* journal, an organ that explicitly addresses the lack of scholarship on non-digital games, I have lingering doubts that it has “never been so” that the field has neglected analog games: indeed, this essay is a rumination on those doubts. Should game studies as a

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- 1 Espen Aarseth, “Just Games,” *Game Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017), <http://gamestudies.org/1701/articles/justgames>.
 - 2 Joris Dormans, “On the Role of the Die: A Brief Ludologic Study of Pen-and-Paper Roleplaying Games and Their Rules,” *Game Studies* 6, no. 1 (2006), <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>.

field continue to neglect analog games, it risks ignoring the fundamentals of game design and innovation in favor of a digital-screen-driven, myopic, “startup” cultural view of games history.

Capacious Notions of “Game”

A few definitions may help. A “digital game” I describe as a game that requires player input on at least one platform capable of electronic computation, often with output on some sort of electronic screen. For the purposes of this article, I refer to digital games as “video and computer games” (VCGs). An “analog game” I loosely define in direct contrast to the digital: as a game that primarily relies on the human being for computation and adjusts its game state using paper, pencil, boards, cards, dice, human voices, or human bodies.³ *Yahtzee* (Milton Bradley, 1956) is an analog game, as well as tag or *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974, Wizards of the Coast, 2014). In other words, analog games run the gamut from simple playground games and puzzles to adult pretend play and complex published commercial board games. It also deserves mentioning the difference between “traditional” games such as backgammon or go, and “hobbyist” games such as *Warhammer* (Games Workshop, 1983), or *Mystrium* (Libellud, 2015). Traditional games are non-proprietary in nature, meaning anyone can manufacture a go board and play without the approval of any rights holder. Hobbyist games are published by specific copyright and trade dress owners, often selling them at conventions or hobbyist game shops. In the 2020s, what counts as analog is becoming increasingly unclear.⁴

3 See also, Ian Bellomy, “What Counts: Configuring the Human in Platform Studies,” in *Analog Game Studies*, vol. 4, ed. Evan Torner, Emma Leigh Waldron, and Shelly Jones (ETC Press, 2020).

4 Premeet Sidhu and Marcus Carter, “The Critical Role of Media Representations, Reduced Stigma and Increased Access in D&D’s Resurgence,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2020: Play Everywhere*, <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/1277>; Melissa J. Rogerson, Lucy A. Sparrow, and Martin R. Gibbs, “Unpacking ‘Boardgames with Apps’: The Hybrid Digital Boardgame Model,” in *CHI ’21: Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3411764.3411764>.

Referencing the work of Jonathan Sterne,⁵ for example, Emma Leigh Waldron, Aaron Trammell, and I wrote that “the term ‘analog’ only exists by way of negative comparison to the digital, such that our present-day digital forms of expression produce their analog heritage as a by-product.”⁶ Put a different way: the suffocating totality of the digital produces its own rebellion.⁷ In 2014, Trammell, Waldron, and I founded the *Analog Game Studies* journal because we saw there was not much scholarship at the time on the cutting-edge development happening in the hobby games industry as well as in the global live-action role-play (LARP), escape room, and playable theater scenes. Marco Arnaudo agrees: “More analog games are being printed than ever before, generating unprecedented capital, and they are propagating innovative mechanics, majestic productions, and new ways for people to interact with each other. This leaves us with a spectacularly exciting, refreshing, creative environment of gamers and games, and one that is ripe for full academic consideration.”⁸

After years of cultivating this subfield, I read Aarseth’s piece cited at the beginning of this essay and wrote the following response:

org/10.1145/3411764.3445077; and Ville Kankainen and Janne Paavilainen, “Hybrid Board Game Design Guidelines,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2019: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*, <http://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/1098>.

- 5 Jonathan Sterne, “Analog [draft] [#digitalkeywords],” *Culture Digitally*, May 15, 2014, <https://culturedigitally.org/2014/05/analog-draftdigitalkeywords/>.
- 6 Evan Torner, Aaron Trammell, and Emma Leigh Waldron, “Reinventing Analog Game Studies: Introductory Manifesto,” in *Analog Game Studies*, vol. 1, ed. Aaron Trammell, Evan Torner, and Emma Leigh Waldron (ETC Press, 2016), 2.
- 7 David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (Perseus, 2016).
- 8 Marco Arnaudo, “Analog Game History: Notes for a Discipline in the Making,” *ROMChip* 1, no. 1 (2019), <https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/65>.

It should give one reason to pause, the sheer irony that—in the ideological universe of some—digital game reality is more “real” than our own physically embodied cognitive reality. Something appears amiss about this, and Aarseth has come to recognize it. [...] Nevertheless, the hard work only begins now: to staff game design programs with tenure-track faculty who have years of experience in non-digital design; to pivot institutional glorification of the digital millennium toward a more nuanced perspective that includes contributions of the non-digital; to examine and follow movements within analog game design theory and their epistemologies regarding actual play. The field must push back against backward notions that design begins with programming and 3D modeling, or that [massively multiplayer online games] (MMOs) or massive open-world [computer role-playing games] (CRPGs) matter more than TRPGs and larps, or that “play” can only happen once massive hardware investments are made, as we currently see with the trend toward Virtual Reality (VR).⁹

In effect, my response affirmed Aarseth’s and *Game Studies*’s commitments to a capacious notion of “game” rather than a narrow one focused only on VCGs. But I also state that the damage has already been done: game studies has institutionalized itself around digital games, leaving those who study board, card, and role-playing games feeling less legitimate, their creators like lesser “game designers” than those who program or 3D-model, and the funding for relevant research scarce. We can point out the lack of research on analog games until we are blue in the face, but that does not eliminate the rampant institutional rationality that nevertheless stubbornly reproduces this hierarchy in the game studies field.¹⁰

9 Evan Torner, “Just (the Institution of Computer) Game Studies,” *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018), <http://analoggamestudies.org/2018/06/just-the-institution-of-computer-game-studies/>.

10 See Sidhu and Carter, “The Critical Role,” and Paul Booth, “Missing a Piece: (The Lack of) Board Game Scholarship in Media Studies,” *Velvet*

Anecdotes of such a hierarchy abound. The Game Developers Conference (GDC) and International Game Developers Association (IGDA) only care about digital games, never analog games. Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) and GDC have been seen as worthwhile conferences for one's career, when board and TRPG-centered conventions Gen Con and Origins are not, despite having featured mixed VCG and analog content, as well as popular and academic panels, for many decades. Analog game designers who want to "legitimate" their cred as designers regularly slap together Twine games to prove to VCG employers they can design a "real" game. Those Twine games often take them less than 24 hours to create and nevertheless land them jobs. The TRPG they might have spent hundreds of hours developing will land them nothing. I myself ran a LARP for someone who turned out to be a developer for *The Division II* (Ubisoft, 2019), and he said over beers: "Ubisoft pays the bills, but playing larps here is far more meaningful gaming in my opinion." Games journalists trained only in VCGs still equate all advances in TRPGs with whatever *Dungeons & Dragons* is doing at the moment, when creators in the industry can attest to Wizards of the Coast, the company that produces it, always being around 5 years behind the curve in design.¹¹ Game scholars ask at conferences why one should care about the rhetoric of colonialism in analog games such as, say, *Goa* (Hans im Glück, 2004) or *Puerto Rico* (Ravensburg, 2002), when they would not question such an interrogation of the same rhetoric of colonialism in VCG *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft, 2012). The "cutting edge" of queer gaming is sought at VCG-heavy QGCon, rather than analog-game-focused Big Bad Con, which is four times the size and humming with the queer indie "physical games" scene from itch.io.¹² Everyone in game studies seems to know Greg Costikyan's work "I Have No Words

Light Trap 81 (2018): 57–60.

- 11 Gwynndaf Hughes, "Covid-19: 'Dungeons and Dragons Got Us through Lockdown,'" *BBC*, July 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-57636378>.
- 12 Evan Torner, "Paradox and Promise of 'Physical Games' on itch.io," *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*, September 20, 2019, <https://coe->

and I Must Design,” but comprehensive studies of his numerous innovations in TRPG design — including *Paranoia* (West End Games, 1984), *Toon* (Steve Jackson Games, 1984), and *Violence!* (Hogshead, 1999) — do not exist in the field at this time.¹³

Why does game studies value digital games over analog games? What makes a game with cardboard and chits, with dice and cards, with costumes and foam weapons somehow of lesser research value than a game on a screen? How did the word “game” become so irretrievably bound to a hyper-specific mode of play, namely that of VCGs? These questions are worth asking, given the meteoric rise of playable theatre,¹⁴ board games,¹⁵ escape rooms,¹⁶ and non-digital role-playing games in the past three decades.¹⁷ Despite these efforts, our field still seems ill-equipped to properly apprehend and analyze the cultural moment in which we live and its recent past. This chapter looks at how the study of analog and digital games became estranged from each other, and offers a few modest suggestions on what might be done to make the term “games” more inclusive of the objects it claims to represent.

Field States

Anthropologists have documented at least 5000 years of human games activity.¹⁸ If we look at the roughly 60–70 years in which

gamecult.org/2019/09/20/paradox-and-promise-of-physical-games-on-itch-io/.

- 13 Greg Costikyan, “I Have No Words & I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games,” in *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, ed. Frans Mäyrä (Tampere University Press, 2002).
- 14 Celia Pearce and Nick Fortugno, eds., “A Special Issue on Playable Theater,” *Well Played* 10, no. 2 (2021), <https://press.etc.cmu.edu/journals/well-played-vol-10-no-2>.
- 15 Booth, “Missing a Piece,” and Arnaudo “Analog Game History.”
- 16 Scott Nicholson and Liz Cable, *Unlocking the Potential of Puzzle-Based Learning: Designing Escape Rooms and Games for the Classroom* (SAGE, 2021).
- 17 José Pablo Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, eds., *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (Routledge, 2018).
- 18 Ian Livingstone and James Wallis, *Board Games in 100 Moves: 8,000 Years of Play* (Dorling Kindersley, 2019).

vCGs have existed as a slice of time, this constitutes maybe 1% of known human games history. vCGs are directly connected to this history, from senet and tag to patience, chess, and *Scrabble* (Hasbro, 1948). Nevertheless, early vCGs served and supplemented analog games, not the other way around. For example, Peter Perla chronicles the introduction of the Navy Electronic War Simulator (NEWS) to the United States Naval War College in the late 1950s.¹⁹ NEWS was three stories tall, cost \$7.25 million, and could not operate as an autonomous game system without human umpires adjudicating both information displayed on the screen as well as the damage computer, “a specially designed, time-shared, analog machine.”²⁰ The main function of NEWS was to introduce the officers-in-training to the pressures of real-time decision-making while relieving the umpires of tedious and time-consuming calculations. In our vCG game histories, it is convenient for us to begin with *Tennis for Two* (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 1958) and *Spacewar!* (MIT, 1962) because they prefigure modern “action” genre games and could be reasonably emulated on computers over the decades, but forgetting NEWS and other early electronic board-game simulation efforts means forgetting the complicated circuits between human players of analog games and electronic modes of feedback and presentation.

Studies of play and games prior to the 1980s were admittedly not even focused on top-secret military exercises, but rather more preoccupied with traditional game rule variants,²¹ the anthropology of play,²² or the overlap between vCGs or analog gaming and simulation overall.²³ Many of the foundational texts

19 Peter Perla, *Peter Perla's The Art of Wargaming*, ed. John Curry (History of Wargaming Project, 2011), 84.

20 Perla, *The Art of Wargaming*, 86.

21 David Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

22 Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes* (Gallimard, 1958), and Elliot M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Study of Games* (John Wiley & Sons, 1971).

23 Carole Spearin McCauley, *Computers and Creativity* (Praeger, 1974), and Richard D. Duke, *Gaming: The Future's Language* (SAGE, 1974).

of the modern-day game studies field published in the 1990s indeed cut between the “legitimate” cultural spheres of literature²⁴ and theater performance,²⁵ but almost always seek some common ground between programmed VCGs and their analog predecessors and contemporaries.²⁶

During this period of the 1960s–2000s, we can no doubt point to several moral panics that also shaped the reception of games and their effects, namely the Satanic Panic around TRPGs in the 1980s²⁷ and the “violence in video games” discourse of the 1990s.²⁸ The hobby’s shared defensive posture against attacks from powerful white Christian American lobbies made “gaming” a generally forbidden activity in middle-class households, even when youth gameplay was also absolutely widespread at this time. In the North American context, VCGs and hobbyist analog gaming offered different variations on some mutual themes: VCGs were presumably for addicts and sociopaths; hobbyist analog games were for nerds and social rejects. *Dungeons & Dragons* sales actually *increased* in the 1980s thanks to the game transforming into a means for disaffected Generation X teens to rebel against their parents,²⁹ with a similar phenomenon transpiring in the 1990s with flagrantly bloody VCG titles

24 Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

25 Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Addison-Wesley, 1991).

26 Costikyan, “I Have No Words”; Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2003); and Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, eds., *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (MIT Press, 2004).

27 Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (University of California Press, 2015).

28 Gareth Schott, *Violent Games: Rules, Realism, and Effect* (Bloomsbury, 2016), and Aaron Drummond, James D. Sauer, and Shaun S. Garea, “The Infamous Relationship Between Violent Video Game Use and Aggression: Uncharted Moderators and Small Effects Make It a Far Cry from Certain,” in *Video Game Influences on Aggression, Cognition, and Attention*, ed. Christopher J. Ferguson (Springer, 2018).

29 Shannon Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons*, vol. 2: *The 80s: A History of the Role Playing Game Industry* (Evil Hat Productions, 2013).

such as *Doom* (id, 1993) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway, 1992). But, as Eric Rosenfield argues, this particular move by the early 2000s toward adrenaline-fueled shooter games counted as a kind of male insurgency against the overwhelming popularity of the pacifist CD-ROM puzzle adventure, *Myst* (Cyan, 1993).³⁰ Both *Doom* and *Myst* blew past all previous sales records in computer gaming, but *Doom* itself helped craft a specifically *male* ideal gamer type, as Rosenfield claims:

The problem is with the methodology of slicing off a demographic, targeting it relentlessly, encouraging people to associate brands with their self-identity, making what they sell not just a product but a lifestyle. It's with aggressively crafting and marketing that brand through toxic masculinity because it sells, without any regard for the repercussions.³¹

I bring this up because the gendered struggle between adventure games — with creators such as Brenda Laurel, Roberta Williams, Jane Jensen, and Tim Schaefer — and first-person shooters (FPS) — with creators such as John Romero, John Carmack, Alex Seropian, and Cliff Bleszinski — helped fuel early scholarship on VCGs, especially regarding violence and gender.³² In the analog gaming world, no such struggle was present. The Satanic Panic had, in the words of Shannon Appelcline, made roleplaying become “feared and hated, [...] demonized during the time of its greatest popularity.”³³ This struck a serious blow to the commercial TRPG industry by the end of the 1990s, only for it to be revitalized by the indie scene in the 2000s and 2010s. Meanwhile in board games, the *Myst*-equivalent — by which I mean a breakout, non-violent 1990s hit — would have been *Settlers of*

30 Eric Rosenfield, “*Doom, Myst, and the War for the Soul of Video Games*,” *Literate Machine*, November 20, 2020, <https://literatemachine.com/2020/11/20/doom-myst-and-the-war-for-the-soul-of-video-games/>.

31 Ibid.

32 Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (MIT Press, 2000).

33 Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons*, 351.

Catan (Franckh-Kosmos, 1995). *Settlers of Catan* popularized eurogames as a global genre, but its well-balanced design was initially only noticed in hobbyist circles until the game, along with *Apples to Apples* (Out of the Box, 1999), leapt into mainstream popularity in the early 2000s. The first academic paper on *Settlers of Catan* is notably only interested in the game as an algorithmic test case for artificial intelligence, and not interested in the game's values and aesthetics.³⁴ David Novitz and Daniel Mackay were toying with the TRPG as a performing art,³⁵ about 5–10 years after Laurel had already conceived of computer games as such.³⁶ Janet Murray projected that VCGs as media would generally and ultimately transform all human narrative.³⁷ VCGs had piqued the interest of Henry Jenkins and other prominent media scholars by the early 2000s; the same could *not* be said for analog hobbyist gaming.³⁸

In addition to the post-Satanic-panic timidity of analog game publishers and the toxic, violently gendered public gaming sphere that was fueling academic debate in the early 2000s, there are three further developments that separated VCGs from hobbyist analog gaming, despite deep shared roots, overlapping communities, and academic efforts to recoup such integration.³⁹ These three developments are: (1) VCGs exist at an exponentially

34 Robert Thomas and Kristian Hammond, "Java Settlers: A Research Environment for Studying Multi-Agent Negotiation," in *IUI '02 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of Intelligent User Interfaces*, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/502716.502779>.

35 David Novitz, "Disputes About Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 2 (1996): 153–63, and Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (McFarland, 2001).

36 Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*.

37 Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 1997).

38 Henry Jenkins, "Reality Bytes: Eight Myths About Video Games Debunked," PBS, 2004, <https://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html>.

39 Aarseth, "Just Games"; Booth "Missing a Piece"; Torner, "Just (the Institution)"; and Aaron Trammell, "Analog Games and the Digital Economy," *Analog Game Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019), <http://analoggamestudies.org/2019/03/analog-games-and-the-digital-economy/>.

larger economic and cultural *scale* than hobbyist analog gaming, (2) academic research funding and student enrollments are *financialized* to such a degree as to be unruffled by experimental recent analog games, and (3) film and media studies have made long-term investments in game studies. These developments, which I will discuss in turn, contributed to a separation of VCG and analog game studies in the mid-2000s, despite rekindled interest in play studies⁴⁰ and material bodies in the meantime.⁴¹ An unnecessary and largely unintentional division in the study of various games media has become codified and reinforced by financial incentives and institutional structures.

Scale, Higher Education, and Media Studies

The economic and cultural scale of VCGs simply cannot be overlooked as a factor for why we pay them more attention. In 2021, the global VCG industry was worth roughly \$151 billion. Meanwhile, the global board games industry that year was worth \$12 billion, or around 7% of VCGs' size. My earlier comments about the tiny fraction of games history that VCGs occupy can be safely flipped on their head: VCGs have an enormous financial and entertainment footprint, one larger now than film.⁴² From the stories of the early *Pong* (Atari, 1972) arcade machines being broken due to being overstuffed with quarters, to today's ultra-monetized loot-box environments, VCGs are designed to coax maximum financial investment from players. Thanks to VCGs becoming established in bars, in malls and, later, in homes in the 1980s, digital gaming as an activity has long had its growth

40 Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (MIT Press, 2014), and Ian Bogost, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (Basic Books, 2016).

41 Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Video Games* (MIT Press, 2018).

42 Gavin Divers, "Gaming Industry Dominates as the Highest Grossing Entertainment Industry," *GamerHub*, January 24, 2023, <https://gamerhub.co.uk/gaming-industry-dominates-as-the-highest-grossing-entertainment-industry/>.

naturalized and justified: vCGs were and are “the future.”⁴³ During the 1970s and 1980s, hobbyists of all genders would assemble their own personal computers, with computer programs and hardware being hawked in analog gaming magazines such as *Dragon*, and hobbyist analog games had advertisements in comics and computer magazines. This overlap was part of what Jon Peterson calls the “elusive shift” in game cultures, when the science-fiction/fantasy communities and wargaming communities began to meld in the late 1970s to create modern geek culture.⁴⁴ In other words, vCGs were “the future,” but hobbyist analog games were certainly present and along for the ride.

In the materials of most higher education games programs, however, the dollar value of the global vCG industry is all that bears mentioning, it seems. Students, parents, and other stakeholders are not presented the “renaissance” in board games and TRPGs that Arnaudo cites.⁴⁵ Here, we can observe a financial picture that extends from our objects of study to academia itself: a financialized higher-education establishment that prioritizes student enrollments and large donations or grants above all else.⁴⁶ In this environment, the curriculum and concurrent research interests are steered both toward those areas likely to attract student enrollments, and to “future-oriented” research programs likely to attract grants and donors. vCGs inheriting the mantle of “the future” despite vast recent innovations in analog games ensnares such programs into the shortsighted profit models of the corporate vCG industry. vCG media become thoroughly disenchanted, a sort of hollowed-out lure for undergraduates rather than serious objects deserving of study and investment. It would be very difficult to ask for tenure-track

43 Duke, *Gaming*.

44 Jon Peterson, *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity* (MIT Press, 2020).

45 Arnaudo, “Analog Game History.”

46 Jeffrey J. Selingo, *College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students* (Houghton Mifflin, 2013).

faculty lines in “analog games” when VCGs are already deployed rather cynically in the current system.⁴⁷

But perhaps most disappointing to me as a film scholar is the role that the discipline of film and media studies has played in the downgrading of analog game studies. For example, game designer and art historian Mary Flanagan sought to interweave contemporary game design with past art movements and analog traditions,⁴⁸ but her work has received far less attention than that of media scholar Mark J.P. Wolf, whose “integrated examination of imaginary worlds from a Media Studies perspective” — perhaps unintentionally — constructs a narrative leading from child’s play to tabletop games to literature to films, video games, and transmedia franchises.⁴⁹ Wolf’s media studies perspective is valuable, but board games and TRPGs are not simply a stepping stone to other media or virtual reality. Each are powerful forms in their own right. Bernard Perron joined forces with Wolf to create the *Video Game Studies Reader* series, which performs the bait-and-switch trick of bringing in games scholars with ample proficiency in both VCGs and analog games, only to solely solicit material on VCGs.⁵⁰

Sheila C. Murphy rightly argues that what we now call “new media” — video games among them — were more or less brought into being by way of television, itself a mass medium in thrall to the rhythms of radio before it.⁵¹ After increasingly cinematic games such as *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) were released, film and media studies interpreted video games as being within their overall purview, much like television, and set about wedding the discourse about VCGs to concepts of “screen media” or “immer-

47 See, for example, Judd Ethan Ruggill’s interview with Ken S. McAllister in this volume.

48 Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (MIT Press, 2009).

49 Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (Routledge, 2012), 12.

50 Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf, eds. *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (Routledge, 2009).

51 Sheila C. Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media* (Rutgers University Press, 2011).

sive media.”⁵² If the concept of “analog” came into being thanks to the incursions of the digital, then so-called “new media” seems like terminology almost *deliberately* designed to bracket out analog media, despite analog media’s resurgence in importance and constitutive interrelation with the digital.⁵³

Even with major corporations such as Hasbro or Asmodee making games accessible to all in large retailers such as Target, board games are both terrific objects of mediation and terrible as mass media,⁵⁴ a central preoccupation of film and media studies. The chief stakeholders in analog games continue to be invested designers and community organizers,⁵⁵ whereas VCGs can count on a wider base of emotionally invested players who have also experienced, say, a more standardized experience than the average TRPG or LARP. VCGs are more contained as media objects, profitable as industrial products, and teachable in an era of streaming, “Let’s Play” video recaps, and instant-access downloading, all of which is additionally fetishized by venture capital-funded tech culture. The stubborn materiality and cognitive investment of analog games confound a film and media studies establishment accustomed to certain flows of cultural production and distribution, even though our training in visual studies and the aesthetic framing of arguments should otherwise make us attend to the unique flows of analog gaming as well.

A final dimension to this discussion is the simple visual pleasure of VCGs. Analog games continue to enhance their box and cover art over time, just as VCGs deliver modest improvements in graphics quality. But perhaps it is the latter that draws the attention of the media scholar in the end: moving images, on a glowing screen. Images that one controls. Already in 1977,

52 Jacquelyn Ford Morie and Kate McCallum, *Handbook of Research on the Global Impacts and Roles of Immersive Media* (IGI Global, 2019).

53 Sax, *The Revenge of Analog*, and Sterne, “Analog [draft].”

54 Paul Booth, *Board Games as Media* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

55 See, for example, Livingston and Wallis, *Board Games in 100 Moves*; Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*; and Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons*.

still during the relative infancy of the VCG as game mode, Len Buckwalter describes these images' arresting quality:

The videogame's delight is that it's a computerized magic lantern. Dancing images radiate the kind of lure that attracted our grandparents to the nickelodeon and the stereopticon viewer. You can see it in the radio-TV department of almost any large store on a Saturday afternoon. Huddled around TV screens are people enchanted by the careening images, psychedelic colors, and digits that tot up the score with the authority of a cash register. Soon the spectators examine the price tag and make the connection: a videogame can illuminate their TV screen at home with the excitement of a penny arcade."⁵⁶

We are unfortunately not in much of a different discursive space than 1977, even if the past fifty years of analog games developments, let alone VCGs, have been nothing short of seismic. Buckwalter is reading *his* cultural moment through the lens of late nineteenth-century entertainment technologies: games researchers connect with both the dancing images on the screen that they can manipulate with their own bodies, and the play cultures that supply meaning beyond the endogenous meaning of the game's own rules structures. Moving beyond the dancing images requires an acknowledgment that, yes, we humans are the computing platforms, with "screens" in our imaginations, and that those media which activate these capacities within us are no less "media" for their oral, written, and pictorial nature.

56 Len Buckwalter, *Video Games* (Grosset and Dunlap, 1977), 10.

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Navigating Public History and Game Preservation: In Conversation with the Computerspielemuseum

Racquel M. Gonzales

Founded in 1997, the Computerspielemuseum in Berlin, Germany holds the distinction of being the first European museum for video and computer games and of creating the first permanent exhibition on game culture in the world. In more than 300 exhibits—the permanent feature *Computerspiele: Evolution eines Mediums* (*Computer Games: Evolution of a Medium*) to the popular traveling exhibition *pong.mythos*—the museum’s directors and curators craft interactive, international explorations of cultural history, challenge public assumptions about gaming, and connect guests with local stories of the medium’s development.

In 2018, the Computerspielemuseum’s founding museum director and curator Andreas Lange shifted into an advisory role to help lead the European Federation of Game Archives Museum and Preservation Projects (EFGAMP). Since then, Dr. Klaus Spieler oversees creative control as the managing director of Gameshouse gGmbH, which supports operation of the museum. With a background in cultural history, Spieler also



Fig. 22.1. In 2021, the Computerspielemuseum celebrate their 10-year anniversary in the current location at Karl-Marx-Allee, a former socialist boulevard constructed under the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic). Courtesy of Computerspielemuseum.

served in the *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle* (Entertainment Software Self-Regulation), a German state regulatory body responsible for game ratings and enforcement of retail and rental compliance, which is required under law as opposed to the self-regulatory industry ratings suggested by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) and the Pan European Game Information (PEGI). Technical director Matthias Oborski brings skills and experience in video installation, video game analysis, and digital preservation that allows the museum's projects to run smoothly behind the scenes and in exhibit spaces. And curator Philipp Frei offers artistic expertise in scenography and production design with an enthusiasm for the medium. He has shaped more than twenty exhibitions and museum events as part of the curation collective "we love old games" with Mascha Tobe. With the broader Computerspielemuseum team, Spieler, Oborski, Frei, and Tobe help define guest engagement with over fifty years of gaming history.

The team also provides a critical voice in digital game preservation for Germany, Europe, and the world as they create and

preserve rich cultural histories within museum walls. In addition to the association with the EFGAMP, the Computerspielemuseum holds important roles in the International Council of Museums, the German Museum Association, the Nestor-Projekt, and the European Union PLANETS (Preservation and Long-Term Access through Networked Services) project, which ensures preservation protocols and digital access for notable cultural and scientific assets.

In this conversation with these Computerspielemuseum staff, we consider the public history work of a museum alongside the public's perceptions of video gaming. Spieler discusses how the museum emerged at a fraught time in Germany's national relationship with game content, play culture, and the continued impact of regulation on the medium. Oborski and Frei offer perspectives on collecting, preserving, and exhibiting game history for archival researchers and non-specialist audiences. Our discussion reflects on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the museum world, and what role museums should play in the future of game studies. This conversation offers insights on game history work outside the United States, and more, the practice of doing public history on games while navigating various stakeholders — institutional, governmental, industrial, public — that shape the narratives we craft and the histories we preserve in museums and archives.

Racquel M. Gonzales: Could you share a bit about the history and mission of the museum?

Klaus Spieler: The Computerspielemuseum first opened in 1997, after two years of preliminary work, with an exhibition in the rooms of a former store. It has its roots in the Computer Games Advisory Service founded in 1994 at the *Förderverein für Jugend- und Sozialarbeit* (Association for the Promotion of Youth and Social Work), whose task was to advise educators and parents on how to deal with the new medium of computer games, which at the time was perceived as threatening by large sections of the public. The goal was to gain acceptance of the medium as a form

of cultural expression and communication, on an equal footing with traditional media.

RMG: So the emergence of the museum itself is tied to a specific perception of video gaming and its influence in Germany at the time?

KS: In the 1990s, the prevailing relationship of Germans to video games was characterized by concern about their effect on adolescents. There were political efforts to keep children and young people under 18 away from this medium. The *Jugendschutzgesetz* (Protection of Young Persons Act) did not distinguish between video games and gambling machines. The cultural potential of games was largely seen in negative terms. This had to be counteracted by addressing the stereotypes familiar to the culture-dominating classes.

Therefore, the concept of the museum that emerged at that time was largely found in the tradition of the classical European cultural museum. The framing of the medium in social and cultural development contexts, the search for influential people and stories, and the selection of suitable exhibits are among the central procedures of the presentation.

Since then, the Computerspielemuseum has made an important contribution to the current acceptance of the medium among the German public. With the touring exhibition *pong. mythos*, the museum reached more than 120,000 visitors in Stuttgart, Leipzig, and Bern in 2006 and 2007. Today's permanent exhibition has been visited by more than one million visitors since it opened ten years ago — 128,000 alone in 2019. Nowadays, even the German Chancellor speaks of computer games as “part of our culture.”

RMG: And what sparks your personal interest in video games?

KS: I have a background in cultural history and saw the basis of a new non-linear *Aneignungsform* (form of acquisition of information about the world) in the new medium, in which

the “Gutenberg galaxy” shaped by letterpress printing would be replaced. This development had to be accompanied and supported by a museum, as a cultural institution traditionally suited for this purpose.

The motives of the founders were different and complemented each other. Andreas Lange, the first curator of the museum, is a religion scholar. His focus was the change of narrated stories and their reception in the interactive medium of computer games. He had a broad foundation in empiricism, which was strengthened and further developed by his work as an expert in the *Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle* (USK) founded at the *Förderverein für Jugend- und Sozialarbeit*.

RMG: In the search for influential video game people and stories, how do you determine what histories shape public exhibition spaces?

Matthias Oborski: First, we look at the overall history of video games itself. In order not to be too subjective, we are in contact with video games historians and cultural scholars who help us determine historical milestones, and sometimes the changing perception of said milestones. Some artifacts are recognized as important by the vast majority of experts, such as the first video game console *Odyssey*, the first successful arcade machine *Pong* (Atari, 1972), or the culturally influential *Pokémon* franchise. If possible, we try to present those artifacts in our exhibition as originally as possible.

Secondly, we balance the historical and cultural importance of an artifact with our possibilities and resources. Every exhibition ends at its walls; we do not have unlimited space, so for example, any kind of early mainframe game can only be presented non-interactively, if at all. We have to refrain from acquiring extremely pricey artifacts.

In recent years, we have been actively trying to circumvent some prevailing biases that exist in the perception of video game history. Further, we sometimes present games or artifacts of no



Fig. 22.2. One example of Computerspielemuseum's unique holdings is *Poly-Play*, the first and only arcade cabinet developed in East Germany. Created by VEB Polytechnik, the game was manufactured from 1985 to 1989 and is a notable example of East-German game engineering. Courtesy of Computerspielemuseum.

major historical and cultural significance, but with a certain narrative that we think helps to paint a more complete picture.

RMG: We deal with the same challenges at The Strong National Museum of Play (The Strong). Video game popularity and nostalgia can create guest expectation of certain artifacts, yet there is also an important balance needed to capture those smaller, less recognizable histories that extend or even challenge what guests see as game history.

MO: We have to pay attention not only to the global history of video games, but also to the local one. In Berlin, we have access to resources that we would not have in other parts of the world: the little-known intricacies of East-German engineering and politics toward gaming, for example. That's why we have a whole section about the differences and similarities of former West Germany and East Germany (see fig. 22.2).

RMG: The museum houses the permanent exhibition on the history of games and a variety of special exhibitions that have covered everything from women's representation, the generic impact of 1950s science fiction on game art, and the role of food in games. I'm curious about the process in conceptualizing these temporary, thematic explorations.

Philipp Frei: For years, our special exhibitions have been produced mainly by the curator duo called "we love old games": that's Mascha Tobe and myself. I am a collector and designer and have been conceiving and realizing exhibitions and events for over ten years now around my favorite topic: (retro) gaming. Mascha's focus is on cultural mediation and studies, so the two of us can manage the balancing act between knowledge transfer and accessible gaming experiences.

We see the exhibition space as a holistic experience, making scenographic design and props just as high of a priority as the use of original hardware. Particularly important to us in the conception of special exhibitions are intermedial references and themes that are reflected in current social discourses.

We talk about most exhibition themes for years, casually, and collect ideas together about what a scenic realization in the museum might look like. These concepts grow in theory until we are ready to cast them into forms. This is where the exchange with other creative people and equally playful friends and colleagues helps us, including the technicians and artisans involved in each exhibition. They are an indispensable part of the team that contribute important elements to the overall result. This synergetic work has resulted in more than ten special exhibitions in recent years.

RMG: Do you find that the public responds positively to these themed experiences?

PF: Regardless of the topic of an exhibition, one of the most common responses from the public is "I didn't know video games have so much to tell about this topic." Like in any other medium,



Fig. 22.3. *Game Milestones* is a permanent interactive exhibit exploring “big picture” movements in game development and popular culture. Here, guests play *Maniac Mansion* (1987), a graphic adventure created by Lucasfilm Games. Courtesy of Computerspielemuseum.

people mostly know the really popular or controversial titles. Regarding video games in particular, even people playing video games are often unaware of the enormous history and diversity of the medium.

RMG: Of course, this is further complicated by the fact that the museum space necessarily greets different publics: non-gaming guests, gaming enthusiasts, tourists, visiting scholars and researchers, industry contacts, professional organizations, and local and international audiences. What do Computerspielemuseum guests want to know about history?

MO: In my experience, older people and people not familiar with video games usually want to know the big picture: when did the first games emerge, how big are they commercially, how did

they evolve, what are the negative effects (asked by Germans) or positive effects (asked by non-Germans). We try to answer all these questions in our permanent exhibition with a combination of traditional text panels, charts, videos, and games and machines themselves.

Younger people and people familiar with video games tend to ask more specific questions about certain games, hardware, or genres. We cannot answer all these questions extensively with one exhibition, obviously. Here, we rely on our very competent and knowledgeable staff, our guides, and our social media channels.

One challenge that is particular to our location in Germany: international audiences are sometimes surprised or disappointed to see a lack of historically important first-person shooters or games perceived to be violent. This has to do with the still somewhat special role video games have in German politics.

RMG: Do you find that the museum often balances public expectations and such institutional constraints? For instance, at The Strong, we often navigate the understandable desire to have access to all our game artifacts — making them playable in-person or online — and the practical matters of long-term archive conservation and copyright permissions.

MO: Most Computerspielemuseum visitors and video game professionals understand the advantages and the limitations of a real museum in a real, physical space. We try to be as open as possible about what is and is not advisable in our opinion. For example, while the audience can interact with many original machines in our exhibition, some rare artifacts — like our original *Computer Space* (Nutting Associates, 1971) — cannot be interacted with at all, although it's still in working order. We simply can't preserve this machine if it's being played all day. A text label explaining this transparently to the audience not only achieves this goal, but also helps to stress the importance of that artifact.

Of course, there are some who are deeply disappointed, because we do not have their favorite game on display. Again, transparency and openness about the operation of a museum and archive is key here and helps to alleviate disappointment. We follow the same principles regarding stakeholders and owners of intellectual properties. After explaining the concept of our museum, we usually find a solution that is satisfactory for all sides.

RMG: This transparency can be so important to help situate the museum's preservation work. The games that researchers study and write about often reflect what can be accessed; museums play a crucial role here. A good example is Ryan Best's *GayBlade* (RJ Best, Inc., 1992), previously believed to be a lost role-playing game important to the history of queer games but recovered with the Computerspielemuseum's help.

MO: In 2018, we were a technical partner for the special exhibition *Rainbow Arcade: A Queer History of Video Games 1985–2018* by the *Schwules Museum Berlin* (Gay Museum Berlin). When this exhibition opened, co-curator Dr. Adrienne Shaw (Temple University, LGBTQ Game Archive) believed *GayBlade* to be lost, because even original author Ryan Best couldn't find any copies of the game anymore. That's why *GayBlade* was mentioned in the exhibition but couldn't be played. However, in 2019 Ryan accidentally found some old *GayBlade* floppy disks but didn't know what to do with them, as the original game did not work under any modern operating system. Apparently, nobody he asked could get the game up and running. In May 2019, Ryan and Adrienne visited Berlin to attend the closing event of *Rainbow Arcade*, and handed the disks to me. After some hair-raising fumbling, I was able to get the original game in working order again in its original Windows 3 environment. I handed the working hard disk image over to Adrienne, who in turn handed it to Jason Scott, curator of the Internet Archive.

RMG: So much of public history work revolves around these issues of access, which the worldwide pandemic made all the more challenging. There has been public attention on the popularity of video games and socially distant play opportunities at this time, but the pandemic also greatly impacted game research with many scholars facing travel difficulties. More, many museums faced challenges in staying open, let alone engaging the public through shutdowns and distancing.

MO: Due to state regulations, we had to close our museum for months. We have received some financial help from the German state, although that alone was barely enough to keep our museum alive. Fortunately and unrelated to the pandemic, we had applied for and received some funding to update our museum, so we could acquire some new exhibits at least. We have cancelled many of our non-essential activities, such as guided tours, special events, and the planning of a new special exhibition. Considering the circumstances, we are really proud not to have laid anyone off.

RMG: The shutdown months for us really prompted reflections about the ways we reach our audiences and where there might be new opportunities to tell stories. We eventually opened with new measures and hours in place but continued to have these conversations.

MO: During lockdown, we tried to stay in limited contact with the public via social media, although our resources were extremely thin at the time. However, we were fairly confident that people would visit our museum again once it re-opened. The museum is open again, although a few exhibits were still off limits because of our strict hygiene policy. During our first August after reopening, we welcomed over 12,000 visitors.

RMG: That's fantastic. Given my own observations of guests at The Strong, there are many people who want to know these histories and how we play. Looking forward, what do museums

bring to the study of video games? How do they shape the field of study?

KS: We believe that museums will continue to play an important role in the study of video games and in society's cultural absorption of the medium. Here, too, we follow the traditional patterns: The museum represents a cultural space that defamiliarizes the contexts and objects, making them more comprehensible. Just as models of a clock and of a steam engine represent basic patterns for grasping mechanical industrial culture, the basic forms of computer games can illustrate the world of digital culture. Making the respective cultural heritage available in a museum also represents a source of cultural inspiration that can serve as a fertile ground for creativity and innovation.

Gameography

Computer Space. Nutting Associates, 1971.

GayBlade. RJ Best, 1992.

Maniac Mansion. Lucasfilm Games, 1987.

Poly-Play. VEB Polytechnik, 1985.

Pong. Atari, 1972.

Archiving Play, Archiving Histories: Preserving Games Hardware, Software, and Experience

Lee W. Hibbard

Games are often under the purview of a kind of planned obsolescence, driven in part by the rapid development of new and innovative technologies and further by the push for a product-based model focused on marketing the next and newest device for engaging play. Games purchased even a few years ago may be unplayable depending on their platform, their release schedule, and player's ability to access the internet, and without proper maintenance of gaming technology, servers, and hardware, a game that was completely playable one day could be rendered unplayable the next. Discussion of the history of games and play highlights the earliest forms of entertainment and media engagement, but often neglects the material components that directly impact the existence of games and the ability to play them.¹ Older video games such as those made for the Atari 2600 or for arcade machines are constantly in danger of being lost to history as their hardware, once innovative and new, becomes obsolete with the rise of new consoles, technologies, and sys-

¹ Raiford Guins, *Game After: A Cultural Study of Video Game Afterlife* (MIT Press, 2014), 8.

tems for games and play. Preserving these old machines is a monumental endeavor, and is essential to avoid the loss of decades of game history. Simultaneously, the experiences gamers have when they engage with game technologies are ephemeral in a different sense, in that often only one version of a game or play experience is preserved in an archival context or in a performance context. Play experiences hold significance in historical and social contexts as the embodied play moments amongst self-identified gamers vary heavily depending on factors such as race, social class, gender identity, able-bodiedness, and access. To preserve only a single play experience is to ignore the multiple variants game narratives are capable of producing and the infinite amount of meaning-making people who play games can engage in, both individually and together. In a space rife with discriminatory behaviors, harassment, and violence against those who do not fall into the assumed category of “gamer” (white, cisgender, male, able-bodied, between the ages of 16 and 35),² the call to preserve the experiences of a diverse group of people who play games is an urgent and necessary one.

In this chapter, I consider the importance of preserving games in both physical and metaphysical contexts by examining current archival efforts to catalog and share games and play experiences with future generations, and by considering their position within game studies. I highlight work being done in three archival contexts—The Strong National Museum of Play, the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, and the Learning Games Initiative (LGI). My look at these three locations includes an examination of each of their missions and goals, selectivity and rationale, and methods and processes, and each section includes interviews with both current directors of and founders of the archives in question. The work of these specific organizations, archives, and museums, while varying widely, provides a dem-

2 Gabriela T. Richard, “‘Play Like a Girl’: Gender Expression, Sexual Identity, and Complex Expectations in a Female-Oriented Gaming Community,” in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 168.

onstration of not only the methods being undertaken to preserve game history, but the importance of that work amongst those organizations and individuals concerned with games and the lives of marginalized people. My goal in this investigation is to demonstrate not only the many diverse games and play experiences that exist now, but how much of gaming history already contains those diverse experiences. By examining current preservation efforts, this chapter not only highlights how varied preservation efforts are in games and play, but demonstrates the importance of examining the archival work being done to preserve the fragile and tenuous technologies and voices of games and play.

The Strong National Museum of Play

Mission and Goals

The Strong National Museum of Play (henceforth, the “Strong Museum”) advertises itself as “the largest and most comprehensive collection of historical materials related to play”³ in the United States, and indeed the world, with more than 500,000 total items as of 2023 and with new items regularly added.⁴ The Strong Museum is home to an array of exhibits, and research, educational and interpretive activities; it focuses on serving families and presenting diverse play and education experiences in support of its stated mission to “study and explore play to illuminate the American experience in all its rich diversity and the broader human story.”⁵ An institution with an extensive collection of toys, dolls, games, and more, as well as tens of thou-

3 “About,” *The Strong National Museum of Play*, <https://www.museumofplay.org/about/>.

4 “2023 Year in Review,” *The Strong National Museum of Play*, https://www.museumofplay.org/app/uploads/2024/01/TheStrong_2023_EndOfYearRecap.pdf.

5 “About,” *The Strong National Museum of Play*, <https://www.museumofplay.org/about/>.

sands of video games,⁶ the Strong Museum amasses resources and items that serve visitors interested in play from casual, academic, and archival perspectives. This unparalleled collection serves a multitude of audiences each year, includes multiple libraries and a school to provide educational resources for visiting students and scholars, and publishes the *American Journal of Play*. Finally, the Strong Museum partners with community organizations such as Monroe County Play Access and Big Brother, Big Sister to ensure the museum is accessible to a wide variety of guests and scholars. Just as the Strong Museum wants to preserve a diverse history of play, they also seek to serve a diverse audience interested in play.⁷

The museum's initial focus, on the collections of Margaret Woodbury Strong, shifted over time as they acquired more games and play-related materials beyond their initial collections of dolls and other ephemera, evolving a more comprehensive view into the educational and historical significance of play. The Strong Museum's major archival component is the Brian Sutton-Smith Library & Archives of Play, a "multidisciplinary research repository devoted to the intellectual, social, and cultural history of play."⁸ The archive is home to over 220,000 documents such as volumes of primary and secondary sources, scholarly works, journals, periodicals, books, comics, manuscripts, and business records. The International Center for the History of Electronic Games (ICHEG) is the Strong Museum's location for the collection, study, and interpretation of video games, electronic games, and materials otherwise related to the study of how these games change the ways people play, learn, and connect with each other

6 "About," *The Strong National Museum of Play*, <https://www.museumofplay.org/about/>.

7 "Community Access and Admissions Programs," *The Strong National Museum of Play*, <https://www.museumofplay.org/about/community-access/>.

8 "About The Strong Fact Sheet," *The Strong National Museum of Play*, <https://www.museumofplay.org/about/press-room/about-the-strong-fact-sheet/>.

across boundaries of culture and geography.⁹ ICHEG's efforts in game preservation and historical scholarship has resulted in their contributing to the Strong Museum in order to maintain and expand the comprehensive assemblage of video games, electronic games, and related historical materials.

Selectivity and Rationale

In order to designate priority for items that need preservation, the museum has created the acronym RAVE, which stands for Rare, At-Risk, Valuable, and Engaging. In a 2020 interview with the author Andrew Borman, then the Strong Museum's Digital Games Curator, described them further, beginning with Rare, which he noted differs from the standard definitions used by general video game collectors: "Rare isn't necessarily one of the ten thousand copies of whatever is sold in stores. It's the one prototype disk we have in our collection."¹⁰ At-Risk indicates anything considered endangered media, including floppy disks, VHS tapes, and other magnetic media, or anything considered more likely to fail in a way that won't allow archivists a shot at saving it. "At the end of the day, if a PC game sold a hundred thousand copies, they're not all going to fail in the same way based on manufacturing or how they're stored. One could fail at the beginning of a disk, one could fail at the end."¹¹ The specific instances of failure being varied makes At-Risk media a high priority for cataloging and preserving, as does Rarity. Valuable as a category is less about monetary worth for the museum, and more about research and historical points of view: "It may be valuable for us to preserve a digital copy of *Super Mario Brothers*, even though there are millions of copies out there. It's really not at-risk, and it's not rare at all, but there's value to it in research

9 "International Center for the History of Electronic Games," *The Strong National Museum of Play*, <https://www.museumofplay.org/collections/icheg/>.

10 Andrew Borman (Director of Digital Preservation, The Strong National Museum of Play), interview with author, 2020.

11 Ibid.

use and what I can do with it by having a digital copy, so that may be pushed ahead in the line.”¹²

Engaging is the broadest of the categories, referring to content that’s considered interesting in some way, be it from an exhibition point of view or a research point of view. All four of these factors contribute to the digitization process and what ends up in archival collections. Borman referred to specific examples of the materials in collections that fall under these categories in ways that may seem unexpected, including videotapes from Atari’s offices detailing day to day life around the company and experiments putting video cameras in cars and driving around to get a better idea of what a first-person camera would look like in a driving game. Borman also discussed hardware considerations, with preservation being necessary for devices and players for tapes, games, and disks that will not play on more modern technology. The players for magnetic tape-based recording devices need to remain in usable condition since the materials preserved on those tapes need to be watched in real-time to be transferred to digital tapes and records. Digitized items, after being prioritized for preservation, are backed up multiple times for redundancy, and the materials that have yet to be digitized are kept in colder storage since cold temperatures slow down media degradation, so that, if the technology improves over time, the museum might be able to get some data off of them.

Methods and Processes

In a 2020 interview with the author Jon-Paul Dyson, head of ICHEG, estimated that the Strong Museum processes between five and fifteen thousand items a year into the database, which is run on Oracle Argus software.¹³ This is a massive amount when compared to other collecting institutions—Dyson mentioned

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jon-Paul Dyson (Senior VP for Exhibits and Interpretive Resources and Director, ICHEG, The Strong National Museum of Play), interview with author, June 2020.

that the average art museum processes fewer than a hundred new acquisitions per year.¹⁴ The Strong Museum operates on a completely different scale. There are also backlogged archival items, which have a different flow to them, and often require coordination with donors. As an example, Dyson referenced the Atari Coin Op collection, which came in with a full tractor trailer's worth of materials that required the museum to hire someone specifically to process the materials; it took a full year. Unloading and cataloging those materials didn't involve examining and inserting individual pages most of the time, but rather cataloging folders and groups of items to create a finding aid. Cataloging is an extensive but necessary amount of work. Dyson referred to a metaphor of cargo ships when discussing the archives: "They're not going to turn on a dime, necessarily. But they're holding things for the long haul."¹⁵ The processes set in place for the Strong Museum's collections are designed to ensure that if the current staff were gone in twenty years, you could still find the same objects with the documentation created by the institution.

When discussing what challenges he foresaw for the future of digital preservation at the Strong Museum, Borman first referred to the fact that so many items start off digital. "It's not the data I'm worried about," he said. "I can back that up any day of the week. But things start to get larger and larger. You know, I think the newest *Call of Duty: Warzone* (Raven Software and Infinity Ward, 2020) is like 217 gigabytes. That's a lot of data to have to back up three times to do it the proper way." But the data in question is essentially useless. Buying the games in physical form means little when the data all comes from an external internet cloud service. If you can't download the updates needed to run them, the games become unplayable. "That's the scariest thing to me right now," Borman said. "Because even if I do my job one hundred percent perfectly, and I can devote every hour

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

of the day to it, that's still a lot of games that are going to be lost over the years."¹⁶

Borman and his colleagues at the Strong Museum take a comprehensive approach to preservation. They back up data, record gameplay, work with communities to back up their experiences, and find ways to make the games playable for those who want to keep playing them. Borman also mentioned work being done by people outside of the archival system and how the museum has attempted to work around the DMCA rules that prevent everyday gamers from creating servers for old games. The museum has the ability to do this, but the average player of the games could not legally do the same thing. The Strong Museum builds relationships with console developers to maintain access to development tools and old hardware, and does what it can to compensate for all online activation materials for newer consoles. Hardware being made currently and within the last ten years has a shorter shelf-life than most of the old floppy disks and similar items held in storage so Borman and his colleagues have to consider how to preserve the experience players can have with that particular game. In addition to this, some developers have begun being cognizant of the need for digital preservation and what it means to do something with the original data in a different context or in a re-release. "All of a sudden this isn't just a floppy disk," Borman said. "It's potentially thousands of dollars on a shelf that I can put out or re-release in some way."¹⁷ The developers are starting to see the value in what archivists have seen as valuable for decades: "This preservation is more than just old papers and old discs that are pieces of plastic. They're cultural history that can provide a lot of meaning and value to gamers and people who aren't gamers."¹⁸ The very nature of the museum's mission means they have to operate differently from most archives: "You'll see a lot of museums trying to preserve the past or things that have already happened," he

¹⁶ Borman, interview with author.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

said. "Whereas in current video game technology, we need to be proactive. We need to be preserving these things now, because we may not have the chance to do it again in the future because it will be gone, that moment will be gone."¹⁹

The landscape of archives and preservation, ever-changing, means the Strong Museum has to consider both technological and industry advancements as they move forward with projects and collections. Dyson specifically noted that digital collecting is one of the major priorities for future collecting initiatives. He also specified his position on what it means to preserve history. In talks given to larger audiences he's referenced the history of sports as a useful analogy:

What does it mean to preserve the history of baseball? Are you actually preserving baseball itself? Or are you preserving the history of baseball? In the same way, are you preserving video games themselves? Or are you preserving the history of video games?²⁰

Sometimes preserving the history is priority, other times it's the game itself, and beyond that it could be a player's experience or even a full community's experience. Discerning what needs to be preserved is a major priority in terms of collecting, and it becomes a larger issue in terms of content and curation. "We won't be able to collect everything," Dyson said. "So we're always making these judgment calls. What's important? What's doable? It's a humbling experience, because sometimes you guess wrong."²¹ Collecting, in Dyson's eyes, is an active conversation with different communities, be they scholarly, institutional, or the citizen community. The resources available in the fan community, the industry, and the people involved in all facets of games, could be at the museum's disposal, and the role of the archivist and curator is to build relationships with those differ-

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Dyson, interview with author.

²¹ Ibid.

ent groups to determine what to collect for the Strong Museum to preserve, and to ensure that the history that is being preserved will be useful and reflective of the wishes of those communities. The Museum provides a broad scope of play materials and experiences, with a focus on physical preservation and education, and allows access to materials both through museum exhibits and appointments with the archivists. Its position of working with international organizations, game companies, and donors makes it one of the largest formalized collections of games and play materials in the world.

The LGBTQ Video Game Archive

Mission and Goals

The LGBTQ Video Game Archive, first made public in May 2016, is listed on its home website as being “a resource for researchers, journalists, critics, game designers/developers/publishers, students, gamers and/or people who play games and anyone else who is interested in learning more about the history of LGBTQ content in video games.”²² The website is not a traditional archival collection of primary sources. It functions more specifically as a “curated collection of LGBTQ and queerly read game content,”²³ but due to the unwieldy nature of that particular title the term Archive serves as a functional replacement, even as the “About” page of the website assures visiting archivists that they are fully aware that the contents of the “archive” are not yet an Archive. The archive contains synthesized information about LGBTQ+ content in digital and non-digital games that dates back as far as the 1970s, and is in a constant state of being updated, including with working lists of academic sources, published research, videos, and data visualization. The archive contains over 1200 games as of June 2020, though only about 400 of them contain research

22 “About (Please Read First!),” *LGBTQ Video Game Archive*, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/about/about-archive/>.

23 Ibid.

the archive considers complete by standards of comprehensive discussion of the game. The scope of the project has shifted and evolved since its creation due to the increase in LGBTQ+ game content over time, and the primary goal of the archive is less about discerning how much LGBTQ+ content there is in games overall and more about recording the fact that this context does exist and has existed for as long as games have been around. Dr. Adrienne Shaw of Temple University, who was interviewed in 2019 for this chapter, founded the archive, and she maintains it along with a changing list of assistants,²⁴ dependent upon funding and interest, and community members can submit games for consideration via a questions and comments form on the Archive's website, which is hosted on Wordpress. In 2018 the LGBTQ Video Game Archive displayed content at the Schwules Museum in Berlin. Titled *Rainbow Arcade*, the exhibit was the first exhibit of LGBTQ+ video game history, covering the years 1985 to 2019. The exhibit featured games present in the archive and was designed to focus on "preserving fleeting histories of queer games, texts, makers, and players."²⁵ One of the games featured both in the exhibit and the archive is *Caper in the Castro* (CM Ralph, 1989), one of the earliest instances of a computer game with overt LGBTQ+ themes.²⁶

24 Assistants to the archive include Hibby Thach, Hana Darling-Wolf, Christopher Persaud, Nirvan West, Elizaveta Friesem, and Zara Trommer, with additional information architecture and design support, research, entries, editorial assistance, and web content assistance provided by Shane A. McGarry, Evan W. Lauteria, Lisa A., Olivia Bradberry, Xavier Ho, Jeremy Brenner-Levoy, Joshua D. Savage, Leandro Augusto Borges Lima, Sawyer Kemp, Cody Mejeur, Emily R. Foster-Brown, Benjamin Sipes, Todd Harper, Mike Burns, Kady Kidd, Samuel Poirier-Poulin, John Francis, Peach Reneau, Cathy Hannabach, and Cathy Heard. "Who 'We' Are," *LGBTQ Video Game Archive*, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/who-we-are/>.

25 Adrienne Shaw (Creator, LGBTQ Video Game Archive), interview with author, August 2020.

26 See Raquel M. Gonzales's conversation with the Computerspielemuseum in this volume.

Selectivity and Rationale

The impetus for a game becoming a part of the archive, according to Shaw, is simply for someone to say there's something queer about it. Whether it's a character, a storyline, or something else about it, Shaw makes a point not to arbitrate what goes on the master list. "I research every game before I put an entry up, but I don't arbitrate what goes onto the master list, because somebody identified something queer about it at some point."²⁷ This can sometimes take the form of offering corrections, and Shaw used the game *It Came From The Desert* (Cinemaware, 1989) as an example of a game that was identified on the surface as queer but had content that, upon further investigation, may have just been a misunderstanding of the colloquial use of the word "girlfriend" by cis women: "I don't think it was meant to hint at some other relationship. But enough people did, and even when I use it as an example, people try to push back." Since it was an example that people claimed some queerness about, Shaw included an entry on it. "I think that not being draconian and deciding what does and doesn't count is part of the queer approach to it," Shaw said. Other features Shaw identified as queer in relation to the archive included being liberal with what counts as a source and not being particularly interested in the canonicity of queer characters:

I'm interested in what the fans say, I'm interested in what the producers say, I'm interested in what's in the game, and my entries will reflect all three of those. But like, if there are fan communities that identify these characters as queer, I don't care what the designer said. In both a political sense and also just in a historical sense. They can say whatever they want, this is what people are saying about these characters and the game and like their relationship to these characters, so like at the same time, if fan communities are like "no there's no way

²⁷ Shaw, interview with author. The citations in the remainder of this section are from the same interview.

that character's queer" and the designer's like "they totally are" then I don't care what the fans say. Whoever claims queerness wins for me.

Methods and Processes

The hardest part of assembling the archive, according to Shaw, was a combination of the use of Wordpress, due to its rigid structure, and the very nature of an archive that concerns a subject that frequently defies categorization. "Trying to identify a tagging and categorization scheme that would make it possible for somebody going to the site to find the kinds of examples they're trying to find, while also trying not to be too categorizing about LGBTQ+ identities," Shaw said, identifying one of the major challenges associated with the archive. Having to create a metadata scheme that would work with the contents was a major challenge, as was the question of accessibility. It was challenging "[c]reating something for an everyday person, from like a teenager through to a professional archivist, so they could find what they're looking for while also not being too rigid in what we're calling character's identities."

Those complex situations proved part of the challenge of training new volunteers in the nuanced language associated with queer identities. "The word you use in 2019 isn't a word somebody would have used in 1980 but also, you have to think about what words somebody would use in 2030." Shaw saw the importance of not labeling things too rigidly as a significant factor in the archive's organization. This means often characters in games who have somewhat ambiguous sexualities often end up in multiple categories. "There are reasons we think this character is a queer woman, and they're implicitly suggesting she's a lesbian, but it's also possible she's bisexual. Having each of those ticked off means people who are looking for any one of these three categories can find the characters they're looking for." Shaw noted that she was grateful for being able to work with her own metadata scheme and not have to apply anyone else's method, but also acknowledged that having to develop that

scheme from scratch was definitely one of the harder parts of constructing the archive. Shaw further noted that, while people suggested from the beginning of the project that it might be a good idea to make use of a Wiki format where more people can edit content, “[f]rom my perspective, that doesn’t do what the site’s trying to do, which is to try to actually do some research and support those entries.”

Shaw highlighted the informal nature of adding new content to the archive. Most games that are submitted via the website’s comment form end up on a to-do list, “[w]hich is literally just a word doc.” “I usually spend a month each summer going through and moving all of those entries into our Excel file, which has tabs of all the games and then tabs by decades for the individual instances of content in each game.” The approach to archiving and prioritizing materials is more niche and idiosyncratic compared to the Strong Museum’s extremely formalized approach. When Shaw had research assistants, she let them work on the games they were most interested in and familiar with, as a lot of the research relies upon knowing where the fan spaces are and knowing the complex virtual histories surrounding those games. Shaw tended to select the oldest game and then work forward chronologically, because she was most interested in getting full documentation of earlier examples. Volunteers were given a tutorial regarding the format—individual game pages, entries for each instance of content—and then specific formatting methods. Shaw also noted that indie designers often wanted to write their own entries for their games, and she allowed that as long as they adhered to the format. “There are some times when people will submit research they’ve done on a game and it’s not in my format, and so it’s not in the to-do pile, but it’s something I have to wait until I have some free time to do so I can reformat to keep things relatively consistent.” Shaw referred to the process of adding entries consistently as a constant battle with herself. “If people want to write long entries about a single game and don’t divide up the instances of content, sometimes I’m willing to put those up and add a lot of tags,” she

noted, laughing, “rather than try to find ways to divide it up narratively.”

If entries require updates due to new information concerning the game’s LGBTQ+ content, Shaw noted that she usually requires a specific citation to go along with an update. “If it’s something like a developer coming out and saying something, for example, in 2014 one of the Nintendo designers said the Toads were asexual or agender, then we write the dates on the entries where the character first appeared, not when they were first mentioned to be LGBTQ+,” she said. “In that entry I added in when the developer said that and also said ‘this interview on this date is why this character is being listed here,’ so if more information is revealed about a character, then we go back and add it.” Requests for updates are apparently a common part of the process of running the archive, and Shaw noted that while people will often reach out to point out that entries should be updated, volunteers often don’t get back to her to write the entries or update them. “It’s as simple as taking the article and updating the entry and saying here’s a new citation about this.” She also referred to working in coordination with game developers such as Ryan Best, creator of *GayBlade* (RJ Best, 1992), and how she held off on updating that entry until the documentary about the game was released. The list’s nature is never-ending, she noted, as more content is frequently being discovered or in need of being updated. “It would be sad if I was done,” she said. “So I’m happy to never be done.”

Though the archive’s structure and process differs from most traditional archival models, it is this very difference that allows it to exist in a queer space that compliments its mission, message, and contents. The queerness of the archive lies in definitions of queerness that extend across international and cultural boundaries, and Shaw noted how important it was to consider queerness outside of the perspective of someone living in the United States in the twenty-first century, and to consider queerness as a bigger range of experiences across time, space, and culture. “It’s hard to classify and it’s hard to find people who are experts in all those things,” she said. “But I feel like it helps make

it a richer history if it can consider that these things aren't just things happening in one part of the world." The LGBTQ Video Game Archive ultimately stands as an example of a community project that serves the needs of a particular community, developing under the purview of a single researcher to highlight and preserve history in an almost documentary-level style of project work, making it stand out from general preservation efforts of games and broad gaming culture.

The Learning Games Initiative

Mission and Goals

The Learning Games Initiative (LGI) studies, teaches with, and builds computer games in educational contexts. Founded in 1999, the LGI's website describes the organization as "an international, transdisciplinary, and multi-institutional research collective"²⁸ and makes use of an Omeka CMS framework, a software program commonly used by digital exhibitions for museums, to house the archive. Containing more than 250,000 items, the archive's contents include over fifteen thousand games; over two hundred game systems; hundreds of scholarly, trade, and fan publications; and thousands of other artifacts that represent the wide and deep incursion of the games industry into popular culture.²⁹ While much of the LGI exists on its website, the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive (LGIRA) is a physical archive portion of the project with nine locations, with the primary location the University of Arizona. The co-directors of LGI, Dr. Ken McAllister and Dr. Judd Ruggill, reported that LGIRA has nine total locations—seven in the US, one in Germany, and one in Australia.³⁰ The LGIRA is open to all game researchers of all ages, and visitors to the LGI website can set up

²⁸ "About," *Learning Games Initiative*, <https://lgira.mesmernet.org/about>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ken S. McAllister and Judd Ethan Ruggill (Co-Directors, Learning in Games Initiative), interview with author, 2022.

appointments to consult with an archivist via the list of directors and archivists on the website's "about" page. Digital materials are accessible on the LGI Website.

Selectivity and Rationale

The LGI website's landing page makes the initiative's goal very clear, stating that the archive's design is based around the concept of "preservation through use" and focuses on making their content accessible to researchers all over the world. The archive's breadth is "meant to be representative rather than comprehensive"³¹ and to function as a source for jump-starting projects and expanding a researcher's scope. The Omeka cataloging process is listed as ongoing and includes not only games but also game ephemera, including paratextual items. LGI archivists collaborate with both gaming communities and developers to secure new materials, often reaching out to gaming clubs and indie developers to not only gather new materials for the archive, but to educate them on the importance of archiving their work.³² They offer to house those materials, help locate another archive that may be more suitable, or develop an archival space in-house to best fit the needs of that particular company, donor, or community. Their work soliciting materials adheres to similar standards as that of the Strong Museum, working with donors who are both past gamers looking to preserve their materials, as well as serious collectors who want their collections cared for and kept together over time. Where the LGI differs from both the Strong Museum and the LGBTQ Video Game Archive is their breadth of collecting, soliciting games and play material across multiple areas, and their heavy focus on creating digital accessibility of that material.

31 "Learning Games Initiative Research Archive," *Learning Games Initiative*, <https://lgira.mesmernet.org/>.

32 McAllister and Ruggill, interview with author.

Methods and Processes

LGI follows a standard intake model for their new materials, going through the stages of appraisal, acquisition, accessioning, processing, preservation, and access. First they determine the value of the materials, which can occur before or after the acquisition stage, which involves the physical transfer of materials from creator or owner to LGI. Accessioning is the creation of a permanent record of materials, which involves assigning unique control numbers to the object, assembly, or lot being processed. Processing includes basic preservation actions such as surveying, arranging, and describing materials to ensure their survival and eventual move into the preservation stage, which involves safeguarding the materials to extend their life. Most notably, this involves creating digital copies or surrogates from materials that can be used without the original media and hardware. The final stage is access.³³ LGI faces major challenges along many parts of this process, including the best methods for preserving DLC of games, delaminating optical media like CDs, and the degradation of plastics. They also have other challenges, including issues of storage space due to the volume of incoming materials and materials that exist in general.

In order to provide educational materials, the initiative aims to preserve as many disparate aspects of games and gaming culture as possible so as to provide jumping off points for research, as opposed to some of the more in-depth collections present in the Strong Museum, or the deep dives into individual games found in the LGBTQ Video Game Archive.

Conclusion: Games History and the Future

In observing the current efforts of different organizations and institutions to preserve the history of games, gaming experiences, and physical game hardware and software, a visible pattern forms. Each of the groups discussed in this chapter have

³³ Ibid.

a drive toward creating and maintaining resources for people, be they academics, gamers, both, or something else entirely, and developing the infrastructure to continue to do so. While obstacles such as finances and budget, space and storage capacity, and an ever-increasing backlog of information that needs to be preserved lie ahead of efforts to preserve and share these games and resources, the passion and motivation behind these efforts paint a positive picture for each of them moving forward. Whether it be providing a large-scale and broad-reaching physical preservation effort like at the Strong Museum, an in-depth research resource like the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, or a collection of games-related artifacts and educational materials like the Learning Games Initiative, all of these and other similar efforts share insights into how people are ensuring games are treated as the important historical artifacts they are. As each of these selected resources indicates, the future of games shows no sign of slowing down when it comes to innovation, creativity, or opportunity, and in highlighting the efforts being made to preserve the past, gamers and researchers alike can witness what possibilities lie ahead.

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Ludic Dissertations: “Level 101” and Video Games as Playable Scholarship

Justin Wigard

There is a curious friction between scholarly camps and creative efforts, despite the ways that game studies as a field has always embraced approaching games with a critical focus, making serious games to advance external fields, and using video games as pedagogical tools. Within corollary fields like comics studies, for example, scholars have long embraced creating comics as a means of disseminating discourse and advancing the field. Strong examples can be seen in Linda Barry’s *Syllabus*¹ or *Making Comics*,² Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics*,³ Stacey Robinson and John Jennings’s “Black Kirby”⁴ endeavors, etc. Game studies’ creative versus critical divide seems problematic for a field so closely intertwined with play and games, yet one that relies on every other medium for explication. To illustrate

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- 1 Linda Barry, *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2014).
 - 2 Linda Barry, *Making Comics* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2019).
 - 3 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (HarperCollins, 1993).
 - 4 Stacey Robinson and John Jennings, “Black Kirby,” *Stacey Robinson*, <https://www.staceyarobinson.com/work/blackkirby>.

play, for instance, game scholars utilize extensive academic texts with long, dense, and nuanced expositions, or rely on other media such as comics, video, podcasts, etc.

This is not to say that game studies is wholly lacking in efforts that bridge the divide: we need only look to Elizabeth LaPensée's corpus,⁵ Jane McGonigal's work,⁶ even programs like MIT's Game Lab. Likewise, Jason Helms's playable article on the affordances of different media-as-scholarship⁷ and Anastasia Salter's sprawling game as scholarship⁸ further push at the boundaries between the critical and the creative. As an ever-expanding and increasingly rhizomatic field of critical inquiry, game studies is rife with potential for alternative scholarship, for playable criticism and creative endeavors, yet has historically been resistant to such efforts.

This chapter traces the divide between creative and critical within game studies' history, offering some accounting of where this stems from, along with how it has grown and shifted particularly in relation to other fields. One way of understanding the persistence of this divide can be traced to the relative historical inaccessibility of game development knowledge, software, and hardware, let alone the inaccessibility of time, energy, and communal efforts.⁹ Another way might be to understand the academy's resistance to consideration of alternative scholarship in lieu of traditional scholarship models:¹⁰ the monograph, the peer-reviewed article, etc.

5 Elizabeth LaPensée, "Games," *Elizabeth LaPensée*, <http://www.elizabethlapensee.com/#/games>.

6 Jane McGonigal, "You Found Me," *Jane McGonigal*, <https://janemcgonigal.com/play-me/>.

7 Jason Helms, "Play Smarter Not Harder: Developing Your Scholarly Meta," *Scholarly and Research Communication* 10, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.22230/src.2019v10n3a333>.

8 Anastasia Salter, "Alice in Dataland 2.0," *Kairos* 20, no. 1 (2015), <https://kairos.technorhetoric.net/20.1/inventio/salter/index.html>.

9 Tina Amini, "Why It's So Hard To Make A Video Game," *Vice*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4w33ed/why-its-so-hard-to-make-a-video-game>.

10 Danielle Cooper et al., "Supporting Research in Languages and Literature," *Ithaka S+R* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313810>.

Further, this chapter envisions a future game studies that bridges the critical and the creative divide through alternative scholarship. I do so by working through the premise, methodology, and stakes of creating a playable video game as my dissertation: “Level 101: A Video Game About Video Games.” Drawing on other alternative dissertations,¹¹ my dissertation explored, explained, and interrogated the video game medium on several levels in order to understand it through a methodology of play. Ultimately, this chapter speculates on what future game studies may look like by embracing playable criticism as a mode of scholarly discourse, and by embracing games as our modes of critical inquiry, not just our objects of observation. Doing so can upend traditional modes of scholarly publication and deliver on the promise of early video game development and studies, the unlimited potential of an interactive medium.

Early Creative-Critical Divide

Typical video game developers were few and far between in the 1950s, working on their own or in small groups due to the expensive and inaccessible nature of early computers, which were housed at academic institutions or loaned out in conjunction with government grants. To even begin learning about these computers, one had to have access to an academic institution or a governmental or military research facility, and then to gain access to the massive computer itself, often only available on a timeshare basis. Would-be developers had to maximize what little time was available for these computers.¹²

11 Nick Sousanis, “Comics as Scholarship & Alternatives,” *Spin Weave and Cut*, <http://spinweaveandcut.com/comics-alternative-scholarship/>.

12 Tristan Donovan also highlights that creating prototypical video games during the 1950s and 1960s required at least a baseline knowledge of electrical engineering in order to modify the hardware necessary to create games, not to mention having access to these early computers. Tristan Donovan, *Replay: The History of Video Games* (Yellow Ant, 2010), 41.

Games like *Spacewar!* initially developed at academic institutions were quickly co-opted into commercial enterprises.¹³ This was less a Promethean democratization of knowledge and more of a commercialization of extant technologies, as embodied by the efforts of creators like Ralph Baer¹⁴ and Nolan Bushnell,¹⁵ but these efforts did inspire grassroots developers to begin making their own commercial video games. While this caused an early gap between those with access to technological knowledge or with financial means and those without, these barriers did lead to inventive workarounds. Early game developers like Roberta and Ken Williams,¹⁶ Joyce and Joseph Weisbecker,¹⁷ and Scott Miller¹⁸ all demonstrate efforts to bridge this gap, including building home computers piecemeal; writing code on the back of wrapping paper to avoid buying expensive printer paper; self-publishing games via bulletin boards; and more.¹⁹

- 13 Donovan recounts the story of Bill Pitts, an undergraduate at Stanford University who, in 1969, set about creating a coin-operated version of *Spacewar!* to try and “make money” though he and his partner, Hugh Tuck, would later get poached by Nolan Bushnell. Donovan, *Replay*, 16–17.
- 14 Jon-Paul Dyson, “Ralph Baer Brings His Brown Box to NCHEG,” *The Strong National Museum of Play*, June 29, 2009, <https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/chegheads/2009/06/ralph-baer-brings-his-brown-box-to-ncheg>.
- 15 Shannon Symonds, “By Any Other Name: The Origin of Atari,” *The Strong National Museum of Play*, May 16, 2011, <https://www.museumofplay.org/blog/chegheads/2011/05/by-any-other-name-the-origin-of-atari>.
- 16 Donovan, *Replay*, 58. See also “Roberta Williams: Graphic Adventure Games,” *Lemelson-MIT*, <https://lemelson.mit.edu/resources/roberta-williams>.
- 17 Benj Edwards, “Rediscovering History’s Lost First Female Video Game Developer,” *FastCompany*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90147592/rediscovering-historys-lost-first-female-video-game-designer>.
- 18 Chris Plante, “Apogee: Where Wolfenstein Got Its Start,” *Polygon*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.polygon.com/features/2017/10/26/16511514/wolfenstein-origins-apogee>.
- 19 For a more thorough accounting of the history of indie game development, see Tabitha Baker “The Complete History of Indie Games,” *The Indie Game Website*, October 19, 2018, <https://www.indiegamewebsite.com/2018/10/19/the-complete-history-of-indie-games/>; Edwards, “First Female Video Game Developer”; and Stewart Brand, “Spacewar: Fanatic Life and Symbolic Death among the Computer Bums,” *Monkeys with*

At the same time, a different kind of insulation took place — companies made up of would-be developers and self-taught programmers were now leading the charge of an entire industry, one that worked to closely guard any secrets. Whereas early academic sequestering was exclusionary based on means of access and proximity, this business sequestering was shaped by financial motivations: protecting developers' secrets and design principles to outpace their competitors.²⁰ This came with a growing expectation of games development experience and effort. Anna Anthropy notes that as the industry grew, so too did the expectations for entry: not just years of schooling or relevant programming or coding experiences, but exorbitant periods of crunch once the job began, or, barring these constraints, an offer for contract-only work.²¹ Certainly, other designers-turned-critics like Chris Crawford,²² Brenda Laurel,²³ Raph Koster,²⁴ and Richard D. Duke²⁵ offer insight not only due to their early games criticism, but to efforts that bridge the gap between criticism and praxis. Koster, for instance, brought comics approaches to bear in his *Theory of Fun* to illustrate nebulous concepts about game design, play, and designing games for fun.²⁶

Scholars, too, were flocking to game development to make games based on work from other disciplines, bringing in perspectives or approaches from media studies, social sciences,

Wheels, https://www.wheels.org/spacewar/stone/rolling_stone.html, "Appendix Two" for additional pricing discussions. This article was first published in *Rolling Stone* in 1972.

20 Box Brown works through one particularly prominent example in *Tetris: The Games People Play* (First Second, 2016).

21 Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (Seven Stories Press, 2012), 16–17.

22 Chris Crawford, *The Art of Computer Game Design* (Osborne/McGraw-Hill, 1984).

23 Brenda Laurel and S. Joy Mountford, eds., *The Art of Human-Computer Interface Design* (Addison-Wesley Longman, 1990).

24 Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design* (O'Reilly Media, 2013).

25 Richard D. Duke, "A Paradigm for Game Design," *Simulation & Games* 11, no. 3 (1980): 364–77.

26 Koster, *A Theory of Fun*, 2013.

communication, and more. Peter Favaro, a psychology PhD, turned to creating a psychology-based video game to supplement his income, interviewing “more than a thousand people to work out what made them tick and what life decisions really affected their lives.”²⁷ Others worked to bridge this critical versus creative gap by starting their own companies built on research, such as Laurel’s Purple Moon.²⁸ From another perspective, games have long been critical in nature, though those games created for purposes other than entertainment were often framed as “serious games.” Stemming from Clark C. Abt’s *Serious Games*,²⁹ the term covers a wide range of games that were created with purpose, whether for business training, scientific research, or education. Clark notes that he and his associates developed “computer simulations of air battles, missile exchanges, disarmament inspection systems,” and more during the late 1950s, and this spirit of games being developed with military intentions has carried forth into the present.³⁰ In other words, serious games often act as bridges between the critical and the creative, where players are utilizing the act of play as a tool for inquiry, whether implicitly or explicitly.

Bridging the Gap

Rather than simply tracing this critical and creative divide, I also want to highlight my own efforts to bridge this gap. My project takes up calls from scholars like John Aycock and Pat-

²⁷ Donovan, *Replay*, 323.

²⁸ It is worth noting that Purple Moon faced scrutiny for reinforcing sexist, gender-based, and racial stereotypes. For more information, see Amy Huang, Ashley Ring, Shelley Toich, and Teresa Torres, “Purple Moon: Thanks but No Thanks for Rockett’s New School,” *GREAT* 1, no. 1 (1998), archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20090403084211/http://www-cse.stanford.edu/classes/cs201/Projects/gender-gap-in-education/page19.htm>, and Rebecca Eisenberg, “Girl Games: Adventures in Lip Gloss,” *Game Developer*, February 12, 1998, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/design/girl-games-adventures-in-lip-gloss>.

²⁹ Clark C. Abt, *Serious Games* (Viking Press, 1970), 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

rick Finn, who suggest that understanding both programming and critical analysis frameworks affords deeper engagement with game studies.³¹ Though game studies scholarship is often contingent upon teasing out the intricacies of game mechanics, the outcomes of computer game programming, or the effects of these games in a wider historical or cultural context, Aycock and Finn argue that “we need to pay as much attention to code as to words and begin our work from the point at which they support play”³² — put another way, even if game studies scholars are not actively developing or critically making software, having knowledge of the coding, programming, and games machinery underlying our specific content areas will only advance game studies. Taking the abstract and making it tangible through play, Steve Wilcox similarly calls for what he terms “praxis games,” that is, “games created specifically for players to enact, embody, or realize a theory, lesson, or skill using the qualities of context, practice, and experience.”³³ Praxis games could easily be called playable criticism, critical games, serious games, or purposeful games. This aligns with what scholars like Stephanie de Smale,³⁴ Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman,³⁵ and others articulate: that designing games — even prototypes — affords deeper understandings of the medium while being a critical reflexive practice.

To this end, my dissertation was a playable one, following in the footsteps of other alternative or ludic dissertations — that is, dissertations that play with the forms and functions of what dissertations can be — that bridge the gap between the academic

31 John Aycock and Patrick Finn, “Uncivil Engineering: A Textual Divide in Game Studies,” *Game Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019), <http://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/aycockfinn>.

32 Aycock and Finn, “Uncivil Engineering.”

33 Steve Wilcox, “Praxis Games: A Design Philosophy for Mobilizing Knowledge Through Play,” *American Journal of Play* 11, no. 2 (2019): 157.

34 Stephanie de Smale, “Game Essays as Critical Media and Research Praxis,” in *Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG* (DiGRA/FDG, 2016).

35 Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2003).

silo and the creative processes of critical making: A.D. Carson's *Owning My Masters*, a rap album as dissertation;³⁶ Amanda Visconti's digital dissertation entitled *Infinite Ulysses*;³⁷ Anna Williams's podcast dissertation *My Gothic Dissertation*;³⁸ Steve Wilcox's dissertation, a portion of which was argued through an accompanying game, *Allergies and Allegories*;³⁹ and Nick Sousanis's *Unflattening*⁴⁰ and Kay Sohini's "Drawing Unbelonging,"⁴¹ both comics as dissertations. As one example, Carson states that *Owning My Masters* is "a rap album that is the text of the dissertation; so rather than it being about rap, or it being about spoken word, it's actually done through those particular modes of presentation," and indeed, Carson's project has become the very first academic peer-reviewed rap album.⁴² Likewise, Visconti's *Infinite Ulysses* has had a major impact; it was archived in July 2016, having reached 24,000 unique visitors, and 1,168 annotations from 775 unique user accounts.⁴³ Similarly Williams's podcast dissertation has since been featured at MLA, in Edinburgh University Press, and in *The Guardian*.⁴⁴ In challenging what the futures of academic writing can be, according to Julia Morani, "these dissertations radically flout the conventions of academic

36 A.D. Carson, "Owning My Masters: The Rhetorics of Rhymes & Revolutions" (PhD diss., Clemson University, 2017).

37 Amanda Visconti, "About," *Infinite Ulysses*, <http://infiniteulysses.com/about>.

38 Anna Williams, "The First-Ever Podcast Dissertation," *My Gothic Dissertation*, <https://www.mygothicdissertation.com>.

39 "GI Spotlight: Steve Wilcox," *University of Waterloo*, January 23, 2015, <https://uwaterloo.ca/games-institute/news/gi-spotlight-steve-wilcox>.

40 Nick Sousanis, *Unflattening* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

41 Kay Sohini, "On Time and Space: An Excerpt from 'Drawing Unbelonging,'" *Studies in Comics* 12, no. 2 (2022): 249–58.

42 Caroline Newman, "A.D. Carson On His First-Ever Peer-Reviewed Rap Album, Spring Shift and Fall Courses," *UVAToday*, August 20, 2020, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/ad-carson-his-first-ever-peer-reviewed-rap-album-spring-shift-and-fall-courses>.

43 Amanda Visconti, "About," *Infinite Ulysses*, <http://infiniteulysses.com/about>.

44 Anna Williams, "Reviews," *My Gothic Dissertation*, <https://www.mygothicdissertation.com/press>.



Fig. 24.1. “Level 101” title screen.

writing by arguing their theses aurally and visually.”⁴⁵ I want to expand on my peers’ work here by advocating for playable criticism as praxis.

This brings me to my own efforts to bridge this gap: “Level 101: A Video Game About Video Games,” which is a short, playable video game demo I created as part of my dissertation. Each of the three branches (or worlds, in games parlance) I explore — history, design, and theory — features stages designed to educate players about the video game medium, as well as encourage critical reflection on video games and the process of playing through them. Players will encounter brief lectures (or cutscenes) from a fictionalized version of me in video game form, followed by a short, playable video game stage. Gameplay includes simple arcade-based action sequences alongside common video game genres like platforming. “Level 101” makes several crucial and critical interventions as its guiding premises. First, it advocates for alternative scholarship in the form of a digital, interactive, and playable artifact. Second, it advances play as a mode of critical inquiry and humanistic pedagogy, par-

⁴⁵ Julia Molinari, “What Makes Our Writing ‘Academic?’,” *Doctoral Writing*, August 22, 2017, <https://doctoralwriting.wordpress.com/2017/08/22/what-makes-our-writing-academic/>.

ticularly in relation to the digital medium of video games and to game studies. Third, “Level 101” acts as an artifact of critical making,⁴⁶ bridging the divide between game creators and game scholars through praxis.

Individual Efforts

The proliferation of free and open-access game development software, combined with the recent reduction in prices of computers capable of video game development, has considerably lowered barriers of access for developing games as scholarship and games as critical forms. RPG Toolkit has been long been one such tool for game development, given its free and open-access nature. First released in 1997 by Christopher B. Matthews, the toolkit has been kept alive by a small, but dedicated, fan community. A similar prepackaged game engine, Game Maker, was created by Mark Overmars and released on November 15, 1999 for free. Game Maker has continued offering different free iterations over the years and has become a staple for games developers and educators to begin working with.⁴⁷ These kinds of open and free game engines have led to more powerful ones like Unity, which offers free personal plans to developers who make less than \$100,000 and free student plans to those aged 16 and over enrolled in accredited educational institutions.⁴⁸ This has afforded opportunities for independent game developers to utilize a robust game engine as well as increased access for scholars, educators, and learners of all kinds. Other programs like Twine⁴⁹ — an open-source tool for nonlinear and interactive

46 Matt Ratto, “Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life,” *The Information Society* 27, no. 4 (2011): 252–60.

47 Chris Wallace, “GameMaker at 20,” *MCV/DEVELOP*, December 4, 2019, <https://www.mcvuk.com/business-news/gamemaker-at-20-sometimes-something-small-and-nameless-is-way-more-impressive-than-one-of-the-big-game-titles/>.

48 “Plans and Pricing,” *Unity*, <https://unity.com/pricing>.

49 Adam Hammond, “A Total Beginner’s Guide to Twine 2.1,” *Adam Hammond*, <http://www.adamhammond.com/twineguide/>.

narratives — have been used to create not just works of interactive fiction, but educational models and games designed for use in the classroom.

In the wake of game studies emerging as a field, many games labs, non-profit organizations, and academic workshops were built for the purpose of collaborative and critical game design, training students and participants in approaches to critical game design; this lowered barriers to game design by teaching students how to apply game design and how to understand games easier, and by making these methods more widely available and accessible. Programs like the MIT Game Lab, UH-Clear Lake's Serious Games and Simulations Innovation Lab, and Michigan State University's Games and Education Lab have brought together game studies scholars and student collaborators into a space for purposeful game design and study. One need only look to the games created within these spaces to see critical efforts applied in creative ways: *Walden*, created by Tracy Fullerton and the USC Game Innovation Lab, is an open-world narrative game that simulates the life experiences of Henry David Thoreau during his time living at Walden Pond. However, many of these academic games labs are costly enterprises, and, for games like *Walden*, need external grants or fellowships in order to move from design to prototype to deployed game.⁵⁰

In their inaugural editorial for the *Journal of Analog Game Studies*, Aaron Trammell, Emma Leigh Waldron, and Evan Torner demonstrate the relatively low barriers of access for critical games in analog modes: "Because the barriers of entry to design do not require the technical expertise demanded by the lines of codes which bring computer games to life, analog games hold the potential to allow a new and different set of voices into design processes, voices which might resist the pathological displays of racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence native to

50 Tracy Fullerton, "Walden, A Game," *Walden Game*, <https://www.waldengame.com/>.

the video game industry.”⁵¹ This can be particularly epitomized through the recent critical and commercial successes of crowdfunding site Kickstarter’s ZineQuest⁵² or itch.io’s gaming bundles curated for social change. It is, of course, important to note that not all participants in ZineQuest are small companies, nor are all games and zines made during this time critical, progressive, or free from controversy — but the event creates space for collaboration, support, and creation.⁵³

Some publication avenues do exist within the academy for treating games as forms of academic publishing. *OneShot: A Journal of Critical Games & Play* deliberately creates space for the submission of games and play as scholarship, offering peer-review processes for “publishing games, as viable and authentic forms of academic works.”⁵⁴ Other journals, including *GAME: The Italian Journal of Game Studies* and *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, have incorporated games in different forms, particularly by including online repositories of digital praxis artifacts. These actions add legitimacy to critical games and playable criticism. Taking a different approach, Central Michigan University Press now has a series dedicated to

51 Aaron Trammell, Emma Leigh Waldron, and Evan Torner, “Reinventing Analog Game Studies,” *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/08/reinventing-analog-game-studies/>. See also Evan Torner’s chapter in this volume for more discussion of analog and digital games.

52 ZineQuest is a month-long event typically held in February for first-time game designers and zinesters to launch their games. It has become an important launchpad for marginalized voices creating praxis games (without using the term as such), a space for advocating for decolonial content and fair pay practices, along with meditating thoughtfully on the process of game design; not all participants are indie developers.

53 For example, the 2020 Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality raised funding for organizations that support those affected by racial injustice, inequality, and police brutality against Black people, generating \$8,149,814.66 by selling a collection of 1741 indie games, game-zines, and game assets. The 2021 Queer Games Bundle on itch.io similarly collected games to support 190 queer indie games creators, artists, and developers, and generated over \$100,000 in donations.

54 “About,” *OneShot: A Journal of Critical Games & Play*, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220518010346/http://oneshotjournal.com/about/>.

Play Smarter Not Harder: Developing Your Scholarly Meta

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Abstract

This game performs two related arguments through interactivity and play: first, publication medium shapes research and second, the concept of flow can increase scholarly productivity. Publication medium is a choice that is always made and often forgotten. This game argues that no medium is neutral and that medium choice shapes knowledge production. You play as a scholar composing an article for publication: choosing your medium, researching, writing, and revising. Through successive plays the game develops the concepts of crunch and flow, and explains how to develop a new scholarly meta (an e-sports term for strategy) that makes research more productive. The game takes roughly twenty minutes to “win,” unlocking a debug mode that makes its arguments more explicit. The game may help you improve your own scholarly decisions around medium choice and productivity.

Introduction

Instructions

Click links like the “Introduction” link above to make choices. To restart at any point, simply refresh your browser. To undo a choice, use the undo and redo buttons in the left sidebar. They are currently not visible because there is nothing to undo. I’ll show you them on the next page. For a black and white version of this text designed for colour-blind users, click [here](#).

References

Figure 24.2. The opening screen from Jason Helms’s “Play Smarter, Not Harder.”

the publication of pedagogical games: “Scholarships and Lore: Games for Learning.” While this has radical and immediate impact for game studies as a field, these opportunities also serve to bridge the creative-critical divide through institutional credibility, both for academic and non-academic creators.

There have been several recent forays into iterations of playable scholarship. Jason Helms’s “Play Smarter Not Harder” acts as one form of playable criticism in a dualistic way: first, using the digital platform of Twine to argue that “medium choice [in scholarly production] shapes knowledge production,” and secondly, illustrating an argument about interactivity and play through a playable format.⁵⁵ Like some of Helms’s other recent projects, “Play Smarter, Not Harder” takes advantage of digital media and the affordances of play to articulate ideas through

⁵⁵ Helms, “Play Smarter Not Harder.”

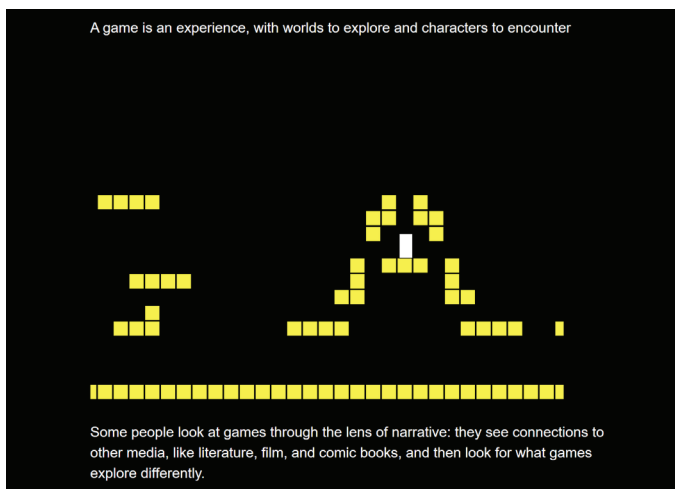


Figure 24.3. The in-progress screen from Salter and Murray's "Blocked In."

interactivity itself. Other digital projects like Anastasia Salter's "Alice in Dataland 2.0" —a work "intended to remediate the text of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* into a critical lens for gazing into Alice herself" along with Salter and John Murray's "Blocked In" (see fig. 3) — stand as projects wherein the design and programming are as imbricated in the stakes of the project as the argumentative content is.

"Level 101" actually began in two parallel versions: one level was built using a free trial of RPG Maker MV, and one was built using Twine. The RPG Maker level was designed to act as a playable alternative to a syllabus, having players find "Treasure" in the form of scrolls that broke down sections of the syllabus, before defeating a boss (a monstrous avatar of myself) that quizzed them on the syllabus. Correct answers dealt 9999 damage, while incorrect ones gave the correct answer and a groan-worthy pun. The Twine level, on the other hand, simulated a text-based adventure and provided historical insights into the genre. In developing these early forms, I realized I needed a

robust platform that would handle both forms as well as future forms this project might take, so I turned to Unity Student, which was comprehensive, free, had prepackaged tutorials, and came with access to the Unity asset store, a online section of Unity's software that allows users to purchase premade visual, audio, and programming packages. My own pathway to playable scholarship was incumbent on taking advantage of free game development programs. Learning Unity, and C#, has not been easy. I am a scholar trained in literary studies and humanities-based close reading; I often work with popular media, including novels, comics, and games, as literary texts to be dissected through written analysis. Designing my game project, on the other hand, required not just learning the logical processes of the programming language C#, but designing all of my code to work with the particulars of the game engine Unity, all while working to blend esoteric theory with applied game design.

Alternate Routes and "Level 101" in Practice and Praxis

Critical praxis in digital humanities offers yet more pathways for bridging the divide between creative and critical. One need only look at the three volumes of *Electronic Literature Collection*, digital collections of critical creations sponsored by the Electronic Literature Organization. Each volume contains dozens of entries (60 for Volumes 1 and 2, while Volume 3 is comprised of "114 entries from 26 countries, 13 languages" and includes digital fiction, applications, Twine games and ARGs.⁵⁶

Similarly, scholar-practitioners from related fields like comics studies offer insights into the affordances of bridging the critical and creative divides. Graphic medicine, originally coined by Ian Williams as the "use of comics in medical education and patient care"⁵⁷ is a growing subset of comics studies where schol-

56 Stephanie Boluk et al., "Editorial Statement," in *The Electronic Literature Collection 3* (Electronic Literature Organization, 2016).

57 Ian Williams, "What is 'Graphic Medicine'?" *Graphic Medicine International Collective*, <https://www.graphicmedicine.org/why-graphic-medicine/>.

ars are not only devoted to analyzing these instances of graphic medicine, but contributing to them as well, whether via online initiatives like the 2020 “Drawing Together Archive” or collecting together scholarly essays with graphic medicine in texts like the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto*.⁵⁸ Likewise, Lynda Barry’s *Making Comics*⁵⁹ and *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*⁶⁰ offer comics-based theory, scholarship, and exercises that not only utilize comics as a medium of transmission, but invite participation for readers to create their own creative engagements with and through comics. Sousanis’s comics-as-dissertation “Unflattening” similarly uses comics to push at traditional models of learning, calling for an “unflattening” to the flattened-out, two-dimensional thinking that pervades academia and higher education. Many such avenues exemplify the nature of making and inquiry blended together, rather than divorcing acts of creation from analytical work.

These related fields offer ample outlets for critical-making in relation to game studies, as in Koster’s *Theory of Fun* which uses comics to articulate game studies theory.⁶¹ My own “Level 101” draws on *Understanding Comics*, Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden’s *How to Read Nancy*,⁶² and “Unflattening” for Worlds 1, 2, and 3 respectively. For instance, *How to Read Nancy* takes an iterative approach to teaching how comics work by deconstructing the same three panels repeatedly and highlighting how elements like panel sizes, dialogue, facial features, groundlines, etc. all contribute to the comic’s construction. This innovative approach to comics streamlines the sprawling and often abstract approach with a design-oriented format, like that utilized by McCloud.⁶³ In the introduction to *Comics and Videogames*:

58 MK Czerwicz et al., *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* (Penn State University Press, 2020).

59 Barry, *Making Comics*.

60 Barry, *Syllabus*.

61 Koster, *A Theory of Fun*.

62 Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy: The Elements of Comics in Three Easy Panels*. (Fantagraphics Books, 2017).

63 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*.

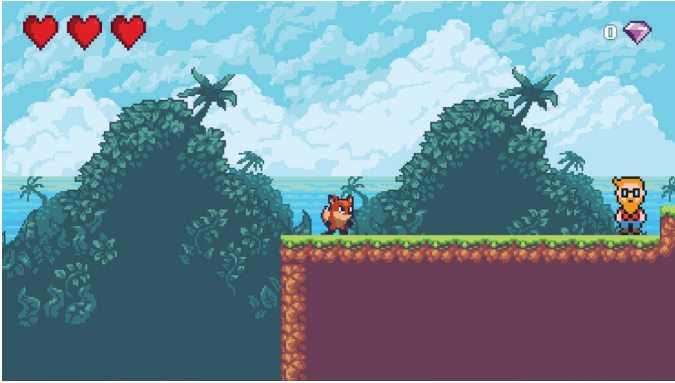


Figure 24.4. The opening screen for World 2-o of “Level 101.”

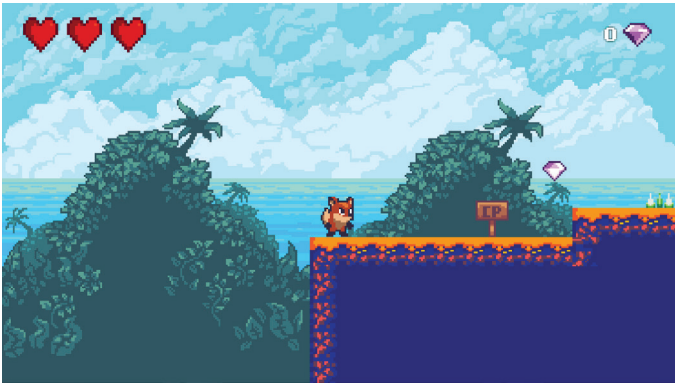


Figure 24.5. The opening screen for an in-progress version of World 2-A of “Level 101.”

From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions, Andreas Rauscher, Daniel Stein, and Jan-Noël Thon report on the “ways in which comics and videogames borrow, adapt, and transform a diverse range of aesthetic, ludic, and narrative strategies conventionally associated with the ‘other’ medium in terms

of *hybrid medialities*.⁶⁴ I continue in this tradition but apply Karasik and Newgarden's comics approach to the video game medium, drawing out and adapting their strategies to a playable format.⁶⁵ Karasik and Newgarden break down fundamental facets of comics, and illustrate them through a single Nancy strip by Ernie Bushmiller from August 8th, 1959. Within the confines of *How to Read Nancy*, readers learn how major concepts like the script and the composition of a comic manifest within Bushmiller's *Nancy* strip, but also how elements are read, such as the staging of a scene, the negative space, even the special effects of a water gun, all within the same three-panel strip.

For "Level 101," I worked to adapt Karasik and Newgarden's deconstructive approach to explaining fundamentals to one world of stages (World 2: Design). My goal was to use the same level design for each stage, a standard platformer stage modelled after classic levels from *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985),⁶⁶ but emphasize a different game design element in each stage: Rules, Space, Time, Systems, and Interactivity. As seen in figure 4, World 2-0 (i.e., world 2, level 0) is the base design without any modifications or additional emphasis, which introduces players to stage design in a large, open, brightly colored level reminiscent of early 1990s platformers. My current project involves modifying this level for World 2-A as shown in figure 24.5, encouraging players to play through when space is brought to the forefront. This level prompts the player to reflect on what happens to this level and experience when the playable boundaries of the level stay functionally the same but are aesthetically or visually different. Here, players' movement capabilities have not changed, but the level's visuals have changed, moving from a bright, green, inviting forest level to a harsh and dangerous-feeling lava level. Further plans also involve trying to highlight other points where space matters: hopping from one platform to another, impinging

64 Andreas Rauscher, Daniel Stein, and Jan-Noël Thon, eds., "Introduction," in *Comics and Videogames: From Hybrid Medialities to Transmedia Expansions* (Routledge, 2020), 2. Emphasis in original.

65 Karasik and Newgarden, *How to Read Nancy*.

66 Shigeru Miyamoto, *Super Mario Bros.*, Nintendo, 1985.

on an enemy's space, and lowering ceilings to simulate a closer, claustrophobic feeling even if players' movement or actions are not impeded. This methodological approach allows players to experiment and interact with new concepts in the same level over and over, working to see how different concepts manifest in the same context and what changes from learning session to learning session. When I first began planning out this world in 2018, my initial plan was to apply McCloud's approach to most of my stages, featuring a fictionalized version of myself talking through a sprawling, comprehensive foray and explaining the intricacies of the medium. But, in practice, this quickly seemed to grow in scope.

Around the same time, I was fortunate enough to present an early version of this project at MSU's Digital Humanities Locus event in 2018, a community-oriented event of presentations for ongoing projects and those just getting started. When I presented the Alpha version of "Level 101," I received significant and guiding questions, including those asking about where such a project would end, how it would all be completed, and whether there were other influential comics studies books I looked to, or whether I simply drew from McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. As a then new person to digital humanities and to creating digital projects, the community at the 2018 Locus event provided me with keen feedback to keep the scope within feasible boundaries by focusing on just a few key concepts related to design. Branching out my research, I became aware of *How to Read Nancy*, and was struck by its method of content delivery, particularly how I could deploy its approach in an iterative model of game design. Thus, I chose to offer one larger main concept to learn (design), followed by modifying and replicating the game space to have, if not wholly unique micro-game levels, then miniature lessons that kept player engagement high. While this was not a traditional playtest experience, the communal feedback from interdisciplinary peers afforded me opportunities to modify the game's development with critical focus, as well as illustrate issues of design within a space that players were familiar with.

Hurdles, Roadblocks, and Beyond “Level 101”

Calling for increased attempts to bridge the creative-critical gap within game studies would be disingenuous without acknowledging the painstaking labor and narrow channels of access involved in making games of any kind, be they paper-and-pen, live-action, digital, or something between or beyond. Post-mortems at games conferences; books on game development narratives like Jason Schreier’s *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*⁶⁷ or Casey O’Donnell’s *Developer’s Dilemma: The Secret World of Videogame Creators*;⁶⁸ and articles like Tina Amini’s “Why It’s So Hard to Make a Video Game”⁶⁹ all highlight the intrinsic difficulties in making any sort of a game, whether as a solo creator or within a large game company of more than one hundred employees. This is not to mention the multitudinous hurdles creators face in moving a game from concept to design to prototype to release: institutional and financial roadblocks, concerns over personal health and well-being, even time itself. The process becomes magnified for scholars who may not receive advancement toward the tenure clock for anything other than traditional print publications in academic journals or an individual monograph, let alone for those game studies scholars working without institutional stability or in an otherwise independent capacity. Kishonna Gray also notes the “institutional, communal, and individual barriers that impede full inclusion of marginalized users” of technology writ large,⁷⁰ and keenly highlights the necessity for and struggles around inclusive design.⁷¹

67 Jason Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made* (HarperCollins, 2017).

68 Casey O’Donnell, *Developer’s Dilemma: The Secret World of Videogame Creators* (MIT Press, 2014).

69 Tina Amini, “Why It’s So Hard to Make a Video Game,” *Vice*, October 19, 2016, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4w33ed/why-its-so-hard-to-make-a-video-game>.

70 Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 3.

71 See also Victoria Braegger’s interview with Kishonna L. Gray in this volume.

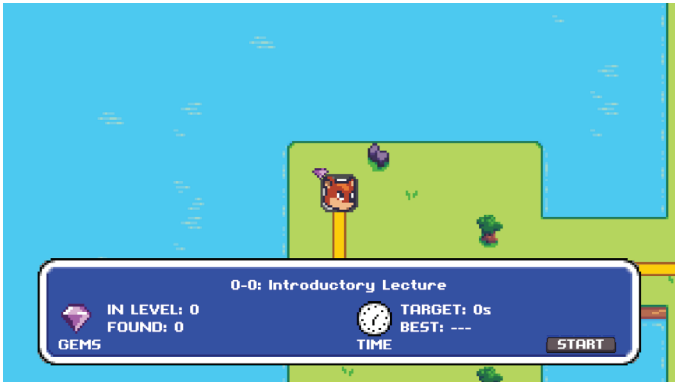


Figure 24.6. “Level 101” world map utilizing some assets from creator Ansimuz.

Thus, efforts to bridge this critical and creative gap are often blockaded by academic institutions that were, initially, early champions of game development and game studies.

But, if early game developers struggled with distribution practices and getting their projects out into the world, an inversion has occurred some fifty years later where games developers now have such a bevy of platforms, hosting spaces, and distribution outlets that it can be challenging to know how to navigate this landscape, let alone how to keep a project stable for long enough to be played. There have been many game studies journals and presses, along with digital humanities journals and outlets receptive to experimental digital projects, that have been put on indefinite hiatus, dissolved, frozen, or otherwise gone inactive. The aforementioned Electronic Literature Organization has been open about their ongoing struggles with publishing and archiving these projects, such as some platforms becoming outdated or discontinued (particularly Adobe Flash), along with new versions of hardware being released and old ones becoming obsolete.⁷² However, as de Smale notes, there is significance

72 Dene Grigar, “AFTERFLASH,” Electronic Literature Organization, 2022, <https://the-next.eliterature.org/exhibition/afterflash/>.

to the praxis of prototyping projects,⁷³ and as Anthropy argues⁷⁴ the act of actually making games (digital, analog, or otherwise) or play-experiences with the tools at hand carries weight and merit. Under this purview, even if they fail, become obsolete, or don't land somewhere notable, these efforts embody game studies and its ties to play. Not all games work, and not all play-throughs are successful.

My own project is necessarily constrained by many of the hurdles and roadblocks outlined above: I am not a game designer by trade, nor an audio engineer, nor a programmer. But, through the affordances of the Unity asset store,⁷⁵ I have been able to acquire free and paid assets for use within "Level 101," as well as learn from programmers and educators through YouTube, Udemy, and online forums. "Level 101" also faces the same long-term problems of digital and infrastructural obsolescence as outlined by the Electronic Literature Organization or in the widespread removal of Adobe Flash. To overcome some of these barriers, I adopted a multi-pronged approach to digital and textual preservation, including several backed-up versions, housing "Level 101" in online cloud servers and in sturdy external hard drives that are heat, water, and dust-resistant.

Perhaps more importantly, I have found a receptive community at my graduate institution, Michigan State University, particularly in the Department of English and the wider Digital Humanities community at MSU. My dissertation co-chairs, Dr. Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Dr. Elizabeth LaPensée, have been extremely supportive throughout the project's development, from nascent ideas to proof-of-concept alphas to the finished project stage. I'm further fortunate that I have not encountered barriers to treating "Level 101" as a dissertation project, but that

73 de Smale, "Game Essays as Critical Media and Research Praxis."

74 Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, 19–20.

75 This follows the process that Meagan Marie terms asset-flipping: "software that is mostly or entirely comprised of assets purchased or downloaded for free from asset marketplaces for engines such as Unity and Unreal, rather than creating bespoke assets for a specific project." Meagan Marie, *Women in Gaming: 100 Professionals of Play* (Prima Games, 2018), 10.

it was created at a large R1 university known for and entrenched in exciting research initiatives.

“Level 101” certainly isn’t a panacea for game studies, but it does advocate for critical praxis in game studies. Writing in 1984, Chris Crawford was critical of stagnant video game development and its increasing commodification, which in many ways has only intensified in the decades since. More recently, Crawford announced that he was stepping away from further development on interactive storytelling, expressing a dissatisfaction with the project’s progress.⁷⁶ Similarly, I understand the impetus to set a project aside if it does not reach its full potential as one envisions it, or, for any reason; video games take an inordinate amount of time, energy, and resources to make. However, in working on “Level 101,” I am also more convinced than ever of the medium’s potential for critical praxis and playable scholarship. In fact, there is an underlying theme throughout the development of “Level 101” of shifting tactics and design approaches to render the abstract idea I have held in my head of the game, as discussed in relation to World 2.

Even so, I return to de Smale’s point about prototypes of video games being both valid and significant, and I think it is increasingly important to try critically making games even when they fail. This may be enacted on small scales: following tutorials to make simple arcade games, participating in online game jams with strangers to create a microgame on a business card, or bringing design activities into game studies classes. Other forms might be supporting academic avenues receptive to critical making, whether through service or by submitting games. By briefly charting this game studies historiography of a creative-critical divide alongside my own attempts to bridge the divide through “Level 101,” current and future game studies scholars can continue to advance these foundations of playable scholarship and ludic dissertations. We can play with what scholarship

⁷⁶ Chris Crawford, “Why I Am Ending Further Work On Interactive Storytelling,” *Erasmatazz*, June 13, 2018, <http://www.erasmatazz.com/library/interactive-storytelling/why-i-am-ending-further.html>.

looks like, invite other players and collaborators to investigate new potential for creative-critical insights, and continue lowering barriers of accessibility for those invested in critical making in the field of game studies.

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Gameography

Super Mario Bros. Nintendo, 1985.

IV.

Trajectories in the Field

Navigating a Complex Space: An Interview with Henry Jenkins

betsy brey

Summary

Henry Jenkins is Provost Professor of Communication, Journalism, Cinematic Arts and Education at the University of Southern California — or as he likes to put it, “Professor of Miscellaneous Studies” or just “media scholar at usc.” A prolific author, Jenkins has written or edited more than twenty books including *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*; *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*; *Fans, Gamers and Bloggers: Exploring Participatory Culture*; and most recently, *Comics and Stuff*¹ in addition to what seems like hundreds of articles on all sorts of pop culture and digital culture subjects. Jenkins has looked at fan communities, comics, the internet, film, and much more, and has a very active period working on video games, writing well-known and well-cited

1 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992); Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006); Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Gamers and Bloggers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York University Press, 2006); and Henry Jenkins, *Comics and Stuff* (New York University Press, 2020).

pieces such as “Games as Narrative Architecture” and “Games: The New Lively Art.”

Jenkins, however, no longer considers himself a game scholar—an interesting distinction. This raises the question, “what does it mean to *do* game studies?” In this interview Jenkins and I discuss the roots of game studies as an area of study and its development into a unique and sometimes baffling field. As a feminist narrative scholar, I was particularly interested in the reception of *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*² as one of the first outwardly feminist pieces of game studies publications, as well as Jenkins’s role in and recollections of the ludology versus narratology debate—a debate that would deny the value of the research that both Jenkins and I do. Viewing the debate from both gendered and nationalistic lenses, Jenkins’s perspective recontextualizes a time in game studies that is well-known but rarely discussed in detail.

Reflecting on his own journey through the development of the field, Jenkins describes the spaces of game studies as they were shifting from an area closely aligned with industry and popular culture toward a more isolated academic field pushed away from development spaces. From the sparking of his interest in play and spatial properties of games, to his defense of video games in front of the US Senate, to his scapegoated position in the ludology versus narratology debate, Jenkins has seen the field from many perspectives—most importantly, he now sees the field from outside of it.

betsy brey: To get us started here, I was wondering if you could walk us through your own history with game studies. What drew you to the field?

Henry Jenkins: Yeah. I am probably the classic Atari gamer when I was in late high school and early undergrad, so that situates me pretty clearly in time [laughs]. And like a lot of other

2 Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (MIT Press, 1998).

things that I enjoyed, it got put on the back shelf while I went to grad school and did all the things that grad students are meant to do.

And so, I was mostly through my PhD work when my son turned six and wanted a super Nintendo system for Christmas. Basically, there was a decade-long gap between the Atari games that my brother and I had played and the Super Mario Brothers my son was. I remember turning on the Super Nintendo that Christmas morning and playing against my son for the first time and just being fascinated by the dramatic change that had taken place in this medium in a relatively short period of time, just in terms of the mechanics, this representational system.

bb: The changes from Atari to Super Nintendo are pretty drastic. A lot of things changed during that time period, we went from arcades to home consoles in addition to changes in the kinds of games that were being made and played. So what took you from a game player to a game scholar? Was it a concept or a game or an element of culture that caught your interest?

HJ: I was drawn toward a fascination with space and the playful engagement of space, which you get when you start with Super Mario Brothers, which I didn't know at the time is designed by one of the best game designers ever.³ So that got me interested. And then I read Marsha Kinder's book, *Playing with Power*,⁴ and wrote a review of that — which was my first thing on games and the first thing I ever wrote on transmedia, both, so there was something in the air there. Marsha's now a colleague here at USC. But at that point I was at MIT when I wrote that book review.

3 Shigeru Miyamoto is the legendary designer behind many of Nintendo's most famous intellectual properties, including Mario and Zelda. See Jennifer DeWinter, *Shigeru Miyamoto: Super Mario Bros., Donkey Kong, The Legend of Zelda* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

4 Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (University of California Press, 1993).

Then I wrote a co-authored piece with Mary Fuller.⁵ She was writing about Renaissance travel narratives and using a very different set of materials from the kinds of sources that I was using while writing *Textual Poachers* at the same time.

So we started this conversation piece on Nintendo and travel narratives. And at that point, I didn't even know to call them computer and video games, for me, it was just Nintendo. My exposure to games at that point was through my son, who like I said, had a Nintendo. That was the system, and I wrote about what I knew. Of course, I've gotten kicked about that from various people ever since — as well as writing mostly about kids at the time.

But anyways, I ended up doing something that combines a spatial aesthetic of games from childhood with some notions about globalization and colonization and so forth. It was both ideological and formless at the same time, and so it was Mary's work on the new world travel narratives⁶ that gave it a more formal structure and then also the theological consequences of settling the new world and the language went on around that.

So that was the beginning of the process and not much happened for a while. Then some of that previous work got me on the radar of SEGA, and they invited me and a bunch of other game scholars to go to a workshop they were having; I think it was in Las Vegas if I can remember correctly. And they brought together a whole bunch of folks and had us just share the work that we were doing. SEGA wanted to hear our work, wanted to foster conversations in the field.

bb: That's pretty amazing to hear — I don't feel like studios have much interest in games academia these days.

HJ: Yeah, at that point it was much more fluid, right?

5 Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller, "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue," in *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steven G. Jones (SAGE, 1995).

6 Mary Fuller, *Voyages in Print: English Narratives of Travel to America 1576–1624* (Cambridge University Press, 1995).

bb: Seems like it!

HJ: There was an excitement there, [studios like Sega and EA] were trying to theorize their own medium and their deconstruction of their games was itself a game theory that we were learning from. And so there are lots of quotes from those things running through the “Lively Art” piece that I wrote in particular.⁷ That’s the one that was most shaped by the work I did with EA and by the work I was doing at the Game Developers Conference. We were able to do a track at E3 for games-based learning stuff through [the collaboration with EA]. We started hitting walls at game developers conference and GDA had this policy that you could not talk about a game under development, which makes sense in an industry context.

bb: Yeah, but that makes academic work on games in progress nearly impossible.

HJ: In an academic world where we were starting to prototype things, there were never going to be games. The whole point was the prototype and the theory around that prototyping is a motive theory. There was no way for us to present our work in dialogue with them. And so what had been a very open practice for a year or two suddenly shut down entirely and there were people like me critiquing that but that door shut and it sounds like various people have found ways around it again, but it’s not an easy thing to shift that. And it kept to the point where that rule didn’t matter anymore. I had a panel on transmedia and

7 Henry Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art,” in *Handbook for Computer Game Studies*, edited by Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein (MIT Press, 2005).

games and I had Will Wright,⁸ Peter Molyneux,⁹ Neil Young,¹⁰ Danny Bilson,¹¹ and myself. And it was turned down because it was too academic.

bb: That's — well that's something.

HJ: And it's like, I had the all-star games team at that moment, it would have packed the house! One academic was enough to sink it. And that was one other factor that led me to say, "This is just not a very friendly territory right now."

But at those early days, there was a lot of fluidity and we had industry people coming and speaking on campus, I consulted with Brenda on Purple Moon games,¹² I did some consulting for EA. We did the creative leaders program. We were in and out of each other's lives for a period of time when there were relatively few of us, but there must have just been growing numbers. Suddenly there was a sense of, there goes the neighborhood.

bb: I can see that. And there were continuing developments and changes in the games industry and development processes. And definitely more of a resistance to the kind of critique work that academics are prone to.

8 Will Wright is an American game developer best known for *SimCity* and *The Sims* series. Wikipedia, s.v. "Will Wright (game designer)," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Wright_\(game_designer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Wright_(game_designer)).

9 Peter Molyneux is an English game developer best known for *Populous*, *Dungeon Keeper*, and the *Fable* series. Wikipedia, s.v. "Peter Molyneux," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Molyneux.

10 Neil Young is an American game developer best known for his roles in Maxis and Electronic Arts (EA) Studios. Wikipedia, s.v. "Ngmoco," <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ngmoco>.

11 Danny Bilson is an American film director and game producer, best known for his work on *The Sims* and the *Harry Potter* games franchise. Wikipedia, s.v. "Danny Bilson," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danny_Bilson.

12 Purple Moon is a game studio headed by Brenda Laurel, developing games targeted specifically for girls. Wikipedia, s.v. "Purple Moon," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purple_Moon.

HJ: Yes. “Critical” was definitely seen as bad, so there were hard feelings over critique. I saw some of that and some of it was accepted as, all right, these guys know what they’re talking about? I can learn from it. And some people accepted it as just being mean.

So anyway, in parallel, around that time I ended up testifying before the US Senate about games and violence broadly.¹³ So that happened, then meanwhile we set up this creative leaders program with Electronic Arts and I was doing monthly workshops all over the US with, again, top game designers including Neil Young, who was one of the key people in that group, Danny Bilson, some others. And for about two and a half years, we were regularly engaged with Electronic Arts on that. So that gave me a very immersive response.

bb: So even as you were working to help studios, it seems like it was more and more difficult to work with them.

HJ: There’s commercial interest at stake. And at some point we were going to hit on the sexual harassment stuff that’s become so important right now as a battle. And they certainly were rallying their defenses against that.

bb: Yeah. I can see how that happened.

HJ: I was being interviewed by the press three or four times a week, always to provide the quote and the fifth paragraph of the article debunking whatever the new study was. I was doing these public debates or invited to do public debates. It was just too much. And the Rockstar stuff hit, I defended *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) on the Donahue show and got beaten up rather badly for that, which I wrote about in *Salon* at the time.¹⁴ And then imme-

13 Henry Jenkins, “Professor Jenkins Goes to Washington,” *Harper’s Magazine*, July 1999.

14 Henry Jenkins, “Coming up Next: Ambushed on ‘Donahue!’,” *Salon*, August 20, 2002, https://www.salon.com/2002/08/20/jenkins_on_donahue/.

diately having defended that, then Rockstar put out *Bully*.¹⁵ And through the *GTA* thing, I had been saying, the games that would have the most damage were those that were most closely aligned to the real-life experience of people because reality shapes our response to media more than the other way around.

HJ: So what do they do? They put out a game encouraging bullying or as far as I saw it at the time. And it was like, I can't do this again. And then the Hot Coffee thing hit¹⁶ and it was like, I can't defend these guys. These are just scum. They may be great designers. And I appreciate the technical achievements, but politically and ethically I couldn't go there, and I needed to back off that. So, I started by just saying, I'm not going to do game violence stuff anymore. And then once I got to USC, there are all kinds of great game designers there and I like hanging out with them and occasionally we do things together, but publicly I'm generally not doing game studies stuff anymore because that world doesn't need me. Your generation and the generation immediately before, some are much stronger than anything I could do at this point as game studies becomes more and more particular and less the broad strokes that my generation was able to try to lay a foundation for.

bb: It's so interesting to hear this whole story because this is deeply important to how game studios and academia kinda got to this point, but there isn't as much clear explanation out there — not without spending hours searching for a specific odd comment here or there. I know plenty of folks are in no conversation whatsoever with the industry. It almost feels like there's

15 *Bully* is an action-adventure RPG where players take on the role of high school delinquent Jimmy to socially control the school, often through violent means. Wikipedia, s.v. "Bully (Video Game)," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bully_\(video_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bully_(video_game)).

16 "Hot Coffee" refers to a mod for *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* which enables a deleted mini-game to be playable, which tasks the player with having sex with a woman. Wikipedia, s.v. "Hot Coffee (Mod)," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot_Coffee_\(mod\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hot_Coffee_(mod)).

a very purposeful wall built there now. For some people, obviously not, but for your average game scholar, it's hard to get into those positions with studios.

HJ: When we were fighting in Congress to help protect their rights to make *Grand Theft Auto* even though it's violent, then we were useful for them. When we were critiquing gender politics inside the industry, we were not.

And so the last thing I did in games was really helped to create the Singapore MIT game lab¹⁷ and we had fifty or sixty students from Singapore coming every summer to work with MIT students on games and I was basically a dramaturg at that point because I don't know programming skills at all but I could see what they were working on and bringing in some issues to think about and I remember enjoying that very, very much. I wanted to keep doing things like that instead of the kind of games work I ended up doing.

bb: That is something I remember hearing you say about your scholarship — that you didn't really “do” games anymore.

HJ: Yes, so now, as this is going on, I'm struggling with a bunch of things; one is that I'm not a good gamer. I don't have hand-eye coordination. My mind doesn't bend well, the kinds of puzzles that ended up in games. I was probably born a decade too early to be anywhere near as good a gamer as most students I was teaching. And I got these students coming through who have an encyclopedic knowledge of games, right? And I know some games, I know key titles, but compared to film or television or comics where I just know everything I can get my hands on, I just am not driven to study games as a medium. I saw myself as opening a space for game studies but not filling it myself. So I could do the broad outlining of what kind of medium this was and how it relates to other media that are out there and I could report on things I was doing.

17 “GAMBIT,” *Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab*, <http://gambit.mit.edu/>.

And by that point administratively, I can set up labs. I can raise funds. I can administer groups. But I was never going to be a game faculty person ultimately. I couldn't teach a course on games even though I was writing a fair amount about it. And so when I left MIT, I just made a conscious decision that, okay, there are other people doing this now, the field is in place. My interest to going elsewhere, toward transmedia, toward worlds, toward comics, and toward political use of media. And so I made another decision, I was going to be a different person at USC than MIT. Your institutions can define you. And so having been in MIT for twenty years, I wanted to find out who I was at USC. And so I closed a bunch of chapters. It's not unrelated to the games and violence work that I was doing, because that was whack-a-mole, emphasis on whack!

bb: So when would you feel like you started doing "games studies"? Do you feel like you ever did "Game Studies" with a capital "G"?

HJ: Yes! So I guess it would start with that SEGA event, and that SEGA event led me to connecting with the Entertainment Software Association and we put together a conference for them that was called "Computer Video Games Come of Age." For that conference, I got to go to studios and basically watch some of these famous developers walk through levels of their games. They were describing in so much detail the work that they put into it, the thinking, it was very clear. Some of them talked a lot about stories. Some of them talked a lot about play mechanics at that point. A lot of them mostly were talking about spatial design and the construction of fantastical, whimsical spaces and emotionally compelling spaces. At that conference, I delivered "Games, the New Lively Art," which became another one of my better known pieces. So that's going on. And by that point, I'm pretty deep into this world.

Next in the story, Espen Aarseth¹⁸ came to MIT to give a talk. We had just accepted one of his former grad students into our master's program so that was the connection there. We had dinner and another great discussion again about space and games, which connects Espen's work to mine at that period. And then I got invited to come over to Bristol to participate in the game studies conference there and was asked specifically, could I offer my theory of games and narrative?

HJ: So I came over there and definitely discovered, oh, there's this thing called ludology in Europe and those people are gunning for me. Basically, I've been set up to deliver a talk at this conference on games and narrative because basically, they needed to cast some Americans as narratologists. And I say, I'm not a narratologist because to me, narratology is a very specific theory of narrative and it's not one that I studied. I never claimed expertise in it. I was writing about games as a medium and one property of that medium was that some people see stories when they design and play games but that's part of what games we're doing. I happened to be an MIT colleague with Janet Murray who was a literature faculty person and writing *Hamlet on the Holodeck*¹⁹ at the same moment in time. And she's a bit more of a narratologist than I am but still not what we would understand to be a narratologist in the traditional sense. She's just talking about narrative, not narratology in particular.

bb: That's around when you wrote "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," right? Despite literally saying it's a middle ground, it was not taken as such by some scholars — especially the more intensely formalist scholars. In Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat

18 Espen Aarseth is a Norwegian academic best known for his work on video games and electronic literature. See Cody Mejeur's interview with Espen Aarseth in this volume.

19 Janet H. Murray is an American academic best known for her work on games and narrative. Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (MIT Press, 2017).

Harrigan's *First Person*,²⁰ you commented that you "don't consider [yourself] to be a narratologist at all," but you certainly found yourself placed in that position.

HJ: So in that conference space, they're all there, right? The big names, the ludologists, guns blazing. It made the piece that came out after that conference a little more armored and trying in that language you cited about making it a middle ground really meant that's my instinct. I thought it was a misrecognition, that I was advocating something that they may have misrecognized because mostly narratology is a European-based tradition, right? So they saw something that looked like their colleagues intruding in their space. And I think partially what's at stake with that battle is branding. Universities' branding strategies. The Scandinavian universities were seeking out a space, using money from creative industry funds from government to bake themselves the base for some new kind of study of games.

And so they branded themselves "ludology" and the field was so new that they needed to cast something else against it. So they say what they were for, they ended up saying what they're against and what they were against basically were Americans. At the end of the day, it was a struggle between Scandinavians and Americans. And it's a game that I saw the ludologists mostly playing and a couple of Americans who were miscast had to defend themselves and trying to sort through this question more fully, so they created us in that writing. But if you look at "Games as Narrative Architecture," *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, and "Games, the New Lively Art," next to "Games and Contested Spaces" that I wrote with Kurt Squire.²¹ The other stuff I was writing, it was all about space at the same moment Espen was writing about game space.

20 Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, eds., *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (MIT Press, 2004).

21 Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins, "The Art of Contested Spaces," *Publications Henry Jenkins*, <https://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/contestedspaces.html>.

So then we invited Jesper Juul²² over to MIT to be part of the community there and you can start to see shifts in his language as he goes through that process and I definitely think over a year of hanging out with me and my students, we came to a different place. And then I went to Scandinavia to debate Espen Aarseth in public and basically it was like debating jello because I couldn't nail down what he stood for that was different from what I stood for. I felt really confused coming out there and trying to find what are we disagreeing on, because everything I said he profusely agreed to. So it really wasn't about anything other than branding and then slightly different language because you're creating a multidisciplinary space for game studies. And I'd gone through that with film studies and television studies.

Now I'm in the midst of comic studies. I've been early at all of these parties and realizing that you've got to listen to different vocabularies, find the common ground, and that's what you build a field around. You don't build around the conflict. But I think temperamentally these Scandinavian guys, the semblance of Vikings I used to joke, came in guns blazing when they really didn't have to. And that's why people call it the debate that never happened. Well, it did happen but it happened in an oral context like this Bristol conference, where there was lots of back and forth, it happened informally over lunches and it is there and some of the books, the *First Person* book and some other things, you can see the frictions there. It happened more for some people than others but I was working hard to patch things together through all of that and did find common ground eventually but it was not that piece. "Narrative Architecture" wasn't taken as a middle ground piece at the time at all.

bb: Which is just baffling to me, because it's literally about space and going through that space. And to do that kind of research, you have to listen to the rule sets and the ways that this world has been created and coded and lots of the things that ludolo-

22 Jesper Juul is a Danish game academic and designer. "Jesper Juul," *Jesper Juul*, <https://www.jesperjuul.net/>.

gists were talking about. I would have been so frustrated! I don't know I would have wanted to be in that space at all, personally.

HJ: I'm glad to have been part of game studies at that formative stage and to make my contributions there but it was never going to be my home. It was always going to be a space I travel through and maybe ask questions and broker some relationships there. And I'm proud to have made the contributions I did. I'm always excited when I see "Narrative Architecture" in particular getting read, which seems to be the piece everyone's held on to the most. And that's great to have a piece like that in game studies.

bb: Yeah. "Narrative Architecture" in particular is the life raft for trying to figure out what the ludology versus narratology debate was because it's so confusing to people when they first encounter it. But my students last year read "Architecture" and came out of it like, "Aren't these two sides kinda the same thing?" The retrospective really helps see things more clearly in this case.

It's just the people don't have the context and they don't have this history and the explanations about, why have these lines been drawn the way they are? What counts as good research? All of that.

HJ: It was all about policing disciplinary boundaries and protecting national brands at the end of the day. And it's horrifying to me that it has as much a legacy today as it did. We should have moved past it. Most of the participants didn't move past it in the course of their career with a couple of exceptions, but it still seems locked in and pretty much every game studies textbook I looked at starts there and defines the field in relationship to it. I'm flattered to have my name in the mix on that often but it's still to me bizarre because it never made sense. It still doesn't make sense.

bb: Yeah. Once you see the context, it looks very much like the, I think Jan Simons said two sides of the same coin.²³ One doesn't really exist without the other so creating this straw man argument was, it's strange that something that could have been just a flash in the pan started to define the field so much.

HJ: Yeah. I believe that the framework I gave in "Architecture" allows you to integrate both sides of that coin. I was not as well prepared and well versed in the ludology language as that, and I think there were some nuances about narration and representation versus simulation that the ludologists were about and I hadn't read enough of them at the time to fully grasp what that distinction meant to them because that stuff was not in print yet. We were writing in parallel at that point and responding to real developments in the game industry as well, except keep in mind that by that point, I'm immersed in the American game industry and talking to American game designers. They were connected to European game designers who have more of an art aesthetic than the American designers.

And so again, the national differences were exaggerating things, and branding strategies I still think is the best way to think about what happened there.

I would say that one of the biggest problems that "ludology versus narratology" has caused is that it keeps us locked in a formalist notion of games, which some of your questions are getting at here. That keeps feminist work locked out of early game studies and the illogical lines being drawn were there from the very beginning and often layered on top of the formalist work in ways that we're just now getting back to.

bb: Oh, you knew exactly where I was going with this next question, hey? But no point in not making it clear — I'd love to hear about *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. It's such a stand-out text from the foundational periods of game studies, given we were

23 Jan Simons, "Narrative, Games, and Theory," *Game Studies* 7, no. 1 (2007), <http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/simons>.

working in a field where it was considered—to paraphrase Espen Aarseth, it wasn't any different to have Lara Croft on-screen compared to a chess piece.²⁴ I'm really interested in the development of the anthology and how it came together, especially during the intense resistance to cultural studies which was enveloping the study of games in the 1990s and 2000s.

HJ: So, returning back to the start of my interest in game studies. In parallel to all of that, I was on the Women's Studies Committee at MIT, and they were really interested in gender and digital culture, which was what I was helping them do some event programming around. And that was at a point where women still were in the gross minority on the internet, which was mostly at military bases and research institutions. And so the early cyber-feminist discourse was something we were bringing into MIT and engaging with. At one of those event planning meetings, someone said, "Well, what about games? Could we do something around games?"

I started putting together a proposal for a conference, and someone suggested Justine Cassell as an expert to lend a hand in the area. Justine was an associate professor at MIT Media Lab, a linguist, and a feminist, as I was and am. And we decided what we wanted to do was tell that story as the first Women's Studies conference with demonstrations at MIT. But we wanted to bring in people who could show what they were doing with the technology. So, the original conference would have been mostly the people who got interviewed for *Barbie and Mortal Kombat*.²⁵ They were people who were showing the games, and we were showcasing and discussing directions for what the beginnings of this "girl's game" movement could look like. I had known and Justine knew Brenda Laurel quite well and I did a little consult-

24 Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, 2004).

25 Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, "From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games," Massachusetts Institute of Technology Conference, Cambridge, MA, Spring 1997.

ing with Brenda Laurel on *Purple Moon*, which was another point of entry into the search.

I'm telling you this in a not totally linear thing because a lot of things were happening in conversation with each other. But Brenda was our first contact. She agreed to come to the conference, and that got us some other people on the table. We got some academics to speak. Justine did her work. I did the piece that's ended up in that book, or at least a small subset of that was presented there. And it was such a big success, both in terms of attendance and the quality of discussion. So, we started talking to MIT Press and the editor had been at the conference, got excited by it, as often happens. We discussed turning it into a book. So that became *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*.

bb: Oh, that's fantastic!

HJ: And so, we took one of my graduate students and one of Justine's graduate students and went out and interviewed the people who were in the field. Justine and I focused on the academic side of it and brought it all together. For us, the idea was to make it a feminist book with demos and throw that out there. And game designers know how to put together a little package of their stuff. But then the question was, did it ship [with a disk of game demos like popular magazines did at the time, or did we have to do the traditional academic volume]? And the publisher finally vetoed that idea as not something the university press knew how to deal with.

Somewhere along the line, we discovered the girl gamers as opposed to the girl games, and that was one of the pieces we were ahead of the curve on — the feminist clans, and so forth, their perspective on it, which I was very excited to see in the book.

bb: Yes, very much so. I'm curious — what was the reception for *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* like?

HJ: Generally positive. I remember *Playboy* did a review of the book and they called it a “battle ax to grind” which I thought was a funny name for saying that we had an agenda for writing about games. I can’t remember if that piece or another one basically critiqued the acknowledgement section where I said nice things about working with Justine — all I said was, we’re a good partnership. And that got turned into “oh, he’s pussy whipped.” That was the most baffling response.

bb: Oh, of course complimenting your co-editor turned into that.

HJ: Then when it goes up on Amazon, we were being hit a lot with “why didn’t we talk more about *Tomb Raider*,” which had come out between the time the book was written and when the book went to press. So I think we got a couple of references in there at the last minute but no, we didn’t get to discuss *Tomb Raider* and that’s clearly, literally a game-changer in terms of that debate. But otherwise, the responses were very positive. We’ve been flattered that there are now three other books that have come out playing off of that title and continued that work forward and that’s great. Justine and I contributed to the first of those books and I just haven’t been doing game studies much since then.

bb: Thinking about it as an axe to grind, that sentiment really hasn’t changed over the years, has it? Oh! I wanted to ask you about something along those lines, about the protectiveness of games, scholars of games, developers of games, and fans, over the product and the process and all of that. Games, as both an industry and field of study, is almost entirely composed of fans of games. You don’t really see that in a lot of fields — software engineers working on word processing programs aren’t “fans” of their products in the same ways that game developers or game scholars are, just as scholars in the majority of fields aren’t fans in the same way as game scholars tend to be.

I mean, not to say that literature scholars aren't fans of particular authors or that sociology scholars aren't deeply passionate about the issues they study. I mean more than most game scholars — and again, game industry workers — start by loving games and then trying to figure out how to study them or make them. The interest in games is present in a different way than in a lot of industries or fields of study. Do you see any of the rejection of academia as part of that fan culture?

HJ: Well that's a complex dance because what I find is a lot of academic and game studies have become more and more militant that they are not aca-fans.²⁶ I trace this back to the big blow-up with Ian Bogost with Jason Mittell back in the day.²⁷ It's something I tried to get more people thinking about. And I tried inviting a lot of the big-name game scholars into forums with big named fan studies people and they did not play nicely together.

bb: That is so strange.

HJ: And to me, there's an absolute parallel, right? Game studies is an aca-fan discourse. I like the *Well Played Game* series, the new game criticism which was very much first-person writing, and it situates you as a gamer and the things you know as a gamer. To me, that's absolutely parallel to what I write as an aca-fan, as someone who is deeply immersed in fandom and writes about it from that point of view. But I think the feminine/masculine thing gets in the way. So there's a kind of distrust for the kinds of emotions expressed by fans, which is often going to be female

26 "Aca-fans" is short for "academic fans," an academic who self-identifies as a member of a fandom, or considers themselves a fan of an object of study. Ian Bogost, "Against Aca-Fandom: On Jason Mittell on Mad Men," *Ian Bogost*, July 29, 2010, http://bogost.com/writing/blog/against_aca-fandom/.

27 Jenkins is referring to the social media dispute between game scholar Ian Bogost and fan studies scholar Jason Mittell. Bogost, "Against Aca-Fandom."

fans, that's seen as distasteful by the hardcore male gamers. So they don't see being a gamer as the same thing as being a fan.

And you hear this line about, everyone is playing games, there's no point to the word gamer. And I'm going, "But there's whole groups of people who call themselves readers and have cons about being readers and joining book clubs; theoretically everyone trained in American schools can read yet some people gain an identity for being a reader. Most people in America watch TV but "fan" is a specific cultural identity.

bb: And "gamer" carries a lot of baggage, has for a long time.

HJ: Yes! "Gamer" is an identity that they feel strong alliances with, and it isn't something most scholars have been willing to do. So, I think there's a different level of work on positionality in game studies versus fan studies that I think could address some of the questions that you're asking there. Because I think fan studies, we're in a heated battle right now about race, ethnicity, nationality, and fan studies. And certainly, that's been a critique of other fans, of scholars, and critique of fandom. All of that's on the table and not everyone's responded well to it, but I think it's grown the field. And I think it'll be healthier to see more of that work in games studies, too. But I shouldn't say that cause I haven't read most of the recent work. I just bump into pieces of it. The industry having its own relationship to it is another whole layer to that, right? And I find film and TV execs are similarly situated in that they would not be doing what they were doing if they didn't love it, yet they don't see themselves as fans or consumers, right?

bb: Right!

HJ: That crossing over to the professional role makes you defensive of the industry, but not capable of seeing yourself as a fan when you talk about what your role is. So when I teach fandom studies, I teach one course for public relations people on fandom. The first thing I want them to do is write their autobiog-

raphy as a fan because I want them to start by reclaiming their connection to consumers. Because I find that even public relations and marketing students are in the process of already starting to identify with the industry and not with the fan consumer side of things, even though it absolutely drives every choice they're making one way or another. The problem is when they're trying so hard to prove that they're not fans, they do things that are damaging to the fan community. And so that's where stereotypes come in and it drives things into a worse shape. The games industry is the same way. They've constructed this hardcore gamer myth that shapes their decisions and they're not keeping track of the diversity that's always been there. But it's that much stronger today than it was a decade ago.

bb: Very much so! And I know that's on the forefront of many scholars' minds right now, but you know how slow publishing is. It takes a while to keep up with what people are talking about, especially when it's contested or political, there's the whole gamer idea that games aren't political, and studios insist their games aren't political so it's ridiculous.

HJ: Yeah [sarcastically], just like *The Twilight Zone* wasn't political, or *He-Man* wasn't political. Popular culture and media studies seem to go through these debates almost every weekend. I just mean everything was pulled from a white male perspective and therefore their own politics weren't questioned.

bb: Yeah. Emma Vossen, one of the editors of this volume, once wrote on Twitter that basically anything but white cis male, that's political.²⁸

HJ: Yeah, absolutely. Someone said about the new *He-Man* last weekend, that it was "creepy vag politics." That tells me everything I need to know about that guy. It tells me little about the

²⁸ @emmahvossen, *Twitter*, June 19, 2019, <https://twitter.com/emmahvossen/status/1138841342921060354>.

show, but if you find the vagina is creepy — well, I don't know what that's saying about the show at all, Mr. Incel.

bb: Yeah. Exactly. The ways that that incel culture has intersected into geek and game culture, that becomes more complicated because what was considered geek culture is pop culture now in general culture. There's a lot of conflicting identity roles going on there.

HJ: Well on the fan side, we know that there have been a couple of interventions taking place there that's kept things stirred up. So *The Last Jedi*, we now know Russian hackers were stirring up issues around the movie as part of their testing of the waters for cultural divides in America leading to Donald Trump.²⁹ But we also know that the alt-right and Breitbart, in particular, was monitoring all of that to recruit angry white fanboys to write for alt-right magazines.³⁰ So those two things brought the worst out of white male fans over the last few years. And I'm sure similar forces are hitting gaming. I just haven't followed that as closely as I've been following the fans.

bb: Yeah. It definitely became its most vocal in 2014 with GamerGate. But it's definitely all still there, it's just not united under a hashtag so loudly. But anything that was said during GamerGate, it's still said just as much and just as vehemently. Just in less public spaces than during 2014 and 2015.

HJ: Yes. So that makes adopting an aca-fan perspective challenging, but only if you assume that fan means uncritical, not that fans are engaged in their own political critique and pursuing their own cultural agendas and so forth. So, I have always seen

29 Michael Kan, "Russian Trolls Exploit Star Wars Backlash for Information Warfare," *PCMag*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.pcmag.com/news/russian-trolls-exploit-star-wars-backlash-for-information-warfare>.

30 Jane Coaston, "Bannon's Breitbart Is Dead: But Breitbart Will Live On," *Vox*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/1/14/16875288/bannon-breitbart-conservative-media>.

that as a critical role and therefore you have every right to critique the things that you love. It's a position to critique from. It's just different. But somehow the desire for distance that crops up when gamers get called into conversations with fan studies people complicates the ability to really engage in the serious discussion of that.

bb: This makes me grateful that early on in my studies I just decided to explain that I love the things I talk about. That's why I talk about them and I'm just going to roll around in the stuff and just embrace my identity as who I am researching this. But I also started in fan studies so I can see how that would impact that.

HJ: Absolutely. Those are battles we fought in fan studies from the very beginning. It's great to feel that students like you can come into a space and just do it and not have to worry that much about it.

bb: It does meet resistance from some scholarly bodies in game studies. In particular, my work along with some of my colleagues was once called "hippy dippy do" by a Computer Science student. And it's like, yeah, I know that's what you think about what I do. It's too much feelings. It's not unbiased enough, all of that, it just reminds me of Donna Haraway's *God Trick*³¹ and folks acting like fan studies or cultural studies within game studies aren't "real" scholarship.

HJ: No. And in the book series I added for NYU, we put out a couple of books of queer game studies writing lately, and that stuff is focused on sensuality, eroticism of play, all of that I find

31 "The god trick" refers to the tendency of people to believe in disembodied knowledge, referring to an eye that can observe from a body-less position. It serves as a metaphor for the impossibility of truly un-situated knowledge. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Women, Science, and Technology: A Reader in Feminist Science Studies*, ed. Mary Wyer et al. (Routledge, 2013).

really welcome those battles. That's important work and I'm happy to put my name behind it.

bb: Me too. My dissertation is actually a queer reading of literary theory. So, right with you there. So much of the work in these kinds of areas has to fight for even slight recognition. It took until 2018 for *Game Studies* the journal to publish queer game studies work labeled as such.

HJ: My mentor in grad school, John Fiske — who just passed away a couple weeks ago, but he did early writing about the arcade space³² and trying to understand the space of play and the performance of gender in the play space well before I wrote anything about that leading up to *Barbie and Mortal Kombat*. It's work that gets dropped out of the history of game studies altogether.

bb: The history of game studies is so strange in a lot of ways, but one way is that we don't have a canon of literature — at least that's what I've always heard people say. There aren't like, required readings for texts or even games that we understand as being foundational. But there is a tacit canon that varies depending on the kind of scholarly background you come from, which makes it hard to communicate ideas across the field. The tacit canon isn't really so much themed or theoretically based, but more based on who you know, which makes for a lot of misunderstanding. I think it was Matthew Kapell who said that we know names of people more than we know their ideas and contributions.³³ So it seems like what we believe to be "canon" is based on notoriety more than scholarship itself, which is really sad. And all fields have arguments that help to explain what is and isn't

32 John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Routledge, 2011).

33 Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, "The Ludic and Narrative as Dialectic About 'What Games Do,'" in *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell (McFarland, 2016).

part of their field. But returning to ludology versus narratology a bit here, that just seems unnecessarily brutal sometimes.

HJ: Yeah. Well, that was sad because the goal always is to open up the broadest possible space when you work in multi-disciplinary field around an emerging medium. You want to explore it all and drawing battle lines prematurely is just incredibly destructive.

bb: Yeah. It's definitely set back a lot of research. I still feel like I have to defend that I study narrative or stories in games and it has been years and years. But the reality of it is, my line of work has been associated with a fight and not with in the actual form of theory or practice for research.

HJ: Yeah. Well, I'm sorry to hear that.

bb: Well, it's part of the job, right?

HJ: Encourage Excelsior, whatever I should say.

bb: Thank you. It also leads to a fair bit of jadedness on my part when I talk about ludology versus narratology or the consistent need to explain it. I have colleagues who run the Popular Culture Association of America's game studies area, and then also here in Canada, the Canadian Game Studies Association, and there's always at least one paper that comes in every conference that is, so what was this ludology versus narratology thing about again? And it's a new scholar who doesn't have the context because they don't have a program that really is looking into games just yet. It's how most of us found our way into games, just interest and trying to see what was there. And it's unfortunate that a lot of the time we just want to sweep that under the rug rather than talk about why it happened.

It's also very interesting to hear the nationality elements of it, because of course looking back, we've all recognized that it's predominantly Scandinavian men who are the ludologists. But

I've almost always thought about it in terms of gender disparity because I had a student once say, "Well aren't the narratologists all the women and Henry Jenkins?" And I'm like, "Well, you can put it that way I guess."

HJ: Yeah. A lot of my work is closely identified with women's topics, most of my career is a catalog of that kind of thing. But yeah, that was the way it played out. There was a certain element of misogyny but there was a lot of America versus the world going on there as well. Because like I said, it was the Nordic Vikings versus the American Eagles.

bb: That is a super helpful framing though because another layer of difficulty in game studies is that people can often have a hard time making statements about games because while something might be true in American studios it's not true in Japanese studios or European studios. Which is, again, a layer of cultural studies and analysis that is often ... well, it can be ignored by some folks because there's a "formalism first" faction of game studies.

HJ: It's still trying to figure out what this thing is called games.

bb: We've talked a lot about how boundaries have been drawn and how it's impacted different pieces of game studies as a field and how we understand and study different elements of games, and a lot of the cultural and political touchstones that are present in games. All of that said, what do you think game studies could benefit the most from moving forward?

HJ: Well, I have only a vague sense of where it's at but I think some of the things we've talked about here are really important. One is that self-reflection about positionality and why we write what we write about and that fundamental question. And then particularity, right? How do we ground our claims in particular genres, particular groups of gamers, particular industries, particular gaming contexts? All of that becomes really impor-

tant. And I'd say, openness to other fields to continue to make a contribution is really crucial. Game studies certainly seems as embattled as it sometimes did in those early days and should be more welcoming of industry practitioners, of fans, of people from different disciplines who may have a different language and may be naive about the debates the field has already had, but bring something useful to the table that the game studies doesn't know already.

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Is It All Just Cultural Studies? One Scholar's Journey into Media and Game Studies

Adrienne Shaw

I Was Never Going to Be a Gamer

I have never considered myself a “gamer,” yet I have played video games consistently since I was six years old. Growing up, I never kept up to date with game releases, the industry, or game culture. My family bought two consoles: a Nintendo Entertainment System in 1986 and a Sega Genesis in 1994. Both were “family” Christmas presents, that primarily my sister and I shared. We did rent a Nintendo Virtual Boy from the local Blockbuster once, but it gave us all headaches. We got maybe one new game a year after the initial purchase of the consoles and a handful of games. When we got a home computer around 1995, it, too, was shared and most of the games or interactive CD-ROMs we had for it were free demos or used copies from my parents’ coworkers.

I did not have my own computer until around 1999, and it was pretty much only good for AOL Instant Messenger and word processing. When I was growing up, the only gaming device that was just mine was a Sega Game Gear, which died around the time I started high school. And while my sister and I, and most people we knew, played digital games, games were

a taken-for-granted part of our lives, not a fandom or passion. In fact, it was only after I started studying games in graduate school that I invested in keeping up with consoles and the latest games. Unlike most game scholars I know, research drives my fandom much more than the other way around. And that particular relationship to games—where games are part of a general media diet and not a special fandom—is what has shaped my approach to game studies.

I Was Never Going to Be an Academic

My relationship to game studies is also shaped by how I ended up in academia. I was never going to go to graduate school. I had always wanted to go away to college, sure. I even fell in love with a small liberal arts college that gave me just enough of a scholarship to make the debt seem worth it. Once there, though, I felt guilty “wasting” money when I could not see a clear career path for me afterward. I did all I could to graduate in three years, which, in retrospect, was probably not a great plan as I did not give myself a chance to find my path. Despite my early misgivings, however, I stumbled my way into a direction.

In my last year and a half of college, my sociology major and philosophy minor allowed me to take courses that looked critically at media, courses that were new offerings on campus at that time. My middle school and high school classes had often included debates about media effects, as moral panics around media—especially video games and music—combined with the 1990s integration of media literacy units in US public education.¹ The 1999 mass shooting and attempted bombing at Columbine High School in Colorado is often pointed to in game

1 Faltin Karlsen, “Analyzing Game Controversies: A Historical Approach to Moral Panics and Digital Games,” in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, ed. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderöth, and Ashley M.L. Brown (Routledge, 2015), and Renee Hobbs, “Media Literacy and the K–12 Content Areas,” in *Media Literacy: Transforming Curriculum and Teaching*, ed. Gretchen Schwarz and Pamela U. Brown (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

studies as kicking off widespread concerns about the links between video games and real-world violence, as the shooters often played *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and consumed violent media generally.² When my school system was inundated with daily bomb threats, a trend across the country following Columbine, our high school administrators kept a close eye on students who wore black trench coats and listened to Marilyn Manson (as their similarities to the Columbine shooters' cultural tastes made them suspect).³ Just one year prior to that, a mass shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas was linked in some reports to the shooters' love of rap music.⁴ However, news stories around those events were a culmination of, not a jumping off point for, concerns about the negative impact media might have on youth.

My childhood saw the addition of parental advisory labels to recorded music in 1985, as well as the addition of parental ratings for television shows and the V-chip (which would allow parents to block children from watching shows with specific ratings) to the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Both were later used to inform 2001 congressional hearings on the entertainment industry's role in keeping violent content, including video games, away from children.⁵ These public debates about the negative impacts of media were integrated into my public-school lesson plans. From analyzing gender norms in advertisements in English class to debating whether rap music could lead to real

2 Dmitri Williams, "The Video Game Lightning Rod," *Information, Communication & Society* 6, no. 4 (2003): 523–50.

3 Darcia Harris Bowman, "Bomb Threats Taking Financial Toll," *Education Week*, October 2, 2004, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/bomb-threats-taking-financial-toll/2004/10>.

4 Kenneth Heard, "Teen Ambush Suspect in Jonesboro Shootings Loved Rap Music, Teacher Says," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, June 16, 1998, <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/1998/jun/16/teen-ambush-suspect-jonesboro-shootings-loved-rap/>.

5 *An Examination of the Entertainment Industry's Efforts to Curb Children's Exposure to Violent Content, Before the Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet*, House Hearing, 107 Congress (US Government Publishing Office, 2001), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-107hhrg74844/html/CHRG-107hhrg74844.htm>.

world violence in social studies class, studying popular culture was used to make abstract academic exercises more concrete. Many of our conversations focused on racial representation in addition to gender representation, perhaps because I (who am white) attended middle and high schools where the majority of students (75 percent) were Black.⁶ Our modes of analysis were intersectional, even if none of us, including our teachers, knew that term. Coming out as queer at the end of high school made me more acutely aware of the importance of media representation as I witnessed the expansion of LGBTQ+ representation in all media during the late 1990s and early 2000s.⁷

Analyzing media in classes made me feel like I had something to say and was not just learning to speak a language that others had given me. It also allowed me to question mainstream claims about media. For example, I played violent video games, including a lot of *Doom* at the time, but it had never caused me to want to kill anyone. Simple media effects claims seemed very suspect to me. However, I did see the importance of how gender, race, and sexuality were represented in media in daily life. That tension — between media being important but not in a deterministic manner — is core to my scholarship. So, while I never envisioned this was a career trajectory back then, it is now hard to imagine I was headed in any other direction.

Getting into Media Studies

I grew up consuming lots of television, video games, comics and other “low brow” literature, and blockbusters films. Learning that media studies took these texts seriously was a scholarly revelation for me. In my undergraduate media studies class, I learned that comics had been much disparaged in the past, but by the early 2000s scholars were starting to take them more seri-

6 *School Digger*, Parkdale High, <https://www.schooldigger.com/go/MD/schools/0051001126/school.aspx>.

7 Suzanna D. Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2001).



Fig. 26.1. Adrienne Shaw's One-year work anniversary pin from Shaw's Supermarket in South Burlington, VT.

ously. Soon, I read every book I could find on comics and filled my library carrel with most of the university's comics holdings.⁸ I wrote several papers on comics in my final undergraduate year (one of which became my first academic publication). Although deeply enjoyable, focusing on comics contributed to my worry that I was "wasting" my time in college, so for good measure I also took an accounting class. Although several of my professors suggested I consider graduate school, I was not planning to go. Who needed more school and more debt?

In 2004, after graduating college, I moved to Burlington, Vermont, falling in love with an idea of a life there without really considering the practicalities of it. I ended up working full-time in the dairy department of a Shaw's Supermarket (no relation). My salary barely covered my share of my cohabitation living expenses and student loan payments, and while attending many a queer potluck with graduate students, I began to wonder if the professors who had been telling me to apply to grad school

8 William W. Savage, Jr., *Combies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945–1954* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Scott McCloud, *Reinventing Comics: The Evolution of an Art Form* (Paradox Press, 2000); and Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of Women's Comics from Teens to Zines* (Chronicle Books, 1999).

were right — if only because doing so would allow me to put my student loan payments on hold.

As my physically demanding job and what I later learned was a chronic pain condition left me with little energy and a lack of mental stimulation at the end of the day, I got back into video games. Although I played a LOT of *Snood* (Snood LLC, 1996) and *Neopets* (Adam Powell and Donna Williams, 1999) in college, I hadn't regularly played console or PC games since high school. The iBook laptop I brought to college froze up just trying to install a newly released program called iTunes, so any game with 3D graphics was out of the question. After college though, my sister gave me a used laptop that worked much better, and I had picked up *Myst* (Cyan Worlds, 1993) from a free bin while moving out of my undergraduate dorms. Each week I spent my Wednesday off using the half-hour of internet time I was allowed at the library and the hour I was allowed at the LGBTQ+ community center's new "cybercenter" looking up the hints for in-game puzzles, researching graduate school, and sending emails to friends and grad programs.

Talking to friends in Burlington, I started feeling that maybe comics and video games were something I could study in academia. For instance, my friend Matt and I would hang out while one of us played games on a laptop, and we talked about avatar choices and gender. He told me that he always picked female characters in games because they were often more agile and characterized as smart, whereas the male protagonists were often large and "macho" in a way that he could not connect with. My research on comics in college had mostly been on the representation of women and lesbians in mainstream and indie comics, but thinking about that in terms of games offered me something new. Nothing I had read about media up until that point acknowledged the ways we can connect with characters who are very different from us demographically, and that conversation set me down a path of inquiry that ultimately became my dissertation and, later, my first book.

With the help of my previous undergraduate advisors, I settled on communication and media studies programs (although

they had hoped I'd stay in philosophy or sociology). I didn't really know anything about the fields or even what an academic field was, beyond a major one could select. I found the comprehensive-exam reading list for one program and I started reading my way through the list, at least what was available at my local library. I also started devouring all the books on video games and computers I could.⁹ I had not even been accepted to grad school yet, but I was doing what I had learned in college: throwing myself fully into whole shelves of the library on a topic and absorbing all I could.

That I got into grad school at all is largely a case of dumb luck plus privilege. I knew how to write well, mostly, and I knew how to sound like I knew what I was talking about. While attending an elite liberal arts college, I had learned the tricks of moving in circles of people whose social class was not my own. What I did not know was literally anything about how academia actually worked. For one, I bought all my GRE preparation materials second-hand (which was easy in a college town) and didn't realize until a week before the test that the analytic portion I had been acing had been replaced by a writing section years before. I learned halfway through grad school that I made a major faux pas in my applications by not mentioning any faculty or anything about the programs in my personal statements. I barely knew anything about academic publishing. I didn't even really know what academics did, just that I was good at school, and this seemed better than my current job prospects.

It became clear that I was a bit naïve about the whole process when I went to prospective students' day and two faculty members made me feel like a pity admit. One suggested I shouldn't be in grad school at all if I didn't really want to teach (I had never

9 Reading John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* reader alongside J.C. Herz's popular history *Joystick Nation* gave me as much of a foundation for studying games as many game studies books. J.C. Herz, *Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts, and Rewired Our Minds* (Little, Brown, and Co., 1997), and John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (University of Georgia Press, 1998).

taught before). The other suggested they had only admitted me because I said I would study games and they thought that was interesting. He also indicated that they all assumed I had gone back to work in my family's grocery store, which is why I had not done anything particularly impressive after college — apparently, I'd neglected to add "no relation" after Shaw's on my CV.

I felt horribly underwhelming compared to the other accepted students, who all worked at nonprofits or consulting agencies, or who already had master's degrees. I did have people in my corner. Katherine Sender, who ended up becoming my advisor, was wonderful and welcoming, and she just happened to be away during prospective students' day. As someone who was not particularly interested in games but was an expert in LGBTQ+ media studies, she pushed me to explain my work in a way that spoke beyond game studies. Also, during the application process, the assistant to the graduate dean had asked for extra materials from me, including a comic I had made that my reference letters mentioned. I later learned just how much she and my future advisor had worked to get me accepted.

Getting into Game Studies

In the fall of 2005, I began graduate school. I was given a shared office space on campus and immediately checked out the dozen or so books on video games the University of Pennsylvania library had at the time. Although none of the faculty worked on games and only one other student did, I entered academia as game studies was formalizing. As I outlined in a summary of the field in 2015:

Several journals were founded between 2000 and 2010, including *Game Studies* in 2001; *Games and Culture* in 2006; *Eludamos* in 2007; *Loading...* in 2007; the *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* in 2008; *Virtual World Research* in 2008; and the *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* (IJGCMS) in 2009. Many more journals focused on gaming have been founded since, and journals

in a variety of fields increasingly accept articles about digital games. In terms of conferences, the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) held its first annual meeting in 2003. The Nordic Game Studies Association (NGSA) followed shortly after in 2004. The Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) and the International Communication Association's (ICA) Game Studies special interest group were formed in 2005 and formally met for the first time in 2006. A small cadre of scholars at the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) annual conference has also represented game studies since the early 2000s. Additional conferences, symposia, and standalone panels have been held around the world by researchers showcasing a variety of intellectual perspectives.¹⁰

There were journals to publish in and conferences to go to, and I did not have to defend the fact that I studied games in the way folks who came before me did. In fact, a faculty member (who left before I got there) had told someone in my same program just five years prior that "games will be irrelevant in a few years" and that he should not study them. I felt grateful to not experience that level of dismissal. But I also did not have much guidance on what to read or what conferences to go to. When I said I studied games, peers often said "that's cool," but I had few people I could actually talk to about games or game studies. To complete my degree requirements, moreover, I had to balance learning and integrating into the fields of communication, media studies, and game studies simultaneously.

There were three books that came out my first year of grad school that became the foundation of my own research agenda: Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's 2005 *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*, T.L. Taylor's 2006 *Play Between Worlds*, and Aphra Kerr's 2006 *The Business and Culture of Digital Games*.¹¹

10 Adrienne Shaw, "Circles, Charmed and Magic: Queering Game Studies," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2015): 70.

11 Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (I.B. Tauris, 2005); T.L. Taylor *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (MIT Press, 2006); and

In general, I am very anti-canon: everyone needs to find their own foundation. However, if forced to pick three game studies books I think everyone should read, I would pick those three. Combined with Patricia Marks Greenfield's 1984 *Mind and Media* and Marsha Kinder's 1991 *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*, these texts gave first-year grad student Adrienne a solid introduction to the various core issues in game studies.¹² Their bibliographies gave me my reading list to develop my research interests. Notably though, likely few people would now recognize those books as central to a field called "game studies" (although some might for Taylor's book). I rarely see the rest cited then or now.¹³

That my scholarly foundation included books that cover industry, texts, and audiences is unsurprising given that this tripartite framing is central to media and cultural studies. Having my graduate school training largely informed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies has shaped both my own approach to studying games as well as which types of game studies have felt useful to me. Cultural studies and media studies have a long history of studying devalued popular objects. I did not feel pressured to defend studying games to my dissertation committee. Instead, I learned to question the ideological assumptions hidden in such defenses. I was skeptical of claims that games were worthy of study because they made billions of dollars, were unique types of media, or were somehow different from every media form that came before.

Aphra Kerr, *The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/ Gameplay* (SAGE, 2006).

12 Patricia Marks Greenfield, *Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Video Games, and Computers* (Harvard University Press, 1984), and Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (University of California Press, 1991).

13 I talk about these texts in a keynote I adapted and recorded for the *Not Your Mama's Gamer's* first journal issue: Adrienne Shaw, "Are We There Yet? The Politics and Practice of Intersectional Feminist Game Studies," *Not Your Mama's Gamer*, April 15, 2018, <http://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17528>.

Indeed, one of the strengths of my training was being encouraged to look at patterns across times, contexts, and topics, rather than search for what has “never been done.” I read work that sought to develop new words for or ways of studying games, but I found work on media reception much more inspiring. Games were and are media texts, after all. Concepts like Stuart Hall’s circuit of culture and encoding/decoding already gave me what I needed to understand the interplay between production and reception, hegemony and resistance.¹⁴

Is This Just about What Conferences We Go To?

Although academics write very good histories of fields by analyzing the history of publications and conferences, our sense of where we belong in academia is shaped by what conferences we go to and online communities we belong to (and those, in turn, are shaped by our graduate training). Early conference experiences, for example, are why I felt like no one in LGBTQ+ media studies was interested in games and no one in game studies was really doing work on LGBTQ+ issues. Early in graduate school, I submitted a conference paper proposal about an LGBTQ+ gaming community to the Game Studies Special Interest Group (SIG) of the International Communication Association (ICA). The only negative review I got back asked “Isn’t there already another SIG for this?” The reviewer was suggesting that I should have sent it to the GLBT Studies (now LGBTQ Studies) SIG instead of the game studies one. My advisor encouraged me to submit another paper on LGBTQ+ games to the Game Studies SIG again the following year so we could make noise if it became a pattern. It didn’t, luckily, but I did end up on the “culture” panel—the only four papers accepted that year from a qualitative perspective that were otherwise unrelated. And beyond conferences,

14 On encoding/decoding, see Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Media Studies*, ed. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (Edinburgh University Press, 1996). On circuits of culture, see Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (SAGE, 1997).

doing a review in 2015 I found that out of 141 issues, existing games studies journals had published just seven articles that were centrally about LGBTQ+ topics.¹⁵ I did not attend a Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference, where many of the people I had been citing went, until after I got my PhD. At that time DiGRA was only held every two years, and it was often more expensive than the conferences I did attend, and so whether that would have been a better venue for my work I could not say.

The creation of professional organizations plays a critical role in definitions of fields, and game studies should be more attentive to its own histories in this regard. For example, I later learned from senior game scholars that when the ICA Game Studies sig was starting, many scholars (particularly those from Europe) felt that their years of organizing to create DiGRA had been largely ignored. The ICA group was being organized by largely US-based scholars who came out of a social psychology tradition of communication studies. They seemed to be reinventing game studies within a particular branch of communication but not at all drawing on the work that had already been done within DiGRA. This has had a lasting impact, as Sebastian Deterding describes game-related communication research as “overwhelmingly using laboratory experiments and surveys,” pointing to ICA’s division as the source.¹⁶ As a communication scholar who does games-related research, I feel a bit misrepresented by that, but that too was my experience of game studies in communication when I was in graduate school. I found much easier homes for my work in the GLBT sig and the Popular Communication and Feminist Scholarship Divisions. And yet, if we look beyond the major conferences, particularly when we look beyond venues distinctly labeled “game studies,” we see much more diversity within game studies work. ICA game studies,

15 Shaw, “Circles, Charmed and Magic,” 70.

16 Sebastian Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies: Assessing the Past, Present, and Future of Interdisciplinary Game Research,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 521–43.

even DiGRA game studies, are not the only versions of game studies.

At smaller conferences, such as the 2006 Trials and Tribulations Conference at Concordia University in Montreal, the 2007 Digital Arts and Culture Conference in Perth, Australia, and the 2009 Under the Mask: Perspectives on the Gamer Conference at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK, I got to meet “my folks” in game studies. These events were where I first met other people interested in questions of representation, qualitative work, and artistic interventions in games and who were also thinking about digital and internet culture broadly. Through those encounters, I got glimpses into a global game studies not evident in the communication conferences I was encouraged to attend by my graduate program. Such global game studies events did not present game studies as a singular thing; the folks doing the work I was interested in were varied in their backgrounds, approaches, and locations. There were people who worked in the games industry, artists, and more traditional academics. It was still a time when, using Deterding’s definition, game studies was more truly interdisciplinary.¹⁷ Later, when Todd Harper invited me to be on a panel titled Moving Forward in Queer Game Studies for the 2012 Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) conference, I finally felt like I was part of a growing community of scholars studying LGBTQ+ issues in games — two years post-graduate school and seven since I had started this work. The 2013 Different Games Conference and 2013 Queerness and Games Conference bolstered this feeling.

But of course, that I could attend those smaller conferences was contingent on having access to a generous amount of travel funding as a graduate student and later travel and grant funding as a faculty member. Had I only been able to attend US-based conferences or only one major conference a year (as is the case for the majority of students and faculty in the United States), I would not have had ready access to the less quantitative social science world of game studies. And the questions of financial

17 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”



Figure 26.2. Photo of Adrienne Shaw speaking at Different Games 2013 at NYU Polytechnic, Brooklyn, NY.

resources are compounded by the very diversity that makes game as well as media studies so inviting. As Jefferson Pooley points out, unlike for sociology or political science where there is a main central conference everyone attends, media studies scholars have four distinct large meetings to choose as their main scholarly home: ICA, the National Communication Association (NCA), the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC), and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS).¹⁸ Similarly, Edward Melcer et al.'s analysis

¹⁸ Jefferson D. Pooley, "The Four Cultures: Media Studies at the Crossroads," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116632777>.

shows that between 2000 and 2014, there were seven different communities of game scholars publishing in different venues and presenting at different conferences (and their analysis only included “core” venues, not game-related publications in other fields).¹⁹ ICA, and to some extent NCA, were the conferences I was “supposed” to go to, and the smaller ones I found on my own were accessible within the means of my travel funding. Had I gone to a different graduate program I might have been encouraged to attend AoIR, scms, the Popular Culture Association conference, the Cultural Studies Association conference, or any number of other academic conferences where people were also doing qualitative game studies research.

Different funding opportunities, the types of conferences people go to, languages people are expected to publish in, and other structures of higher education (including service and teaching loads) deeply shape what we study, how we study it, and who gets to hear about it.²⁰ Many people involved in game studies early on stopped publishing in game studies for myriad reasons, and the area of study ends up being defined by the people who publish continuously—which is shaped by access to resources, stability of employment, and whether they find support for their work within a broader community of scholars. In turn, this shapes what we think of as a field. This is not unique to game studies, but it does highlight the importance of reflecting on how much our understandings of the field are shaped by our personal experiences and local influences.

19 Edward Melcer, Truong-Huy Dinh Nguyen, Zhengxing Chen, Alessandro Canossa, Magy Seif El-Nasr, and Katherine Isbister, “Games Research Today: Analyzing the Academic Landscape 2000–2014,” in *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, June 22–25, 2015 (FDG, 2015).

20 For studies analyzing how this plays out with DiGRA in particular, see Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt, Lars de Wildt, Rachel Kowert, and Aleya Sandovar, “Homo Includens: Surveying DiGRA’s Diversity,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4, no. 1 (2018): 67–104, and Hanna Wirman, “DiGRA Chapter Diversity,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4, no. 1 (2018): 105–17.

Conference acceptances also end up shaping citation practices. Scholars tend to cite the work of the people they have shared geographic proximity to, and that is not always because of inadequate literature review practices. A Canadian graduate student I worked with who had done a major review of game studies literature once told me, “the Canadians are citing the Canadians, and the US scholars are citing the US scholars, but none of them seem to be citing each other.”²¹ I’m sure if we did a citational study, we could see on a global scale how much region influences citation practices, much as scholars have shown that these practices are gendered and raced.²² Access to paywalled journals and academic books are not equally distributed around the world, but also quite a bit of early digital research was published in online journals that are not indexed in many library databases (some are gone entirely). When we learn about fields of study, all we can go on is what we happen to have found in our own search of what has been published and the work we see at conferences, and without mentorship we never learn what we missed. Indeed, I learned more about the broader field of game studies thanks to a helpful early reviewer of my book manuscript, who pointed out a huge body of work I had never heard of that was published in venues that were not places I had been trained to look, most of it by scholars located outside the United States. If, as Pooley outlines, there are overlapping cultures of media studies in the United States defined by disciplinary training, in many ways the “culture” of game studies is very tied to scholars’ country or continent as much as it is by definitions of “the field.”²³

21 Private communication.

22 Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne, “Citation Matters: Mobilizing the Politics of Citation toward a Practice of ‘Conscientious Engagement,’” *Gender, Place, and Culture* 24, no. 7 (2017): 954–73, and Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain, “#CommunicationSoWhite,” *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (2018): 254–66.

23 Pooley, “The Four Cultures.”

Maybe It Is All Just Cultural Studies?

Part of what helped me navigate the earlier period where I felt doubly marginalized as someone studying games and LGBTQ+ topics was my cultural studies training. Cultural studies, via media studies, taught me to reject the notion of cohesive fields, and so I did not feel left out of fields that I did not see as having a clear definition in the first place. Beginning my work when and where I did, I had no guidance on what or who to read. I had to become simultaneously well-read in scholarship on games, cultural studies, and communication and media studies broadly — as well as postcolonial, critical race, gender, and queer studies. This expansive grounding, however, also allowed me to see that even as their methods, terminology, and theories differ, they contain many overlapping concerns. This is the richness of interdisciplinarity, making connections across domains rather than limiting definitions. Game studies needs to embrace a version of interdisciplinarity that resists the urge to produce canons. Interdisciplinarity does not invest in policing disciplinary boundaries or methodological norms but in putting knowledge produced across domains of expertise toward solving problems and making better sense of the world.

Many of the casual conversations I have had over the years with people involved in the early days of game studies said the definition work that was done was used to justify establishing programs, funding and hiring lines, and organizational support for conferences and journals. “We should be allowed to study games” quickly seemed to shift to “this is what makes game studies different” in ways that have had a lasting impact on who thinks they can enter the field. Deterding argues that the success of game studies as establishing itself as a field is a “pyrrhic victory,” as establishing games as worthy of study, allowed scholars to stay in their “origin” disciplines.²⁴ Perhaps my own trajectory and identity as a scholar is an example of that, but in ways that were very much shaped by the academic job market. Becoming

24 Deterding, “The Pyrrhic Victory of Game Studies.”

a specialist in game studies when there were no jobs in game studies was never a viable option for me. Jobs and departments in media and communication vary widely in their definitions of the field, and even when hiring someone who studies games, applicants are expected to be broadly conversant in the many cultures of media and communication studies.

However, I also think that from my own experience media and cultural studies were always a potential home for game studies. For me, game studies has always been media studies and vice versa. There was no tweaking or translation that needed to happen for it to all make sense. In what is probably my favorite publication, despite being written during one of my worst semesters of graduate school (for context I had a migraine for a month and a half of it, and that wasn't the worst part), I argued that game studies needs to take more of a cultural studies approach to studying game culture: "This is a critical, not descriptive practice."²⁵ I am not invested in all game scholars becoming cultural studies scholars, but I do invite all game scholars to think about *why* they are doing the work they are doing.

Rather than define what game studies should be, can we ask *why* game studies should be? And the answer should not be "to create new centers and departments." The critical politics of cultural studies are what drive my own work. When I start to feel like studying games is a waste of time in the midst of a global pandemic and myriad crises, I remind myself of that underlying political impetus. I remind myself of the vital importance media representation played in my own life and that I have seen how advocating for representation of marginalized groups in games makes real difference in people's lives. Cultural studies taught me that understanding how structures reproduce forms of oppression over time is the only way to conceive of interventions.

25 Adrienne Shaw, "What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 4 (2010): 403–24.

Finally, I think game scholars should have a better understanding of the multiple histories of game studies, and those histories cannot be written only as summaries of what was published and is regularly cited. I encourage new game scholars to dig into the bibliographies of books and articles they find helpful, rather than stopping with the text itself. Moreover, critical histories of cultural studies are embedded in the lived experiences of the scholars whose work is being reviewed and the contexts under which programs were formed and research produced. Learning that scholars like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall were “outsiders” to British academia made the particular insights of British cultural studies make so much more sense to me.²⁶ I offer the personal stories I do in this chapter because I think it helps contextualize my own work. But this is just my story, and I think without making a concerted effort to document it we could lose the history of how game studies came to be as it is. We need those personal and professional stories that are the backdrop of the scholarship produced. That history, more than anything, is what is absent from game studies.

26 Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2003).

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Turns in Game Studies: An Interview with Kishonna L. Gray

victoria l. braegger

Looking at the future of game studies requires a deep, introspective examination of where the field began, considering not only who was left out but why. In a reflection of the gaming industry, many of the early spaces carved out for game studies were dominated by male voices and perspectives. However, just as important as where the field began are the moments when the field experienced a turn — or had the potential to turn, but didn't. In the early 2010s, game studies began its gradual turn toward inclusivity, a moment marked by increased scholarship discussing representation and gaming culture. As Kishonna Gray discusses in this interview, the turn toward inclusivity and representation in games has its own limits and constraints that should be recognized: what has been a moment for gender may not be a moment for race.

Kishonna Gray is a Professor of Racial Justice and Technology in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (2020) and *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live* (2014), and co-editor of two collections examining culture and gaming, *Women in Games, Feminism in Play* (2018) and *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*

(2018). Her articles have appeared in *Gender, Technology and Development*; *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*; *Journal of Lesbian Studies*; *Sociology Compass*; and *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, to name a handful. She served as an organizing committee member for DiGRA's Workshop on Decolonizing Game Studies and for Cal Poly's Foundations of Digital Games Conference. Her calls for attention to intersectional inclusion in academia include the viral hashtag #CiteHer-Work and the Gray Test, a metric for assessing how inclusive a piece of academic scholarship is.

This interview with Kishonna Gray focuses on her entrance(s) into game studies, as well as her experiences presenting her work to the field at large. What begins as a nostalgic story of grad school procrastination becomes a serious discussion of exclusion within scholarly circles and of what it takes to be recognized as being *within* game studies. Gray's work on Black bodies within gaming spaces and gaming communities has been dismissed as "not game studies," and Gray herself has been labeled as outside game studies. For Gray, her third entrance into game studies—her acceptance into the field—hasn't happened yet. Moments of laughter are disrupted by serious discussions of when the field was poised to turn toward scholarship on race and BIPOC experiences within the gaming community but ultimately didn't, and the field's treatment of marginalized scholars.

To paraphrase Gray, game studies has a habit of doing one thing at a time—but we could and should do more. The gaming industry is facing a reckoning brought on by decades of exclusive and exploitive practices: questions concerning representation, culture, inclusion, and diversity are at the forefront of conversations surrounding the industry. We should have these same conversations in game studies. We have much work to do; getting there is going to take a lot of reflection and a lot of talking.

victoria l. braegger: You entered game studies around 2011?

Kishonna Gray: That depends on how you all might define the field and what it means to enter the field. For me, my entrance to game studies began for me as a child questioning and wondering why there were no characters that look like me in games. If you think about a field and its research, I immediately think about that curiosity of asking questions like why and how? That started at a young age, of me playing and wondering why. Who are these people that make these cultural artifacts? Why are they leaving me out?

My curiosity then transitioned into more of academic inquiry. Around 2007, I shared office space with Timothy Rollins, who was doing his project on *EverQuest* (Verant Interactive & 989 Studios, 1999). I didn't play *EverQuest*. I didn't do PC gaming, so I didn't really know what that was, but when he told me it was a video game, I was shocked. I was like, "You can do research on video games?" So, I would say my interest was piqued, but that was not where my focus was at the time. In my mind I'm like, "That's stupid. Who does that?" [laughter]

vlb: Who would do that? [laughter]

KLG: I thought, "There are more serious issues than video games to be worried about right now." I was coming into my PhD program from working on a thesis project around Hurricane Katrina, so there was a lot of death. A lot of Black death. And I thought, "I don't have time to be focused on what's happening in a gaming space when people are actually dying." Especially from a Black studies tradition, I think that's one of the lines of thought that drives Black studies scholarship, and why gaming has not really been fully integrated into Black studies. Because in their mind, they're like, "This is a game, but we're focused on keeping Black folks alive, keeping folks out of the arms of the criminal justice system." Those kinds of things weigh heavily. So, the moment I got into game studies, it was really by accident.

vlb: I think I've heard you talk about this before. What do you mean by accident?

KLK: It was really pure procrastination. It was a class project and I had decided I was going to do some of the theoretical background for my dissertation. But I delayed on that. I delayed on a lot of things. I was working. I wasn't supposed to be working but I was just broke. I was trying to be a full-time PhD student, I was teaching, and I was working. I was trying to do all these things. It was just too much.

I procrastinated and I was taking Daniel Bernardi's class and I told him, "I have not done this project at all." And he said, "It's okay, Kishonna. We can figure it out." He was so generous. He didn't have to be, but he was. Ethnography was the assignment and he said, "Well, Kishonna, just think about the spaces you occupy. What do you spend your time doing?"

I was ashamed to tell him that I was playing *Halo 2* (Bungie, 2004), heavy. Like, I'm Master Chief, bro. [laughter] I didn't wanna tell him that, but I did. I did the ethnography on that space and that turned into my academic career. I had always looked at gaming space as my recreational activity. I hadn't flipped lenses to look at gaming from a particular perspective of, "What actually are the experiences of folks who look like me, and why is that?" That's when I began to look at them and I'm like, "This is structural. This is institutional neglect and institutional racism."

A lot of those spaces hadn't been online for more than three years at that point and I thought it was fascinating. I remember reading Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's work¹ and that just blew my mind. I wanted to try to make sense of the space in a world where people said overt racism doesn't exist anymore. Here I am looking at these online spaces and I'm like, "This is fucking Jim Crow! This is full-on antebellum South. This is full-on traditional, overt racism we're seeing." It's not new; it's not re-packaged and re-fashioned. They hear somebody's Black, they call them the N-word, and they want them out.

1 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 3rd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010).

I thought that this was an important space to really interrogate, first off because of the sheer volume of people who are in the space, but also because it's this space where me and others like me are for our leisure and we still can't escape the realities of racism in America. It's ever-present. It's all around us. We're going from experiencing microaggressions in the workplace and classroom and questioning if we belong in these spaces, and then we go online and we have to deal with all that.

That was my second entry into the field. The first one was when I was a child, the second one was graduate school, and I would say the third moment when I gain entrance into game studies hasn't happened yet.

vlb: I think you talked a little bit about that in *Intersectional Tech*. There's this idea of "add diverse bodies and stir," and I think that's a big thing in game studies. Race needs just as much attention as gender in game studies and we haven't really reached that point.

KLG: We haven't. We completely just skipped over it. That's why I say that I don't think that I have come into game studies in a way that I wanna be in game studies. I feel like people have allowed me in the back door. I don't have any publications in any games outlets. I spent my early career trying to figure out how to get published in them. There was a lot of rejections, and then I stopped trying. Some people might argue that I'm not a games studies scholar 'cause I've not yet crossed that threshold.

The other thing is I was just flat out told at one conference that what I do is not games studies. There is a singular definition of what people think games studies is, and I don't fit that, or I, at least at the time, didn't fit that. I'm a cultural scholar that just happens to explore gaming, but I'm not a games studies scholar because I didn't come through that particular tradition. I don't ask the right questions. I don't fit because I'm not engaging in the conversations that constitute the bulk of what folks engage in.

My entrance to games studies was through like a feminist game studies lens. It was through feminist games studies schol-

ars. It was lovely humans like Carly Kocurek, Adrienne Shaw, Shira Chess,² and these amazing folks who say, “Come to this party, come to this function, come to this conference.” They have been really awesome.

vlb: Can you talk a little more about the boundaries that you’ve seen, or continue to see in games studies?

KLK: I had a conversation with David Leonard before and he said he felt that race is that thing that games studies doesn’t know what to do with. Him, Lisa Nakamura, and André Brock were some of the folks that wrote about race first, and those are the ones that I mirrored my work after. When I was coming along, I didn’t realize they had been chased out of games studies. They don’t get invited. I remember David explained he’s never been invited to come and speak at any games studies thing. I think that whenever these different waves come along, they’re like, “Okay, we’re focused on this,” and then we have amazing scholarship around that. I don’t know if we’ll ever have a race moment. They tried back in the mid-2000s. I’ve tried.

Even though a lot of my orientation is intersectional and feminist, I think it’s important to have this critical race conversation, which is why I’m very intentional about how I frame *Intersectional Tech* around Black users in digital gaming. I just wanna give a nod to those scholars from the early 2000s talking about race. I wanna make sure that they know their work is valuable and valid to me, even if it’s not to anybody else.

2 For examples of these scholars’ work, see: Carly Kocurek, “Editor’s Introduction: It Isn’t Difficult to Find Feminist Game Studies, but Can We Find a Feminist Game History?,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1–11; Carly Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Adrienne Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1 (2012): 28–44; Shira Chess, *Play Like a Feminist* (MIT Press, 2020); and Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

I'm still waiting to come into games studies. While everybody else says, "Kishonna, you are here, don't worry about all that stuff," there are still some signifiers. I had a Promotion and Tenure committee member ask me, "Well, if you're a game studies scholar, then why aren't you publishing in this outlet?"

vlb: From within game studies, especially feminist methodology circles, it's like, "Oh yeah, Kishonna is 100% in games studies." There's no debate. But administratively, it's a very singular lens about who is and who's not in game studies. Administrative definitions are another boundary.

KLK: Absolutely. Somebody said they'd love to have my work now, I'm like, "You know what, I don't even want them to have it. They can't have it." [chuckle] Is that wrong?

vlb: No. I would say that, like you said, there is kind of this idea that game studies is only that which is in games outlets. And it's not; it's wider than that. It's more intra-disciplinary. *Game Studies* publishes about twenty or so articles a year, so most of us are probably not in game studies if we go with that.

KLK: We're not. Absolutely right. [laughter]

vlb: *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live* was a different take on existing scholarship on violence in games. It really reframed the discussion by foregrounding the experiences of Black bodies. Could you talk a little bit about the culmination of that project?

KLK: A lot of folks advised me to not do it. First off, they said the outlet's not prestigious enough, so it's not a good way to signify my work or signify where I am in game studies. For me, I'm first generation. I don't know nothing about all this talk, but in my mind if I write a book, that's my words. Why does the spine matter? Why does the name of the company who's exploiting and extracting all of my labor matter? I never understood that. At

that time, I thought, “What is something I could say right now about race in the gaming space?” Then we get *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*.

Anytime I can reproduce and reprint that opening narrative about my experience in the multiplayer space where my teammates are telling me to go get my crack babies and go get my welfare check, I do it. I wanna share that experience in every book because it’s such an anchoring experience. The moment it happened, I wasn’t upset. And I never want to be so complacent where I normalize racism and sexism. I think that’s what we did in the gaming space. I feel like that’s such an anchoring moment because I had always just been dismissive of that kind of stuff, but somebody read it and they didn’t believe that it was true. They didn’t believe that it happened.

vlb: Like in the Good Morning America segment?³

KLG: Yeah. The folks at Good Morning America wanted to set up the experiment.⁴ I’ve never experienced that before, especially when it comes to journalism. Usually, it’s just me recalling something and then it happening, but they wanted to set up this experiment with some Black gamers to see what would happen if they went online to play. I said to them, “Well, a lot has changed in these spaces, so it might be nothing happens.” So many people had gone to the private spaces and private chats. A lot of people don’t even utilize public lobbies to communicate anymore. I also felt a type of way asking people to subject themselves to that. So, I used my partner and people I knew closely. I

3 Good Morning America, “Gamers of Color Detail Experiences with Online Harassment | GMA,” *You Tube*, October 21, 2020, <https://youtu.be/MbCWtmbppb8>.

4 The Good Morning America segment aired October 21, 2020 to accompany the day’s cover story, “Women and Gamers of Color Detail Experiences with Online Harassment in Games like *Call of Duty*.” Good Morning America asked Kishonna to gather a group of Black gamers to play online in public matches with their microphones on to show the types of racism experienced in these spaces. However, the level of racism experienced by the group was deemed too vulgar to air.

didn't want them just finding a random person because I wanted to make sure that when it happens, that a de-briefing happens and that they're okay. Although we had normalized it, it still irks you that this is still something that these spaces haven't done anything about.

A couple of rounds go by and nothing is happening. Then all of a sudden, the racism happens (see figure 27.2). The Good Morning America folks said it was too graphic, they couldn't air it. Now in my mind I'm like, "What were they expecting? You just subjected these Black folks to extreme forms of racism, and you're not even gonna air it because it will be too much for the sensibilities of your white audience. Some Black folks have to experience this. It's the least that we ask your audience to just hear it and see what folks are experiencing." It was too egregious and just too graphic to air. I was very bothered by that. I've always had to do this thing where I had to prove it. Sure enough, they came in and they were like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry that happened."

There's always these moments where people just don't believe that racism is out there. That's frustrating. So with *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*, I wanted to give people a snippet of what was happening, but also give them historical background of what has always transpired. It's manifested in these digital ways because there are still racist people that are just behind these tools and technologies. It's embedded into the core and into the fabric of gaming space because there's no way to disconnect some folks. Their racist ideologies form the products they create. You have Safiya Noble, Ruha Benjamin, and André Brock making these arguments in different kinds of spaces. And I just wanted to put gaming into that conversation as well.

Gaming is a complex entity. There are a lot of complex layers, and I think people might be overwhelmed because in their mind, they had reduced gaming to child's play. They say, "These are kids doing this?" I'm like, "No, these are full-on adults." That blows their mind. It's just so many layers to overcome. That's why I really wanted to just use *Race, Gender, and Deviance* to have that kind of conversation, but also to turn the conversation



Fig. 27.1. A screenshot of the Good Morning America (GMA) segment at 2:24, showing a transcript of a racist comment directed at the group of Black gamers Kishonna organized to play online for GMA. The text reads: “We’re going to [expletive] hang you some day.” While it is mentioned in the segment that the majority of the racism experienced throughout the session was too vulgar and too graphic to air on television, this comment and the gamer’s following comment, “I [expletive] hate Black people,” were aired.

related to violence on its head. I wanted to nuance the conversation of violence. I use the concept of deviance from criminology. A lot of people were saying the deviant behavior in the space is white men saying the N-word. That’s actually not the deviant behavior. That’s the normal behavior. That’s the behavior that doesn’t get punished. I wanted to extend that conversation so people could recognize that the presence of Black people disrupts gaming space. The presence of a Black speaker in the space disrupts the sensibilities of white gamers who just expected it to be them, expected it to be created by them, for them, and always, always about them.

vlb: Can you talk about how this leads to the larger ethnographic project that is *Intersectional Tech*?

KLG: As an ethnographer, I know it takes time to make cultures legible for an academic audience. Let me just articulate what it is I see ethnography trying to do: it's trying to give more than just a glimpse into a culture or sub-culture. It's trying to get the everydayness, the nuances, the complexities, the lived experiences, the changes, the feeling, the vibe. And it takes time to do more than just a snapshot.

My dissertation was a snapshot. It was a three-year ethnography of the space. Then the book was a little bit more. It was me having learned and having seen what some of the changes had done to the culture, and seeing women leaving and disabled people leaving. I'm like, "You know, something's happening here. What's happening here?" *Intersectional Tech* is a culmination of that. It's a 10-year ethnography where I'm able to just see all these parts, see what fits where, and see what conversations can be linked to the institutional changes and the neglect that was happening. It also makes sense of how technology, at the core, enables certain things, disables certain things, prohibits certain things, and inhibits certain things.

I was really fascinated with the technology of the space and with the convergence of the technology on the space. The incorporation of social media into gaming spaces was huge, but also how things that were happening in the world impacted the folks who were there, like women finding out that Chris Brown had done significant violence to Rihanna. It was a significant moment in the community. Then Black Lives Matter was happening and GamerGate was happening. And it was interesting to see which ones were more significant and which ones were less significant.

vlb: Can you talk a little more about significant events in the community?

KLG: Yeah. GamerGate was like a pebble in the water because Black folks just couldn't care less about GamerGate, and that was because GamerGate couldn't care less about them. At the time I said a lot of these gamers don't mind being called sexist;

they didn't wanna be called racist at the time. I thought that was significant. I followed a thread of GamerGate supporters who were trying to get Black dudes on their side. They were basically saying, "Hey, these women want us out of here." There were actually some Black men that joined and it was a particular brand of Black man that joined. The stronger identity for Black men who supported GamerGate was the nerd identity. That same brand of Black men that supported GamerGate didn't support Black Lives Matter. It was a particular brand of, "I'm not Black, I'm just a gamer." That kind of thing.

It was interesting to see how GamerGate played out. I haven't written about that yet. I'm still trying to make sense of it. Sometimes, something can happen and people write about it. I'm not that kind of scholar. I have to sit within something and see it play out and see how it impacts communities over time. If I would've wrote about GamerGate at that moment, it wouldn't have been what I said right now. I would've said something totally different. I would've said something like, "Black people need to pay attention to GamerGate because this is gonna be something significant that impacts us." Me and David Leonard wrote a little bit about that in the opening of *Woke Gaming*, where we tried to say, "GamerGate was like a precursor to the alt-right using technological tools to sustain harassment campaigns." When I return to write about it, it'll make more sense.

vlb: I saw *Intersectional Tech* as building on the frameworks in *Race, Gender, and Deviance*. It underscores how the games industry prioritizes and systemically codifies white, cisgender, heterosexual masculine experiences, and how Black communities continue to exist. Can you talk about building the frameworks for *Intersectional Tech*?

KLK: I made it up 'cause I had to write a book for tenure. [laughter]

vlb: Making it up as you go along? [laughter]

KLG: Yeah, absolutely! I just made it up as I was going and it fit. I think maybe the most thinking that I probably did around that phrasing was connecting that phrase with what came in the book. I knew that intersectionality was core to what I wanted to do. So many people lump intersectionality into a conversation around feminism, and I wanted to make sure that race was still key and core to the work I was doing. I knew I had to be intentional because so many people don't recognize that the core of what intersectionality is, is a Black woman's experience. I wanted to illustrate that, but I also wanted to illustrate the manner in which we make the technology intersectional by the things we do with it. Black Twitter is intersectional tech because it's illustrating and highlighting Black experiences, remixing culture, humor, jokes, sacred tales, legends, and myths.

I love seeing how Black people are elevating the different kinds of aspects of Black culture in these ways. Again, gaming gets left out of these conversations, so I wanted to bring gaming in and say, "Yes, Black Twitter is cool, but so is gaming."

I guess, I wish I had more of a profound, brilliant response to the question. That I planned these things and they came to fruition just as I planned, but that's not what happened at all. [chuckle] But that's important, 'cause I think it's honest conversation. I think we don't have enough of those honest conversations of how we just happened into a lot of stuff, a lot of scholarship.

vlb: You say, "As *Intersectional Tech* demonstrates, through a variety of examples exploring marginalized experiences, an intersectional focus dismantles the illusion that white men are the center of the digital gaming universe."⁵ A couple of pages later, you say, "It's important to highlight the contradiction between ideals of inclusion espoused in the video game industry and in society as a whole and the persistence of injustices in the structural and institutional context in which they may have

5 Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 167.

developed.”⁶ I think for a long time, game studies just followed the games industry in prioritizing white male voices. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship between industry, game studies as a field, and society? Like how those three merged to form sort of a monolith of white male perspective?

KLG: It’s always been important to me to highlight the complicity of white supremacy in gaming culture, and I think it’s important that we link all the nodes of that machine. Gamers, game developers, game designers, public relations, marketing, gaming culture as a whole — it’s a large trifecta, right? But I also think that it’s important to highlight how these industries are so rooted in white supremacy because of how complicit academia is. A lot of these folks went through computer science programs and engineering programs, and they never had a critical exploration into anything they were making or producing. They don’t have ethical conversations of, “Yes, we can do that, but should we?”

The curriculum does not embed any kinds of conversations of the impact and the harms that can be done from their thinking. Like, “Women’s brains are smaller and that’s why there’s so many guys here because we’re the smartest and best in the room.” And that if there’s somebody that’s different in the space, that means they got here through affirmative action and they’re not as smart. Or, “I can just create this because this is how I thought Black people were in the world.” Or, “Of course all Middle Eastern people are terrorists. It’s no big deal because there are Middle Eastern terrorists out there.” There’s never any kind of critical reflection.

I think it’s important to highlight that structural and institutional kind of thing. What Xbox wants to do is say that it’s individual bad actors. They don’t realize that it’s them enabling and that they are complicit in the racist renderings behind somebody using offensive gamertags. GamerGate can only happen because the industry had rendered women illegible, underval-

6 Ibid., 169.

ued, and invisible. If the gaming industry had valued women, there's no way that anybody could have pulled off that heist. There's no way that they would have been able to pull off a heist like that if the industry had not already decided they didn't give a fuck about women, right?

So it doesn't come to me as any surprise that I haven't been asked to come to the industry table to talk about my work. There have been different iterations of people trying to get me to come and talk to Xbox. The first time it happened, they laid out all the things they wanted me to do. I sent them a quote for how much it would cost and didn't hear anything. Then a couple of years later, someone said, "Your work is amazing. We're gonna talk to the higher-ups and see what can happen." Then nothing happens. I think that it's really telling that my work is not the kind of work they really want to engage in because it's gonna make them have to do some serious thinking, soul-searching, and reflection that they're not ready to do.

And that's okay. I'll continue to write about them, and I'll continue to publish. I just think it's telling that they are not interested or investing in doing better. I don't know if I answered your question or not.

vlb: No, I think that answers it, that we haven't really moved far.

klg: No, not at all.

vlb: Throw enough money at it, it will go away—except it doesn't. [laughter]

klg: Throw some money at it and it'll go away. [laughter]

vlb: Are there any topics in game studies that you feel the field needs to move beyond?

klg: This isn't endemic to game studies, but I think we do the journalistic thing too often. Something's happening in the moment and then we jump on it. For instance, I have so many

folks reach out and say they wanna do projects on a hashtag. I'm like, "You know your conversation isn't really about the hashtag. It's a larger conversation." I don't think that we've done our due diligence for students to give them methodological acumen to be able to go beyond what a hashtag looks like. What does studying it look like? What kinds of questions are you asking about it? Students are wanting to get that quick, sexy, dirty kind of thing, and they wanna just get it done and have it be cool and quick. I wanna make sure that it's entirely clear that I would be okay with this if that translated into success for them in academia. I just wanna make sure that we aren't so narrowly focused on the things that are happening in the moment that we miss out on the larger structures that need to be interrogated alongside it.

And I hate that thing where we think that only one thing can happen at a time.

vlb: To wrap this conversation up, what do you hope to see from game studies moving forward? What kind of scholarship would you hope the field would start producing or letting in through the front door?

KLG: We really need to have a critical race game studies moment. Some people think it happened already. I don't think it has happened yet. Someone said, "Well, Kishonna, you're doing it 'cause you're the only one." And I'm not the only one. There are people who gave us a great foundation. André Brock, David Leonard, Lisa Nakamura, TreaAndrea Russworm, Sam Blackmon, Anna Everett, Gabriela Richard — there are plenty of folks.⁷ How many people do we need to be significant enough? Do we have to have a convergence for it to be taken seriously? If our experiences are telling, then it means academia isn't gonna care anyway. I'm thinking about something David Leonard shared with me. He said, "*Nobody* cared about this or *game studies* didn't care?"

But I really think that we need to have more of a critical examination of race studies within games. I remember I was at

7 See bibliography for examples of this scholarship.

a dinner and somebody was complaining that they didn't like the direction that DiGRA was going. That was the year that T.L. Taylor did the keynote⁸ and they were trying to say that that's not what game studies is. T.L. Taylor is the cream of the crop in game studies. And if they don't give a fuck about T.L. then they really could care less about me and my contributions. The person didn't even know who I was, so I was just sitting there listening. These were really prominent people in the field of game studies at a conference last fall. This isn't even a long time ago that somebody was saying that cultural engagement in game studies is not wanted by most folks in game studies.

They're just giving lip service and just talking, but we actually have to think about how these were folks who might say that they care and value diversity, but when in essence, they really don't. So maybe some of those conversations still need to happen.

8 T.L. Taylor, "E-sports in the Age of Networked Broadcast," keynote, Digital Games Research Association conference, Kyoto, Japan, August 8, 2019.

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Gameography

Halo 2. Bungie, 2004.

EverQuest. Verant Interactive and 989 Studios, 1999.

Confessions of a Game Studies Insider: “Our” Field Needs to Do Better

Christopher A. Paul

One of the enduring features of my life has been luck. I was lucky to be born into the body I have and the privilege it confers and I was exceptionally lucky to graduate from college and graduate school when I did. I was lucky when I happened to be one of the first scholars to utilize communication studies-influenced rhetorical analysis in game studies. Timing and luck led to an almost perfect sweet spot: substantial work had been done and rhetoric had been introduced to the field, but it was heavily influenced by English Departments.¹ That left me with a clear path to relitigate elements of the decades-long debates between the fields of rhetoric, while applying what I had learned in graduate school to the texts popular in game studies at the time, which basically meant *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). Fortunately for me, I had played *World of Warcraft* since launch and had enough background with the game to write about it,

1 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007); Ian Bogost, “Videogames and Ideological Frames,” *Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 (2006): 165–83; and Ian Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” in *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*, ed. Katie Salen (MIT Press, 2008).

leading to my first major publication in game studies.² At that point, around 2008, studies of *World of Warcraft* dominated game studies, with easily more than half of conference presentations focused on a single game.

The backdrop of luck threads through our lives and complicates any attempt to develop an actual meritocracy, and I also think that elements of luck can mute differences and encourage homogenization of a field.³ Game studies is in an interesting space, as games are central to the leisure pursuits of many, the professional endeavors of a handful of skilled e-sports players, and a terrain for academic research that is increasingly complex and nuanced. There was a point when game studies was marginalized from traditional academic research, relegated to developing its own conferences, journals, and networks. This is shifting though, as games are being studied from a variety of angles and increasingly integrated into journals within disciplinary fields, fragmenting where games research appears and producing research that is often ahistorical.

However, the history of game studies is complicated, as the analytical lens that game studies often uses to assess video games and the culture and texts around them is rarely turned internally. My goal in this essay is to use the trajectory of my research to join with many other essays in this collection to turn my focus back onto game studies and point toward gaps and limitations in the field. Recognizing the role of luck should encourage those of us who have been lucky to reflect on how we have benefited from circumstance. Acknowledging how we have moved forward, even when we may have also been challenged in other ways, should lead us to think about how we can help others get lucky too. Critically reflecting on luck leads to acknowledgments of privilege, serendipity, and our obligation to others. Those of us who have benefited from the way things

2 Christopher A. Paul, "Welfare Epics? The Rhetoric of Rewards in *World of Warcraft*," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 2 (2010): 158–76.

3 Christopher A. Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

are should be doing what we can to make things better for those who come after us; we need to pass our luck along more broadly than we may have received it. For me, by arriving relatively early to the field I never really had to acknowledge or analyze my luck, as the systems and structures I analyzed in games became my focus rather than the systems and structures of academics and game studies. This piece is intended to add a bit more balance to my end of that ledger.

Hypertext

Like many researchers who chose to study new media objects, I was the one person in my graduate communication program who spurned the study of traditional analytical objects, like speeches, in favor of newer media, like hypertext. I managed to find journals to guide me, but I was distant from the field and never really found a way into a research community. My first academic conference was isolating, as I was critiquing a dominant approach in studying hypertext and presenting to a roomful of adherents. I had flown halfway across the country on the promise that there would be dozens of presentations. Apparently the conference did not get that many submissions, so I was in a room presenting with two other graduate students from the host institution and a bunch of their friends who had shown up to support them. I was the one communication studies student, so I did the presentation like my advisor and engaged in a tightly edited reading. They had PowerPoints. I spent a fair chunk of time critiquing the approach of one of their faculty members. They used the same as a basis of their analysis. Three faculty were tasked with responding to me and, during my presentation, one audibly mocked the approach I was taking. It was alienating and ultimately drove me away from publishing much of anything I wrote in graduate school.

Then by chance, in 2006, as I was deep into *World of Warcraft* while I sought to settle into my first job after graduation, I came across a mailer for the first issue of *Games and Culture*. I found a community of scholars where I could make an impact, where the

ideas I had were actively engaged and pushed forward. At least that is how the community landed for me, a cis-het white male who has been playing video games since I was a child. I benefited from an exceptionally lucky string of events that hinged on getting the mailer, having a supportive research mentor, and having the timing to have a student come along who was similarly interested in games research who ended up publishing a paper out of class he took with me.⁴ I was in a situation where everything I was writing about hypertext got split reviews, one that praised my work as innovative and another that ridiculed it for not hewing more closely to the dominant norms of an emerging field. I was at an institution and in a department that gave me the freedom to study just about whatever I wanted. I was early enough in my career that a pivot did not cost me much, especially when I was not getting clear progress in publishing what I started researching in graduate school. I was also single, without kids, and living in a new state with few connections, so I could dump time into reading, researching, and writing.

Scholars in game studies pushed me and I started to examine the boundaries of my thinking about games. The first conference where I presented work in game studies was the Association of Internet Researchers conference in 2008 when I was one of many, many people presenting work about *World of Warcraft*. At the time, I couldn't see why others would delve into other games; *WoW* was where it was at. Years later, with the benefit of listening to work by awesome colleagues, I started to see the limits of the field and echoes of the same dynamics that chased me out of studying hypertext. Game studies coalesced around a group of games largely played by those who studied them, narrowing the field and what was considered a valid research question.⁵ I started analyzing a broader group of texts, work-

4 Jason Pittman and Christopher A. Paul, "Seeking Fulfillment: Comparing Role-Play in Table-Top Gaming and World of Warcraft," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1 (2008): 53–65.

5 Samuel Coavoux, Manuel Boutet, and Vinciane Zabban, "What We Know About Games: A Scientometric Approach to Game Studies in the 2000s," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 563–84.

ing harder to ask different questions, which led me to thinking about sports, mobile, and free-to-play games.

Long story short, the rejection from one community eventually landed me in another, but the serendipity I experienced and structural privilege I carry smoothed off the rough edges and let me settle into a spot where I have been fortunate to publish multiple books and attend conferences around the world. Had I not experienced routine rejection for my work on hypertext I likely never would have landed in game studies. However, without my ability to readily blend into the game studies community I may not have settled there either. I write this with the hope that we, as game scholars, can reflect on the initial question of what is not getting researched and why? What is getting prioritized and what is pushed to the margins? Who feels comfortable and welcomed, and who hits that first conference and never comes back? How do we conduct and write peer reviews and how may that process push people away? More importantly, I am interested in reflecting on the answers that stem from those questions, like who isn't doing the research, more specifically who isn't seen doing the research, and what are we losing from the field as people turn away.

Limitations and Game Studies

I suspect that most who have thought deeply about games would quickly acknowledge that a system and how it is built has an impact on what comes out of it. In a game, designers build a framework for interaction and everything a player does is influenced by the box in which they have been placed. Surely, they can resist or play in ways the designer did not originally intend, effectively remaking the system, but when we play games the initial terms are set by the design. Even open worlds are only so open, and innovative designers can push limits, but at some

level video games are about rule systems carried out by computers.⁶

Similar to how a video game sets the terms on which it is encountered, game studies is impacted by the environment in which it is placed. Almost all game studies scholars are tied to institutions of higher education; the field is dominated by scholars in North America, Europe, and Australia; and conferences are international with a handful of hubs, but involve substantial travel for many. There are a few key graduate programs that have several faculty lines in game studies, but most scholars connected to the field are at institutions where they are one of a few, or perhaps the only, person studying games. As an international, multidisciplinary field, game studies is informed by many different academic traditions, offering the groundwork for interesting, collaborative work. On first glance, game studies benefits from the fact that scholars within the field can pull from a variety of resources, blending approaches and theories to analyze games in vibrant ways. That methodological heterogeneity is potentially quite interesting, but it is also complicated by the dynamics that push against that diversity and enforce more rigid structures, stamping out difference and drawing a clearer boundary around the field.

Although I cannot offer a definitive reason why game studies is not a more diverse field, pushing beyond the basics and engaging in self-reflection requires looking deeply at the field and the limitations within it. A foundational dynamic, particularly for those who started doing research on games years ago and for those who are not in dedicated programs focused on games, is an internalized marginalization and a chip on our shoulder about our object of study. I suspect just about everyone reading this essay has experienced a moment where the object of their research was mocked or marginalized. We have all likely had to write an explanation and justify the importance of studying games. Even if you're relatively new to the field and have not

6 Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (MIT Press, 2005).

experienced this personally, the field suffers as a whole from a wound which I do not believe we have fully healed. Founding organizations and journals is an incredible amount of work. It was necessary effort for those in the early days of game studies, it is how people connected and found each other, but there is also a way the story can be told to focus on how it was a retreat into comfort and resulted in a definition of the new in opposition to the old. That collective marginalization, combined with the work that went into setting up all of the new entities, put the field and the people within it in a collective defensive crouch. The marginalization, both real and perceived, and need to found something of our own, produced an insularity that made it “ours” for some, not all. It’s the kind of situation where we may always have room for whoever we deem our personal family, but we’re also likely to take quite poorly to our family being critiqued by those outside of it. To that end, I hope this is read as a critique coming from inside the family, one where we drive and push each other to do more and do better.

To get that space for reflection and critique, I think it is important to turn to assess my work to point toward homogeneity in the field and the places where I have challenged norms and those where I have fallen in line. As foregrounded earlier, the types of games analyzed within the field has been quite limited. Although this is changing, initial research in game studies focused mostly on role-playing and shooting games, often with an emphasis on the online modes of those games.⁷ This is the extension of the feedback I got at the conferences years ago; why are we all studying the same games when there is so much more out there? I have certainly expanded beyond just writing about *WoW*, by analyzing sports video games and casual and mobile titles, but there are key trends in my work that conform to the homogeneity of the field.⁸

7 Coavoux, Boutet, and Zabban, “What We Know About Games.”

8 Christopher A. Paul, “It’s in the Game? Shifting Scene with Online Play,” in *Sports Videogames*, ed. Mia Consalvo, Konstantin Mitgutsch, and Abe Stein (Routledge, 2013); Shira Chess and Christopher A. Paul, “The End of Casual: Long Live Casual,” *Games and Culture* 14, no. 2 (2019): 107–18; and

A huge limitation of my work is in that I typically study what I play and I do not do enough to reach outside the confines of what I would generally come across. I need to do more to play and think about games that are not typical for me. My typical techniques of relying on texts by journalists and online posts from players for the texts I write about in my research self-selects populations of people that lean toward the core of gaming, which can leave that core without critique. Games research is far less likely to address the games played by the young and the old, the quiet players who do not leave visible traces of their play, and the folks that do not fall into more stable categories of research.⁹

There are notable exceptions to this general premise of what does not get studied. T.L Taylor conducted foundational research on online gaming and e-sports.¹⁰ Mia Consalvo did early work on the social negotiation of cheating and later work with Jason Begy on *Faunasphere*.¹¹ Kishonna Gray has done exceptional work on race and gaming, detailing how people of color are often marginalized in game play and in communities around games.¹² Adrienne Shaw and Amanda Cote did excellent work

Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games: What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames* (MIT Press, 2019).

9 Amanda C. Cote, *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games* (New York University Press, 2020).

10 T.L. Taylor, "Does WoW Change Everything? How a PvP Server, Multinational Player Base, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2006): 318–37, and T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (MIT Press, 2012).

11 Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007), and Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy, *Players and Their Pets: Gaming Communities from Beta to Sunset* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

12 Kishonna Gray, "Collective Organizing, Individual Resistance, or Asshole Griefer? An Ethnographic Analysis of Women of Color in Xbox Live," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 2 (2013), <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/26295>; Kishonna Gray, *Race, Gender, & Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* (Routledge, 2014); and Kishonna Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020).

on players, typically women, who do not fit traditional assumptions of who plays video games.¹³ Carly Kocurek has done exceptional work addressing how arcades in the United States fostered a perception that video games were for adolescent boys.¹⁴ Kelly Bergstrom and others have done excellent work studying novice versus experienced play and the niche game *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003).¹⁵ And Shira Chess has studied women who play and casual and mobile games.¹⁶ However, this kind of work is a relatively broad exception to the general trends in game studies. Game studies still focuses all too often on computer and console games aimed at core gaming audiences, leading to a lot of the same and less of the different. This also surfaces a second area that requires reflection, one that may be far more difficult for the field to process: the suffocating whiteness of games research.

As the English-language dominance of academia is filtered through a discipline that is largely based around scholars in North America and Northern Europe, game studies is an incredibly white field. Even more powerfully, some of the scholars of color who have done excellent work addressing games and race are dramatically under cited and have often stopped publishing work and studying games as their work did not land well, turning to fields like media studies that are at least somewhat more diverse. More of us should be citing the critical work of scholars like Kishonna Gray, TreaAndrea Russworm, André Brock, Lisa

13 Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014), and Cote, *Gaming Sexism*.

14 Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

15 Kelly Bergstrom, Jennifer Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell, "What's 'Choice' Got to Do with It? Avatar Selection Differences between Novice and Expert Players of World of Warcraft and Rift," in *FDG '12: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (ACM Press, 2012), 97, and Marcus Carter, Kelly Bergstrom, and Darryl Woodford, eds., *Internet Spaceships Are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

16 Shira Chess, *Play Like a Feminist* (MIT Press, 2020), and Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

Nakamura, and Florence Chee. The work by scholars of color also tends to ask questions and access communities of players that are not addressed in the rest of the literature, as their perspectives and positionalities open up research questions and populations of players that white researchers are far less likely to ask or be able to access.

It is also worth considering for whom that suffocating whiteness works. Although I would argue that the lack of diversity negatively impacts us all, it also means that those of us who are white game scholars typically walk into rooms with a lot of people who look like us. When we present to groups we see faces that are familiar, potentially giving us entry and comfort to build relationships and find a scholarly home. However, that overwhelming whiteness comes with a cost of alienating others.

Who gets included in the center of a discipline and who gets invited into access the time and counsel of senior scholars is an incredibly important part of a field. These early choices, the reviews and encouragement we do or do not get, snowball and continue to perpetuate a group of scholars who often think, look, and act in similar ways. My home discipline of communication studies and rhetoric is beginning a process of addressing why it is so white and there are moves to decolonize fields like design studies. In communication, the legacy of white supremacy in the field was brought into open discussion by a 2018 article by Paula Chakravartty, Rachel Kuo, Victoria Grubbs, and Charlton McIlwain entitled “#CommunicationSoWhite.”¹⁷ The authors trace how scholars of color suffer from lower publication rates, lower citation rates, and hold fewer editorial positions, concluding that “the field of communication, however disparate and fractured, is well served if it looks within on questions of representation and citations, and acts towards taking more seriously an account of race as a central analytic.”¹⁸ The flagship journal in rhetoric, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, published a special issue

17 Paula Chakravartty et al., “#CommunicationSoWhite,” *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (2018): 254–66.

18 Chakravartty et al., 263.

in 2019 that addressed how rhetoric is a racist field and how scholars could seek to practice anti-racist rhetoric and rhetoric not centered on the United States.¹⁹ Although publishing the articles and beginning the conversation can only do so much, it is a notable step toward critical self-reflection and opens up discussion about change. To the best of my knowledge as of this writing, similar efforts in game studies are limited to a special issue in the *Journal of Games Criticism*, which is notable given the prominence of white authors in the field, myself included.²⁰

In 2015 Kishonna Gray began #CiteHerWork in the wake of an interview where she referenced research conducted by Adrienne Shaw only to see Shaw's work omitted from a final article.²¹ In 2018 Wendy Belcher articulated The Gray Test for assessing scholarly competence, where a journal article must cite the work of at least two women and at least two non-white people and actually discuss their work in the body of the text.²² There have been other efforts in the field, like the Digital Games Research Associations's diversity working group, largely led by people like Mahli-Ann R. Butt, Cody Mejeur, and Alayna Cole, who are mainly doing the work as they are also graduate students or young scholars. However, these moves are ancillary to the central field. They are important, but discussed and known on the margins rather than features of special issues of prominent publications and keynotes within the field, making it all too easy

19 Darrel Wanzer-Serrano, "Rhetoric's Rac(e/Ist) Problems," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 105, no. 4 (2019): 465–76, and Godfried Agyeman Asante, "#RhetoricSoWhite and US Centered: Reflections on Challenges and Opportunities," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 105, no. 4 (2019): 484–88.

20 Sabine Harrer et al., eds., "Surviving Whiteness in Games," special issue, *Journal of Games Criticism* 5, no. A (2023), <https://gamescriticism.org/volume-5-bonus-issue-a-surviving-whiteness-in-games/>.

21 Kishonna Gray, "#CiteHerWork: Marginalizing Women in Academic and Journalistic Writing," *Kishonna Gray*, December 28, 2015, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200812172137/https://www.kishonnagray.com/manifestmy-reality/citeherwork-marginalizing-women-in-academic-and-journalistic-writing>.

22 @WendyLBelcher, *Twitter*, July 17, 2018, <https://twitter.com/WendyLBelcher/status/1019319858465517570>.

for the field to continue with business as usual. The typical readership for this work is the already committed rather than the field as a whole.

There are key works in early game studies by authors of color that raise important questions, yet many do not have massive citation counts and the authors have often pivoted out of games and into media studies after their games research was not particularly well received. In a mirror image of the welcoming, accepting space I found as a white author in game studies, authors like André Brock and Lisa Nakamura published key pieces about race and games years ago and have largely moved out of the field.²³ Perhaps their interests changed and they sought other avenues, but there is a fair question to be asked about whether or not their work was integrated into how the field could move forward or pushed to the side. Kishonna Gray has published exceptional work about race and games, yet her newest book as of this writing, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*, was not published by a press with a long history of publishing about video games.²⁴ This is something she talks about in her interview within this volume, as she encountered difficulties in getting her vital work published. TreaAndrea Russworm has also done great work on representation and gaming, including an excellent breakdown of Spike Lee's contribution to the *NBA2K* series of games.²⁵ Gerald Voorhees did excellent work on procedural rhetoric and has co-edited a

23 André Brock, "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong": *Resident Evil 5*, Racial Representation, and Gamers," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 5 (2011): 429–52; Lisa Nakamura, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009): 128–44; and André Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* (New York University Press, 2020).

24 Gray, *Intersectional Tech*.

25 TreaAndrea Russworm, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Indiana University Press, 2017), and TreaAndrea Russworm, "Computational Blackness: The Procedural Logics of Race, Game, and Cinema, or How Spike Lee's *Da Dream* Productively 'Broke' a Popular Video Game," *Black Camera* 10, no. 1 (2018): 193–212.

pair of books on masculinity and feminisms in games.²⁶ Florence Chee has published fascinating work, including great work about play in Korea.²⁷ Tara Fickle's book, *The Race Card*, is a fantastic breakdown of how video games further and disrupt Asian American stereotypes.²⁸

This paragraph of citations and references is far from exhaustive, it is inherently partial and limited. However, it is intended to spark a moment of reflection, to help those of us who are white-identified to think deeply about who we are citing and why, to think about what we gatekeep and why, and to think more about who we reach out to and who we likely leave behind. To be clear, I am part and parcel of the problem. I have not cited or used the work in the last paragraph as much as I should. I have assigned it into my classes, but this essay is part of my effort to address what I am citing in my work and what I have not. It is also a clear call and commitment from me to think through how I engage in conferences, which panels I choose to attend, who I seek out to talk with, and how I approach reviewing manuscripts I am asked to read. We should all be thinking about who we mentor and how, about who gets welcomed into the field and how intake of new people can help us add to the overall diversity of the field.

Moving beyond where we have been requires us to seek out what might not be comfortable at first, and expand our horizons and the questions we are asking. It requires us to move beyond the group of scholars with whom we may share key demographic characteristics and seek out those who are different, who can add a perspective we may not carry on our own. It is about criti-

26 Gerald A. Voorhees, "The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games," *Game Studies* 9, no. 2 (2009), <http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/voorhees>; Gerald A. Voorhees, "I Play Therefore I Am: Sid Meier's Civilization, Turn-Based Strategy Games and the Cogito," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2009): 254–75; and Nick Taylor and Gerald A. Voorhees, *Masculinities in Play* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

27 Florence Chee, "The Games We Play Online and Offline: Making Wang-tta in Korea," *Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 (2006): 225–39.

28 Tara Fickle, *The Race Card: From Gaming Technologies to Model Minorities* (New York University Press, 2019).

cally reflecting on what we are doing and how we are doing it in order to create a field where we act on #GameStudiesSoWhite before we chase another generation of scholars out of the field.

I was incredibly lucky to find game studies early in my career and fall right into it. Many other scholars do not have the same privilege. What has been limits what can be. Game studies needs more people, more different kinds of people, looking at different kinds of games from different kinds of perspectives to become a more robust and dynamic field. In order to create a more just, richer field with better, more sophisticated research we need to disrupt what has been and build what we need. We need critical reflection in prominent places. We need more space and encouragement for the voices we are missing. And, the obligation for this change needs to not just come from those who are in tenuous or marginalized positions. I have chosen to spend my time writing chapters like this one and writing book reviews for scholars whose work should be getting more attention. I have spent time mentoring young scholars at my institution and want to do more within the field. I have turned down invitations to opportunities for recognition and passed that on to those who may not get them as often. I want to be mindful in my conference experiences to reach out and include people instead of simply falling into my normal patterns of spending time with those I already know. I am at a point in my career where I am secure enough to sign my reviews for journals, which reminds me of the obligation I have to those whose work I am reviewing and hopefully gives those whose work I am reviewing a chance to see there are humans on both sides of the review process. Those of us who have been lucky, who have been able to carve out space for their work in game studies, have an obligation to look around and push ourselves to be better. There are plenty of examples of other fields doing this work. We are behind. We have been limited, but we need not stay that way. Let's do better.

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“Publish in English or It’s Game Over”: On English Linguistic Monopoly in Game Studies

Samuel Poirier-Poulin

Every time I google “English language monopoly,” the first results I get are advertisements for the *Monopoly* board game. Yes, that game many of us hate but somehow always end up playing. I realized over time that writing “English linguistic monopoly” would return the desired results, but I think this initial situation might be telling.

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Over the last forty years, the world of research has shifted toward more homogenous practices and ways of quantifying achievements.¹ Although this has been traditionally associated with the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humani-

¹ Ruth Breeze, “Citing Outside the Community? An Investigation of the Language of Bibliography in Top Journals,” in *English in Europe*, vol. 2: *English as a Scientific and Research Language*, ed. Ramón Plo Alastrué and Carmen Pérez-Llantada (De Gruyter Mouton, 2015), 38.



Fig. 29.1. Picture of a *Monopoly* board game.

ties are becoming more and more affected by these practices, notably the use of indices to assess the quality and impact of publications, and the need to publish in a few top-tier journals — a tendency that now extends far beyond the Anglosphere (i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand).² These changes have been accompanied by a shift from the use of several languages in international communications (notably German, French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, and English) to a clear preeminence of English. According to Ulrich Ammon, articles in English constitute roughly 81% of

- 2 Breeze, "Citing Outside the Community?," 37–38; Mary Jane Curry and Theresa Lillis, "Multilingual Scholars and the Imperative to Publish in English: Negotiating Interests, Demands, and Rewards," *TESOL Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2004): 663–88; David Nicholas et al., "Early Career Researchers and Their Publishing and Authorship Practices," *Learned Publishing* 30, no. 3 (2017): 205–17; and Hendrik P. van Dalen and Kène Henkens, "Intended and Unintended Consequences of a Publish-or-Perish Culture: A Worldwide Survey," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 63, no. 7 (2012): 1282–93.

all the publications indexed in the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences between 1880 and 2006 for the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science.³ Along the same lines, Nadine Desrochers and Vincent Larivière have found that the percentage of research published in English in the social sciences and the humanities and indexed in the Web of Science went from 30% in 1980 in France and Germany to 80% in 2014, and from 70% to 90% in the province of Quebec, Canada. On average, articles published in English for these three nations and in these fields have been cited thrice more than articles written in their national languages.⁴ The mastery of English is now a requirement for anyone who wishes to access relevant publications and gain international recognition. In game studies, the dominance of English can be partly explained by its young history and the boom in research in that discipline since the 2000s, when English already had a central place in academia.

In a world where the English language takes more and more space, publishing in a language other than English often reduces the chances of being read, leaving the field to other scholars.

3 Ulrich Ammon, “World Languages: Trends and Futures,” in *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*, ed. Nikolas Coupland (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 115.

4 Nadine Desrochers and Vincent Larivière, “Je veux bien, mais me citerez-vous? On Publication Language Strategies in an Anglicized Research Landscape,” in *Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on Science and Technology Indicators*, ed. Ismael Ràfols, Jordi Molas-Gallart, Elena Castro-Martínez, and Richard Woolley (Editorial Universitat Politècnica de València, 2016), 889. This data is not without its limitations considering that the Web of Science is known for its bias toward articles written in English. The data presented here is thus not representative of the whole research produced in each of these nations (especially not Quebec), but of the publication language of articles published in high-ranking journals. For a more detailed discussion on this matter and on the case of Quebec, see Vincent Larivière, “Le français, langue seconde? De l’évolution des lieux et langues de publication des chercheurs au Québec, en France et en Allemagne” [The status of French as a second language. About the evolution of the places and languages of publication of Quebec, French and German researchers], *Recherches sociographiques* 59, no. 3 (2018): 339–63.

Such choice means not engaging in international debates nor collective scholarly decisions, and being less likely to receive promotion and research funding.⁵ In theory, authors may publish in any language and in any journal they wish, using any relevant research paradigm, but this freedom is illusory if publishing only in certain journals (mostly English-language, high-ranking international journals) has positive impacts on their career.⁶ The well-known aphorism “publish or perish” should be rephrased as “publish *in English* or perish,” or as I like to say in game studies, “publish in English or it’s game over.”⁷

While several authors have written about the dominance of the English language in academia, their reflections mostly take place in the fields of intercultural communication, language education, and law and public policy. On the other hand, research on diversity and inclusion in game studies has mostly focused on issues related to gender, race, and sexuality. Issues related to language have generally been left unaddressed. In their study on diversity workers, Cody Mejeur, Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt, and Alayna Cole note the “perpetuating Anglocentrism of game studies,” acknowledging that their study unfortunately reproduces this pattern.⁸ Meanwhile, in another publication, Butt et

5 Loïc Blondiaux et al., “Publier aujourd’hui une revue de sciences sociales” [Publishing today a social sciences journal], *Politix* 4, no. 100 (2012): 249; Breeze, “Citing Outside the Community?,” 41; and Sedef Uzuner, “Multilingual Scholars’ Participation in Core/Global Academic Communities: A Literature Review,” *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 7, no. 4 (2008): 254–55.

6 Breeze, “Citing Outside the Community?,” 40.

7 See for example David Bakewell, “Publish in English, or Perish?,” *Nature* 356 (1992): 648; Desrochers and Larivière, “Je veux bien,” 888; Mario S. Di Bitetti and Julián A. Ferreras, “Publish (in English) or Perish: The Effect on Citation Rate of Using Languages Other Than English in Scientific Publications,” *Ambio* 46, no. 1 (2017): 123; and Olga Solovova, Joana Vieira Santos, and Joaquim Verissimo, “Publish in English or Perish in Portuguese: Struggles and Constraints on the Semiperiphery,” *Publications* 6, no. 2 (2018): 25.

8 Cody Mejeur, Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt, and Alayna Cole, “Feminist and Furious: Diversity Work(ers) Against Game Studies of Empire!,” *Games and Culture* 16, no. 3 (2021): 348.

al. briefly discuss questions of language alongside questions of age, gender, career level, and location in their work on inclusiveness within the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA). Their work ultimately shows how the main conference of DiGRA is “particularly exclusive of coloured, non-anglophone and non-Western bodies.”⁹ On a more positive note, Hanna Wirman highlights the importance of regional DiGRA chapters in countering a language barrier. She notes the importance of local language in the creation of these chapters and their role in supporting and circulating game studies scholarship outside the Anglosphere.¹⁰

I genuinely believe that the use of only one language for international communications is practical, but we must reflect on the power of language in game studies. My goal in this chapter is to bridge the gap between research on linguistic monopoly in academia and the discipline of game studies, seeking to critically reflect on how game studies have been built and are still being built around the English language. Following Amanda Phillips, my analysis starts from the premise that feelings can be a valuable source of knowledge to understand tensions and imbalances of power within academic communities. As they write: “Affect has a way of exposing where obstacles continue to exist even when we cannot identify or talk about them explicitly. Feeling bad or feeling good (or feeling good about feeling bad) all reveal important power dynamics at work in our scholarly exchanges.”¹¹ Throughout this essay, I use emphatic rhetoric and make broad and provocative claims about the anglicization of academic research and gatekeeping within high-ranking journals; further analyses should take into consideration how factors like gender, geography, race, class, and disability intersect

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- 9 Mahli-Ann Rakkomkaew Butt et al., “Homo Includens: Surveying DiGRA’s Diversity,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4, no. 1 (2018): 96.
 - 10 Hanna Wirman, “DiGRA Chapter Diversity,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 4, no. 1 (2018): 109–10.
 - 11 Amanda Phillips, “Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 17.

with native language and complexify the power dynamics analyzed here.

What I describe will already be too familiar to many non-native English speakers (NNEs, hereafter); at the same time, the English language has become so ubiquitous in game studies and in academia in general that many of us have come to accept it, “taken in and by the game,” without really pausing to analyze what it implies and what could be done better.¹² There is an inherent paradox in the act of writing in English about English linguistic monopoly, but as an early-career scholar trying to carve out a place for myself in game studies, I feel pressure to publish my work in English — and this piece in particular — to reach a larger audience and, sadly, to avoid “wasting” it.

* * *

My reflection finds its origin in the concept of linguisticism, defined by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas as “ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language.”¹³ Päivi Gynther explains that linguisticism is “fundamentally [...] a matter of depriving people of power and influence due to their language.”¹⁴ In the world of game studies, we can think of linguisticism in relation to the dominance of English and how it creates a hierarchy of knowledge and privileges for researchers who are native English speakers (NES, hereafter). Articles that are not written in English often fail to cross national borders and are ignored by the scientific community at-large, and articles written in “bad” English are excluded from

12 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 116.

13 Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, “Multilingualism and the Education of Minority Children,” in *Minority Education: From Shame to Struggle*, ed. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Jim Cummins (Multilingual Matters, 1988), 13.

14 Päivi Gynther, *Beyond Systemic Discrimination: Educational Rights, Skills Acquisition and the Case of Roma* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2007), 105.

strong peer-reviewed journals. This process generates a structure that makes it harder for NNEs to challenge the knowledge produced by NES (and completely impossible if they publish in any language other than English), resulting in NES producing knowledge that is “secure” and that gets more easily legitimized as established knowledge. This reflection can be further developed through Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic market. According to Bourdieu, “there is a linguistic market whenever someone produces an utterance for receivers capable of assessing it, evaluating it and setting a price on it.” The value of a certain language or variety of language on the linguistic market depends on how close this language is to the dominant norms and the ones seen as legitimate within a certain context.¹⁵ In game studies, English has a higher linguistic capital than other languages: publications in this language are generally those considered worth reading (by both NES and NNEs), and well-written English that reads like that of an NES is the variety of English that allows someone to publish in prestigious journals. As Larivière points out, here linguistic capital is intimately related to scientific capital.¹⁶

Data provided by Samuel Coavoux, Manuel Boutet, and Vinciane Zabban reveals that 63% of the journal articles published in *Game Studies* between 2001 and 2013 ($n = 107$), and 82% of those published in *Games and Culture* between 2006 and 2014 ($n = 184$) were written by authors located in the Anglosphere.¹⁷ This supports the idea that the English language acts as a form of gatekeeping and that NES have an increased access to journals that are more prestigious and that have played a major role in shaping the discipline of game studies and establishing its community. To see if the situation had changed, I compiled in 2021

15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question*, trans. Richard Nice (Sage, 1993), 79.

16 Larivière, “Le français, langue seconde?” 340.

17 I obtained these numbers by compiling the data provided in Samuel Coavoux, Manuel Boutet, and Vinciane Zabban, “What We Know About Games: A Scientometric Approach to Game Studies in the 2000s,” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 6 (2017): 568.

data on the country of origin of the articles published in both journals between 2018 and 2020. I found that 59% of the articles published in *Game Studies* ($n = 61$) and 68% of those published in *Games and Culture* ($n = 105$) were written by authors located in the Anglosphere.¹⁸ While things are slowly improving, the fact that roughly 64% of the research published in leading game studies journals still comes from five countries, and especially from the United States and the United Kingdom, is far from ideal. Interestingly, the work published as part of the proceedings of DiGRA comes from more diverse linguistic areas: only 47% of the work published between 2002 and 2012 ($n = 603$) and 32% of the full papers published between 2018 and 2020 ($n = 154$) come from the Anglosphere.¹⁹ While this might be explained by the fact that the main DiGRA conferences have mostly taken place in Europe, this data reveals nonetheless that there is a vibrant community of NNEs willing to participate in the emerging discipline of game studies.

Even though the journal *Game Studies* has been fundamental in establishing the discipline on an international scale, its policy regarding language is surprisingly discriminatory. When con-

18 Following Coavoux, Boutet, and Zabban, "What We Know About Games," 566, I removed editorials, book reviews, and interviews from the data set. In contrast with them, though, I separated the data for Quebec from that of the rest of Canada to better reflect language use. In the case of *Games and Culture*, where articles are first published online (OnlineFirst) and later as part of a journal issue, I used the original online publication year of each article. The data is rather stable throughout the years for *Games and Culture*: it roughly varies between 66% and 70% (2018: 65.71%; 2019: 69.77%; 2020: 66.67%). The data is less stable for *Game Studies*. In particular, the number of articles coming from the Anglosphere for the year 2020 is rather low (2018: 70.8%; 2019: 63.6%; 2020: 46%).

19 I obtained this number for the period 2002–2012 by compiling the data provided in Coavoux, Boutet, and Zabban, "What We Know About Games," 568. I gathered the data for the period 2018–2020 by manually searching DiGRA's digital library. Only full papers published as part of the main proceedings of DiGRA were included in the data set (i.e., I did not include papers published as part of a local chapter, nor extended abstracts). The number of papers coming from the Anglosphere is rather stable throughout the years (2018: 32.5%; 2019: 29.31%; 2020: 35.71%).

sulting the submission guidelines on its website, one can read as the first element on the “Submission Checklist”: “If English is not your first language you have had your article reviewed or edited by an English language editor.”²⁰ Needless to say, such statements make NNEs feel rather unwelcome and unsuited to this academic space. On the other hand, *Games and Culture* refers “authors who want to refine the use of English in their manuscripts” to the service of “a non-affiliated company [... that] specializes in editing and correcting English-language manuscripts written by authors with a primary language other than English.”²¹ Although *Games and Culture* does not explicitly request that NNEs consult a language editor, its message still targets them and gives the impression that the manuscript they submit must be very well written from the start. Both journals imply that they are not interested in publishing articles with strong content but with a writing style that still needs some improvements. In addition, both journals defer financial costs onto the writers, which is especially problematic with workers in precarious positions such as graduate students and early career or underemployed researchers.

These language policies contrast with those of other international journals that do not rank as high in terms of prestige and impact factor: *Eludamos* and the *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* make no mention on their websites of their policy regarding the English language; the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* writes that it “strive[s] to be global in nature” and that “editors are encouraged to initially focus on content and ignore language issues which will be addressed at a later stage”; and the *Journal of Games Criticism* and the student journal *Press Start* both explicitly state that they offer support to NNEs.²² The *Jour-*

20 “Submission Guidelines,” *Game Studies*, http://gamestudies.org/2004/submission_guidelines.

21 “Submit Paper,” *Games and Culture*, section “Writing Assistance,” §1, <https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/GAC>.

22 “For Authors,” *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, section “Acceptance Rate,” §2, <https://jvwr.net/for-authors/>.

nal of Games Criticism even mentions it twice on its submission webpage:

Do *not* let the academic publication style dissuade you from submitting. All submissions are judged solely on the quality of the argument. All submissions undergo editing with the help of *JGC*'s technical editor prior to publication to ensure they follow the style and grammar expectations.

We are an English language journal. Our editorial board is comfortable with English as a second language, so spelling does not need to be excellent to be considered for review. We accept articles based on the quality of the argument; our technical editor works with all authors to ensure their style and grammar meet the standards of the *JGC*.²³

The journal *Press Start*, for which I have served as Editor-in-Chief since February 2022, has taken a series of measures since its creation to be more welcoming to NNES, from allowing community members to post on our Facebook page game studies-related information in different languages, to working with them since 2018 to translate our open call for papers into as many languages as possible. Our current multilingual call for papers includes eighteen languages: English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Urdu, French, Greek, Italian, Thai, Chinese, Arabic, German, Finnish, Swedish, Dutch, Polish, Turkish, and Slovak. We also included this note in those calls and now in the general guidelines on our website:

As a student-run journal with an international editorial board, we encourage non-native English speakers to submit their work. The Editorial Board will, to the best of our capac-

23 "Submissions," *Journal of Games Criticism*, section "Style and Grammar," §3, emphasis in the original, and section "Spelling," §1, <https://gamescriticism.org/submission-guidelines/>.

ity, help those submitting to meet the editorial guidelines for the journal and a good standard of academic English.²⁴

Although we only publish work in English, these measures have been a way for us to celebrate multilingual scholarship and to attract authors, peer reviewers, and readers from around the globe as we work to improve author diversity. That being said, 61% of the articles we published between 2018 and 2020 ($N = 28$) were written by authors located in the Anglosphere, a number rather similar to that of *Game Studies*.²⁵ While our measures do not currently translate into a different quantifiable outcome, I would highlight that change happens slowly and that the work *Press Start* (and other NNES-friendly journals) is doing is meaningful because it seeks to change thinking and attitudes in academic research.

Ironically, these differences indicate that less-known journals with fewer resources seem the most willing to help NNES. High-ranking journals receive so many submissions that they can afford to discriminate against authors based on their languages. Such practices indicate an abuse of authority and reflect the gatekeeping power of prestigious English-medium journals, whose editors can ultimately decide whose research counts and whose does not. While several scholars have argued that linguistic inequalities could be solved by offering academic writing courses to NNES, such a solution puts most of the work on NNES rather than on the people who benefit the most from the current system.²⁶ As Miguel Clavero reminds us, although we all benefit from having a common language in research, it is crucial

24 “Information for Authors,” *Press Start*, §4, <https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/information/authors>.

25 The number of articles written by authors located in the Anglosphere and published in *Press Start* has even been slowly increasing throughout the years (2018: 50%; 2019: 62.5%; 2020: 66.67%).

26 For an overview, see Uzuner, “Multilingual Scholars,” 260; see also Carmen Pérez-Llantada, Ramón Plo, and Gibson R. Ferguson, “‘You Don’t Say What You Know, Only What You Can’: The Perceptions and Practices of Senior Spanish Academics Regarding Research Dissemination in English,” *English for Specific Purposes* 30, no. 1 (2011): 27.

to remember that NNEs bear all the costs of this system. According to him, “the privilege of being a NEs should come with a responsibility to help [NNEs] colleagues with linguistic issues, and this responsibility affects individuals (e.g., editors and reviewers) as well as publishers.”²⁷ Azizah Alogali stresses that researchers and publishing institutions should keep in mind the historical and sociocultural backgrounds of NNEs when reviewing a manuscript. She further points out that “it is the responsibility of those who are doing the gatekeeping to open those gates” and give space to a plurality of voices.²⁸ This is especially vital because knowledge perpetuates itself, and the current system not only favors certain kinds of knowledge, but also certain experiences.²⁹ Meanwhile, Pat Strauss highlights that current writing standards should be examined to see if texts that are considered “inferior” are not simply different and reflective of the sociolinguistic reality of academia. Strauss interestingly argues that the relative conservatism over the use of English can be explained not only by the fact that some NEs “regard themselves as ‘owners’ and ‘custodians’ of English,” but also by the fact that new disciplines are emerging and fighting to be recognized in academia — such as game studies!³⁰ This situation can push scholars to be more traditional and to fear that challenging the current writing norms might confirm the status of their disciplines as inferior.³¹ It also pushes journals as institutions toward

27 Miguel Clavero, “Awkward wording. Rephrase’: Linguistic Injustice in Ecological Journals,” *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 25, no. 10 (2010): 552.

28 Azizah Alogali, “World Englishes: Changing the Paradigm of Linguistic Diversity in Global Academia,” *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 3, no. 1 (2018): 65.

29 I am drawing here on the work of Alisha Karabinus, who originally made this observation in relation to game studies scholarship and gender. See Alisha Karabinus, “We Are Building Histories: On the Need for Feminist Game Studies,” *Not Your Mama’s Gamer*, August 1, 2017, \$13, <http://www.nymgamer.com/?p=16637>.

30 Pat Strauss, “‘It’s Not the Way We Use English’ — Can We Resist the Native Speaker Stranglehold on Academic Publications?,” *Publications* 5, no. 4 (2017): 27, \$10.

31 *Ibid.*, 27, \$18.

certain trends: to chase impact factors and prestige, rather than to challenge exclusionary practices.

* * *

The anglicization of international research happens in parallel with that of national journals and conferences. To give a few examples, *Loading...*, the journal of the English-French bilingual Canadian Game Studies Association, very rarely publishes articles in French, except as part of special issues; in *G/A/M/E: The Italian Journal of Game Studies*, which is halfway between a national and an international journal, English publications are steadily replacing Italian; the Austrian conference Future and Reality of Gaming (FROG) held its first annual meeting in German in 2007 and, from 2008 onwards, has provided either German and English, or English-only tracks, with English as its main conference language; and depending on the year, the Chinese DiGRA chapter has organized conferences in Mandarin and English, or in English only. English is now seen as the language of choice even for national events outside the Anglo-sphere, arguably because it attracts scholars from other countries and gives more prestige to the events. Questioning the use of English as the main conference language in these circumstances is difficult without appearing as the killjoy willing to break the “community.” The justification given on the Chinese DiGRA website for the 2017 and 2018 conferences, which were held entirely in English, is telling: “We realize that many of our attendees are not native English speakers but believe that using English(es) as the conference language helps foster cohesion and better interaction during the conference, and strengthens Chinese DiGRA as a community.”³² The English language is often positively perceived as the *lingua franca* of academia — allowing us all to come together and exchange our ideas — a misconception that reinforces the myth of English as a *lingua nullius*,

32 “Chinese DiGRA 2018,” *Chinese DiGRA*, section “How to Submit,” <http://www.chinesedigra.org/conferences/chinese-digra-2018/>.

that is, an ahistorical, apolitical, and acultural language that is inherently neutral and serves everyone equally.³³ This kind of discourse hides the fact that language is more than a vehicle for knowledge: it is deeply embedded in local culture and identity; it is a matter of “collisions and repercussions far-reaching both ideologically and practically,”³⁴ and failing to recognize that can lead to “cultural, epistemic or linguistic loss.”³⁵ It also hides the fact that language can lead to unequal relationships and to linguistic tensions between speakers with different levels of English. We should not forget that language and imperialism are closely related. English has become a *lingua franca* in a world that has been dominated by Anglophone countries on the scientific, economic, military, and cultural levels since the nineteenth century, and especially by the United States following the Second World War.³⁶

Anna Wierzbicka has made a strong case for theorizing the influence of the English language on scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities, showing that English monolingualism leads to a culture-dependent perspective, with value concepts, frames of reference, and forms of attention that are shaped by English culture and its evolution. For her, reflecting on the English language from a historical and cross-linguistic perspective is a first move toward avoiding English becoming a “conceptual prison.”³⁷ Along the same lines, translator Karen Bennett has shown the challenges of translating research in the humanities (from Portuguese into English) without suppressing the original epistemology of the research.³⁸ According to her,

33 Robert Phillipson, “Myths and Realities of ‘Global’ English,” *Language Policy* 16 (2017): 316, 321–22.

34 Desrochers and Larivière, “Je veux bien,” 891.

35 Breeze, “Citing Outside the Community?,” 54.

36 Phillipson, “Myths and Realities,” 313–31.

37 Anna Wierzbicka, *Imprisoned in English: The Hazards of English as a Default Language* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 4.

38 Karen Bennett, “Epistemicide! The Tale of a Predatory Discourse,” *The Translator* 13, no. 2 (2007): 151–69, and Karen Bennett, “Towards an Epistemological Monoculture: Mechanisms of Epistemicide in European Research Publication,” in *English in Europe*, vol. 2: *English as a Scientific*

the process of making a text suitable for publication in the English-speaking world often involves not only the elimination of characteristic lexical features and ornament, but also the complete destruction and reconstruction of the entire infrastructure of the text, with far-reaching consequences as regards the worldview encoded in it.³⁹

Bennett argues that such a system is epistemicidal and contributes to the destruction of knowledge systems that do not translate well into English.⁴⁰ Finally, Rainer Enrique Hamel has highlighted the pressure faced by NNEs who wish to publish in high-ranking journals and who are often expected to adopt the discursive style, the research model, and the bibliography traditionally associated with the Anglosphere.⁴¹ Hamel shows that publishing in English implies more than simply picking one language over another: it impacts the questions we ask and the way we conduct research. To be clear, the fact that academic English follows a certain structure and style (direct and without ornament) is not a problem in itself; however, it becomes one if English is the only “valid” language to express our ideas. As Hamel writes, English monolingualism leads to research that is less rich and less innovative because it all starts from the same epistemology.⁴²

The need to publish in English to participate in the debates in game studies is somewhat paradoxical considering the dynamism of the discipline across five continents, the presence of

and *Research Language*, ed. Ramón Plo Alastrué and Carmen Pérez-Llantada (De Gruyter Mouton, 2015).

39 Bennett, “Epistemicide!,” 155.

40 Ibid., 154.

41 Rainer Enrique Hamel, “El campo de las ciencias y la educación superior entre el monopolio del inglés y el plurilingüismo: elementos para una política del lenguaje en América Latina” [The field of science and higher education between the monopoly of English and plurilingualism: elements for a language policy in Latin America], *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada* 52, no. 2 (2013): 343. On the management of citations, see also Breeze, “Citing Outside the Community?,” 37–58.

42 Hamel, “El campo de las ciencias,” 335–36.

regional DiGRA chapters (in 2021 alone, three new chapters were announced — DiGRA Brazil, DiGRA Spain, and DiGRA India), and recent calls to decenter game studies.⁴³ As Suresh Canagarajah observes, despite strong interest in local knowledge in Western academia, publishing practices still hamper the diffusion of this knowledge.⁴⁴ It is hard not to agree with him on that matter, and with Alogali, who summarizes the irony of the situation: “It turns out that most publishers would rather print the descriptions of international research from third-party ‘native speakers’ than to look to the original producers of this knowledge, however willing they may be to share their expertise.”⁴⁵ In addition, this obsession for English is rather surprising considering that two of the canonical texts in game studies — Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and Roger Caillois’s *Man, Play and Games* — were respectively written in Dutch and French, and became well known thanks to their translations. The work of French philosopher Jacques Henriot, which to this date has not been translated into English, has had a considerable influence on francophone game studies, and we can wonder what would have been its impact on the international development of game studies if a translation were available.⁴⁶ Similar remarks can be made about

43 See for example Mehdi Derfoufi, “Décentrer l’histoire du jeu vidéo ?” [Decentering the history of video games?], *De l’autre côté*, February 28, 2018, <https://delautrecote.org/2018/02/28/une-autre-histoire-du-jeu-video/>; Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin, “Regional Game Studies,” *Game Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016), <http://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/liboriussen>; Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Springer Nature, 2017); Phillip Penix-Tadsen, ed., *Video Games and the Global South* (ETC Press, 2019); Jaroslav Švelch, *Gaming the Iron Curtain: How Teenagers and Amateurs in Communist Czechoslovakia Claimed the Medium of Computer Games* (MIT Press, 2018); Mark J.P. Wolf, ed., *Video Games Around the World* (MIT Press, 2015); and G. Zhang, “Parallax View: ‘Year One’ of Chinese Game Studies?,” *Games and Culture* 11, no. 3 (2016): 332–38.

44 Suresh Canagarajah, “Reconstructing Local Knowledge,” *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 1, no. 4 (2002): 254.

45 Alogali, “World Englishes,” 64.

46 Jacques Henriot, *Le jeu [Play]* (Presses universitaires de France, 1969), and Jacques Henriot, *Sous couleur de jouer: la métaphore ludique* [Wearing

the work of Graciela Scheines, fundamental in the development of play studies in Argentina in the 1980s and 1990s, but sadly ignored in game studies due to the absence of an English translation of her work.⁴⁷ More recently, G. Zhang has analyzed the many points of contact between the work of Jin Shen Mi and Jen Chen, exclusively published in Chinese in 2006, and the work of well-known game scholars Alexander Galloway and Thomas Apperley published in English around the same time, highlighting the development of two parallel academic worlds.⁴⁸ As the above examples show, game studies happen in many languages, and we need to look beyond English if we truly want to listen to all the diverse voices in our discipline.

* * *

In summary, the language we use to express ourselves has a major influence on the way the knowledge we create is perceived and transmitted (or not) worldwide. Even though the use of only one language for international papers and conferences is practical, it is crucial to acknowledge that language

the colors of a player: the ludic metaphor] (José Corti, 1989). For recent work summarizing or building on the philosophy of Henriot, see “30 ans de Sciences du jeu à Villeteuse. Hommage à Jacques Henriot” [30 years of game science at Villeteuse. Homage to Jacques Henriot], ed. Aymeric Brody and Gilles Brougère, special issue, *Sciences du jeu* 1 (2013), <https://journals.openedition.org/sdj/195>; Maude Bonenfant, *Le libre jeu: réflexions sur l'appropriation de l'activité ludique* [The free play: reflections on the appropriation of the ludic activity] (Liber, 2016); and Thibault Philippette, “Gamification: Rethinking ‘Playing the Game’ with Jacques Henriot,” in *Rethinking Gamification*, ed. Mathias Fuchs, Sonia Fizek, Paolo Ruffino, and Niklas Schrape (meson press, 2014).

47 Graciela I. Scheines, *Juguetes y jugadores* [Toys and players] (Editorial de Belgrano, 1981), and Graciela I. Scheines, *Juegos inocentes, juegos terribles* [Innocent games, terrible games] (EUDEBA, 1998). For a brief overview of Scheines’s work, see Diego Maté, “Game studies: apuntes para un estado de la cuestión” [Game studies: notes for a state of the art], *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación* 98 (2020): 28.

48 Zhang, “Parallax View,” 332–38, and Jin Shen Mi and Jen Chen, 游戏东西: 电脑游戏的文化意义研究 [Gaming East and West: a study of cultural values of computer games] (Guangxi Normal University Press, 2006).

generates situations of privilege and exclusion. This is especially true in the world of research, where the reputation of scholars strongly depends on their high-impact publications. No matter how much my English skills have improved over the years, it will always take me more time and energy to read papers in English than in my native tongue, to write in English, and to proofread work I wrote in English (to choose the right preposition, to avoid using too many word connectors, and so on). I will always be more nervous to present my work in a conference held in English, especially in front of native speakers, just like I will always be less comfortable giving my opinion in a meeting held in English. These feelings are often hard for me to describe, but every time I feel bad at a conference because I am unable to “properly” answer a question in English, every time I feel overly visible because of my accent or unsuited to this space, I realize the important power dynamics that are revealed. I realize how language shapes academic communities and how feelings are a powerful source of knowledge.

I have examined in this chapter two main ways linguisticism occurs in game studies and in academia more broadly. It occurs through:

1. The anglicization of research and the need for NNEs to publish and present their work in English in order to be read, cited, and recognized as contributors to our discipline — English is what allows them to exist on the international level and, sometimes, on the national level as well (English = existence);
2. A gatekeeping process, especially within high-ranking journals, that makes it harder for NNEs to publish their work due to the absence of linguistic support from publishing institutions and the emphasis these institutions put on so-called “good” English (native-speaker-like academic English = publication privilege).

In parallel to this process, English continues to be presented as a neutral language situated outside culture and history, a *lingua*

nullius that serves everyone equally well and leads to cohesion and community.

I would like to conclude on a positive note, by taking a utopian stance and outlining how I envision game studies in relation to language. As highlighted by Paulo Freire, to be utopian is “to have your feet firmly planted on the ground, in such a way that foreseeing the future becomes a normal thing. You know the present so well, you can imagine a possible future of transformation.” Far from being a state of ignorance, utopianism is for him a “dialectical relationship between denouncing the present and announcing the future. To anticipate tomorrow by dreaming today.” It allows us “to go beyond tomorrow without being naively optimistic.”⁴⁹

I envision game studies as a place where we more consciously reflect on the influence of the English language and on the voices this has privileged and those it has left out. A place where linguistic privilege is recognized and where NNES feel comfortable publicly talking about the difficulties they face, so that we can all work toward improving the situation. A place where reviewers, editors, and other parties involved provide linguistic support to NNES to the best of their capacity and where no one gets their manuscript back with the comment: “Please have your manuscript revised by a native English speaker” (or worse, as exemplified on the Tumblr “Shit My Reviewers Say”).⁵⁰ I envision game studies as a place where we do not assume that all relevant scholarship is available in English and where we embrace the idea that all relevant scholarship simply *cannot* be available in English because language allows us to express our ideas differently through different ways of knowing. A place where learning a new language is encouraged and where multilingual scholars are seen as a “main pillar of global scholarship”⁵¹ because they explore new research avenues, “help reform, expand, and enrich

49 Paulo Freire and Ira Shor, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (MacMillan, 1987), 186–87.

50 “Shit My Reviewers Say,” *Tumblr*, <https://shitmyreviewerssay.tumblr.com/>.

51 Uzuner, “Multilingual Scholars,” 251.

the knowledge base of core disciplinary communities,”⁵² make accessible untapped resources, and navigate and bridge the gap between different epistemologies. A place where we consciously make an effort to cite scholars from outside the Anglosphere and to cite work written in different languages. Ultimately, I envision game studies as a place where it is completely fine and even good that not everyone knows or has access to the same “classics” and where we learn from each other.

* * *

Linguistic monopoly in academia is similar to a game of *Monopoly*, where people with more capital (be it linguistic or financial) keep doing better, often to the detriment of others, and end up monopolizing the game, and where it gets harder and harder to survive for those who do not adopt a similar strategy. I suggest changing these rules before it is “Game Over” for many of us.

52 Yongyan Li, “Writing for International Publication: The Perception of Chinese Doctoral Researchers,” *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching* 12 (2002): 2, quoted in Uzuner, “Multilingual Scholars,” 251.

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The Influence of Aesthetics and Semiotics on Game Research in Japan: An Interview with Matsumoto Kentaro

Douglas Schules

Overview

Matsumoto Kentaro¹ is a professor at Dokkyo University, where he specializes in *eizō kigōron* 映像記号論 (visual semiotics), digital media theory, and tourism communication theory. He served as the director of The Japanese Association for Semiotic Studies (JASS), the editorial director of the Japan Society of Tourism Science, and the director of public relations for the Japan Society for Communication. He is also Guest House Professor at Xi'an Engineering University in China. His research to date has examined computer games and digital maps, and his current research agenda has gravitated toward cross-border distribution of Japan–China culture and on the representation of ghosts in Japan.

¹ For Japanese scholars, I have utilized the conventions of Japanese name order, which lists family name first, then given name.

While his broader research agenda is concerned with the influences of media on society, his work on games has focused on embodiment and materiality. These themes appear most prominently in his role as editor of books concerned with the intersections between games and culture. *The Gamified World: Computer Game Semiotics*, for example, explores the ways in which games are reshaping the world through their influences on modern culture and society, with many of the included essays outlining ideas that have become influential in Japanese game scholarship. The more recent *Questions from Pokémon GO* address the relationships between games and society from a more interdisciplinary perspective, drawing from contributors in fields such as tourism, sociology, and geography to examine how the applications of new media technologies in games are adopted in these fields.

It should be noted that while a robust culture of criticism and commentary of games emerged in hobbyist and other communities in Japan as early as the 1980s, academic research on the subject has been heavily influenced by the country's game industry. As a result, humanities research such as that discussed in this interview, while present, has tended to take a back seat to research focused on issues relevant to the industry, such as technical development, marketing, and so forth.

Douglas Schules: Before we get to the topic of games, I was hoping you could provide a little about your academic background.

Matsumoto Kentaro: From 1996 to 1999, I was enrolled in the College of Liberal Arts at International Christian University, where I received instruction from Professor Ikeda Richiko, who specializes in communications research.² Furthermore, in 2000,

2 Some of Ikeda's work includes R. Ikeda and K. Matsumoto, eds., *Media Komyunikēshon-ron* [Media communication theory] (Nakanishiya Publishing, 2010), and R. Ikeda, *Media Riterashī no Genzai: Kōgai/Kankyōmondai kara Yomitoku* [The current state of media literacy: exploring pollution and environmental issues] (Nakanishiya Publishing, 2013).

I entered Kyoto University's Graduate School of Human and Environmental Studies, where I engaged in research on photography under the guidance of Professor Matsushima Tadashi, who is known for his friendship with Roland Barthes.³ Barthes, who died in 1980, was talking about analog photographs taken on film, but in the early 2000s digital cameras were just starting to take off, and he [Matsushima] saw what he called "photos" transform into something completely different as they went digital.

My master's thesis, "What Is Photography for Roland Barthes?," which I submitted in 2002, received the highest evaluation at the review stage, and it was later published by Nakanishiya Publishing Company in 2014 as a book with the same title. After I wrote my master's thesis, however, I had no intention whatsoever of limiting myself to research on Barthes's photography, because I realized that his discourse about it was of little use in thinking about digital photography. For this reason, my research focus shifted to media studies, and in my dissertation, I compared the discourse between semiotics and media theory from the viewpoints of "intermediary" and "extension." Since obtaining my PhD, I have studied the relationship between modern digital imaging technology and human beings in a variety of fields, including games, digital maps, smartphones, character businesses, and theme parks.

DS: Many of the researchers on games I work with outside of Japan come from different fields and methodological backgrounds. To what extent does the same apply in Japan?

3 Matsushima wrote extensively in Japanese and French; he is known for R. Yamaji, T. Matsushima, and K. Harada, *Monogatari no Meikyū: Misuteri no Shigaku* [The labyrinth of tales: The poetics of mystery] (Yūhikaku Publishing Company, 1986), and a Japanese translation with commentary of Barthes's *The Physiology of Taste*. Roland Barthes, *Baruto*, "Mikaku no Seirigaku" o Yomu — Tsuki Buriya Savuaran Shō [Reading Barthes's *The Physiology of Taste* — with excerpts from Brillat-Savarin], trans. T. Matsushima (Misuzu Publishing Company, 1985).

mk: It's a bit of a detour, but let me briefly explain my involvement in game research. In 2009, at the 29th meeting of The Japanese Association for Semiotic Studies held at Tokai University,⁴ I, together with a fiction researcher, Dr. Kawada Manabu,⁵ made a research presentation entitled "The Problems of Embodiment in Videogames," which was later published under the title "'Connected Me' and 'Represented Me': Possibilities for Semiotics and Media Theory Concerning Computer Games" in an edited volume touching on themes of communication, life, and the body.⁶

This was my first opportunity to engage in game research. After that, I received a call from Dr. Yoshioka Hiroshi, a professor of aesthetics at Kyoto University and current president of The Japanese Society for Aesthetics⁷. He was appointed as the chairman of the organizing committee for the 31st annual conference of The Japanese Association for Semiotic Studies, which was held in May 2011. As a result of discussions at the board of directors, we decided to design the conference around the theme of a "gamified world." With the help of Dr. Yoshida Hiroshi, who was, at the time, at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Ritsumeikan University and is now an associate professor at the University of Tokyo, we were able to organize several sessions on this topic, and the discussions that took place were compiled in the 2013 publication, *The Gamified World: Computer Game Semiotics*.⁸

All of this research I just mentioned addresses the issue of how games are reshaping our world, rather than discussing games, themselves, as objects. I think that awareness of this dif-

4 The program for the conference can be found at: https://www.jassweb.jp/pdf/jass_29th_conf.pdf.

5 Dr. Kawada Manabu is a Professor at Kyoto University of the Arts.

6 Nihon Kigō Gakkai, ed., *Inochi to karada no komyunikēshon iryō to kigō-gaku no taiwa* [Communication between life and the body: Dialogues between medicine and semiotics] (Keio University Press, 2011).

7 An English language version of the site, along with selected issues of the society's journals, may be found at: <http://www.bigakukai.jp/index-e.html>.

8 Nihon Kigō Gakkai, ed., *Gēmuka suru sekai konpyūtagēmu no kigō-ron* [The gamified world: Computer game semiotics] (Shinyosha, 2013).

ference was reflected in the theme of the conference and the book title: “the gamified world.”

Anyway, when *Pokémon GO* was released in 2016, I learned that it was a hot topic among sociologists and geographers engaged in tourism research. So, in collaboration with Dr. Endo Hideki, a tourism sociologist at Ritsumeikan University, and Dr. Kanda Koji, a humanities geographer at Ritsumeikan University, we published *Questions from Pokémon GO*.⁹

That’s not to say I’m a game researcher. Therefore, it is difficult to provide an accurate explanation of the development of game research in Japan. However, *The Gamified World* book I mentioned previously contains a discussion on this topic¹⁰ in which Dr. Yoshida explains the development of game research from the perspective of *kansei* studies.¹¹ This field shares many

9 Koji Kanda, Hideki Endo, and Kentaro Matsumoto, eds., *Pokemon GO kara no toi kakuchō sa reru sekai no riariti* [Questions from *Pokémon GO*: Realities of the extended world] (Shinyosha, 2018).

10 Hiroshi Yoshida, “Gēmu kenkyū no kore made to korekara — kansei gakusha no shiten kara” [The past and future of game studies: From the perspective of a Kansei scholar], in *Gēmuka suru sekai konpyūtāgēmu no kigō-ron* [The gamified world: Computer game semiotics], ed. Nihon kigō gakkai (Shinyosha, 2013).

11 *Kansei gaku* 感性学 (Kansei studies) can be translated as “aesthetics.” The more common word for aesthetics is *bi gaku* (lit. the study of beauty), although this term does not seem to imply the political undertones of the term in some Western examinations of the subject. Kansei studies advocates for a consideration of art and beauty in terms their intersections with fields such as politics, education, culture, and so forth. On page 162 of “Gēmu kenkyū no,” Yoshida discusses that while traditional aesthetics has studied the philosophy of beauty or art theory, kansei studies should build on these insights to incorporate methods of study from fields such as cognitive science and human engineering. A more expansive explanation of kansei studies can be found in Inomo’s article “Notes on ‘Kansei Studies,’” where it is positioned similarly to concepts such as *chiryo* (techne and phronesis) that “organize human practical action and arrange them in a clear and orderly manner. [...] Accordingly, the sites of practical knowledges, such as cultural design and cultural production, which function as knowledges that create new cultures, should be considered the site where the realization of kansei studies occurs.” Nobuyuki Inomo, “‘Kansei gaku’ oboegaki” [Notes on ‘Kansei Studies’], *Bungaku geijutsu*

concerns with semiotics, and for that reason I think it is valuable for my approach to research on games.

DS: Japan has a long history with the study of games, although this hasn't always been centered in universities or done by academics. As Dr. Yoshida notes in that chapter you mention, some of the earliest scholarship is located in the work of hobbyists. Why do you think this is?

MK: Given my background, as I've already mentioned, I must first say that my involvement in game research in this sense is limited. I am not a game researcher, nor have I consistently explored games and game history itself. Rather, I believe that games provide an extremely important perspective to considering the relationships between people and media, especially after the digital revolution, and it is to that extent that I am strongly interested in games.

DS: Let's talk a bit about these relationships a bit more from the perspective of semiotics. What can semiotics learn from studying games, and what can games learn from semiotics?

MK: Personally, I have been able to adopt a new perspective of the field of semiotics by examining games, and I think that thinking about games is very important for updating semiotics. A semiotics perspective is very useful in thinking about game acceptance. As I mentioned in my book *Digital Semiotics*,¹² the acceptance of a game by a player is realized through two circuits:

1. representation of the world through audiovisual symbols (symbolic dimension)

bunka 26, no. 2 (2015): 66. Kansei studies, then, positions aesthetics as artistic activities that are also demonstrations of certain types of cognition.

12 K. Matsumoto, *Dejitaru kigōron* — “*shikaku ni jūzoku suru shokkaku*” *ga hikiyoseru riariti* [Digital semiotics: Reality brought about by the sense of touch's dependency on the visual] (Shinyosha, 2019).

2. extension of humanity through controllers (media dimension)

The intervention of the player into the game world is premised on the synchronicity between the behavior of the audiovisual symbol that the game console recreates and the operation of the controller, an extension of the player's nervous system. But the process can also be organized as a synergy between semiotic mechanisms influenced by the perception of the game world and media mechanisms that link the player's body to hardware. In my case, I have tried to bridge the two academic perspectives of semiotics and media theory, and I feel that games are a good way to do so.

DS: You're saying that games are multimodal objects, correct? How common of an approach is this in Japanese scholarship dealing with games, and what insights have researchers advanced in this regard?

MK: I feel it is difficult to give an overall picture of the discussions in Japan, but basically, as you mentioned, I think that the view that games are multimodal is becoming common.

DS: Who would you say are the major influences on games scholarship in Japan?

MK: I believe that game research is a very interdisciplinary field. I feel that it has been established by incorporating diverse viewpoints, and so I think it is difficult to only identify a single influential person. Personally, however, I pay attention to the research of both Dr. Yoshida and Dr. Matsunaga Shinji. Both are researchers in the field of aesthetics, but I think that their research greatly contributes to understanding games in the humanities. I also think that their arguments apply not just to games, but also to digital media in general.

Dr. Yoshida was instrumental in helping me organize JASS's 31st annual meeting, and I'm indebted to him for his assistance. I

have already mentioned his contributions in kansei studies, but in chapter two of *The Gamified World*,¹³ he draws upon semiotic theories of Charles W. Morris to develop an argument that can be described as the ontology of games. I find this approach very stimulating.

In 2018, Dr. Matsunaga published *Videogame Aesthetics*,¹⁴ which I think is also a very important document.¹⁵ You could say that this is a book on game research that should be read [by scholars] in Japan. Dr. Matsunaga's discussion of video games as behavioral simulations in an earlier work¹⁶ is also valuable and, I think, applicable to digital media in general. Nowadays, both in games and other domains, "an experience" is often simulated and reconstructed in a different technical context than it really is. For example, the experience of playing tennis will be technically restructured in *Wii Sports*. Likewise, the experience of watching a movie or DJing will be reconfigured through a smartphone app, or the scary experiences of the characters in

13 H. Yoshida, "Bideogēmu no kigōronteki bunseki — 'sukurin no nijūka' o megutte" [The semiotic analysis of videogames — Concerning the duplication of screens], in *Gēmuka suru sekai konpyūtagēmu no kigō-ron* [The gamified world: Computer game semiotics], ed. Nihon Kigō Gakkai (Shinyosha, 2013).

14 Shinji Matsunaga, *Bideogēmu no bigaku* [Videogame aesthetics] (Keio University Press, 2018).

15 In a blog post on his website entitled "*Videogame Aesthetics* is this kind of book," Matsunaga describes the book as an extension of his doctoral dissertation and synthesis on his work translating Jesper Juul's *Half-Real* and Nelson's Goodman's *Languages of Art*, writing that "The book is a reinterpretation of Juul's formulation of the dual nature of videogames—rules and fiction—and their mutual relationships from the standpoint of Goodman's semiotic theory." He states that the book can be read as a sequel to *Half-Real*, seeing the analysis applicable not just to videogames aesthetics but, more broadly, the aesthetics of popular culture. To that end, initial chapters serve as an introduction to English-language terms used in modern aesthetic analysis. Shinji Matsunaga, "'Bideogēmu No Bigaku' Wa Kon'na-Pon" [Videogame aesthetics is this kind of book], *Game Studies & Aesthetics*, October 18, 2018, <http://9bit.99ing.net/Entry/89/>.

16 Nihon Kigō Gakkai, ed., *Ongaku Ga Owaru Toki Sangyō/Tekunoroji/Gensetsu* [When the music ends: Industry, technology, and discourse] (Shinyosha, 2015).

the movie *Jaws* can be restructured through the attraction at USJ [Universal Studios Japan]. I have been using Dr. Matsunaga's work to explore how this "technical synthesis of experiences" permeates modern society, and I think one of the best examples of this can be seen in changes wrought by the pandemic. In the COVID-19 era, things were restructured as "online-," "remote-," or "virtual-" whatever, but virtual tourism could also be redefined in that context.

As for game researchers from outside Japan, the work of Jesper Juul has been utilized, and about a decade ago I was referring to his books *Half-Real* (2005) and *A Casual Revolution* (2009).

DS: Broadly speaking, what types or categories of games research is being pursued in Japan today?

MK: *Questions from Pokémon GO* had contributions from researchers across diverse fields, including semiotics, literary theory, visual culture, technical philosophy, tourism sociology, geography, digital maps, content tourism, and Islamic tourism research, to name a few. I think that this project suggests the interdisciplinary nature and breadth of game research. In a situation where *gēmutekina sōzō ryoku* ゲーム的な想像力 (game-like imagination) is spreading socially, as the concept of gamification suggests, attention to games will be important in every field. In fact, I think that it has a certain degree of importance in the context of my tourism research.

In addition to the "casual revolution" that Juul mentions, it can be pointed out that game-like imagination continues to be seeded across society in part because gamification is being tested out across its various domains.

DS: What are the current issues being discussed in the field?

mk: In the field of tourism, examples of gamification include stamp rallies,¹⁷ mystery-solving games, and airline member rating systems. All of these can be seen as demonstrations of the social diffusion of game-like imagination. A stamp rally, for example, is a game to collect stamps at various tourist spots. Depending on the stamps you collect, you may receive some kind of privilege or reward, such as a present. On the other hand, a mystery-solving game is a game set at a certain venue, where you can experience the story by solving the questions. SCRAP is a well-known company in this field, and I met its representative, Mr. Kato Takao, around 2008, and I have been closely monitoring his development.

Recently, I have been exchanging opinions in this field with Ito Hidetaka of PK Theater,¹⁸ which deals with many mystery-solving games, and I have been making similar games in seminars in cooperation with the tourism department of Kurashiki City.¹⁹

ds: These sound like examinations of non-digital games. I find this interesting because a lot of the research seen in major English-language journals often comes from the assumption that

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- 17 In this case, “stamps” refer to *inkan*, or the seal left by an ink stamp. The modern iteration of stamp rallies originates in the 1970s, although according to Shachihata’s Stamp Rally Research Institute (Stamp Rally Research Institute, “Sutanpurari No Rekishi” [The history of Stamp Rallies], *Shachihata Stamp Rally*, archived at: https://web.archive.org/web/20160917153051/https://www.shachihata.co.jp/stamprally_service/lab/2.html), some form of this can be seen in practices such as religious pilgrimage, where penitents traveled to temples to dedicate sutras they had written, and received signatures as proof of their visits. This is anecdotally supported by Murakami Tetsuki, a hobbyist researcher on government and religious seals, who notes that in the beginning of the Showa period (1926–1989) these signatures were replaced by seals. Tetsuki Murakami, “Sutanpubūmu to Goshuin” [The stamp boom and goshuin], *Kokon goshuin kenkyūshitsu*, July 3, 2017, <https://goshuin.net/history-05/>.
- 18 A link to the PK Theater’s homepage can be found here: <http://www.pkth.net/>.
- 19 Examples of these games and seminars can be found at <https://media-kurashiki.jimdofree.com/>.

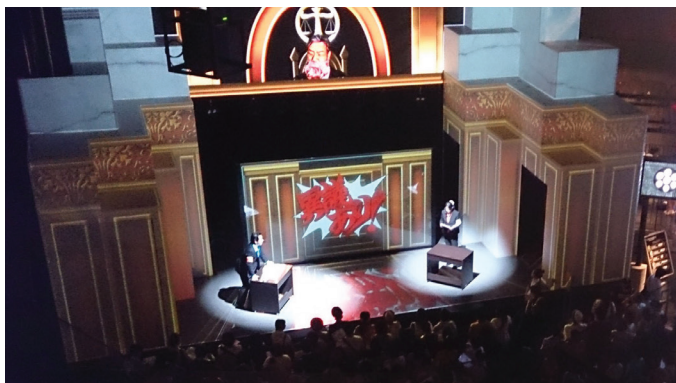


Fig. 30.1. *Ace Attorney: Acquittal Challenge* in Joypolis event experience.

“games” means “digital games” or “video games.” Board games or puzzles are not the typical types of games analyzed. What are your thoughts on the importance of non-digital games?

МК: As you say, many studies have been directed toward “digital games” or “video games.” However, I am also interested in the development of other “non-digital games.” PK Theater that I mentioned worked on one project a few years ago, called “*Ace Attorney: Acquittal Challenge* in Joypolis.”²⁰

Maybe you know Capcom’s *Ace Attorney* series. This live-action game was based on *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, and the venue was Joypolis[, an amusement park] in Odaiba. The story develops in real space, not in the digital game, and it was very interesting how the worldview of digital games was reconstructed in physical space. In today’s media-mixed environment, digital games are sometimes reconstructed in the real world, and in this sense, I feel that it is meaningful to look at

²⁰ Further details on *Ace Attorney: Acquittal Challenge* can be found at the following URL: <http://www.pkth.net/gyakuten-sai/>.



Fig. 30.2. *Ace Attorney: Acquittal Challenge* in Joypolis event experience.

them in a cross-sectoral manner rather than separating them into distinct categories of digital and non-digital.

DS: You've been working on research related to China. Can you tell us a little more about this and its importance to Japanese game studies?

MK: In recent years, I have had more chances to give lectures and teach intensive courses in China. With respect to game research, Deng Jianshi of Peking University has asked me to contribute a chapter to a book on game studies in Japan.²¹ The book itself is a Chinese translation of a collection of Japanese game research papers written in Japan since the 1980s. It contains work by quite influential seminal researchers, such as Nakagawa Daichi, Ōsawa Masachi, Yoshimi Shun'ya, Azuma Hiroki, Yoshida Hiroshi, and Nakazawa Shin'ichi.²² I expect that academic exchanges

21 Information on the book can be found at <https://book.douban.com/subject/35283953/>.

22 A list of the chapters included in the book appears below, although I have done my best to locate the original sources and provide citations for them, including online links when available. They are included in

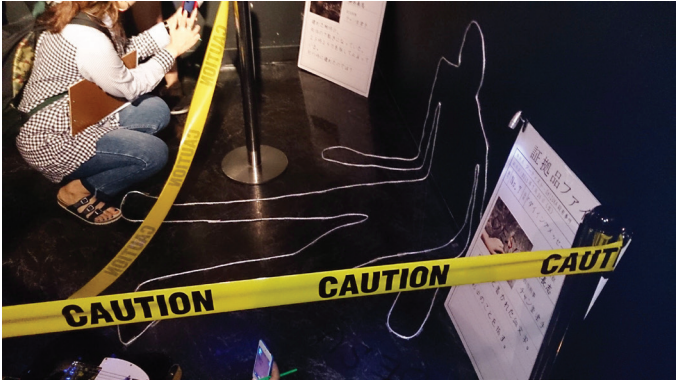


Fig. 30.3. Photos from the *Ace Attorney: Acquittal Challenge* in Joypolis event experience.

between Japan and China in the field of game research will increase in the future.

Elsewhere, my friend Ito, who I mentioned before is head of PK Theater, has put *Identity V: Fifth Personality* by Chinese developer NetEase Games on the 2.5-dimension stage in Japan.²³

the works cited at the end of the interview. Nakagawa Daichi, "How Japanese Games Have Been Discussed: The Goals of Game Criticism and Research" (2018); Nakazawa Shin'ichi, "Game Freak Plays with Bugs" (1984); Ōsawa Masachi, "Otaku Theory: Cult, Others, and Identity" (1992); Sawano Masaki, "The Merchant Torneko and the Economics of Monsters" (1993); Yoshimi Shun'ya, "Multilayered Media and Children's Reality" (1995); Wada Atsuhiko, "The Act of Reading Media: Videogames and Representations of War" (2000); Yahiro Shigeki, "Semiotic Discourses of Love: 'Eroticism' in Videogames" (2004); Azuma Hiroki, "The Inability to Stop before *Moe*: About AIR" (2007); Matsumoto Kentaro, "The Composition of Sports Games: What Do They Emulate in Real Life?" (2013); Hiroshi Yoshida, "The Experience of Death in Games: Revisiting the Controversy on Gamic Realism" (2016); Yoshida Hiroshi, "Gameplay as Counter: For the Theory of Gamic Realism 2.0" (2017); Yoshida Hiroshi, "Metagamic Realism: Digital Games as a Platform for Criticism" (2018); and Yang Junxiao, "Chinese Game Culture: Chinese Game Players Dream of Science Fiction" (2016).

- 23 2.5-dimension, or 2.5D, refers to stage productions and musicals that draw from Japanese creative properties manga, anime, and video games. Further details in English may be found in materials published by the

The cross-cultural and media trends in this area are also interesting.

DS: What are your thoughts on the future directions of research on games?

MK: Recently, there has been an increase in joint research on tourism (with sociologists and cultural anthropologists), and from the perspective of game research, I believe that the theme of games will become an increasingly important research subject in a variety of fields.

As a case in point, I recently had the opportunity to write a review of a book titled *The Things that Connect Us Now*, edited by Yamada Yoshihiro and Okamoto Ryōsuke.²⁴ While this book contains a range of chapters on diverse themes, Suzuki Ryōtaro's chapter²⁵ on the geo-location game *Dragon Quest Walk*²⁶ is an example of this direction. A tourist scientist, he basically

Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association (*Japan 2.5-Dimensional Musical Association*, https://www.j25musical.jp/user/img/download/J2.5D_pamphlet.pdf) or in Japanese at: https://www.trans.co.jp/column/trend/oshikatsu_25dstage/.

24 Yoshihiro Yamada and Ryōsuke Okamoto, eds., *Ima Watashitachi O Tsunagu Mono: Kakuchō Genjitsu Jidai No Kankō to Media* [The things that connect us now: Tourism and media in the era of augmented reality] (Koubundou, 2021).

25 Ryotaro Suzuki, "Sumātofon no naka no omyage — hukugen suru materiariti to hoji sa reru pafōmansu" [Souvenirs in smartphones: Diminishing materiality and maintaining performance], in *Ima Watashitachi O Tsunagu Mono: Kakuchō Genjitsu Jidai No Kankō to Media* [The things that connect us now: Tourism and media in the era of augmented reality], ed. Yoshihiro Yamada and Ryōsuke Okamoto (Koubundou, 2021).

26 *Dragon Quest Walk* is a smartphone game developed by COLOPL and published by Square-Enix in 2019. It is playable only in Japan, and similar to *Pokémon GO* in purpose, but instead of visiting gyms or Pokéstops in set locations determined by the developer, players undertake quests whose destination points they can determine themselves. The game does, however, identify famous landmarks or cultural sites in each prefecture, such as Tokyo Tower in Tokyo, and encourages players to visit them by rewarding them with virtual souvenirs they can gift to other players.

analyzed the data related to souvenirs in the game, which for researchers in the field of tourism who have explored their social function is very intriguing in light of their role as simulated objects in the game.

Essentially, game-like imagination is spreading into society in various ways, and by expanding this outside games studies, [Japanese] researchers in various fields will be interested in games and have room to analyze them.

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“There’s Nothing Written about It”: Disciplinary, Regionality, and the Ghosts Haunting Game Studies

Alison Harvey

Accidental Historiography, or: On Bumbling into a Nascent Field

By luck of timing, I began my graduate career and engaged in my first foray into studying games at a moment where academic interest in the form was just budding. Espen Aarseth staked a claim on beginning the field with the creation of the *Game Studies* journal, proclaiming 2001 to be “Year One of Computer *Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field.”¹ Despite this claim, research on video games has been traced back at least as far as 1985 with Mary Ann Buckles’s doctoral thesis on *Adventure*,² but a relative absence of research in the intervening years meant in 2005 it was possible for an English-language master’s student to express an interest in video games and then read nearly everything written in the field as a

1 Espen Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

2 Mary Ann Buckles, “Interactive Fiction: The Computer Storygame ‘Adventure’” (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 1985).

whole. It is from this very specific happenstance that I explore in this chapter the canons and canyons of game studies, and highlight the significance of regionality and disciplinarity by considering the role of Canadian scholarship and activism in the field. While canonical game studies are works that are recognized as core and fundamental to the field, canyons refer to bodies of scholarship that have been overlooked or not seen as of primary significance to game studies. Based on these insights I argue for the collective need in our field to acknowledge who is missing but actually present — absences I call “ghosts” — in our scholarship, enacting the “fucking the canon” that Rebecca Harrison has called for in film studies.³ Only through this process can we become inclusive and also widely acknowledge how the field has always been diverse.

As reflexivity is vital to historiography, I will begin by setting the scene for this accidental historiography. Several contextual and biographical factors are relevant in addition to timing. I was enrolled in the MA Media Studies program in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montréal, Canada, where my exposure to diverse schools of thought from cultural studies to critical technology approaches to political economy perspectives mitigated any pressure or desire for disciplinarity in my engagements with game studies. I also came to graduate school from a practice-based undergraduate program focused on media-making and creative writing, where I had limited opportunities to engage with critical theory, not to mention the politics of epistemology. Finally, I began my explorations with all the privileges of a white, cisgender, able-bodied person and all the vulnerabilities of being queer, female, and the first in my working-class family to attend university, and I now revisit this experience from the much less insecure vantage point of

3 Rebecca Harrison, “Fuck the Canon (Or, How Do You Solve a Problem like Von Trier?): Teaching, Screening and Writing about Cinema in the Age of #MeToo,” *MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture*, November 9, 2018, <https://maifeminism.com/fuck-the-canon-or-how-do-you-solve-a-problem-like-von-trier-teaching-screening-and-writing-about-cinema-in-the-age-of-metoo/>.

holding a tenured associate professor position. The sensation of a “lack of belonging” in games as explored by Emma Vossen⁴ did not come so much from encountering a male-dominated field at that point as from my lack of both educational and cultural capital in academic spaces. In 2005, my interest in studying games was very much based on observing that video games had been a childhood pleasure that for me had evaporated in the 1990s; my disengagement from games and inkling that this was related to gender was not a source of concern at the time, but of inspiration. This quickly changed.

Over the course of my MA I wrote a nearly 36,000 word thesis entitled “The Name of the Game: Building Methodologies for the Study of Video Game Theory” that I have used here as a key reference for verifying my memories of wading into the early work on games. In this embarrassingly earnest document inspired by how “the foundational work of the medium is riddled with hostile attacks on the disciplinary assumptions brought to bear by scholars of narrative, new media theory, and textual analysis,” I considered how “a canon continues to evade its researchers, resulting in circular argument and a number of misunderstood concepts.”⁵ I did not initially intend to write about the state of game studies and the infamous narratology versus ludology scuffle, but my proposed project examining what appeared to me to be a masculinization of games was stalled at the point of the literature review. At this stage, what I was encountering in the field did not provide an adequate corpus for such a project, eliciting in me that common refrain of those without knowledge of how to construct a project around a gap: “There’s nothing written about it!” My supervisor, a critical feminist scholar of communication technology, wisely advised me to explore the stakes and contours of the existing research terrain in games,

4 Emma Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018), 178.

5 Alison Harvey, “The Name of the Game: Building Methodologies for the Study of Video Game Theory” (MA thesis, Concordia University, 2007), 2–3.

and that is how I found myself lamenting how the extant scholarship on gender and race, such as work by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins,⁶ Helen W. Kennedy,⁷ and David J. Leonard⁸ were side-lined in the fiery treatises privileging the simulational over the representational in games. These are the “canyons”—the absences, gaps, and overlooked grounds of a field that are the by-product of the creation and reification of canons, what Adrienne Shaw refers to as “ahistories” of games⁹ and what Amanda Phillips calls “scholarly negging” in game studies, where the discourse of the field creates an actively hostile climate for the work of marginalized scholars.¹⁰ As both of these scholars highlight and I will discuss further below, these erasures and effacements in particular obscure the contributions of marginalized scholars and those working on political topics, creating the ghosts of game studies.

Back in 2005–2007, my excursions into game studies were shaped by engagement not with those researching ludic texts and worlds but with my peers studying topics related to Canadian communication policy and media reporting of conflict, and by my committee of critical communications scholars with expertise on information and communication technologies, mobile media, and cultural studies. This was not because I was the only person in the city researching games. Quite to the contrary, there are multiple historiographies to be written about Canadian game studies from other accidental early researchers.

6 Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (MIT Press, 1998).

7 Helen W. Kennedy, “Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis,” *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>.

8 David J. Leonard, “Not a Hater, Just Keepin’ it Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies,” *Games and Culture* 1, no 1 (2006): 83–88.

9 Adrienne Shaw, “Are We There Yet? The Politics and Practice of Intersectional Feminist Game Studies,” *Not Your Mama’s Gamer*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.nymgamer.com/?p=17528>.

10 Amanda Phillips, “Negg(at)ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 12–36.

In the mid-2000s there were already branching pathways even just in the Montréal academic context, where Bernard Perron was both leading game studies scholarship (for instance, co-editing with Mark J.P. Wolf *The Video Game Theory Reader*¹¹) and teaching and mentoring cohorts of French students eager to study games. Even more locally, I was wading through the scholarship in tandem with the activities of the GameCODE project, led by Bart Simon in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia, but I didn’t interface with that work, for reasons precisely to do with the affective charge exerted within the canon-building and legitimacy-creating activities of early game studies work.

Despite GameCODE’s focus on questions of games’ cultural impact, and the significance of Simon’s¹² and Perron’s work¹³ in my discussions of broadening game studies in the thesis, I didn’t feel comfortable inserting myself into these communities. Truthfully the reason was a growing feeling of intimidation about my “game chops” — I became worried about the validity of my interest in the field when I saw labs filled with researchers playing game titles I had never touched. As noted, my desire to study homosociality, masculinity, and games was borne of my childhood gameplay and the realization that while my cousin and I had stopped playing, the boys and men in my life had not. In retrospect, there was a relationship between my sensation of fraudulence, a loss of connection to gaming, the industry’s investments in male audiences, and the value judgments about what constitutes a game in the scholarship I was grappling with. Unlike today, there were no cultural or academic touchstones for unpacking these impressions. To compensate, I began to play a range of games, in the process kindling a love for *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) that would open my eyes to the (anti-)sociality of online games. While this ended up

11 Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, eds, *The Video Game Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2003).

12 Bart Simon, “Beyond Cyberspatial Flaneurie: On the Analytic Potential of Living With Digital Games,” *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 62–67.

13 Wolf and Perron, *The Video Game Theory Reader*.

being a productive coping strategy, the pressure I felt to invest in mainstream gaming must be recognized as having potentially exclusionary effects, which I will discuss below.

Several things stood out to me as a very junior game scholar about the available scholarship, most of it comprising what we characterize as the ludology vs. narratology debates:

1. It did not provide a way for me to study what I had initially identified as my interest, the masculine homosocial nature of gaming in adulthood and its exclusionary impacts.
2. It was often characterized by an aggressive tone comfortable with bold pronouncements about (a) the novelty, value, and uniqueness of games, and (b) the fundamental academic misunderstanding of their study.

At the time I did not make the connection between the masculinization of gaming as a pursuit and the machismo of these arguments, the nestling of game studies within games culture that Emma Vossen¹⁴ so elegantly articulates, and the parallels between debates about what constitutes “real games” and “real game studies.”¹⁵ It is clear fifteen years later how the consequence of this is implicit value judgements about the legitimacy of claiming the title of a game player and indeed the identity of a game scholar. Even without coming to these conclusions, the definitional and disciplinary work that constituted the bulk of the scholarship available for me to read in 2005–2007 shaped my formative position as a researcher, leading me to study mainstream console and computer games in my master’s thesis and to adopt a confrontational and defensive voice that characterized the work of many students and young researchers for years — the voice that justifies the field as well as one’s suitability to study it, usually through references to ludic knowledges and dispositions but also to games with high-profit margins that, as

14 Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming.”

15 Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games: What’s Legitimate and What’s Not in Contemporary Videogames* (MIT Press, 2019), xxii.

a consequence, normalized a sort of AAA-centric game studies for many years.

While this game studies “us” versus “them” dynamic¹⁶ may have initially alienated me from potential connections with the Anglophone and Francophone games scene in my hometown, it also propelled me toward finding other academic shelters in Canada. Before I move into a discussion of the development of Canadian game studies, I want to pause here to reflect on the concerns that arise from recounting this early history of the field. Specifically, while my journey continued into game studies as well as back into game play, we might imagine there are others who encountered these explicit discussions and performances of legitimacy in the field and did not proceed, pushed out by sentiments of not living up to the expectations of what it takes to study this form perpetuated within early game studies as much as in game culture. I am not simply imagining this possibility—I have met researchers in communication, media studies, education, and sociology who have waved off games as something beyond their area of expertise, backing away (sometimes literally) from the prospect of including games in their studies of online interaction, digital culture, and educational technologies. Along with the early scholars who wrote about games but not ludology, falling into canyons of non-legitimated research rather than constituting central canons of game studies, I consider these students and researchers to be ghosts haunting our field, spectral figures that did not become the corpus or the corporeality of the development of game studies.

Marginal Research in a Marginal Place

Naming absences—be they canyons of underacknowledged areas of work or ghosts of those who were not included—is as important as articulating the initial building blocks of the field because they both leave their traces in the shape of this field today. I want to continue my reflections by tracing the early ori-

16 Ibid., xxiv.

gins of Canadian game studies from my perspective as a student who found herself by happenstance at a significant launch point of what has become a very active, critical, and engaged region of game studies.

Melanie Swalwell's edited collection on local game histories is animated by her observation that "game history did not unfold uniformly and the particularities of space and place matter, yet most digital game and software histories are silent with respect to geography."¹⁷ Equally true is the impact of locality and region on game studies. While my master's thesis was fixated on the canonical ventures of primarily Nordic game scholars, it was equally interested in the boundary-breaking scholarship appearing in the flourishing of specific venues for research in games. This included the creation of the journal *Games and Culture* and the publication of critical works engaging with the relationship between culture and technology, such as those by Constance Steinkuehler¹⁸ and T.L. Taylor.¹⁹ While in the early days I workshopped my work in disciplinary spaces such as the International Conference on Narrative (where attendees were supportive but also perplexed by the ludology versus narratology battle framing for the field), what marked a significant turn for me was the establishment of the Canadian Game Studies Association (CGSA) conference in 2006 and the launch the following year of *Loading...: The Canadian Journal of Game Studies*. Suddenly I was able to leave aside my preoccupation with Danish, Norwegian, and Finnish researchers as there was a vibrancy of game studies closer to home, particularly in spaces where mainstream game play was not the focal point.

While there is no formal institutional history of the CGSA, I can refer readers to, I can say that as a junior scholar my approach to game studies was shaped by this association, its leadership, and the work of its members. Canadian game studies immedi-

17 Melanie Swalwell, ed., *Game History and the Local* (Palgrave, 2021).

18 Constance Steinkuehler, "The Mangle of Play," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 3 (2006): 199–213.

19 T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (MIT Press, 2006).

ately took a tone that was different from the game studies scholarship I had examined in my thesis. For one thing, it was radically and enthusiastically interdisciplinary, and from even the earliest days of its formation it was less invested in definitional practices and conceptual battlegrounds as it was with the myriad lived realities of game play and production. It was also profoundly critical and specifically feminist, created and led by two scholars at the forefront of growing not only local game studies but also gender and games scholarship that challenged essentializing approaches to boys’ and girls’ play.²⁰ And thirdly, it was and remains an association that is focused on mentorship and support for junior scholars, as articulated in the introduction to the inaugural issue of *Loading...* — “a further intent of these meetings was to broaden our relationships with others working in this area in order to better support our graduate students with a wider range of potential advisors, supervisors, teachers and examiners.”²¹ The first issue of the journal featured nearly two dozen papers based on talks at that first conference, demonstrating the commitment to developing and promoting work in diverse areas of specialization and using a range of methods.

These characteristics of early Canadian game studies had a strong influence on my development as a scholar, enabling me to establish a doctoral project focused on questions of gender as I initially intended. But beyond the many opportunities it created for me individually, it also created the grounds for the formation of networks of peers and collaborators across the country. While I am sure there are critiques to be levied at this foundation of a national hub — for instance, the official bilingualism of Canada is not fully represented despite ongoing efforts to improve

20 See for example Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, “Gender, Simulation and Gaming: Research Review and Redirections,” *Simulation & Gaming* 41, no. 1 (2010): 52–71, and Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, “Girls@Play: An Ethnographic Study of Gender and Digital Gameplay,” *Feminist Media Studies* 2, no. 11 (2011): 167–79.

21 Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, “Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of ‘Loading...’” *Loading...* 1, no. 1 (2007), <https://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/25/24p.1>.

this — these initiatives without a doubt contributed not only an academic home for diverse emerging and established scholars across the country but also provided the terrain for the development of myriad critical, cross-disciplinary, and important projects, initiatives, and activities beyond it.

Within the spatial constraints of this chapter it is not possible to exhaustively list the plethora of Canadian game studies activities occurring since the 2000s — readers are encouraged to consult the CGSA, *Loading...*, and materials mentioned below to dip their toes in this exciting work — but I want to cite three examples giving a taste of its varied critical identity and interdisciplinary spirit. In terms of platforms hosting engagements with game criticism, Canada is home to *First Person Scholar*,²² a middle-state publication hosted at the University of Waterloo inviting writing on games from “developers, scholars, critics, or enthusiasts” with “particular interest in submissions from people of color, queer folks, women, and non-binary individuals.”²³ Canada is also the site of a long-standing tradition of embedded, ethnographic, and active research with game-makers in studios and networking spaces, establishing some key research on indie games as outlined in Felan Parker’s review of indie game studies.²⁴ And as noted above, Canadian game studies has long been an active site of research on gender and feminism in games, hosting two major international and interdisciplinary networks (Feminists in Games and Refiguring Innovation in Games) dedicated to “inventing equity” in games.²⁵ Within these three examples and across Canadian game studies there is an evident commitment to inclusion and to transformations of hegemonic

22 *First Person Scholar*, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/>.

23 For more, see Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming.”

24 Felan Parker, “Indie Game Studies Year Eleven,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies*, <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/683>.

25 For more, see Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, “Tipping Points: Marginality, Misogyny, and Videogames,” *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 29, no. 2 (2013): 72–85.

games culture, collaborative and multi-method approaches, and engagements from researchers across disciplines and fields.

Although these are areas of strength and leadership, I want to conclude by reflecting on a paradox of this flourishing and diverse regional scene. Despite its scholarly as well as artistic and activist might, I have observed that the status of Canadian work has remained largely marginal even within game studies; when it is recognized it is applauded but too often I have noted gaps in citation practices that overlook the early and ongoing contributions of this body of work. This is part of the broader marginalization and erasure of contributions made by feminist, critical race, and queer researchers that Kishonna L. Gray addresses with the #CiteHerWork campaign²⁶ and her scholarship more broadly.²⁷ Writing of feminist memory and of often-overlooked feminists of color, Sara Ahmed underlines the importance of citation as a politics, noting that “citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow.”²⁸ The ongoing marginality of Canadian game studies, with all its experimentation, activism, and polyvocal collaboration — creating ghosts of a whole area of work that began early and only continued to

26 Kishonna L. Gray, “#CiteHerWork: Marginalizing Women in Academic and Journalistic Writing,” *Kishonna Gray*, December 28, 2015, archived at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200812172137/https://www.kishonnagray.com/manifestmy-reality/citeherwork-marginalizing-women-in-academic-and-journalistic-writing>, and Nyasha Junior, “Researching Gaming and Showing Why Citations Matter,” *Women in Higher Education*, August 3, 2021, <https://www.wihe.com/article-details/194/researching-gaming-and-showing-why-citations-matter/>.

27 Kishonna L. Gray, *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* (Louisiana State University Press, 2020); Kishonna L. Gray, *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live: Theoretical Perspectives from the Virtual Margins* (Taylor and Francis, 2014); Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard, eds., *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Social Injustice* (University of Washington Press, 2018); and Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen, eds., *Feminism in Play* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

28 Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 17.

bloom — contributes to the ongoing picture of game studies as a specific, delimited pathway, one that is bounded and closed. As a supervisor of student work on games, I have seen countless times how this contributes to the idea that there are gaps in the scholarship and then rehashes of the early and at this point decidedly uninteresting debates. It is for this reason that the future of our field depends on a confrontation of its epistemic legacies through the collective act of fucking the canon that encourages journeys into the canyons instead.

Epistemic Violence and Why Fucking the Canon is the Future

My recollections of the scant scholarship and the power of disciplinary boundaries created in the process of legitimizing game studies might seem quite disconnected from the vibrancy and variety of the field in 2025 (fortunately!), but I wish to conclude by arguing that this origin story continues to haunt the scholarship to this day. Mia Consalvo and Christopher Paul²⁹ compellingly argue that game studies history has entrenched the dominance of the study of particular genres, with political fallout from the border-drawing of game studies exemplified by the discounting of popular titles such as *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000) as simulations rather than real games. This is likely to have produced a range of ghosts in our field, potential but lost scholars who could not countenance such dismissals of the diversity of game experiences and their audiences. Early game studies was equally exclusionary of interdisciplinary engagements, with Aarseth famously and questionably referring to work from film and literature studies as “colonising attempts.”³⁰ I argued earlier that these sentiments about the uniqueness of games and inappropriateness of whole approaches to them are also generative of ghosts in games studies. Buckles is a poignant example this kind of ghost: a researcher discouraged by senior academics unfamiliar with the form and the field and who ulti-

29 Consalvo and Paul, *Real Games*.

30 Aarseth, “Computer Game Studies.”

mately left not only game studies but also academia. We might ask how disciplinary gatekeeping maintains divisions between insiders and outsiders in games that leads to some students being supervised by those who know the scholarship, leaving others to do the labor of creating connections with games in what might be unwelcome or hostile academic settings.

In addition to these myriad missing and overlooked voices, what I wanted to highlight about my discussion of the ghosting of Canadian game studies in the previous section is that canons are not simply produced as part of the initial work of establishing a field or discipline as a valid area of study. Canons persist because they are reproduced — in syllabi³¹, in bibliographies, in reading recommendations at talks, in keynote speaker invitations, and of course in historiographies that affirm them in telling the story of our field. I am very conscious that my own citation of work here has re-canonized some scholars, and left others off while adhering to word count limits. But I do so with the intention of providing a mode for jumping off and away from this canon by recognizing the “epistemic violence” endemic in our scholarship. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak deploys this concept to refer to the silencing of marginalized peoples and ways of knowing,³² and I adapt it in this discussion of game studies to refer to the ghosting and canyonization of critical voices, particularly from the perspectives of feminist thought, critical race theory, post-colonial approaches, and queer studies. In addition to the misrecognition of the significance of Canadian game studies work, especially in terms of feminist research, I have observed time and again the silos created for studies in these areas, such as the Women in Games stream at the Digital Games Research Association conference in 2009. Explorations of race, sexuality, and gender in games are typically clustered together on panels regardless of their methods or foci, and all too frequently only

31 See Alisha Karabinus’s chapter in this volume.

32 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Macmillan, 1988).

attended by the usual suspects, those already reading and citing and conducting this kind of research.³³ While this has by necessity led to the creation of critical spaces of some of the most exciting scholarly communities in the field—I would cite here QGCon and Different Games as two noteworthy examples—we must also consider what these specialized homes mean for the new student to games, working with non-specialist advisors and turning to the oldest journals with “games” in the name. Consalvo and Paul reflect on this as well, noting how “scholars who study games made primarily for women have long had their work treated as specialized rather than an unmarked, ‘regular’—read ‘real’—games scholarship.”³⁴ The need for specialized events continues to affirm the default subject of game studies broadly, and potentially marginalizes work on the diversity of games in culture, such as Shira Chess’s scholarship that has done much to legitimize the play of casual games.³⁵

The solution to troubling these legacies in the field is not to call for “more” of anything (aside from perhaps broader literature reviewing on all of our parts). The study of games has become a rich terrain that is and has been interdisciplinary, multi-modal, creative, and engaged with the politics of games and its cultures and communities. Instead, I propose we follow the example of a different kind of disciplinary work—fucking the canon, as articulated by Rebecca Harrison in her writing about film studies following #MeToo³⁶ and in a time when #TimesUpAcademia is making visible the harassers and abusers in academic institutions that had been previously only known through whisper networks. She describes the experience of disrupting the usual “pale, male, and stale” list of authors and film-makers in her courses, introducing students to feminist and postcolonial work as foundational instead. While she faced the usual critiques made against those who confront power and

33 See Victoria Braegger’s chapter in this volume.

34 Consalvo and Paul, *Real Games*, xxv–xxvi.

35 Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

36 Harrison, “Fuck the Canon.”

epistemology, such as “don’t be political in the classroom,” an echo of the same retort found when engaging in criticism in the game spaces, she also found the space of the classroom transformed when she fucked with the canon, with women’s participation greatly increased.

In line with Harrison’s project, I propose that dealing with the problem of “there’s nothing written about it” and our ghosts means grappling with our institutional and disciplinary influences (including regional and national forces) by fucking the games canon. Let’s leave aside not only well-trodden debates but also core games and established concepts, dubious metaphors and scholars who have never cited people of color, LGBTQ+ scholars, and women. Let’s exert our energies not on “problematizing” them—as Harrison says, “that’s a whole lot of problematizing to be doing”³⁷—but collectively as a field work together to circulate instead all of that scholarship that has always been there to cite, the phenomenal work of emerging students, research from a wide range of fields and approaches, and scholarship from different regional contexts. Let’s feel comfortable hanging out in the canyons and bringing our students there instead to meet the field’s ghosts. Let’s change the narrative of what “game studies is,” because repeating the same only serves to paint a portrait of a haunted field rather than a space of incredible breadth and depth. Only by “creating new histories,” to paraphrase Harrison,³⁸ can we embrace the richness and diversity that has always been there.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

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Definitions, Boundaries, and Issues Week: An Analysis of University Games Courses

Alisha Karabinus

What are we talking about when we talk about game studies? Depending on who you are, mention of *game studies* could evoke a vibrant, dynamic interdisciplinary landscape or something entirely less welcoming. Current ideas of game studies arise from a cacophony of traditions and disciplinary approaches, such as media studies, computer science, sociology, and psychology. Scholars may begin outside games and move toward them, or within games while looking outward, and the result is “a complex arrangement of intersecting disciplines orbiting around a cluster of objects of study (an arrangement we may or may not consider coherent enough to call an interdiscipline).”¹ Amanda Phillips’s layered description highlights the challenge of navigating this space, where we disagree about everything from the very nature of those objects of study to how to bound (or not) the discussion(s) in the first place.

¹ Amanda Phillips, “Negg(at)Ing the Game Studies Subject: An Affective History of the Field,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 15.

A definition of games, or game studies, begins to look like an equation; when game studies is y , x results, becomes reality. Change y and arrive at a new version of x , a new reality. Look one direction and find discussions of code as divorced from any consideration of the people writing it; look another and find analysis of the labor conditions around the coders. But as games become more and more entwined with multiple aspects of everyday life, it is no longer enough to simply debate definitions or disciplinary boundaries. We must recognize the need to look further in all aspects of game studies. “Specifically,” TreaAndrea M. Russworm writes, “what might it mean for the field of game studies to make the persistence of white supremacy central to how we play, write about, and teach video games? How can we use our personal and intellectual interests in video games as a way to foster institutional critique and change—both on our campuses and beyond?”² This book about game studies is really about those perspectives, about what is learned or gained when we adjust our lenses to bring more of the landscape into focus. But this invitation for greater complication and nuance in our research should also encourage us to interrogate what that means for our classrooms, as Russworm’s call for game studies to confront white supremacy directly is not just a matter of scholarly discourse, but of how we educate the next generation of game designers, critics, and scholars. How do we present this fraught and fractured field of study to our students?

In this chapter, I examine a crucial aspect of the broader conversation about game studies: what we talk about when we *teach* games. What are the rhetorical commonplaces shared in classes across disciplines, and how do those shared ideas align with changing cultural contexts with and around games? Through my analysis, I discovered that contemporary issues and events, as well as the connections between games and culture, receive limited attention in games courses. Instead, the courses tend

2 TreaAndrea M. Russworm, “A Call to Action for Video Game Studies in an Age of Reanimated White Supremacy,” *Velvet Light Trap* 81 (2018): 75.

to focus on establishing historical context and definitions, with artifacts of the past instead dominating our syllabi.

Background

Introducing students to concepts of games and their study can be challenging under the best conditions — and in the summer of 2020, as I was looking ahead to my first course on games, the conditions were far from the best. With the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt increased pressure to get things “right.” However, finding entry points into games and game culture was a daunting task, given the deeply varied engagement with games, even within my own field of rhetoric. While two game scholars may find overlaps in canon, materials and approaches still vary widely across disciplines.

The version of game studies I chose to construct felt significant, as it might be the only one my students would encounter in the academy. Despite the growth in academic engagement with games and the proliferation of games scholarship, many campuses may only have a handful of game-focused specialists scattered across departments and programs.³ Consequently, a single scholar’s definition of the scope of game studies may have an outsized influence on how students begin engaging with games.

In search of guidance, I reviewed numerous sample syllabi from friends, colleagues, and online sources. Instead of resolving my questions about presenting the study of games to students, these syllabi raised even more questions. How do we frame games, our study of them, and their entanglements with societies and cultures? Whose voices do we center, and whom do we allow to speak? Who designs the histories we teach?

3 Paul Martin, “The Intellectual Structure of Game Research,” *Game Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1801/articles/paul_martin, and Cody Mejeur et al., “Looking for Group: Building Interdisciplinary Game Studies Communities,” paper presented at the International Academic Conference on Meaningful Play, East Lansing, MI, October 11, 2018, <https://meaningfulplay.msu.edu/2018/program.php?session=123>.

Who speaks, and who designs—these questions are critical. However, from this analysis, I have learned that perhaps the most telling exploration is *how* we speak about critical issues in games-focused classrooms. How do we frame the social, cultural, and political realities influencing engagement with games? Russworm argues that this engagement must be foundational in our courses, but often, questions about race, power, and ideology are relegated to the margins of the syllabus.⁴ My analysis of undergraduate games course syllabi demonstrates precisely what that marginalization looks like and how it shapes the way games appear in the academy.

A Fractured History

Contemporary game studies can so often be described by its numerous dividing lines and definitions. Even the first issue of *Game Studies* is marked by contention, not only in Espen Aarseth's notable "Year One" editorial but in the selection of papers published in that issue as well.⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan argues the intrinsic entanglement of narrative in technology⁶—the user, in reacting, creates narrative—while Markku Eskelinen rejects narrative in games as mere "marketing" and sarcastically questions why scholars can't tell the difference between a ball and a book:

Outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories. On the other hand, if and when games and especially computer games are studied and theo-

4 Russworm, "A Call to Action."

5 Espen Aarseth, "Computer Game Studies, Year One," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

6 Marie-Laure Ryan, "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/>.

rized they are almost without exception colonised from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies.⁷

Meanwhile, Jesper Juul argues that to decide in either of these directions—for or against stories in games—definitions and angles must be established. There is no neutral discussion to be had; we must start with negotiation.⁸

These disagreements in the broader ludosphere do not start with the inception of *Game Studies*—indeed, this book lays out many starting points for contemporary academic study of games beyond the founding of one journal. However, it is noteworthy that many of those beginnings are just as contentious as scholars being asked to self-select into teams championing their definition of “game.” On the one hand, in the early days of game studies, as scholars were working to better establish ideas of what game scholarship could be, a certain focus on definition and boundary may have been expected. But rather than simply helping to establish a new scholarly space, those definitions became identities and twenty years later,⁹ the same conversations, sometimes down to the very same articles, continue to delimit the scope of what has become a rich interdisciplinary landscape.

7 Markku Eskelinen, “The Gaming Situation,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>.

8 Jesper Juul, “Games Telling Stories?” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/>.

9 Janet H. Murray, “Janet Murray on Why Some Players and Critics Still Cannot Tolerate Narrative in Games,” *First Person Scholar*, May 18, 2017, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/janet-murray-on-why-some-players-and-critics-still-cannot-tolerate-narrative-in-games/>; Emma Vossen, “On the Cultural Inaccessibility of Gaming: Invading, Creating, and Reclaiming the Cultural Clubhouse” (PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2018), <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/13649>; Sal Humphreys, “On Being a Feminist in Games Studies,” *Games and Culture* 14, nos. 7–8 (2019): 825–42; and Alex Gekker, “Against Game Studies,” *Media and Communication* 9, no. 1 (2021): 73–83.

The Syllabus as Artifact

To investigate how these landscapes were being constructed in undergraduate games courses, I decided to examine the types of syllabi I had been reading. While each class is unique, a syllabus offers an aspirational roadmap, a guide to what an instructor hopes to achieve and how they plan to introduce students to the material. A syllabus, through its specific combination of authors, assignments, and policies, presents its own bounded reality.¹⁰ When made public, it often transitions from aspiration to artifact, serving as a record of what has transpired. Scholars post past syllabi as portfolio displays and recruitment tools; a past syllabus clearly illustrates a course's future potential to prospective students. Universities may also make syllabi from current or past courses available for the express purpose of recruitment. As a public artifact, the syllabus becomes a crucial instrument for understanding how an individual, a program, an institution, or, as in this case, an interdisciplinary space, presents itself to the world.¹¹ To the informed reader, these documents represent just one aspect of a disciplinary canon — teachers are all too aware of the impossibility of fitting everything into a single term — but to the lay reader, and perhaps particularly to students, the knowledge presented in a course can shape reality. A curious student who encounters a game studies class and opens the sample document doesn't see one facet of the multifaceted game studies universe — they simply see a presentation of games.

For research purposes, too, syllabi are easier to access and analyze than notes on a particular course, making them frequently utilized in analyzing trends within disciplines and focus

10 Charles J. Fornaciari and Kathy Lund Dean, "The 21st-Century Syllabus: From Pedagogy to Andragogy," *Journal of Management Education* 38, no. 5 (2014): 701–23, and Claudia Stanny, Melissa Gonzalez, and Britt McGowan, "Assessing the Culture of Teaching and Learning through a Syllabus Review," *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education* 40, no. 7 (2015): 898–913.

11 Emily J. Isaacs, *Writing at the State U: Instruction and Administration at 106 Comprehensive Universities* (Utah State University Press, 2018), 5–6.

areas to better understand course design.¹² It is tricky to study games courses in this way, however. Most studies of this type are limited to a single discipline or approach, while games classes appear across disciplines, sometimes in focused clusters of courses, but also often tucked away in surprising programmatic locations. Holding them all to the same standard in the way of a review of syllabi in, say, sociology courses, is difficult at best and perhaps even unproductive. Nevertheless, I believe simply seeking to *understand* what we're teaching, and how, is critical in understanding the ways in which we, as individual instructors and as programs, may be influencing how games move through our cultures and communities. The issue isn't just a canon we debate as we try to talk across disciplines, or a question of which research methodologies are most effective and when. Games have become deeply entangled in politics, education, and economics—to name a few arenas—and so what's at stake here is much larger, though it does not get any easier to untangle these connections. As Adrienne Shaw writes, "Accounting for multiple axes of oppression and privilege while also trying to make claims about how games function as cultural, social, and commercial projects is certainly difficult,"¹³ but I believe it is an effort worth making in our classrooms, for if we do not do the work, who will?

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- 12 For example, Anastasiya A. Lipnevich et al., "What's on the Syllabus? An Analysis of Assessment Criteria in First Year Courses across us and Spanish Universities," *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability: International Journal of Policy, Practice and Research* 33, no. 4 (2021): 675–99; Philip Young P. Hong and David R. Hodge, "Understanding Social Justice in Social Work: A Content Analysis of Course Syllabi," *Families in Society* 90, no. 2 (2009): 212–19; Angela P. Murillo and Ayoung Yoon, "A Study of Emerging Trends in Digital Preservation Literature: An Analysis of Journal Articles Presented in Course Syllabi," *Journal of Librarianship & Information Science* 53, no. 4 (2021): 615–29; and Mona M. Shattell et al., "Culturally Competent Practice in a Pre-Licensure Baccalaureate Nursing Program in the United States: A Mixed-Methods Study," *Nursing Education Perspectives* 34, no. 6 (2013): 383–89.
- 13 Adrienne Shaw, "Are We There Yet? The Politics and Practice of Intersectional Game Studies," *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 81 (2018): 76–80.

To that end, in this study I asked:

- Which concepts, themes, and authors show up frequently in game course syllabi? How are they framed?
- In what ways are critical social issues being addressed and engaged in games courses, as reflected in syllabi?

Studying the Syllabus

To begin developing an understanding of what’s taught in and around games, I gathered English-language syllabi from official, public sources of courses centered on games.¹⁴ The sole additional criterion for the initial data collection was that each syllabus in the dataset must include at least a mention of one reading or textbook. This requirement was imposed to gain insight into how students were being encouraged to engage with communities outside the classroom.

Table 32.1. Description of dataset

<i>Year (n=50)</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
2022	1	2.0
2021	3	6.0
2020	6	12.0
2019	7	14.0
2018	8	16.0
2017	8	16.0
2016	6	12.0
2015	7	14.0
Indeterminate	4	8.0

¹⁴ I define “presented as evidence of class or program” here as “official,” as in both instances an entity is using the syllabus to demonstrate the course to an outside audience.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Upper	29	58.0
Lower	21	42.0
Graduate (cross-listed)	4	8.0
<i>Disciplinary area</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Anthropology	1	2.0
Art/Art history	2	4.0
Computer science	4	8.0
Creative writing	1	2.0
Education	2	4.0
Game design	16	32.0
Game studies	13	26.0
Gender studies	1	2.0
Geography	1	2.0
Media studies	11	22.0
Psychology	1	2.0
Rhetoric	2	4.0
Sociology	1	2.0

Within these criteria, I collected the first 100 syllabi available via web search, while avoiding exact duplicates.¹⁵ While this approach may not allow for a comprehensive view of game courses around the world, it does afford a *public* view of the framing of games and game development in the academy.¹⁶ For the purpose of this analysis, I narrowed that data set to only undergraduate courses from 2015 to 2022,¹⁷ which resulted in a sample of 50 course syllabi.

15 When multiple years of the same course syllabus were available, I selected two: the earliest and the most recent.

16 Isaacs, *Writing at the State U*.

17 I selected 2015, the year after the advent of GamerGate, as such a wide-reaching event with continued impact in and around gaming was likely to make an impact on classroom conversations, and if that was the case,

Documents were imported into MAXQDA for initial content analysis in order to explore emerging themes across lines of discipline and focus.¹⁸ As a solo researcher, I leaned heavily on in vivo coding,¹⁹ allowing the language of individual syllabi to guide topic-based determinations.

While the larger sample was more global, this undergraduate set ($n=50$) overwhelmingly represented American institutions and so should not be seen as reflective of any other region (t. 32.1). When courses were cross-listed or seemed otherwise to reflect multi- or interdisciplinary perspectives, I coded all that were applicable. Finally, while my focus was undergraduate courses, I did not exclude courses that were also cross-listed as graduate courses. If they were primarily presented as undergraduate courses, I counted them as such here, and four of these courses are represented in the data set (t. 32.1).

Documents in the data set are spread across included years, though few trends appear in the syllabi to mark global shifts between 2015 and 2022. There is an observable move toward more engagement with social justice in the more recent syllabi, a trend that may be more (or less) observable with a larger sample. I hope to tackle this question in future research.

Ten distinct disciplinary areas show up in the results, but it is those focus areas that cut across disciplines that are most heavily represented here: courses labeled as media studies, game studies, and game design show up most consistently, though they are inconsistent in terms of department or unit attachment. Disciplinary units represented in those three categories include communication, literary studies, education, art, computer science, information systems and technology, and film studies, along with interdisciplinary units, colleges, and departments.

I wanted only trends that emerged afterward for the purpose of this analysis.

18 In the above-referenced studies of syllabi, content analysis is the most common method for observing trends and themes in these documents.

19 Jimmie Manning, "In Vivo Coding," in *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, ed. Jörg Matthes, Christine S. Davis, and Robert F. Potter (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 1–2.

Unless courses are attached to programs that prominently feature “game” in the name, locating games in the academy remains tricky, though the categories observed here map neatly onto Paul Martin’s exploration of scholarly communities and areas in games research.²⁰

Table 32.2. Description of dataset

<i>Keyword</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Design	37	74.0
Culture	31	62.0
Society	22	44.0
Critical	14	28.0
History	14	28.0
Production	14	28.0
Industry	12	24.0
Political	11	22.0

Course Focus: Values and Orientations

To better understand how courses were oriented (beyond the disciplinary labels in t. 32.1), I analyzed course descriptions for skills, themes, and concepts (t. 32.2). Course descriptions provide a rich text for analysis, and table 32.2 lists the most frequent thematic keyword occurrences. Design is a prevalent focus, as both production-oriented and analytical courses often mention design within course descriptions. However, there is a distinction between the two types of courses. Analytical courses typically treat design as a subject to be explored rather than as an action to be performed. That separation is apparent in the other top keywords in table 32.2. Design may be by far the most common, appearing in nearly two-thirds of the documents in the

²⁰ Martin, “The Intellectual Structure of Game Research.”

data set, but courses focused on design and production may be quite different from courses centering design and culture.

Table 32.3. Most Common Texts

Author	Title & Year	Frequency	Percentage
Fullerton	<i>Game Design Workshop</i> , 2018	7	14.0
Salen & Zimmerman	<i>Rules of Play</i> , 2003	3	6.0
Gibson Bond	<i>Introduction to Game Design, Prototyping, and Development</i> , 2017	2	
Payne & Huntemann	<i>How to Play Video Games</i> , 2019	2	4.0
Schell	<i>Art of Game Design</i> , 2019	2	4.0
Sutton-Smith	<i>Ambiguity of Play</i> , 2001	2	4.0

Textbook analysis (t. 32.3) did not yield much agreement beyond the prominence of Tracy Fullerton’s *Game Design Workshop* as a primary text.²¹ While design was a prominent theme among courses that used one or two assigned textbooks, with 14 courses (28%) requiring at least one book on design principles and production, this may only reveal a trend in certain types of classes. Many courses eschewed a single textbook in favor of artifacts from many sources. Among textbook assignments, Fullerton’s book was required for seven courses, or 14%.

21 Tracy Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games* (CRC Press, 2018).

Table 32.4. Most Common Authors

<i>Author</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Ian Bogost	15	30.0
Katie Salen Tekinbaş & Eric Zimmerman	15	30.0
Henry Jenkins	10	20.0
Mia Consalvo	10	20.0
Tracy Fullerton	10	20.0

The most commonly assigned authors (t. 32.4) include some overlap with textbook assignments as shown in table 32.3, demonstrating that even when full textbooks were not assigned, excerpts and other works by the same authors in design-oriented classes and units frequently appeared on syllabi. The most frequently assigned author otherwise was Ian Bogost, whose work appeared in 30% of of the syllabi. As both a scholar and a game designer whose works also often appear in mainstream as well as academic sources, the commonality of his work in the data set is unsurprising. Henry Jenkins and Mia Consalvo's prominence begins to reveal emerging trends in the data. While both scholars had several different pieces assigned across syllabi in the data set, Jenkins's essay "Game Design as Narrative Architecture" was his most assigned piece, while Consalvo's appearances were largely split between the 2009 article on representation in games, "The Virtual Census," of which she was an author, and selections from her work on cheating, navigating rules, and exploring boundaries in and around gameplay.²²

The most common themes, topics, and readings in the data set offer extensive analytical potential, and while most is beyond

22 Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (MIT Press, 2004); Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (MIT Press, 2007); and Dmitri Williams et al., "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 5 (2009): 815–34.

the scope of this essay, I think further mapping which authors and texts are most commonly associated with particular themes will be productive territory to explore in future research.

Course Structures: Unpacking “Issues Week”

When I first began coding course structure, I noticed how many courses began by defining games, perhaps because I do this as well. We begin with artifacts. In analyzing these course structures, however, it became apparent we aren’t just beginning with artifacts, but with the debates and dichotomies, with the fractures, while the critical issues surrounding people, such as political radicalism, labor issues in the industry, identity, mental health, and more, were often siloed into sub-units later in the term. Critical engagements with social justice, identity, embodiment, and experience were frequently compressed and conflated, and in a single week, perhaps two, a class would be asked to grapple with race, gender, violence, addiction, and streaming or fandoms. Wryly, I began to reference this phenomenon as “issues week” in my notes, but as I worked it grew harder to ignore that in many courses, concepts like the ludology versus narratology debate — an idea meaningless to many of our students until we give it form — were far more privileged than engagement with gender or race.

Table 32.5. Calendar Structure

<i>Structure</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
No schedule	9	18.0
No social issues	3	6.0
Social issues, but no reference to identity	19	38.0
1 week on social issues	7	14.0
1-3 weeks on social issues	10	20.0
Social issues are foundational	4	8.0

Table 32.5 offers a breakdown of course calendar structures and their treatments of race, gender, sexuality, and other issues of identity. 38% referenced some sort of social issue without any explicit mention of identity or positionality, while an additional 24% either included no schedule of topics or made no mention of any kind of social issues whatsoever. Seventeen, or 34% fell into the “issues week” model, compressing identity issues into small units dedicated to controversies and problems. Only four syllabi, 8% of the data set, could be argued as having positioned identity as a central concept foundational to the course, and only these seemed to spend more than 2.5 weeks on topics related to identity.

As with textbooks and other assigned materials, these findings present a fruitful possibility for further analysis, particularly considering the frequency with which several social issues were compressed or conflated in these documents. In future projects I plan to undertake some of this mapping work, to better understand the labels given to various themes and issues, particular social issues, and how artifacts and themes were paired and presented in syllabi.

Critical Issues: Race, Ethnicity, and What We Mean When We Say Representation

While much of the analysis of deeper meanings and connections between the content in the syllabi in this data set is beyond the scope of this essay, to explore engagement with critical social issues in games courses, I did focus in on mentions of race and ethnicity. Not only does this deeper focus speak directly to calls for game studies scholars to study the reemergence of white supremacist violence, but it also offers some understanding of how “culture” — one of the most common orientations in the syllabi — was being theorized in these documents.

Table 32.6. Engagement with race

<i>Content</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>	<i>Context</i>
One article on race and avatars	Mid-2010s	Situated within one week on identity; paired with two readings on other identities
Schedule simply indicates a lecture on “race”	N/A	Situated within one week on games and culture; paired with content on other cultural considerations (non-deintity)
One article on race and representation	Late 2010s	Situated within one week on representation; paired with two readings on other identities
Two race-themed items referenced on supplemental (optional) reading list	Early 2000s	No reference to race in course schedule
Multiple articles on race highlighting Black issues	2005-2020	Situated within a subunit on Black issues in games
“Race” is a bullet point on a list of controversies in gaming	N/A	No other reference to race or ethnicity
Book selection; optional reading	Early 2000s	Situated within a week on feminist game studies
One article on representation (multiple identities)	2000-2010	Situated within a week on representation; followed by a week on gender and harassment
One article on race and gaming communities	Late 2010s	No apparent related topics

Three articles engaging race and ethnicity from different angles	2005-2020	Situated within a multiweek unit on identities and representation; foundational
One article on race in niche gaming communities	Late 2010s	Situated within two weeks on identities
One article on race in niche gaming communities	Late 2010s	Situated within two weeks on identities
One article on representation (multiple identities); another later in the term	2005-2010	Multiple points in term; foundational

Culture appears as a focus for 62% of the course descriptions in the syllabi, with 21 (or 42%) including some engagement with issues of identity. However, only thirteen documents, or 26%, explicitly mentioned race, ethnicity, or related ideas (outside of nondiscrimination statements). As shown in table 32.6, this engagement does not always amount to significant engagement; one syllabus merely lists race as one of a long list of controversies in gaming, while another offers a reference to a lecture that, at least in terms of the syllabus alone, is divorced from any other detail or context. Table 32.6 also includes publication timeframes for the readings and materials included, where applicable, and as shown, only four of these courses included work published after the mid-2010s. Only three individual authors repeat here on issues of race, representation, and identity:

- Lisa Nakamura (work from the early 2000s)
- David J. Leonard (one article from 2006)
- TreaAndrea M. Russworm (recent articles)

The other item that appears more than once in this subset is the aforementioned piece “The Virtual Census” from 2009,²³ and while this remains an excellent piece of analysis, it is vastly outdated for contemporary students, particularly when serving as the only piece of content explicitly engaging issues of race in games. In nearly every example here, identity was flattened, as though anything and everything outside of an unstated default are enacted — and analyzed — in the same way.

One syllabus in the data set frames identity as central and foundational to the course content, explicitly referencing Critical Race Theory in the course overview. However, despite this framing, the syllabus does not include any readings or materials that directly address race, racial identity, or ethnicity. While the syllabus provides readings that directly engage issues relating to gender and sexual orientation, the absence of content engaging with race or race-linked positions makes the emphasis on identity feel incomplete, or even hollow, when examining the syllabus itself. Only a single article explicitly addressing white supremacy and games was assigned in any of the syllabi, in a single course. That piece was written by Russworm, whose plea for game scholars to do more grows ever more essential throughout this analysis:

[G]ame studies [must] expand notions of what representation means for the medium so that this call to action will not fall only to those comparatively few scholars who already prioritize writing about race, identity, and gaming. I ask both the seasoned and the new voices in game studies: What will game studies become as the field’s growth coincides with the reanimation of white supremacy in every aspect of American life, and how is gaming culture and games scholarship implicated in such a turn?²⁴

23 Williams et al., “The Virtual Census.”

24 Russworm, “A Call to Action for Video Game Studies.”

Here, Russworm warns that already this work falls on far too small a group of scholars, but the irony that her work would be among an extraordinarily small subset of a subset in this analysis is thick indeed.

Concluding Thoughts

In this analysis, I sought to explore publicly available syllabi in courses across disciplines to determine how students are oriented toward academic engagement with games. While I expected to find some disengagement with contemporary social issues in games courses, even I was surprised by the level of marginalization of this content. I also expected to see more change in classroom structures, particularly in the later years in the dataset; I presumed some reckoning with #GamerGate, at the very least, would inspire changes in course structures, and there would be a greater number of readings engaging with social issues. After all, as Shaw points out:

[W]e have plenty of examples by now! Many of these are collected in the recent anthology *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat: Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming*. Yet even earlier than this, David Leonard's "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real" discussed the importance of considering race, class, and gender in doing studies of race in games; Mia Consalvo's work on the *Sims* considered the intersectionality of the default Sim creation screen; Diane Carr acknowledged the intersectional approaches to gender that shape how and what girls play, even if that is not a sustained part of her analysis; T.L. Taylor's early work on embodiment in games addressed multiple axes of identity; and the list could go on.²⁵

25 Shaw, "Are We There Yet?"; David J. Leonard, "Not a Hater, Just Keepin' It Real: The Importance of Race- and Gender-Based Game Studies," *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 83–88; Mia Consalvo, "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (Routledge, 2003);

Syllabi may not reflect everything that happens in a classroom, but as public records of games in education, these documents reveal that the growth and change in game studies is not being fully realized in our classrooms. The failure to integrate contemporary social issues consistently throughout the course structure means critical discussions of race, gender, and class are treated as special topics to be considered once and left alone. But as Russworm argues, these issues must be foundational to our work. Similarly, Shaw writes: “Building on intersectional critique and modes of analysis, I think game scholars moving forward need to imagine our work in terms of coalitional politics. Rather than making space for people to work on questions of race and class in addition to gender, can we all think more critically about how all of our work is about race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on?”²⁶

In many cases, this “issues week” framing paints gender, race, and class as siloed problems to be solved, disentangled and separate from “real” considerations like design. But *race* is not a problem; *white supremacy* is. *Gender* is not a problem; *misogyny* and *transphobia* are. Discrimination, toxicity, and polarization in the games industry and culture are the real issues that require critical engagement.

These structures can and should be changed, and the data points to some promising models of more inclusive and thoughtful course design. From this analysis I can say first, we must explicitly embed positionality and identity from the start of any course. Instructors need to scaffold discussions of identity and power from the outset, challenging students to grapple with questions of privilege, representation, access, and context from day one, whether they are primarily studying culture, design, or anything else. Embedding these discussions throughout the

Diane Carr, “Contexts, Gaming Pleasures, and Gendered Preferences,” *Simulation & Gaming* 35, no. 4 (2005): 464–82; and T.L. Taylor, “Intentional Bodies: Virtual Environments and the Designers Who Shape Them,” *International Journal of Engineering Education* 19, no. 1 (2003): 25–34.

²⁶ Shaw, “Are We There Yet?”

term allows students to unpack complex social issues gradually, and avoids the tokenizing effect of relegating these increasingly important discussions to a single week or two.

Second, this foundational approach to social issues avoids the conflation of identity with problems. Compressing social issues into “issues weeks” alongside actual issues, such as questions of addictive design or in-game violence, reduces these critical social topics to mere controversies or curiosities rather than integral elements of games. By centering identity throughout the course, we resist this tendency to flatten or tokenize, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness between games, culture, and social justice.

Third, in what may be the easiest intervention to enact, instructors should regularly review their course materials to ensure they reflect the current state of the field. For example, while the 2010 “Virtual Census” remains an excellent breakdown of representation in games, it no longer captures the contemporary state of the industry’s engagement with these issues.²⁷ Such canon pieces are important, but it is equally important to contrast with material that reflects current engagement with the critical issues of today.

Some courses in the dataset opened my eyes to these different, more inclusive approaches. These syllabi signposted a clear grounding in critical interrogation at the beginning of the term, using language that was repeated throughout the course. These courses placed positionality on the same level as those fundamentals. No longer was identity an “issue” on par with regulatory systems or studies on violence — instead, identity was framed as a foundational lens impacting all content in the course. This subtle but necessary shift in framing represents a radical repositioning of students, one that orients learning toward a game studies that must grapple with violent white supremacy, but also face the issues of crunch, lack of diversity, and workplace

27 Williams et al., “The Virtual Census.”

harassment — critical battlefields in the games industry today.²⁸ While these issues may not bear the same weight in every class across disciplines, as we observe the role of games in contemporary society it is difficult to argue that designers do not need to grapple with social issues.

The data gathered from these syllabi can inspire us to rethink how we are shaping experiences for our students, and how we can build a better future. I believe we can have a better game studies, and I know I am not alone in wanting this. But that fight cannot only happen in our scholarship; it must happen everywhere we are, and we must carry the fight with us into our classrooms. Otherwise, we are not building a better future or a better game studies. We are simply maintaining the status quo.

28 Johanna Weststar and Shruti Kumar, “IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey 2019: Industry Trends and Future Outlook Report” (International Game Developers Association, 2020), 19–21, 28–30, 36–37.

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ity (MIT Press, 2023), offers a cultural history and a critique of the role of monsters in video games. He has also published work on local game production, humor in games, and video game voice acting. He is a co-founder of the Central and Eastern European Game Studies (CEEGS) conference and the inaugural chair of DiGRA Central and Eastern Europe (2022–).

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Tobias Unterhuber (he/him) studied modern German literature, comparative literature, and study of religion at LMU Munich and at the University of California, Berkeley. In 2018, he earned his PhD with his thesis on the works of Swiss author Christian Kracht. He is a post-doc for literature and media studies at the University of Innsbruck, where he also leads the game studies research group. His research interests include game studies, gender studies, discourse analysis, media history, specifically the media cultural history of games and play. He is co-

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