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What is game studies anyway?

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ABSTRACT In this introduction, game studies is argued to be a force of innovation for cultural studies. While game studies, as it has developed over the last 10 years, fits well within cultural studies' methodology and theory, it does more than benefit from cultural studies as a 'mother discipline'. Game studies proves itself to be a strong force, especially in its productive use of political economy to analyse games and gaming as a (new) cultural form. Building on a descriptive taxonomy of games and gaming by both genre and 'platform', this is an introduction to games and gaming for those with a cultural studies background. While ideally, game studies will develop also as cultural critique, this is a far cry from dominant practice in the gamer community. Gamers tend to be 'hand-in-glove' with the industry. It is high time for game studies to turn a critical eye on itself.

KEYWORDS game genres, game studies, platforms, political economy, upgrade culture

In 1986, Richard Johnson famously wondered in a double-length essay in *Social Text*: 'What is cultural studies anyway?' He suggests that we understand it as 'a kind of alchemy for producing useful knowledge; codify it and you might halt its reactions' (1986–7: 38). 'Should cultural studies aspire to be an academic discipline?' is his leading question. This is the very question facing game studies today. As an interdisciplinary endeavour, as a critique, it could be a force in the world; as a forced unity it might turn inward and lose its social and political strength. Of course, preceding this question are what would seem to be two simpler ones: what is game studies anyway? And what is it doing here in a cultural studies journal?

Johnson suggests that we understand cultural studies as an (organic) whole rather than as a unity, which came into being under specific historical conditions. Understanding cultural studies as a whole allows him to discuss the central directions taken in the field and to make room for different versions and approaches. Understanding a field as a unity can

result in overly codified orthodoxies. Similarly, the driving force behind presenting a special issue on games, gaming and game studies here is to bring cultural studies up to speed with a new domain of research, while investigating the possibility that it can both learn from and reinforce game studies' 'sense of direction'. It is moving against codification of cultural studies as a field, and suggests, totally immodestly, that game studies might benefit from understanding itself in the light of cultural studies traditions.

As with all intellectual traditions, Johnson argues, cultural studies has to be understood in its locatedness. Marx and Gramsci are his theoretical 'father figures'. Three premises and a suggestion shape his discussion, all of which will be familiar but nevertheless bear repeating, to see what they might mean to game studies. The premises are first, that cultural processes are intimately connected with social relations. The second is that culture involves power and helps to produce asymmetries. The third is that culture is neither an autonomous nor an externally determined field, but a site of social differences and struggles (Johnson, 1986–7). A little later he suggests that interlocking circuits of capital and circuits of culture could serve as an open, multilayered theoretical model. While a number of interesting and relevant insights follow from this model, suffice to say that new constellations of public and private culture need careful observation. The fact that 'masculine and middle-class structures of "interest" (in both meanings of the term)' continue to define what are 'important public issues' (1986–7: 53) might be a saving grace for game studies, meaning money for research or resulting in untimely codification, as it also could mean undue and premature general interest in a field that needs time to develop.

For cultural studies, Johnson identified political limits and potentials for three areas, and they will come as no surprise. They have remained relevant to development in cultural studies, and could do the same for game studies as well as for robust cultural critique. By keeping an eye on our own position(s) within the circuits of power and culture, Johnson hopes that we can avoid at the very least becoming part of the 'problem', and perhaps even contribute to solutions, such as more equal relations of power, or a strong and engaged rather than dismissive public debate about the widest possible range of cultural forms.

In cultural studies, Johnson sees work on production that turns a blind eye towards the complexity of everyday practice and common sense. There is textual analysis that foregoes understanding beyond the determinations of the filmic text (which two decades ago was a key site of discussion). There is ethnographic work that over-identifies with particular groups and does not wish to take a step back from the political project of defending, for example, middle-class disdain for a popular genre. In two decades, Johnson's wish still stands for a cultural studies that is open-minded and

open-hearted, recognized for making politics and the general public more culturally aware and open (both on the right- and left-wings).

We too want to 'breed' cultural analysis that understands social complexity; that understands that texts 'force' readings; and that readers, on their part, manage to negotiate that discursive power. We too recognize the need to understand relations of production, and the interlocking of circuits of power and culture. What has changed, significantly, are the cultural forms that we argue about politically, which are taking the brunt of high-cultural and middle-class indignation and outcry while making money for corporate capitalism. Whereas Johnson referred to film, popular reading, television and girl culture, cultural studies today has to come to terms with new forms of electronic entertainment: video and computer games, new forms of community-building and a renewed interest in masculinity and violence, often linked to ethnicity and popular music. All three are relevant to the developing field of game studies.

In this special issue we have collected contributions from game studies scholars. Their work builds on cultural studies and the traditions with which cultural studies remains in dialogue. Arguably, however, game studies is not cultural studies. It offers itself as a new interdisciplinary field. It is relevant to ask: what is game studies anyway? We will use Johnson's questions and observations to structure our own, and to introduce game studies as a domain of inquiry. Of course, we will introduce the contributions collected here and point to how they contribute to the game studies of the future. Also, we want to point to where and how cultural studies as an interdisciplinary endeavour can profit and learn from 'game studies'.

Forebear/forerunner

So far, discussion of gaming and of games has appeared in dedicated young journals and on media studies web fora. Gaming is often part of a wider-ranging discussion of cultural texts and products encountered as a multiform marketed package. Take, for example, *Pokémon*. *Pokémon* are a kind of animal that can be trained, have powers and can transform. *Pokémon* came to media users in 1998 as an animated television series and electronic and card games. Developed to sell Nintendo's Gameboy (the first handheld game computer), *Pokémon* was an incredible hit with young (and not so young) users worldwide. The game became a highly successful means to sell the handheld computer. *Pokémon* was taken up also by critics as a key example of how western societies are perverting children, as it was said to celebrate violence. *Pokémon* merchandising and fierce marketing was seen as a strong example of installing materialism in young children to the detriment of higher values: *Pokémon* was the devil incarnate. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green (2003) analysed the evident pleasure that children took in the series and the outcry among self-appointed guardians of morality. They asserted the

cultural complexities and significance of *Pokémon* as both a business case and a question of cultural logic and value: *Pokémon* can be read as a new type of '*Bildungsroman*' (protagonist Ash's quest to become a great trainer) and a clever marketing strategy. *Pokémon* also brokered a new deal between the media industry and media users. At the right price, and at a certain quality level, we found that we were willing to invest in electronic games. While those who do not play games only saw another screen taking away children from literary culture, with competition and fighting being offered as central to being someone, others found a new and rich cultural form and domain.

From the perspective of game studies, questions about *Pokémon* and the other hit games that followed (such as *The Sims* and *Tycoon* or *Fifa* series) offer themselves in a logic of widening circles in water: what is the game like? What pleasure and what significance does it have for players? In what kind of cultural context does it function? How does it represent the world; what morality is offered? Following these text and use-based questions are questions of production. What kind of labour and labour relations are involved in producing both the hardware and software? Which comes first? While hardware would seem to be longer lasting, today software sells hardware. Designing the software, games and the interface of machines is far more valuable than putting together chips and integrated circuits in a hard plastic and metal box. Have world labour relations shifted with the development of gaming as a significant form of popular entertainment?

All of these questions are obviously part of the cultural studies 'canon'. While this suggests that game studies can (and should) be subsumed under cultural studies as a specialist category of cultural studies, this is not entirely true. As this issue shows, game studies are in a way ahead of cultural studies. While there is an old Marxist legacy, cultural studies has neglected, as Johnson argues, to integrate questions of political economy and governance into its exposé of the use and function of cultural forms. While these questions are gaining urgency, some work in game studies has begun its trajectory precisely from the perspective of what Foucault called governmentality. In this issue, following a 'show, don't tell' logic, we will begin with two contributions suggesting that understanding control and (self-)governance goes to the heart of the cultural significance of games and gaming. While cultural studies can be accused, quite rightly, of neglecting production, production is a central term for game studies. It includes labour and labour relations at all stages of the coming into being, both physically and intellectually, of a game. Apart from labour, there is also the question of ownership: who is the legal owner of the work that goes into games? Who makes money, who gains pleasure and at what price?

Game studies, then, can be a force of innovation in cultural studies itself, simply by its strong cultural sense of political economy. In addition, game

studies has investigated texts and textual relations as well as questions of representation in games. Although we will return to genres in games, a short example here might be in order. There is a type of game called 'first-person shooter': this means simply that the person playing the game gets to choose and hold a weapon, and shoots from a first-person perspective. *America's Army* is a game in this genre, developed by the US Army as a tool to get, as they put it, 'into the consideration set' of (preferably) young men. *America's Army*'s development team cleverly mixed various educational, marketing and propaganda mechanisms at their disposal to offer a (free) game which, on the one hand, fits perfectly into the first-person shooter genre, while at the same time reinforcing a highly politicized recruiting agenda. Although perhaps too obvious an example, such a game begs questions of representation. How and why can players from all over the world (this is a game one can play via the internet against users logged on from other parts of the world), play as members of the US Army, and why would they want to? What exactly is represented here? Has the US Army become a dislocated marker of military supremacy for players outside the US, who apparently collectively disregard that the US Army has become a symbol of rampant amoral imperialism for others? Is this a new form of camp, poking fun at American military prowess by playing at being that army?

There is some audience research into gaming, but none answers these questions. Only a small portion of the available audience research is scholarly. Most of the raw data come from market research companies and the industry itself. More importantly perhaps from a cultural studies perspective, ideally audience studies in gaming are not to be descriptive, but well theorized. The field of game studies has its own grounding texts of which, remarkably, Johan Huizinga's classic text *Homo Ludens* (1955[1938]) is one. Until now, Huizinga's notion of 'the magic circle' has been taken as the simple and ultimate descriptive truth of gaming, electronically or not. Here there is clearly a need for theorization to break an unproductive orthodoxy in a young field.

Origins, platforms and genres (for the uninitiated)

Game studies is not the study of (the use of) digital media, computers or internet. Although there is an invented history of the field, naming the work of Huizinga, Caillois and Sutton-Smith (see Pargman and Jakobsson in this issue), it is more useful to understand game studies as a decade-old invention that came into being with electronic, video and computer games as cultural form. For the uninitiated we offer a simple descriptive taxonomy by platform and by genre, which together structure the field of gaming. Having outlined what is available, we will return to the cultural and theoretical questions raised by gaming as a corporate and a cultural practice.

Platforms

A platform is where you can play a game, or what you can play a game 'on' – although most are 'hardware' (machines), a more complete definition would be the material conditions enabling a person to play a game. The list below gives the platforms.

- console games – consoles are machines used with a digital video disc (DVD) or another type of optical disc containing a game. Think of Sony's Playstation 2 (2000) and more recently Playstation 3 (2006), Microsoft's Xbox 360 (2005) and Nintendo's Wii (2006);
- handhelds – small computers used with a memory card. Examples are Playstation Portable (2004), Nintendo Gameboy Advance (2001), and more recently Nintendo DS [Dual Screen] (2004);
- personal computer (PC) games – games generally played on Windows desktops or laptops. They come in two varieties: casual games in game genres (see below), and 'Triple-A' games: bestselling games available for all platforms. As a result, both hardcore and casual gamers will use PCs to play;
- fringe – live action, role-playing games; Viking era re-enactment; battles;
- fringe – alternate reality games that occasionally cross over into other games.

Game genres

Machines are only the means to play games. To play a particular game, you need software. Software comes in genres, usually available for multiple platforms, even if a single disc cannot be used for different kinds of machines:

- first-person shooters – *Doom*, *Counter-Strike*, *America's Army*. The person playing the game gets to shoot others in all kinds of situations, ranging from historical contemporary war scenes to urban guerilla;
- sports – *Fifa* series, *Tony Hawk's* series, *Need for Speed*. The player plays an entire team in a match, the machine plays the other team or opponent. The player also can be a trainer, decide on the line-up, buy and sell players and so on; or simply do a car or skate race;
- simulation – *Sims*, *Rollercoaster*, *Horse Tycoon*, *My Horse and Me* (Wii). The player 'dolls up' characters, trains or manages them, builds and decorates houses;
- real-time strategy – *Starcraft*, *Company of Heroes*, *Command & Conquer* series. The idea is to command an army, as with the boardgame *Risk*;
- Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) – A player builds and trains a character, meets up online with other characters and achieves goals, builds powers and gains symbolic money to buy weapons, good horse or tool. Fighting as well as crafts and building a fantasy world are included. *World of Warcraft* is played by 9 million

people worldwide (as of 2007) a number that is still growing. In the European Union and US, users pay a monthly subscription fee of €13 or $15 (in China, players pay far less and per hour). A player also needs a €20 starter pack: an expansion pack is available at €30. The interesting thing is that after its initial marketing, *World of Warcraft* has spent relatively little on advertising. The game is sold by word-of-mouth;

- PC games – these are not strictly a genre, but they are different. Almost all can be bought to be played on an ordinary computer, excluding *Super Mario* and the Nintendo games. Those played primarily on PCs are so-called 'casual games', such as *Mah Jong*, *Tetris* or *Bejewelled*. They are not held in much regard by the gamer community, but are enjoyed hugely (as the stereotype has it) by women and other players who play on their own, exploring new forms of leisure and building new types of social connections through gaming online.

Perfect storm: hardware and software wars

For (hardcore) gamers, game journalists and critics, the holiday season of 2007 was what they called the 'perfect storm'. A host of titles was released and this year there was not only a discussion of which games to buy, but also in which new hardware platform to invest. The perfect storm points to two key characteristics of the game industry, which make up the backdrop of this alleged 'epic struggle' for industry-wide domination. First, there is the cyclical nature of hardware production. Game console technology is significantly upgraded when new game hardware is brought onto the market, every five years or so. Second, there is the interactive entertainment industry's seasonal revenue stream – the highest game sales volumes occur during the holiday season.

In previous years, Sony's Playstation 2 held the coveted first spot as the leading hardware platform. It had been years since there had been a completely new line-up of eagerly anticipated, fresh and, in the eyes of many, new and promising game technology. Microsoft's Xbox 360 started what is termed by gamers as the 'next-gen war', heralding 'a new era of High Definition gaming' in 2007. The Nintendo Wii joined the fray soon after. Nintendo's strategy builds upon their popular handheld device, the Nintendo DS, opting for interface innovation, using motion-sensitive controllers rather than high-definition graphics and large amounts of computing power. Sony followed suit with the launch of Playstation 3, which was meant to determine 'the future of entertainment' by introducing, in the eyes of many, an overly expensive piece of advanced gaming technology. Sony's marketing spokespeople stressed the future outlook of Playstation 3, which is meant to be ahead of its time in terms of technology.

Publishing (power) houses, for their part, lined up their triple-A titles which in many cases had been in development for years. For many dedicated or 'hardcore' gamers, Christmas came early in 2007 because of the

launch of the futuristic first-person shooter *Halo 3*, exclusively available for Xbox 360. A marketing campaign of unprecedented scale and scope, consisting of alternate reality games, online campaigns, launch events around the globe and everything else that contemporary marketing has to offer, paved the way for a new sales record. The game grossed $300 million in sales in its first week. This in itself was spun into a follow-up marketing campaign, arguing that '*Halo 3* had become a pop-culture phenomenon' and that its launch was indeed the 'biggest day in U.S. entertainment history'.

Yet *Halo 3* was just the first of many mass-marketing campaigns. More blockbusters followed, just in time to meet the Christmas deadline. The multiplatform release of *Guitar Hero 3*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, or 'exclusive' (single console) releases such as *Super Mario Galaxy* (Wii), *Mass Effect* (Xbox 360) and *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Playstation 3) made gamers and gaming critics go mad with anticipation and hyperbole. It would not be a challenge to find a review of one of these titles using phrases such as 'best game ever', 'highly realistic', 'state of the art', and 'the future of games is here'. In feature articles many critics asked: 'where to find the time to play it all?' Playing a single title involves a considerable time investment, ranging from 20 hours for a single player title, up to almost indefinite replayability in the case of online multiplayer games.

The story of the 'perfect storm' is illuminating in many ways. For example, it shows that generally, gamer discourse – within one of the thousands of game news website, game magazines, weblogs (blogs), newspapers or on message boards – is dominated by male fans. They play for longer amounts of time on the newest range of consoles. Casual gamers, mostly female, play short titles on the PC. Shared industry traits across manufacturers and software publishers offer insight into the political economy of the game industry which generally are taken for granted, especially by hardcore gamers. Let us 'follow the money'.

The razor blade model

Particularly for the console manufacturers, most notably Sony and Microsoft, profits are made by software sales in order to earn back losses on sophisticated and expensive hardware. This is known as the 'razor blade model'. For industry analysts and stockholders, an important indicator of a console's success is its 'attach rate': the amount of games sold per platform. For example, Xbox 360, which came out early in the 'next-gen' cycle in 2007, has the highest attach rate, said to be around six to seven games per console. The most dedicated fans tend to act out their anticipated role as early adopters. They invest heavily in gaming hardware and software. In comparison Wii, which is more popular among a less 'hardcore' crowd, has a much lower attach rate. In practice this means, at least in 2007, that

there are almost twice as many games sold for every Xbox 360 compared to the Wii. There are regional differences of course. Korea and Japan are exceptionally heavy gaming nations. The game *Starcraft* (from the designers of *World of Warcraft*) is currently South Korea's national sport.

When a game is a success, the software pays back the investment and sales losses on hardware and the investment in developing the game. Manufacturers are even willing to play long shots and aim to make a profit on part 2 of a title. Quite a gamble is involved. At the end of the day, only 5 percent of games are a hit. They pay for the 95 percent which never turn a profit at all. This is a business model comparable to the record industry. It is a high-risk, capital-intensive part of the cultural industry, focused on the continual innovation of technology. Obviously, if games (software) make up for the money that is lost on the hardware, the 'installed base' of a machine is crucial for the manufacturer or publisher. The next generation machines recently introduced would seem to fit between Xbox versus Playstation, while the Wii has found a much bigger market on its own.

While Xbox 360 has a high attach rate, Playstation 2, a 'previous-gen' machine, has been there for longer with more than 120 million machines sold worldwide. However, this may not mean much in the next-gen console wars. Wii, a funny and relatively cheap to make machine which has players engage in physical activity and has a profit margin even on the hardware, is doing remarkably well. According to sales figures posted online, which are the bread and butter of many fan websites, more than 15.5 million had been sold by the end of 2007. Xbox 360 follows closely with more than 14 million, while Playstation 3 'only' sold 6.7 million. Meanwhile, Nintendo sold more than 58 million of its Dual Screen (DS) handhelds. While the low attach rate for Wii could become a serious problem, Nintendo does not seem to have much to worry about; it makes enormous profits on its exclusive titles (recently, *Mario Party 8* and *SuperMario Galaxy*, and *The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass* for DS). If you want to play a new game, you have to get a next-gen machine, as graphics have been upgraded to new standards. Of course, other gimmicks have been introduced. Microsoft is defining Xbox 360 in terms of connectivity and has introduced Live Messenger on its game console. Sony's Playstation 3 has very advanced technology as its unique quality. This means, in turn, that game development has become more expensive. The development cost for the action third-person shooting game *Stranglehold* (officially titled *John Woo Presents Stranglehold*) is rumoured to be more than $30 million.

Gamers seldom openly question the fundamental economic models underlying the game industry. For example, Playstation 2 games can be played only on Playstation 2. The same title is useless on a PC or Xbox 360. You need to buy a new copy in order to play it on a different platform. With any luck you can buy a Playstation 3 with build-in backwards compatibility to play Playstation 2 games, but these machines are (even) more

expensive than the standard Playstation 3 model and were taken off the shelves in autumn 2007. In the games industry there is no interoperable software format for game consoles, such as mp3 for music or PDF, XML or HTML for text. There is not much choice between console hardware manufacturers either.

For the most part, gamers' apprehension of the political economy of the game industry, for example the oligopolistic nature of the game industry, the logic of recurring five-year hardware cycles, the importance of attach rates and the impact of new hardware on short-term profitability, seems to be quite limited. Ironically, on a purely economic level, being a 'winner' of the next-gen console wars – in terms of a high number of console hardware sales – does not automatically mean profitability. In the current 'next-gen' console cycle, this goes especially for Playstation 3 which was sold at a great loss during the 2007 holiday season without a decent gaming library to offset hardware losses through more profitable software sales.

Microsoft, for its part, lost more than $2 billion during the previous (sixth) generation of console hardware on Xbox, and it is all but certain that the Xbox 360 will make up for these losses. Marketers, publishers and gamers focus their discussions on relatively cheap innovative gaming hardware, sidetracking the far more profitable strategy of selling game software. For example, even though a game's price declines very rapidly only several months after launch, gamers are poised to buy a new game the moment they can. Even before the launch of a newly-released title, many have played or seen parts of the game through piracy, official demos or participating in betas (trial versions). Other than sales figures, upcoming titles and hardware revisions, there is not much introspection among gamers about their own role as consumers. In many instances, gamers seem to be blissfully unaware of the collective power that they wield. In the rare case of gamers being aware of their position, they do not care about the many inequalities constituting contemporary game culture, arguing 'that everybody wins when the game industry makes a profit, right?'

Blissful ignorance

As far as gamers themselves are concerned, discussions on the overall social, technological and economic contexts of game production, distribution and consumption follow a particular discursive pattern. This is shaped by the industry itself through press releases, staged presentations at game conventions and trade shows, and aided by the game industry's more than intimate relationship with game journalists. Therefore, a gamer's account of the game industry is usually individualistic. It focuses on small details or insignificant but intriguing facts. It may question other gamers' fan identity or discuss today's news or tomorrow's hits. A more holistic or historically-informed view, which unveils the balance of power

between producers and players themselves, is hard to find. In general, important questions about the effects of the concentration of capital, such as limiting access to the means of production, the appropriation of intellectual property, free labour and diversity in content, are left largely unanalysed and unquestioned.

One could debate whether the task of a gamer is to engage in critical discussion of the role of the game industry every time that new game hardware and software hit the shelves. When gamers are intellectuals, as is the case for one of us, cultural studies and political economy are much-needed resources to voice a more structural critique of gaming as an industry. There is a clear need to reflect upon the relationship and day-to-day interactions between gamers, using expensive, innovative and advanced game technology, and the game industry – the vast and global industrial complex comprising hardware manufacturers and software developers, marketers and a growing pool of subsidiary positions. A purely financial perspective conforms with the anticipatory function of the dominant industry discourse which focuses on technical, and thus economic, progress. Such an outlook would ignore the role of power, structured through capital, and the many material and immaterial inequalities that it produces within game culture. An example here would be the common practice of inviting gamers to engage in the further development of games. Gamers consider this to be an honour; the industry disguises free labour and intellectual theft as a competition to be among those making a new title. Relatively little work exists that addresses these issues. This issue presents two articles that begin to remedy the situation. Sal Humphreys inquires into the logic of governance and the flow of power between publishers, developers and players in the MMORPGs *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*; and David B. Nieborg and Shenja van der Graaf draw on developer interviews to point to the proprietary logic and expropriation underlying the participatory practices of gamers.

There are more proverbial exceptions to the rule. Consider, for example, the work of Kerr and of Kennedy and Dovey (a review of their book follows Humphreys' and Nieborg and Van der Graaf's articles), who call attention to the cultures of production. Kennedy and Dovey reflect upon the role of innovation within the game industry, drawing on Kline et al.'s (2003) inclusive and useful book, and discuss the 'the dynamic of permanent upgrade culture'. As with capitalism itself, the game industry's logic is always in flux and inherently forward-looking. The game industry needs 'freshness'. Dominant as gamer and industry discourse, it would be hard to tell where one begins and the other ends, and for proof of this, think of the pervasive 'next-gen' label used lovingly by all. Arguably, labour and industry organizational characteristics, the inherent pleasures of consumer ideology and pervasive mass-marketing campaigns, all reify the game industry's production–consumption feedback loop. The capital-intensive, high-risk nature of cultural production keeps the game industry

on its toes. Although it must be stressed that neither a single economic, technological, judicial, political or sociocultural characteristic determines media use, innovative business strategies undeniably structure consumption practices.

For a long time political economists of communications have been interested in cultural industries' tendency to cluster capital through takeovers and alliances (Bettig and Hall, 2003). Major franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* are embedded in media conglomerates which spawn books, movies and, of course, games. *The Lord of the Rings* is an example where the three blockbuster movies have been a powerful catalyst for existing user interest, stemming from Tolkien's books (Thompson, 2007). From the perspective of the game industry, the expansion of *The Lord of the Rings* franchise to the game industry has never been a real question, as pre-awareness of such a transglobal franchise enabled game publishers to build on the movies' exposure. The game industry is anything but an exception to concentration tendencies, and therefore a deeper understanding of inter-industry relationships is a reasonable concern for any political economic account of the game industry.

Although they drew on less contemporary examples, early game scholars stressed the economic relevance of the game industry and, thus, of their research. They argued that games are important because there is a lot of money involved in the development, marketing and publishing of games. For years, the cliché has been bandied about that 'games are bigger than movies'. What exactly can be classified as 'the game industry', or which revenue streams in the film industry (box office sales, DVD sales, syndication fees) are taken into account in such an introduction, is unclear. Acknowledging the game industry's economic might is important. Solely measuring the relevance of digital play in terms of new and shiny hardware, sales volumes and shareholder happiness (i.e. profit) would miss the growing importance of games in popular culture. To dwell on the rising economic importance of the game industry has proven to be something of a barrier to account for the cultural, political and social effects of digital play on players, the industry itself and society as a whole.

It is undeniable that the game industry in practice has become an important factor in the media industry. On a corporate as well as a financial level, the game industry has a bright future. Just as stereotypes are based largely on the traits of an object or person, such introductions might be unoriginal, but they hold a great deal of truth. Still, as with dominant fan discourse of triple-A titles and hardware sales, such a perspective masks, on the one hand, the role of game culture vis-à-vis the game industry, and on the other, prevents a deeper understanding of the dominant industry logic which is technology-driven and based on a continual mass marketing effort. Adorno's remarks about the movie and music industry also apply to the game industry: 'The power of the cultural industry's ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness' (1991: 104).

Game studies as innovator for cultural studies

There is, then, a host of good reasons to turn to game studies today. The industry and its global reach are making impressive profits. The pleasure audiences take in gaming is equally important, as are the conditions under which games come into being. From an educational context it is surprising to see how games in widely different contexts are believed naively to be a solution to didactic and learning problems, as if the game as form does not need content or quality graphics to become attractive – as if any game will do. A cultural studies perspective helps to argue the cultural specificity of games and gaming as practice. The history of cultural studies itself provides useful examples and warnings for game studies as an emerging field: how, after all, to keep developing, to remain open-minded and not get bogged down in untimely orthodoxies; how to be a critical and political voice in the charged domain of high-profile cultural studies. Indeed, from the perspective of cultural studies, games are more popular culture than most popular culture. They are woven more deeply into the corporate–capitalist web and, at the same time, are a 'lifeworld' force of pleasure and companiability and a greater source of abject horror from a high cultural or a 'children-are-vulnerable' perspective than any other popular form. While games and gaming provide great examples to address issues of violence, sexism and neo-colonial imperialism, we have chosen to frame games and gaming as an emerging field, an interdisciplinary domain coming into being, from which cultural studies can learn.

Technology and innovation, governance and exploitation of free labour have all remained at the outskirts of cultural studies as a field. We (as in 'we the cultural studies community') know a bit about community-building among fans, but the scale on which *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life* (which is not really a game, but a virtual world) are played, involving literally millions of people around the globe, is unprecedented. We know about questions of identity and challenging them, but Lara Croft's 'kicking ass' and founding a cross-gender following has not been understood other than as an example to women and a challenge to gender codes (Inness, 1999). Game studies can take us further to think through what meaning, if any, gender still has in a dematerialized virtual world. Similarly, violent games, such as the gruesome game *Manhunt 2*, challenge us to rethink ethics and ideology.

The ban in the United Kingdom of the ultraviolent game *Manhunt 2* in late June 2007 by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) led to questions in the Dutch Parliament. The rationale behind the ban was the gruesome and interactive nature of *Manhunt 2*'s depiction of murder. Banning the game holds the argument that strangling an innocent victim in a virtual world by, in the case of the Nintendo Wii version, the Wii-mote and Nunchuck, making strangling gestures, is far worse than gruesome horror movies such as *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) or *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005).

Dutch socialist Member of Parliament Jeroen Dijsselbloem urged the Minister of Justice to explore the legal possibilities of banning the game in the Netherlands. In the end such a ban was rendered obsolete for the time being because of the developer's self-censorship.

Who wants to defend a highly violent, and in many ways disgusting, game? A great number of industry professionals are far from happy with *Manhunt 2*'s provocative theme and developer Rockstar's controversial image. Even so, the *Manhunt 2* case touches upon important issues such as censorship and freedom of speech. Gamers are left to wonder why adults are forbidden to play such games and game critics point out the underlying – arguably 'sick' or perverse – humour in the game. During the *Manhunt 2* controversy, Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner for Information Society and Media, praised the industry's self-regulatory efforts, such as the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) system, at a game industry meeting in Brussels, and warned parents and retailers to uphold such ratings. Her speech during the meeting shows that an informed opinion about game culture leads to far more relevant, albeit difficult, questions:

> Freedom of expression is one the foundations of our society. So how do we ensure that minors are protected from unsuitable or even harmful content, while making it possible for adults to see, read and play what they want? (Reding, 2007)

As with the porn magazine *Hustler*'s slogan 'Relax, it's just sex', there is the continuing issue of making a public vice out of what might well be private morality. Feminist anti- and anti-anti-pornography never managed to solve that one. The real gain for cultural studies in taking a closer look at game studies is in recognizing that there is more than relevance in questions of law. Ownership, governance, virtual property, hate crime and freedom of speech challenge us to rethink media use, and how political economy might be less of a bore and an exciting means to get to grips with popular cultural phenomena. We need to come to terms with the networked information economy (Benkler, 2006), the Creative Commons and issues of piracy versus open-source software as a form of ideology-in-action.

We are living an 'upgrade' of industrial society. Never mind whether it is called 'risk society', network or experience economy. As there is no escape, we are all learning to adapt. Games, or MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, are structured like a spreadsheet. Playing the game means analysing risk levels. Easily more than a hundred parameters, all expressed in numbers, can be accessed on-screen. Your health is measured via various statistics; your fighting power is expressed in 'dps' (damage per second); your bank account (conveniently expressed in amounts of silver and gold) shows your financial wellbeing. Others have access to all of these statistics. The 'stats' of a team are on-call for all team members

engaging in a raid (called a 'party'). *World of Warcraft*'s vast database of items (39,000), spells (30,000), objects, creatures, quests (5500) and player profiles are available on demand. It is possible to know everything about everybody. Fighting becomes a form of maths. In a player versus player (PVP) fight, it is a question of checking stat bars and meters and filling the right characteristics at the right time. While the fantasy setting of *World of Warcraft* might suggest a nostalgic longing for the time of the knights of the Round Table, the game is a training ground for tomorrow's citizens.

For this issue we have selected two articles that bring questions of governance, the law and exploitation of free labour in the experience economy to cultural studies. We have already mentioned Sal Humphreys' 'Ruling the Virtual World: Governance in Massively Multiplayer Online Games' and David Nieborg and Shenja van der Graaf's: 'The Mod Industries? The Industrial Logic of Non-Market Game Production'. Two further articles relate to textual analysis and questions of representation, and to developing well-theorized audience ethnography in gaming. Vít Šisler presents a representation study with a twist in 'Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games'. Although Arab counterparts to *America's Army* are not yet hugely economically successful, they do suggest a critical practice in gamer culture that otherwise remains hidden. Daniel Pargman and Peter Jakobsson provide a strong example of audience research in game studies. Their 'Do You Believe in Magic? Computer Games in Everyday Life' uses interview material to build new game studies theory from the perspective of audiences.

The book reviews in this issue are meant to give a fuller sense of the field of game studies to those readers who are not familiar with it. According them an important role, we have moved away from the classic order of things in journals and interspersed reviews with the articles. Also, notably, we decided to conclude this issue of *European Journal of Cultural Studies* with a column by one of the leading scholars in the field, rather than use it as an opening. Frans Mäyrä's 'Open Invitation: Mapping Global Game Cultures. Issues for a Sociocultural Study of Games and Players' is a call for self-reflection in the game studies community as well as a call to arms for all of us interested in games and gaming, in order to contribute to a strong factual research base. In a field so full of fans, too much use is made of data provided by the very industry from which we would like to be emancipated.

Speaking both as a gaming fan and as one living in a household full of fans, we would like to underscore the need to build a solid knowledge base. This will add to, rather than destroy, the fun. Furthermore, we would like to emphasize that by understanding how the circuits of power and culture are linked, game studies can move ahead, and in so doing, energize cultural studies. Let us discover whether Richard Johnson's observations have been answered, or whether indeed we are allowing

this new field to move into the mode of 'normal science', becoming an orthodoxy rather than a vibrant and energetic, engaged and public mode of cultural critique.

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