The Game Culture Reader

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Edited by

Jason C. Thompson and Marc A. Ouellette

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This volume is dedicated to all of the people who have presented their work on game culture at the Southwest/Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association conference. What began under the subject area “Computer Culture” has now grown into its own subject area, “Game Studies, Culture, Play, and Practice”; we honor the community of academic scholars and industry professionals whose intellectual curiosity, labor, and generosity inform, challenge, question, define, and celebrate the serious work of studying games.

But the man skilled in all ways of contending,
satisfied by the great bow’s look and heft,
like a musician, like a harper, when
with quiet hand upon his instrument
he draws between his thumb and forefinger
a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly
Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.
Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,
so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang
a swallow’s note.
In the hushed hall it smote the suitors and all their faces changed.

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

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INTRODUCTION: A GAME STUDIES MANIFESTO

In the epigraph to this collection, we return to a foundational text of the western literary canon, Homer's *Odyssey*, and see in Penelope's "bow contest" an illustrative moment in the history of game culture. Having fought in the Trojan War and having survived his ten-year trek home, the weary Odysseus cannot simply show up—the returning hero must rout the odious suitors whom Penelope has forestalled. In order to buy more time for vengeance, Odysseus disguises himself as an old beggar; in order to buy more time for deferral, Penelope creates an unwinnable game: she will marry the suitor able to string Odysseus' bow and shoot an arrow through the handles of twelve axes.

We contend that this ludic scene from the *Odyssey*—an exemplar of literature, which is a constituent of Western culture—mirrors the ludic scene of digital games—exemplars of media, which are constituent of global culture.[1]As a canonical text, the *Odyssey* clearly has an influence on subsequent texts, yet we know that contemporary texts will condition reception of the *Odyssey* just as surely as we saw and heard people on the Costa Concordia claim that their experience was like being in the movie *Titanic* instead of like being aboard the ship RMS *Titanic*.

In the quotation, Odysseus easily strings the bow, and then he plucks it. The cord's high pitch—a swallow's song, something beautiful—is the sound of excellence or *arête*, living up to potential, the hero returned, the kingdom restored. Though any gamer would understand this scene as constitutive of a literary boss level, gamers and Game Studies scholars might miss how the boss level is itself a repurposing of one of Vladimir Propp's myriad tests for the archetypal hero, which in turn was a repurposing of the trials of the epic hero. In Game Studies, we borrow terms from predecessors and adduce inexact terms from popular culture. Returning to Homer, neither arrow nor sword that smites the suitors but the sound: Before it, laughter and derision; after, a hushed hall and fallen faces. The game is over before Odysseus draws the first arrow, before the first suitor dies. The sound offers a kind of absolute—one of Aristotle's irrefutable signs or *tekmerion*—recognized by game opponents. If destruction has a song, it must surely be the vibrating "taut gut" of Odyssey's bow, made into a dark lyre.

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[1] We also acknowledge that literature is only one constituent of Western culture; that non-western cultures are comprised of various components, including literature and media; that media and literature are but components of global culture; and that the terms 'western' and 'non-western' reify the Orientalism identified by Edward Said (1978). Finally, we note that digital games are not literature, but we find much promise in their consideration as popular global fiction.

There is no single account for using this epigraph. In one interpretation, Odysseus represents the digital game player: both take a disguised form (beggar, avatar), understand contextual rules (Penelope's explanation, training levels), and demonstrate excellence though physicality (stringing a bow, using a controller). In a formal explanation, the epigraph ends before the violence of the slaughter in a salute to the fatigue that this association—video games and violence—brings about in game scholars. In a metaphorical way, the objectionable suitors represent those opportunistic scholars from other disciplines whose initial forays into Game Studies reveal that they are more interesting in the prize (Penelope) than the price (rootlessness). A basic reason simply links digital games and literature by their ability to tell stories that sway human hearts. Another version hears in the sound of the strung bow a warning shot. Still another reminds the reader that digital games are reducible to neither narrative nor ludus; in fact, we do not wish to reify the narratology/ludology distinction here. We propose that the medium of digital games remains understudied in part because of this unhelpful distinction.

As with much within digital games that remains unexplored, perhaps it is simple ubiquity that undermines their study—games, like the suitors, are everywhere. Perhaps digital games, their players, and talk about them have become so common that they are consequently taken to be unimportant. This is a grievously misleading deduction, for it is precisely their common character as *endoxa* that makes them so significant.

Paradoxically, though games may get camouflaged by a kind of unmarked cultural activity or *energeia*—smartphone screen taps, flash game mouse clicks, controller shoulder button pulls—they also may get highlighted as various forms of escape, the characterization of which ranges from the childish (usually innocent) diversion of *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo 1985) to the gory (usually psychopathic) playground of *MadWorld* (Platinum Games 2009). However, as much as games are thought to be an escape from normality, they mirror and reinforce the systemic and institutionalized imposition of instrumental rationality into contemporary means of evaluating the worthiness of human endeavors. Said another way, games are deeply embedded in the ideological practices through which models of efficiency appear natural and immanent so that the underlying value judgments are rendered invisible. In a contradictory fashion, they must qualify as mindless escape but not as inducing the kind of cognitive dissonance that might lead to the discovery of this complicity. This underscores that games themselves are teaching tools, independent of instructors and their input; moreover, it highlights the need for a thorough understanding of all of the ways in which games work to produce meaning, especially those that overlap the traditional and somewhat arbitrary boundaries of academic pursuits.

One consequence of this lack of scholarly attention can be seen in the terminology used to analyze games. Terms from other disciplines and nonacademic contexts get imported into Game Studies, often to act as invasive species responsible for many indelible marks upon the collective knowledge and memory of digital game culture. The multiplicities contained in single words—*ludic*, *game*, *character*, *world*, *time*, and so on remain singularities glossed over by game studies literature, and as a consequence, we have little to no critical language for categorizing these ludic phenomena or engaging in a critical discussion of their rhetoric and history. These multiple, multiplying difficulties lead us to wonder: How can we, as Game Studies scholars, expect to stand as a full and equal complement to the established disciplines we simultaneously knock and envy if we cannot account fully for the diversity and concomitant significance of games, game players, and the influence of the two on each other?

We propose in this collection that Game Studies—that peculiar multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary field wherein international researchers from such diverse areas as rhetoric, computer science, literary studies, culture studies, psychology, media studies and so on come together to study games—has reached an unproductive stasis. Its scholarship remains either divided (as in aforementioned narratologists and ludologists and their updated analogues) or indecisive (as in its frequently apolitical stances on play and fandom). Though we applaud the important work already accomplished by game scholars, we note that, when we widen the frame to include all game discourses, the three topics of violence, sexism, and addiction continue to dominate political, media, religious, legal, psychological, and technological realms; moreover, we content that the emphasis these three place on the consumer—namely, the consumer's ability to be negatively affected by this particular form of media consumption—obscure other important questions about the video game as a cultural medium. Video game production and distribution practices recede from public view, as do consumption concerns not overtly tied to negative affect. Beyond the headline-friendly modern topoi that now direct video game discourses, what issues, approaches, and insights are being, if not erased, then displaced?

We stand with our colleagues collected herein to demand that anyone claiming to write about games actually play them, know them, and understand or at least endeavor to understand their complexities, both seen and unseen. We deplore the operant failures of imagination seen when academic conferees—after professing their ignorance of the field, or worse, disallowing video game meaning altogether—launch enormous vessels of argument that then linger in doldrums reminiscent of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": "as idle as a painted ship / upon a painted ocean." How many hot, lethargic listeners have wished for the freshening breeze of a singular insight? For the field, too: we wish for the bag of storm winds bottled by "a bull's hide sewn from neck to tail"—the gift from King Aiolos Hippotades' to Odysseus, a divine throttle (Homer 1991, 165 lines 2-22).

Identifying this stasis and naming its principle influences of violence, sexism, and addiction affords Game Studies scholars a unique opportunity: not only may we advance the current discussion, but doing so will reveal the necessity of revisiting former controversies and methodologies with a serious eye to their improvement. The reflexivity seen in other disciplines (the "rhetorical turn" in sociology, the "postmodern turn" in rhetoric, etc.) has not yet occurred in Game Studies, and this fact promotes ambivalence. Game Studies remains open and free to enter; happily, the field has not undergone balkanization. We wonder, though, if the necessity to legitimate this type of study over the past fifteen years may have rounded the sharper edges of distinction. Are we now ready, with generosity and rigor, to lay aside our similarities and disagree?

In order to speed this reflexivity we present the current volume, which in rejecting the consumer-affect insistence finds space to explore the imbricated processes of production, distribution, and consumption that govern the medium itself. This exploratory work often challenges or reconfigures the use of former terms; oftentimes, it engenders new ones. The potential utility of interrogating video game discourses through alternative terms is provocative. Instead of falling back on loan terms from cinema (diegetic, extradiegetic) or literature (genre, character), game scholars might discover new terministic affordances. We clarify that we do not advocate infiltrating another discipline in a raid for new terms (the academic equivalent of shouting "Leeroy Jenkins!" before running headlong into danger). Instead, we see the possibility for new terms that would create, not destroy, ludic ambiguities. As Kenneth Burke cautioned, "what we want is not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise (1974, xviii).

The medium proves complex to define: video games are not computer hardware, not software, not wireless networks, not televisions, not narrative, not play experiences, and not human beings—though modern games typically use all of these elements. Together, these cohere within culture as complicated, variegated forms of polychronological play. Articulating just one of these forms, not to mention arguing for its ability to persuade, can be a Daedalean problematic.

We must game culture by culturing games. We must play digital games to game digital play. Like Odysseus, we must take to the sea and not see to the take. Like him, we must meet blowhards with hard blows, windbags with bags of wind. We must not beg for any admission or admit to any begging. We must note the pluck to pluck the note, suit the killers to kill the suitors. We must discover to play and play to discover. We must labor to reveal labor, play to reveal play, and endeavor to reveal endeavor. In short, we must game the culture of reading in order to read the culture of gaming.

Section Reviews

The methodologies used for the examinations in this collection find their foundations in much of the game studies work situated within a broader, humanities tradition that seeks to redefine the analytical tools of textual analyses for cultural artifacts, which necessarily includes digital ones.

In seeking out some of these lesser-known, under-acknowledged areas we found a host of provocative scholarship: respondents proposed essays interrogating representations of gender and sexuality for their political assumptions, war simulations for their narrative contours, simulacra of US dystopias for their aesthetics, and role-playing games for their obscured and obscuring labor practices. We reviewed essays articulating many aspects of play—from theorizing the different ludic types or 'ludicities,' to the play-role of time in digital games—and also essays that sought to broaden game studies discourse to include analyses of disability, history, and political resistance found in particular digital game titles.

Throughout this process three areas of scholarly enquiry emerged: digital game theory, ludic spaces and temporalities, and digital game rhetorics. Though it may be difficult to differentiate these three from each other—when is a theory arhetorical? What discussion of time sits outside of that of its perception, and thus theory? How do we separate in-game time from in-game space? When are digital games, themselves always discoursively-produced and productive of discourse, atheoretical?—we offer these groupings as a starting place. Each deserves close attention and future consideration by academics and lay audiences, by independent scholars and professional game designers, and by casual fans and hardcore gamers.

Just as Game Studies must inevitably integrate the contrasting and oftentimes competing perspectives of game designers, corporate marketers, and end users, it must also fundamentally reject not only the worn commonplaces of today and their auditioning replacements (gamification, proceduralism), but also it must embrace its unorthodox constitution of international, transdisciplinary members.

In bringing together this collection we have tried our best to represent the diversity of the field by including as many perspectives as possible: Our eleven essays contain work by four graduate students, five assistant professors, one lecturer, and two professors; we work at public universities (University of Arizona, Swinburne University of Technology, University of Wyoming, Arizona State, Old Dominion, Otago, Texas Tech, UCLA), private universities (Texas Christian, Bentley), and one fine arts college (Brunswick). We come from departments of English, Art, Communication, Cinema, and Media, and we teach courses on rhetoric, art, media theory, composition, interactivity, literature, communication, gender studies, new media, pedagogy, game studies, film, and others. We are from Canada, Germany, Mexico, New Zealand, Australia, and the US. We also value collaboration: two of us co-edited this collection, two co-wrote their essay, three are currently editors at different academic journals, and four are active video game archivists.

However, in order for Game Studies to continue—if it is to outgrow the industry fetishism, academic opportunism, breathless fandom, iniquitous labor, and unseemly reportage that arise as if by spontaneous generation whenever violence, sexism, and addiction get invoked—it must reject the dominant, apolitical discourse that would consign digital games to irrelevant spheres of harmless child play or invidious mass entertainment.

We commend our contributors for their willingness to try something new, and we share a common belief that though terms from other disciplines offer useful points of reference and departure, we must depart from this practice if we are ever to reference the terms unique to games.

This is necessary if we are ever to theorize in digital game discourse Foucault's 'statement' (*énoncé*), the ground of possibility for discourse itself.

We must discipline the discipline; we must throttle the throttle. Until then, all our bases belong to them.

Chapter Reviews

We introduce Part I—Video Game Theory—with Chapter One, "On Ludicity (or On Ludic Ambrosia and Dragon's Teeth)." Steven Conway proposes the term 'ludicity' in order to expand the critical vocabulary of play: specifically, he defines 'hyper-ludicity' (expansion of play), 'contra-ludicity' (contraction of play), and 'hypo-ludicity' (emptiness of play) and offers them in explanation for the anomalies, availabilities, affabilities, and artifacts that may occur with gameplay. In enumerating and in employing these concepts, Conway hopes to offer not categories for consideration but also a guide to scholars in the field. That is to say, Conway recognizes the need not just for the study of digital games but also a language for doing so. Thus, the opportunity exists for scholars to identify, to analyze, and to create the necessary terminology for current and for future study. Moreover, the more precise discourse Conway charts will help scholars to identify existing phenomena, to obviate the continued misapplication of borrowed terms, and to avoid missing altogether the crucial components of the artifacts we examine. Even so, Conway grounds his approach in a close ludological reading of the relevant texts, while acknowledging their inherent phenomenological limitations and remaining mindful of their wider significance for digital game culture, society, and industry.

In Chapter Two, "Bourdieu's Forms of Capital and Video Game Production," Randy Nichols revisits Bourdieu's work on value in order to apply it to the cultural production of video game studies. Nichols rejects a status quo definition of video game meaning and impact by pursing the idea that video games represent not status but its opposite: "a battle over meaning, bounded by economic consideration." Nichols reveals how video games draw on a wide network of cultural production for creation, reproduction of cultural capital, and legitimacy.

The notion that Game Studies scholars have an opportunity to rethink some critical commonplaces—in this, and in other disciplines—runs through Marc A. Ouellette's Chapter Three, "Gay for Play: Theorizing LGBTQ Characters in Game Studies," as well. Ouellette recognizes that the prevailing positions regarding the construction of gender, sex, and sexuality in digital environments crystallized prior to two important developments, one popular and one scholarly. First, the proliferation of consoles and the rapid progression of their capabilities brings increasingly sophisticated simulations into increasing numbers of homes. Second, theories of gender, sex, and sexuality now tend to stress the performative aspects of these formations. Rather than impermeable boundaries, these identities are fluid and depend upon deployments. Moreover, the placement of play is as much a part of the processes of gender, sex, and sexuality as it is a part of digital games. Combining the two should allow for greater levels of exposure to and participation in a wider array of subjectivities by a wider array of participants. However, it remains to be seen if the game industry is ready for the kinds of advancements Ouellette—and many gamers and modders—anticipate. As a corollary, Ouellette's findings indicate once again that as much as digital games represent technological progress, these are secondary to the social and cultural dimensions in which the games are produced, consumer, modified and shared.

In Chapter Four, "Restart after Death: Self-optimizing, Normalism, and Re-entry in Computer Games," Rolf F. Nohr examines more specifically the experience of actual players with one of the most frequently frustrating elements of gameplay, the demise and subsequent re-entry of an avatar or play element. Importantly, Nohr differentiates the restart and re-entry routines of digital games from the seemingly similar narrative techniques applied in film, television, and literature. Such insertions comprise structural features of the game and represent manifestations of algorithms rather than allegories. At the same time, Nohr also hopes to advance discussions in the field by further distinguishing between and among modes of analysis. Indeed, it could be argued that he enumerates the distinctions between what might be understood as phylogenesis and ontogenesis for the discipline. In favoring the former, Nohr aims at uncovering structures of meaning that pervade a computer game on its narrative, ludic, aesthetic, and technical levels and asks at the same time for the extension and continuation of these structures of meaning into other forms. Moreover, such a move allows scholars to consider the relationships between and among games and the intertextual networks that surround them, including handbooks, walkthroughs, movies, books, and myths. This is important because such inquiries reveal not only the meanings of a particular game, but also offer insights into the structure of meaning and its articulations in a given society.

We begin Part II—Ludic Spaces & Temporalities—with collaborative scholars Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S. McAllister. In Chapter Five's "Against the Use of Computer Games in the Classroom: The Wickedness of Ludic Pedagogies" they take issue with the presumed value of integrating computer games into the classroom space by formulating six "wicked" problems intended to reveal and complicated some pedagogical assumptions on the following: simplicity, jeopardy, novelty, work, infantilization, and study. Ruggill and McAllister conclude by calling for "a better computer game-based pedagogy" that incorporates political economy, recursivity, and reciprocity. The reasoning behind Ruggill and McAllister's contrarian viewpoint is sound, both in terms of its pedagogical premises and in terms of its ludic leanings. Crucially, they argue, well-meaning academics might rush to adopt the latest technology, toy, or trinket for a variety of reasons other than their comfort with the complexities of computer games. Said another way, having a console in a classroom might have the same effect as having a baby in classroom. Very quickly the class becomes about the baby rather than the subjects at hand. Conversely, a game system might quickly become the same kind of cliché as the ubiquitous presentation software. Then, there is the spectrum of challenges between these polarities. Thus, Ruggill and McAllister carefully skirt several controversial matters and restrict themselves instead to nothing less than a series of irresolvable questions regarding the future of computer games in the classroom. However, this is yet another reminder that any answer is always already provisional. Although they outline several means of achieving workable solutions, it becomes clear that underlying it all is the need for reflexivity in every facet of repurposing games for pedagogical purposes.

In Chapter Six, "Movies in the Gameworld: Revisiting the Video Game Cutscene and Its Temporal Implications," David O'Grady isolates *Fallout 3*'s cutscenes, specifically those involving Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System (VATS) for their manipulation of ludic time. O'Grady draws on recent scholarly models of the various video game timeframes—including Juul (2005) and Zagal and Mateas (2010)—to ultimately argue for the reconsideration of the cutscene as mere excess or exposition, but rather as a temporal compensation and correction, one that may inform an understanding of time-consciousness. In furthering the conversations started earlier in the collection, O'Grady enumerates and locates one of the kinds of concerns only someone with significant experience playing games can truly appreciate and understand—the sort of thing Ruggill and McAllister point out as being essential to games pedagogy. Like Nohr, though, he wants to explore the cut scene as a structural element in addition to its usual presumed function as something that furthers the plot. In suspending the player's control, the game disrupts the much-theorized interactivity and prevents participation. Indeed, few features frustrate more frequently than full motion videos (FMVs), cut-scenes and, as O'Grady argues, their near-cousins glitches, lags, interruptions, freezes and all of the remaining. For O'Grady, these offer another way to consider the relationship between a game and its manipulation of time, especially "real" time, as different from the present. In so doing, O'Grady demonstrates the ways in which immersion—long a favorite for those dabbling or damning—has become an over-used, even misused term with little purchase. Instead, the interplay of agency and its suspension suggests an intriguing entry point for a more thorough interrogation of interactivity.

In Chapter Seven, "Playing with Numbers: Games as Training in Numerical Practices," Stefan Böhme also visits notions of time, and specifically, the interplay of past, present, and future in terms of their production in and through numerical practices. Starting with the premise that games are essentially representations of multiple and simultaneous calculations, Böhme finds himself immersed, as it were, in the language of business rather than the language of fun. Players find themselves in situations—the present—largely on the basis of data already collected—the past—and the game's responses—the future—come from the same sorts of statistical indicators used to predict market fluctuations and other areas of commerce (up to and including student success) via simulations that produce normality. Thus, training in numerical practices constitutes one of the most significant pedagogies within video games.

In Chapter Eight, "Into the Third Dimension: Unexplored Facts of Player/Character Interactions," as Christine Daviault argues, the ways in which the game and the player affect the non-player characters, and vice-versa, challenges the prevailing assumptions that player enjoyment can only come via vicarious participation in and through the main protagonist. Ultimately, Daviault calls upon Game Studies scholars consider more closely a game's non-player characters. While accepting non-player characters as structural elements, Daviault departs from many of the other essayists in this collection by contemplating these characters as essential elements in a game's narrative integrity and as significant sources of untapped information on player enjoyment of the game. Ignoring the relationships between avatar/player and the non-player characters risks missing occasions to study more completely the ways in which players engage with games. As Daviault demonstrates, the enjoyment of and participation with non-player characters interrupts the critical commonplaces that suggest a straight and unbroken line between player and avatar. This calls into question much of the pro forma media effects scholarship surrounding games and opens up discussions of games as complex social networks in their own right.

Section III—Video Game Rhetorics—leads with Kevin Moberly's "Preemptive Strikes: Ludology, Narratology, and Deterrence in Computer Game Studies." In a collection of evocative pieces, Moberly's essay is perhaps the most so. In not attempting to settle the debate between the narratologists and the ludologists, Moberly calls to task many of the leading thinkers in the field for their part in establishing the outside boundaries of what can and cannot be said in the scholarly conversations that constitute game studies. Moberly begins by approaching the debate between ludology and narratology through Baudrillard's notion of deterrence. That is to say, he recognizes that since they are forms of representation, scholarship, and criticism are always already political practices. In this way, they structure knowledge as legitimate and as illegitimate. In effect, Moberly presents the debate as echoing a kind of cause-and-effect reversal in which academic activity neither explicates nor elucidates objects of study but instead creates them. Said another way, the representation of the real thoroughly and completely conditions the reception of the real. Ultimately, the narratology vs. ludology debate becomes an occlusive rather than a magic circle, ensuring that social, political, and economic questions are never asked. Moberly offers dozens of rich allusions to help readers actually locate the actual debate. However, we might offer him one other. This might be understood as the mythological "mother-in-law" definition of a discursive regime, whereby those deploying either discourses position themselves as the subject and argue from place where they alone make sense. Games, and more significantly game players, then become nothing more than fetishes or tokens of exchange in the internecine games of colony and empire that structure and perpetuate academic institutions.

In Chapter Ten, "Failure is Not an Option: WWII, Video Games, and the War on Terror" James W. Creel makes the case for the rhetorical reading of *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* (Gearbox Software 2008) as a contemporary, motivated, and motivating response to the Iraq War. Creel returns to Kenneth Burke's "frames of acceptance"—those particular ways of viewing both the world and the viewer's place in it—and finds that the "saturation of advertisements, political addresses, and consumer products with WWII narrative and imagery suggests that the American public still considers the 'Good War' a relevant and valid" frame. Following Burke, the frames of acceptance grow entrenched and create a bureaucratized imagination; Creel reads *Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway* for those bureaucratic elements that encourage players to draw parallels between unlike battles in dissimilar wars—Operation: Market Garden during WWII and US coalition setbacks during the Iraq War. In reading a war game for its modern-day war identification, Creel anticipates Thompson in Chapter Eleven.

Jason C. Thompson's penultimate "Rising Sun/Fallen Brother: Rhetoric and the Emergent Topos of the War Brother" builds upon previous discussions of the ability of video games to represent the past by reviewing the pedagogical, historical, analogical, and metaphorical functions of war games, specifically those titles in the *Medal of Honor* series. Returning to classical rhetoric, Thompson revisits the argumentative notion of a commonplace, or topos, to which speakers may turn in order to create persuasive arguments. Played in this light, war video games represent neither historical wars nor interactive narratives but multiple and overlapping persuasive arguments about how the player should feel about, and act toward, them—games as motivating identifications of one thing with another. When examining persuasive arguments at work in the *Medal of Honor* series Thompson locates in *Rising Sun* multiple departures from previous franchise touchstones such as avatar identity, theater of operations, and stealth game mechanics; he proposes that these deviations should not be considered individually but as species common to a genus: the emergence of "the war-brother topos." Thompson argues that the dominant rhetoric of the game—obtaining player consent for the war on terror—relies on various examples of the war-brother topos: through careful analysis of game manual, cover, and initial training level, Thompson details how each example of the war-brother topos in *Rising Sun* draws from either or both of its defining aspects: manipulation of time (in the form of anachronism) and manipulation of space (in the form of the elision of war and home).Though examples of the war-brother topos vary, each exerts a hegemonic pressure on the player in order to achieve the game's obscured purpose.

In Chapter Twelve, we welcome the alternative—and essential—perspective of professional game designer Francisco Ortega-Grimaldo. In "Boarder(er) Games: A Case Study on the Creation of Socially-Based Board Games" we find an intriguing and necessary intervention in this collection. It is obviously a hybrid piece and as such needs to be understood within several rich traditions and allowed to explore the boundaries of them. The most important contribution this paper makes to the collection is that it reminds readers of the complexities of game designs and hits at the intersection of the fraught relationship between readers and texts. In this regard, the author's position as a reader himself—of the border, of the immigration process, of politics, of culture, and of games—makes one ponder if this needs to be acknowledged explicitly as such. Said another way, the designer is always already a reader. In fact, the author's neologism, *ludoztli*, invokes such a stance. While it means, quite literally, "making games," the etymology and the definition are unequivocal in demanding an *a priori* political awareness on the part of the designer in order to instill or to produce a resultant reflection of this in the player via the simulation. It also demands a tremendous amount of reading and reflexivity on the part of the designer and yet seems to displace notions of the *auteur*, or "maker," in the traditional, classical sense of poetics and *poiesis*.

PART I:

VIDEO GAME THEORY

CHAPTER ONE

ON LUDICITY (OR ON LUDIC AMBROSIA AND DRAGON'S TEETH)

STEVEN CONWAY

Introduction

Pac-Man's (Namco 1980) power pellets, *Super Mario Bros.*' (Nintendo 1985) mushrooms, *Quake*'s (id Software 1996) quad damage, *Half-Life 2*'s (Valve Corporation 2004) gravity gun, *Mario Kart Wii*'s (Nintendo 2008) lightning bolt; each stand, to greater or lesser degrees, as icons representing the culture and history of digital games. They are utilised within digital game culture for purposes as varied as fashion items, insider argot, debates, articles, competitions (e.g., GameTrailers.com's *Salute to Power-Ups* contest), and game modifications. They are employed by developers for inspirational or aspirational purposes, as a design reference, blueprint, or intertextual (and intratextual) acknowledgment. Lastly, they are used and experienced within the games by players as strategic manoeuvres, visceral thrills, moments of technological sublimity, and as conspicuous spectacles.

To offer a concise summation of each, hyper-ludicity expands play, enhancing the user's effectance within the game environment, through either the augmentation of existing abilities, or the addition of new powers. Contra-ludicity is the opposite, where the player has his or her capabilities diminished, or removed entirely. The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview and insight into the workings of hyper- and contra-ludicity; their design, implementation, and utilisation; and their wider significance for digital game culture, society, and industry. I will take examples from a range of eras, genres, and formats to illustrate the universality of hyper- and contra-ludicity, and in doing so provide a broad assortment of reference points through which the majority of readers may gain a foothold. In particular I will present a critical reading of Team Bondi's *L.A. Noire* (2011) to demonstrate the dangers inherent in misapplying these concepts, whereupon *hyper*-ludicity becomes *hypo*-ludicity.

As I have outlined previously (Conway 2010a), hyper- and contra-ludicity are responsible for many indelible marks upon the collective knowledge and memory of digital game culture. Yet both remain extraordinarily glossed over by game studies literature, and as a consequence, we have no critical language for categorising these ludic phenomena or engaging in a crucial discussion of their aesthetics. Indeed, the sole word we have for these various design features is the 'power-up,' a slang term borrowed from fan discourse that itself subsumes the full spectrum of ludicity: put another way, we need terms that will allow not only for power-*ups* (hyper-ludicity), but also for power-*downs* (contra-ludicity), for example the 'poison mushroom' appearing in *Super Mario Bros.: The Lost Levels* (Nintendo 1986). Such use of language creates a 'common sense' design paradigm that threatens to imprison our use of these mechanics, as Wittgenstein understood: "A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (1958, passage 115). Henceforth if we do not identify, analyze, and create suitable terminology for such phenomena, we may be condemned to continued misapplication of such designs, or worse still, to myopic understanding of a crucial component of the artefacts we examine. As with much within digital games that remains unexplored, perhaps it is simple ubiquity that undermines their study; their presence is so common it is consequently taken to be unimportant. This is a grievously misleading deduction, for it is precisely their common character that makes them so significant. As illustrated in the opening sentence, hyper-ludicity can be evidenced across eras, formats, genres, and modes of interaction, as can contra-ludicity.

In fact, both are present in one of the first digital games ever created, Russell et al.'s *Spacewar!* (1962). The overall design of the game, like many of the proceeding arcade era, is contra-ludic; you cannot hope to win the game as your spaceship's supply of missiles and fuel is limited, finally leading to stasis as the ship drifts impotently towards the gravity well of a star and inevitable annihilation. It is in many ways a ludic lesson on the second law of thermodynamics, illustrating well the principle of entropy as the closed environment of the gamespace eventually leads to exhaustion and disorder, and the player is finally confronted by the system's inevitable inertia. The 'hyperspace' option, whereby your ship disappears and reappears at a random location on the screen (avoiding enemy fire and the star, but perhaps re-emerging directly in front of both), is perhaps the earliest digital example of hyper-ludic *alea* (borrowing from Caillois (2001), a mechanic based primarily upon luck or chance). This would later be embodied in design features such as the venerable storage container mechanic, manifest in countless fantasy-themed role-playing games and platformers such as *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (Konami 1997) as treasure chests, spewing forth one of the following: coins, useful items, or in a contra-ludic twist (for *alea* always invites the possibility of inversion), an enemy. This convention is knowingly played upon in a number of games; for example, in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo 1998)the clay pots you continually smash in search of coins can occasionally rise up against you to avenge their shattered brethren, levitating and hurling themselves towards your avatar.

Whilst hyper-ludicity can regularly become permanent, for example in role-playing games (RPGs), it is extremely rare for contra-ludicity to be introduced mid-game as a stable feature. Of course, the entire game structure can veer towards hyper- and contra-ludicity. For example *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) and its ilk are systemically contra-ludic, denying for the player any hope of ultimate victory; though contra-ludic like the above *Spacewar!*, *Tetris* is its ideological opposite in terms of its operation, providing an endless growth of energy: ludic perpetual motion. Generally, role-playing games such as *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare 2011) provide a stark contrast to counter-ludic systems, being imbued with a cascading hyper-ludicity that usually reaches its zenith within the last third of the game.

The methodology used for this examination finds its foundation in much game studies work situated within the Humanities tradition that seeks to redefine the analytical tool of textual analysis for digital artefacts. Influenced by analyses and methodologies described variously by Aarseth (1994), Murray (1998), Bogost (2006), Consalvo and Dutton (2006), and Galloway (2006), the proceeding investigation is predicated upon a close ludological reading of the discussed texts to identify and consider a specific design feature, whilst acknowledging inherent phenomenological limitations (Krzywinska 2005). This approach is aptly summarised by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum:

> A creator's design decisions instantiate her content within the form of a particular medium in order to afford the user experience that she intends. This specific engagement with the form, design, content, and experience of an individual work is at the same time an engagement with the general form and the overall design dynamics of the chosen medium [. . .]. Isolating specific phenomena to read allows theorists to limit claims about the contribution of the reading. In the same way that a literary theorist might focus on the use of metaphor or imagery in a text, a game scholar