

Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games

Brendan Keogh

Abstract

Despite being the focus of academic studies for close to two decades and a significant part of popular culture for much longer, the humanities generally and cultural studies in particular lacks a coherent vocabulary to perform strong, analytical criticism of individual videogame works. The solution is not another prescriptive, top-down model that attempts to understand all videogame play the same way, but a descriptive, bottom-up conceptual toolkit that understands particular videogames in the moment of play when videogame and player come together. This article highlights the values inherited by game studies that have resisted the creation of such a toolkit and suggests one path forward grounded in the phenomenological pleasures of videogame play across worlds and bodies. After exploring game studies' historical hostility to critical and textual readings, it conceptualises the 'videogame text'—the critic's object of study—as the coming together of the player and the videogame in a cybernetic circuit of embodied pleasures. This circuit flows across both the actual and virtual worlds of play in a convergence of form and content. Ultimately, this article lays a groundwork for academic roads into videogame criticism that is primarily concerned with understanding videogames as videogames to complement those ad-hoc methods already being developed by a nascent scene of online critics and bloggers.

Author Biography

Brendan Keogh is a PhD candidate and sessional lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. His research focuses on methods and styles of videogame criticism, and he practices as a videogame critic for a variety of international publications including *Edge*, *Ars Technica*, *Polygon*, *The New Statesman*, and *Overland Literary Journal*. He is the author of *Killing is Harmless: A Critical Reading of Spec Ops: The Line*.

Introduction

Halfway through Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998), I confront the boss Psycho Mantis. Ostensibly a game of 'tactical stealth espionage' about a highly trained covert agent sneaking into a military base, the *Metal Gear Solid* series is well known for mixing eccentric and fantastic characters and mythologies with its hyperreal visuals and military jargon. As I, playing as Solid Snake, enter the office deep under the Shadow Moses complex, Psycho Mantis appears before us, levitating over the desk. The camera drops from its usual bird's-eye, third-person perspective into the eyes of Solid Snake so that I am looking directly at Psycho Mantis and, through Snake, he is looking directly at me. After much talking, he insists on reading my mind so as to show off his great psychic power. After reading the 1MB memory card inserted in the Playstation console, he tells me that I like playing *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (Konami, 1997); he tells me I am bold because I have not saved my game often. Then, to show off his telekinesis, he insists I place the Playstation controller on a flat surface. I put the controller on the carpet of my lounge room; Psycho Mantis thrusts the palm of his hand towards his side of the television screen and, with the power of the controller's rumble motors, he moves it across the floor. Once he is done with his show and we commence battle, I ultimately defeat his mindreading ability by unplugging the controller and plugging it into the Player Two slot of the console. "I can't read you!" he wails as he fails to predict my/Snake's shots.

The fourth-wall breaking moments of the *Metal Gear Solid* series, such as the battle against Psycho Mantis, are commonly understood as novelties that fly in the face of the common, if ill-defined, goal for most videogames to have the player feel a sense of 'immersion' in the virtual world (Ryan, 2001, p. 3; Murray, 1997, p. 71). Significantly, however, the player's presence in the virtual world is utterly dependent on the player's actual body and the videogame hardware that is repressed when striving to feel immersion (Kirkpatrick, 2009, p. 135). In *Metal Gear Solid*, as in all videogames, meaning and experience are not exclusive attributes of the virtual world. Rather, they arise in how hardware, player, and audiovisual representation come together in the moment of play. Just like Psycho Mantis, players effortlessly draw together in the same sentence thumb sticks, virtual characters and environments, living rooms, fingers, laser rifles, loading screens, save points, and the end of the world. While "it is in the *silencing of the controller* that we construct the boundary between ordinary experience and the illusion we enter when we relate to screen imagery and other game feedback 'as if' they constituted an environment or immersive world for play" (Kirkpatrick, 2009, p. 135, emphasis added), to understand what is actually happening in a moment of videogame play the critic must attend to both what the player is consciously aware of, and what the player is doing their best to ignore.

Yet, in its short history, the academic study of games has predominately focused on the opposite. There are no shortage of models that attempt to reduce videogames to their most formal elements (Eskelinen, 2001; Juul, 2005; Fullerton 2008). Such models, fixated as they often

are on understanding videogames first and foremost as games, reduce a heterogeneous cultural form and all its intricacies and tensions of style, form, and content to a singular type of system that must be made more efficient. In doing so, they tacitly suggest that there is a *pure* videogame form somewhere out there that we should be striving for, that the videogames of yesterday and today are but pale imitations, still mired in the visual and narrative trappings of 'old' media. This trajectory of academic game studies plays smoothly into the commercial game industry's pervasive, progressivist coupling of 'quality' videogames with technological advancements, demolishing one 'generation' of games with a 'better' generation every five years (Witthof and de Peuter, 2009, p. 71). When technology allows us to leave behind the trappings of other media, then videogames will be truly special. The industry spoke, and game studies wandered off into the desert to find the Promised Land.

While game studies broadly has been more concerned with defining what videogames *should* be than understanding what they are, there is a need for a body of scholarly videogame criticism that "avoid[s] the maelstrom of potential" (Atkins and Kryzwinska, 2007, p. 2), that siren call that has game scholars and hobbyists alike waiting eagerly for the 'better' designed videogames that 'better' technology will allow us to have 'one day'. This body of scholarly videogame criticism would analyse and understand the videogames that already exist *as videogames*. It would not separate a videogame's components into distinct spheres but analyse them in how they come together during play to be embodied by and incorporated with the player. Videogame criticism must not account simply for the transcendent experiences of virtual worlds but for the grounded experiences of videogame play—the way videogame play is fundamentally embodied, and the way the player's body is fundamentally unstable. When Psycho Mantis reads my mind through the memory card inserted in the Playstation console, he is not simply breaking the fourth wall—he is revealing the full textual machinations that spill across both sides of the screen that must be the focus of the videogame critic.

This article points to an alternative path in the study of videogames as a cultural form—a path of close, critical analysis grounded in the phenomenological concerns of videogame play. It is not interested in reducing videogames to any one model or taxonomy, but in methods of critical analysis that can locate specific, embodied phenomena of videogame play and understand them as gestalts of cultural meaning. It aligns itself with those authors that, against the overwhelming formalism of game studies, have already attempted such grounded and textual analyses, such as Atkins and Kryzwinska's (2007) *Videogame, Player, Text*; Swalwell and Wilson's (2008) *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming*; the close readings of the *Well Played* journal; and Dyer-Witthof and de Peuter's (2009) *Games of Empire* that grounds its critiques of videogames and capitalism in close readings of specific games. Carroll (2009) succinctly claimed in *On Criticism*, "it is the taste of the pudding the critic cares about, not its adherence to an established recipe" (p. 26). The academic videogame critic, as opposed to the game studies formalist, must be more concerned with understanding how (and why) a certain videogame feels to play than with how well it fits into a pre-determined and arbitrary notion of 'gameness'. This method of videogame criticism cannot help but to

be phenomenologically grounded, accounting for and tracing meanings through bodies and worlds without privileging one or the other. It cannot distinguish between ‘game’ and ‘non-game’ elements of the videogame as has previously been done (Newman, 2002; Galloway, 2006). Instead it must start with a reconceptualised understanding of videogame play that can trace the interrelated aesthetic pleasures of pressing a button, watching a cut-scene, killing an alien, scrolling through a menu, tweeting a high score as all contributing to (or weakening) a specific game-and-player’s embodied experience.

Through the phenomenological approach to videogame criticism and textual analysis it forwards, this article hopes to mark an intervention in the narrowly focused ways in which videogame play is conceptualised, and lay the conceptual foundations that academic videogame critics can build upon with an ever-growing body of criticism of specific game texts. Wilson (2007) noted that “a criticism that seeks to establish boundaries, borders, and rules will be unable to capture the processual experiences of intimacy that specific games provide” (p. 350). The concepts and methods forwarded by this article, on the other hand, make no claim to any singular, universally applicable model of videogame criticism, and they are all the stronger for this. Instead they acknowledge the coming together of hardware, flesh, and audiovisuals without centring on any one of them—an approach less concerned with finding a purity of games than in embracing what Ian Bogost (2009) accurately calls videogames’ messiness. It takes seriously Wilson’s (2007) claim that “close, piecemeal analysis of particular games, rather than blanket critical statements, is a better way to understand the diverse pleasures of gameplay” (p. 47).

I begin by conducting a brief history of game studies’ hostility to close, textual criticism of videogames, highlighting the lingering and pervasive tendency to ‘purify’ videogames that has prevented them being understood for what they are: messy hybrids of a variety of previous media forms. I then construct a series of concerns and perspectives for an academic videogame criticism to begin from. The first of these sections observes how the concept of ‘immersion’ obscures critical analysis of videogames as cultural forms that actually exist, as it leads to the same separation of form and content that Susan Sontag (1964) so completely dismantled half a decade ago. The videogame critic, I argue, must avoid immersion to understand how videogame play functions across worlds. From here, I locate the videogame ‘text’ that must be the focus for videogame critics as not a purely semiotic, ephemeral construct, but a cybernetic circuit crossing both actual and virtual worlds, and reducible to neither. Here, I argue that the videogame text must be understood primarily as one of embodied pleasure for the player, but that the player’s ‘body’ is distributed during play across actual and virtual worlds via the videogame hardware in a way that Lister et al (2009) note is literally cyborgian (p. 306). In my conclusion, I argue why a shift towards close, critical analyses of specific videogames is inevitable and, indeed, is already emerging as a younger generation of theorists with a more everyday relationship to videogames begins presenting and publishing research. These scholars have grown up in a time where playing a videogame is as mundane as watching a film or listening to pop music; they do not require all-encompassing formal

methods to understand what videogames are, but critical toolkits to deploy and alter as they build a stronger understanding of videogames as a cultural form.

The Purity Complex of Game Studies

Much scholarly literature around videogames works to—either explicitly or implicitly—distill some pure essence of ‘play’ at the heart of videogames, as though we must shed the superfluous excesses lingering from previous media to find a pure, procedural, and disembodied videogame play. Consequentially, one neat part is often taken to stand in for the whole messy assemblage that is videogame play. This was most explicit during the destructive land-grab of the narratology/ludology debate in the formative years of game studies, when many claims were as eccentric as they are memorable (1). However, even up to recent years, it is typical to see one ‘central’ component of videogame play standing in to speak for the whole while ‘non-play’ elements such as cut scenes, menus, and loadings screens remain conspicuously ignored. See, for instance Kirkpatrick’s (2013) repeated reference to a “natural inclination of play” (p. 53) that apparently “distinguishes [games] from other popular media” (p. 40). It is worth spending some time highlighting a few such cases to demonstrate how reductionist and formalist accounts of videogame play obscure as much as they reveal, how they came to underline scholarly thinking around the videogame form, and the challenges they present to a videogame criticism grounded in close analysis.

What Purity Obscures

Formalist approaches that insist that certain elements of game design are more fundamental than others marginalise those videogames that do not meet certain arbitrary criteria, even if they rank among the most popular videogames of all time. For instance, Juul’s (2005) persistent privileging of a fundamentally rule-based ‘gameness’ through his classic game model dismisses fictional worlds as optionally imagined (p.141) and sidelines the popular *Sim City* (Maxis, 1989) as it lacks explicit goals (Juul, 2005, p. 47; Wilson, 2007, p. 67-68). But even in more recent literature, the idea that there is something distinctly unique and fundamental to videogames, distinguishing them from all other cultural forms, is pervasive. Galloway (2006), for instance, acknowledges the ‘remediation’ of previous audiovisual media that contributes to videogame design, but offhandedly claimed that this remediation occurs solely because of “a fear of the pure uniqueness of video gaming” (p. 11). By remediation, Galloway is referring to Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) notion that “what is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (p. 15). Galloway’s claim to a ‘pure uniqueness’ is telling. It acknowledges that, indeed, videogames do often overlap in their design and the aesthetic pleasures they offer with other media, such as film and music, but they *shouldn’t*. He explicitly suggests what is implicit in much scholarly work around videogames: Videogames are *exceptional*, and the videogames we currently have are held back in their ties to ‘old’ media.

For Galloway, this purity is in the centrality of ‘action’ for videogames: The player *does something*. It is this same notion of pure action that allows Galloway to distinguish between play and non-play acts within a videogame (2006, p. 8-19; see also Newman, 2002) and which allows curious claims such as Atkins’s (2006) that a game can be “denuded of its graphics [while] retaining its game play” (p. 132-33); or Kirkpatrick’s (2013) equally bizarre and destructive claim that “the test of gameness is subtraction: strip away the other features and you still have a game” (p. 42). Indeed, the dichotomy of action and representation is perhaps the most contested in the formalist wars to assert what a videogame is. Eskelinen (2001), along with many of the ludologists, privileges videogames’ “remediation of [nondigital] games” over what he sees as the insignificant window dressing of audiovisual representation. Similarly dismissive of the significance of audiovisual design, writing at different times, Aarseth (2004) and Newman (2002) both claim that it does not matter what *Tomb Raider’s* Lara Croft (Eidos, 1996) looked like, only what it is possible to do with her. Most tellingly, perhaps, is Juul’s (2005) assertion that because early players of *Quake III* reduced graphical quality in order to obtain a better framerate, rules mattered more than fiction (p. 139), reducing semiotic representation to texture resolution quality. All such claims presume that, at their core, videogames are primarily games, and should value playful action over ‘passive’ and interchangeable engagements with audiovisual representation. All such claims are acts of scholarly sabotage that work to toss aside any elements particular to the videogame form that we do not immediately understand until our object of study represents a form we already have a framework for: non-digital games.

However, Swalwell and Wilson (2008), in a justifiably scathing attack on the formalist tendencies of ludology, highlight what should be obvious: Videogames are not “*just games*” (p. 2). Cutting videogames off from other media “is counterproductive in that it blinds us to rich commonalities and continuities with cinema, television, music, visual arts, *and* predigital games” (Swalwell and Wilson, 2008, p. 4). The affordances and constraints of videogame play, what the player can or cannot ‘do’, only make sense in relation to the audiovisually constructed fictional world of the game, and it is not surprising that videogames would pick up representational strategies of other audiovisual media. The remediation that Galloway ascribes as a symptom is rather the necessary process of a new medium enunciating itself (Bolter and Grusin, 1999, p. 9). Responding particularly to Juul’s (2005) dubious claim that a game’s rules are more “fundamental” than its “imaginary” fiction (p. 121), Wilson (2007) noted that:

In relation to Juul’s claim that rules can operate independently of the fictional projection of videogames’ fictional worlds, we can legitimately wonder what such an experience would be like. Could the rules of, say, PAC-MAN be said to apply to anything, or be meaningful, in the absence of its graphics and sounds? What would the rules be like if they were functioning independently of this? The question is hard to frame since it seems to have no sense (i.e. application). (p. 211)

A videogame's mechanics and audiovisuals are symbiotic, a singular and irreducible component of videogame play. Claims, such as Newman's and Aarseth's above, that Lara Croft's depiction in *Tomb Raider* as a human female matters less than what her body allows the player to do ignores the very fact that the player only considers 'walk', or 'run', or 'jump' as viable options because Lara Croft is represented as a human being capable of such actions. Further, Lara Croft's representation as a human being suggests that the player *should* jump over the bottomless pit rather than fall into or float over it. The very fact that Lara Croft is audiovisually represented as a human is significant to the player's comprehension of what is dangerous to their engagement with the fictional world. Audiovisual design, those elements of videogame design that explicitly overlap with attributes of other media and which apparently mar the purity of videogames, is fundamental to the player's comprehension of what actions a game affords.

These critiques of Lara Croft are also significant for their implication that the gender of one of videogames' most popular woman characters should be ignored. Formalist claims to a 'purity' of the videogame form are inevitably hegemonic. To make sweeping, authoritative, a priori claims as to what a videogame is at its core is only ever an act of exclusion, of determining that certain works and experience of those works are invalid. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) tellingly note that the videogames that are most frequently cited as deviations from formalist game models are those with more gender balanced audiences, "which implicitly works to reinforce the notion that these are not really games and their players are not *really* gamers" (p. 37). The game studies impulse to value those games of 'pure action' has a strong reliance on the values and ideologies of hacker culture, as explored in great depth by Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p. 63-83), and this hacker culture has strong, masculinist roots (see Turkle, 2005, p. 91-130 and p. 183-218). Echoing this, a survey by Shaw (2011) shows that videogame players were vastly more likely to self-identify as a 'gamer' than female or genderqueer players (p. 34). The trend of videogames (and the study of them) to value a strong, autonomous role for the player in the game both draws from and perpetuates a way of understanding the world exclusive to those privileged few who can move through the world so freely. Allen (2013), for instance, noted that the "supreme motility" of open-world games, such as *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011), "often functions as an exaggeration of a freedom of movement that [cisgender men] enjoy in the physical spaces of non-game worlds". The values of a 'pure uniqueness of videogames' embedded in the ability to act freely parallels with a certain, liberal conceptualisation of being human that, as Hayles (1999) notes, "applied, at best, to the fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice" (p. 286). It is no coincidence that those videogames produced by and reflective of marginalized identities, such as Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012), Merritt Kopas's *Lim* (2012), Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* (2012), or Porpentine's *Howling Dogs* (2012), or those games that offer a far lower barrier of entry, such as the 'casual' games of Facebook, smartphones, or Nintendo's Wii console, are often marginalised as not 'real' games by the old-guard of games culture (2). The

desire of both enthusiasts and academics to purify videogames perpetuates a homogenous and hegemonic culture that privileges the most privileged producers and players, and marginalises the most marginalised.

A Pervasive Purity

The desire to claim an exceptionalist purity of videogame play separate from other media is, thus, significantly problematic. It is also, however, entirely understandable given the historical cultural marginalisation of videogames. From the zeal of the ludologists to the more moderately tempered hypotheses of their contemporaries, game scholars have been pressured to justify why videogames are an object worthy of study (and funding!). Focusing on what differentiates videogames from other media while denying the similarities was, originally, a necessity if skeptical university departments were going to pay attention. Its lingering legacy, however, is a pervasive notion that videogames are different due to their interactive nature: The player's active role in the game supposedly renders traditional modes of analysis useless. However, as various phenomenologists and cultural theorists (Hayles, 2004; Sobchack, 2004; McCloud, 1993) have shown, every medium demands an active bodily engagement from the audience—a book needs a reader willing to turn pages in the right order no less than a videogame requires a player to press buttons at the right time. In *Cybertext*, Aarseth (1997) warns against claiming an exceptional status for videogames based on the notion of 'interactivity' or 'action'—ironically, perhaps, considering how central *Cybertext* is to the ludologist impulses still undermining game studies. He notes that 'interactive' is a weasel word that "connotes various vague ideas of computer screens, user freedom, and personalized media, while denoting nothing... To declare a system interactive is to endorse it with a magic power" (p. 48). 'Interactivity' does not get us any closer to understanding how videogames function as cultural artefacts but preemptively defends against any attempt to understand them culturally.

Gillespie (2012) observes this as part of a larger trend, noting that digital media's apparent blurring of 'consumer' and 'producer' roles has largely dismantled the role of the critic in favour of the active participation (and free labour) of users. Gillespie worries, however, "that the trope of participation, when presented as an end, does not rectify the diminishment of critical influence in that it *diverts attention from the actual content under analysis*" (p. 58, emphasis added). This avoidance of analysing the 'actual content' of a videogame (a term that demands examination below) can be seen in game studies traditional hostility towards close, analytical readings of games. For instance, in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Murray 'reads' the popular game *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) as a "perfect enactment of the overtaken lives of Americans in the 1990s" to demonstrate how the meaningful engagements players have with games can be read as interpretations of experience (Murray, 1997, p. 143-144). For Murray, *Tetris*'s audiovisual representation of shapes to be quickly and neatly organised, and the mechanical imperatives of keeping the game going comes together with her own bodily actions of pressing buttons and her embodied perception of these increasingly hectic actions

in relation to the game's visuals and sounds. Murray's reading attracted much hostility from game scholars during the ludology/narratology debate. Most notoriously, Eskelinen (2001) bluntly claims that:

Instead of studying the actual game Murray tries to interpret its supposed content, or better yet, project her favourite content on it; consequently we don't learn anything of the features that make *Tetris* a game. The explanation for this interpretative violence seems to be equally horrid: the determination to find or forge a story at any cost, as games can't be games because if they were, they apparently couldn't be studied at all (Eskelinen, 2001).

While Eskelinen's claims are clearly overstated and have certainly been historically privileged because of their crassness, they remain indicative of a broader suspicion in game studies to subjective critical analyses of games that do not contribute to some formal, universal understanding of what games are. If Murray's critical reading of *Tetris* cannot tell us "anything of the features that make Tetris a game", then it is apparently meaningless to us, as though the only film critics worth engaging with tell us nothing more than what formal elements makes *The Godfather* a film (3).

Purity and Videogame Criticism

If the academic videogame critic's goal is to understand how a videogame is engaged with by players to produce meanings and pleasures, it makes no sense to claim different elements and features of that videogame as either more or less central to the 'playing' of that videogame when all these elements are intermingled with the player to both mediate and produce meaningful phenomena. When Galloway (2006) suggests that "no gameplay is actually happening" at the moment the player allows the playable character to stand stationary in the game *Shenmue* (Sega AM2, 1999), letting the virtual day roll into virtual night (p. 10), he tacitly implies that the player is only playfully engaged with the game when pressing buttons. This privileging (and reduction) of action is even more blatant when he says that videogames are not founded on "looking and reading but in the instigation of material change through action" (Galloway, 2006, p. 4). Action is indeed central to videogame play, of course, but such a statement both forgets that any action must be performed by a body and assumes that looking and reading are not bodily actions in themselves. One does not stop playing a videogame when one is not pressing a button but remains actively and bodily involved in gameplay through the senses. To account for the pleasures of videogame play, the videogame critic must look at much broader engagements between player and game than a narrow, purified definition of action.

The ludology/narratology turf war is long over, to be sure, but the desire to find a pure, essential 'gameness' persists as a tendency underlining game studies. Golding (2013) observes

this in his look at game studies' still-present fixation on 'configuration' as central to videogames:

It has transformed the videogame into 'The Videogame' like a proper name, providing a way of conceiving and constructing the medium on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected purposes. From above, through configuration, we encounter the videogame as a concept. (Golding, 2013, p. 30)

However, just as Donna Haraway (1991) would rather be understood as a hybridised cyborg than a pure goddess (p. 181), what is unique about videogames is not best understood as a purity of form but a bastardisation of forms. The ludologists are right to see videogames as a remediation of games, but they are wrong to marginalise videogames' remediation of audiovisual media, such as film, theatre, literature, and music. Privileging actions or rules or audiovisuals or narrative or the visual world or any single component that contributes to the player's engagement instead of tracing the ways all come together *actively damages* videogame criticism and obscures the full story of what videogames and players are doing with each other. To marginalise core elements, such as cut scenes, audiovisual design, inventory menus, microprocessors, music, and characters, in the search for a pure, formalist notion of videogame play is to ignore the significant contributions of all of these, and the varied ways they are interpreted by an embodied, perceiving player in a specific instance of play.

Every corporeal, technological, and virtual component present during a phenomenon of videogame play makes a contribution to the unique and hybridised shape of that phenomenon. If the academic videogame critic is to understand the pleasures and meanings offered by a particular videogames, they must avoid the temptation to reduce or purify that is so pervasive in the academic study of games. Instead they must hold onto the messy, hybrid assemblage of videogame play as their object of analysis, accounting for how videogame play functions across worlds and across bodies.

Playing Across Worlds: Against Immersion

In an extensive 2003 essay on the Japanese role-playing game *Mother 2* (Ape and HAL Laboratory, 1994; released as *Earthbound* in the West), videogame critic, journalist, and developer Tim Rogers synthesises descriptive analysis and developer interviews to contextualise *Mother 2* within a broader comprehension of Japanese game design and aesthetics. Instead of talking about the game in broad generalisations, Rogers focused on specific moments of gameplay to make his insights. One such moment Rogers concentrates on is a house that the player is able to purchase in the town of Onett for \$10,000 in-game dollars. However, as Rogers notes, the player is unlikely to have access to this kind of money when the house is first encountered. Instead:

It is the breed of player most commonly referred to as a “gamer” that will need to buy the house. This gamer will come all the way back to Onett once he [sic] has enough money to buy the house. You can’t buy the house during the game’s ending, when you’ll no doubt have more than \$10,000 in the bank, because the real-estate agent is gone and the door is locked. You can’t buy it past a certain point in the game, either, because once the endgame begins, Onett is invaded by aliens and plunged into eternal darkness until you kill the alien. If you want to buy the house, you have to come back at some reasonably early point in the game. When you buy the house, the real-estate agent takes your money and leaves the doorway. He runs all the way off-screen. You are then free to enter the house. When you go inside, you find that it’s a run-down shack with wooden floors and walls. A few boards are missing. With the power of its pixels, the game shows you that the mattress in the middle of the floor has a few springs popping up out of its fabric. The back wall of the house—the third wall, as it were—is missing, and we can see the lake in the distance. The fourth wall is already gone—that’s the wall through which we, the player, see our heroes standing in this dilapidated shack. We’re looking at, essentially, a house with two walls. This can be construed as what [*Mother 2*’s producer, Shigesato] Itoi thinks of the videogame as a medium—it is a house with two walls. (Rogers, 2003)

In this excerpt, Rogers does not distinguish between the game’s technologies, mechanics, story, or world but instead richly threads them all together, simultaneously, in thick description, just as the *Mother 2* player would experience them. Rogers pulls together the player’s investment in real labour to procure the virtual money required to buy the house; the “power of the pixels” in depicting the house as dilapidated; and the missing wall through which the player views the world through their television’s screen to make insights into the value of the game and the creator’s intentions. By drawing together technologies, mechanics, representation, and the pressures on the player’s physical body to describe an embodied and local phenomena of videogame play, Rogers is able to go on to make broader observations on Shigesato Itoi’s artistic practices. Like Kojima’s *Metal Gear Solid* series, Rogers observes how *Mother 2* draws attention to and takes advantage of the formal properties most videogames typically attempt to render invisible.

While he has taken it no further, Roger’s extension of the *Mother 2* house to a metaphor of videogames as a two-walled medium is a powerful one for the videogame critic when trying to avoid the fallacy of immersion. The concept of ‘immersion’ as something players and games wish to strive for is critiqued as often as it is uncritically deployed. Its popular usage suggests that a videogame ideally transports a player to an autonomous, diegetic, sealed-off world independent of the actual world (Ryan, 2001, p. 15). It has an immediate history in the rhetoric surrounding Virtual Reality (VR) technology of the 90s, and its roots in the various media and techniques that have long attempted to give an audience a sense of presence in a

virtual world, from Alberti's Window perspective system deployed by painters of the fifteenth century, through to the panoramas of the nineteenth century and other more recent technologies, such as the stereoscope and 3D cinema (Lister et al., 2009, 115-123). Just like all these past media, videogame immersion does not simply allow players to 'step into' a world that is waiting for them. Rather, it requires a significantly active role from the player. Murray (1997) notes that while most media call for a suspension of disbelief, texts like videogames that strive for immersion demand the player *actively makes belief*: "because of our desire to experience immersion, we focus our attention on the enveloping world and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience" (p. 110). Like Don Quixote tilting at windmills, it is up to the player to make the virtual world make sense by sealing off the gaps the game leaves open. In two-dimensional JRPGs like *Mother 2*, it is a very common trope for the fourth wall of the house to be rendered invisible so that the player can view the characters inside, not unlike a theatre set. More accurately, this wall does not exist. The player must *actively construct the fourth wall* in order to feel a sense of immersion sealed off from the rest of the world. This complements Kirkpatrick's (2009) powerful reflections on how the player must repress the "toy-like" controller in the hand and the exertion of the body to feel immersed in a virtual world, even as the player's presence in that virtual world is dependent on that controller (p. 130). While countless videogames do certainly strive to have their player feel this sensation of immersion, the videogame critic must resist its siren call to focus on those material elements that are silenced in the process.

Immersion, effectively, splits the game's content from the game's form, reintroducing the Cartesian split that "takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there" (1964, p.13) that critic Susan Sontag so convincingly dismantled half a decade ago in her essays "Against Interpretation" (1964) and "On Style" (1965). Immersion, deployed uncritically, privileges a desire for immediate experience of the 'content' of the videogame while ignoring the fact that this content "is, as it were, the pretext, the goal, the lure which engages consciousness in essentially *formal* processes of transformation" (Sontag, 1965, p. 25). As a theatre critic accounts for the performances of actors or an art critic accounts for the brushstrokes that contribute to a portrait, the videogame critic cannot hope to understand the virtual world of the videogame text without accounting for the player's active involvement with formal, material elements and construction of an imagined fourth-wall. Such a need to focus on 'form' is not a call to return to the old formalism of game studies critiqued above—"That word [formalism] should be reserved for those works of art which mechanically perpetuate outmoded or depleted aesthetic formulas," Sontag quips (1965, p. 27)—but simply to understand how in specific phenomena of videogame play the player, the hardware, and audiovisual representation *come together* to produce meaning (4). The videogame critic must hold onto both form and content, balancing both the actual and virtual components of the videogame text. They require "a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive vocabulary—of forms" (Sontag, 1964, p. 12).

A growing body of literature around mobile media practices and gaming offers one way to do this. Theorists such as Ingrid Richardson (2012), Larissa Hjorth (2010), and Dean Chan (2008) have observed that videogames designed for mobile devices often forgo traditional videogame design's striving for immersion. Rather, as they are most commonly played in

brief moments of waiting, they ask the player to pay attention to two worlds at once ‘co-attentively’ (Keogh, forthcoming) as they incorporate videogame play into everyday life. Richardson in particular has used Ihde’s (1993) notion of postphenomenology as a way to hold onto the hybridity of worlds that is explicit for the mobile videogame player but obscured in traditional videogame play. Postphenomenology explores not how human subjects change their world through technology, but how humans, their worlds, and technologies are all necessary and active parts of each other. It calls for an examination of technologically embodied practices (Ihde, 2009, p. 30) and recognises that “[t]echnologies transform our experience of the world and our perceptions and interpretations of our world, and we in turn become transformed in the process” (Ihde, 2009, p. 44). Similarly, Richardson noted that mobile gaming demands a particular corporeal schema; one that is defined by “a somatic and visceral understanding [of] naïve physics, an awareness of the proprioceptive capacities of one’s own body, an understanding of the spatial arrangement of the physical environment, and a complex awareness of other people” (2009, p. 220). For Richardson, postphenomenology “counters the notion that *disembodiment* is a condition of using the internet or the phone” (2009, p. 218) and notes that location-based games in particular “work to seamlessly combine the corporeal schematics of actual and virtual worlds as they are actively negotiated on-the-move, effectively creating a *hybrid mode of being where the boundary between game and real life collapses*” (2012, p. 143, emphasis added).

A postphenomenological approach to videogame play accounts for the overlapping worlds active during videogame play. It allows the critic to account for what Psycho Mantis makes explicit in *Metal Gear Solid* when he collapses Solid Snake and I into a single addressee of his speech, and what *Mother 2* makes implicit inside the two-walled house: that the ‘content’ of videogames—their virtual worlds and the player’s presence inside of them—is a product of the player’s actual engagement with formal and material properties. It allows the videogame critic to avoid the fallacy of immersion that sees videogames analysed as ‘virtual worlds’ rather than as actual, material, cultural, and formal artefacts that actually signify something. Significantly, then, such an approach raises the question of how, exactly, the player is present across these actual and virtual worlds.

Playing Across Bodies: Locating a Videogame Text

With an emphasis on videogames being studied as games or as virtual worlds comes an inevitable suspicion of games being studied as texts. Early textual analyses of videogames are often criticized for focusing primarily on narrative elements, such as plot and character, and for downplaying the active role of the player. Early works, such as Atkins’s *More Than A Game* (2003), while full of fruitful critical analysis, tellingly limit discussion of what the player ‘does’ in a game to a summary paragraph at the beginning of each chapter before focusing exclusively on that game’s fictional (though, not necessarily ‘narrative’) content. To simultaneously hold onto what is unique about videogames while also acknowledging their ties to other media, however, we need a conception of the videogame text as a hybrid of semiotics, actions, and systems—one that can account for both the player’s active and embodied engagement with material form and the player’s sense of presence in the virtual world as integral textual components.

Aarseth (1997) still makes the most significant contribution in this area in his ‘ergodic’ focus on texts. While the intervening years has seen ‘ergodic’ reduced to a synonym of ‘interactive’, Aarseth notes that all texts exist in a machine-like relationship between medium, sign, and operator (1997, p. 21). This is in line with traditional understandings of what a text is, such as Barthes’s (1977) appropriate observation that “the metaphor of the Text is that of the *network*” (p. 161) and that “the Text requires that one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work *but by joining them in a single signifying practice*” (p. 162, emphasis added). If all texts hybridise medium, sign, and operator, then those texts that Aarseth views as ‘ergodic’—such as videogames and hypertext fiction—are those texts that posit “the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange” (Aarseth, 1997, p. 1). Put another way, a text is best considered ergodic if it integrates the reader’s active configuration of material form as part of the textual experience. The videogame text is best understood in this way, existing in the coming together of the player’s proprioceptive awareness of both the videogame’s material form (controllers, screens, rumble motors, etc.), the audiovisual signs (characters, a projected world, music, menus, etc.), and the various interrelations between all three. To analyse a videogame text is to analyse this entire textual *network*.

Indeed, the most fruitful attempts to forward critical frameworks for analyses of videogame texts rely on and forward concepts of gameplay as a cybernetic circuit (see Jayemanne, 2005; Giddings and Kennedy, 2008; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p. 84-103). Such frameworks build on the work of cybernetic, actor-network, and cyborg theorists, such as Gregory Bateson (1972), Bruno Latour (1991), and Donna Haraway (1991), to constructively straddle the border between social and technological determinisms where both player and videogame are seen as having some mediating effect, some agency, over the other. It highlights that the oft-privileged pleasure of mastering a videogame is but a subset of the broader, more applicable pleasure of participating with a videogame. Giddings and Kennedy (2008) note that in videogame play, both humans and nonhumans are playful objects (p. 21) and went on to note that:

Activity and passivity are not opposites in videogame play but fluctuations in the circuit, and thus [...] a new conceptual language is needed to attend to both the operations of nonhuman agency and the human pleasures of lack of agency, of being controlled, of being acted upon. (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008, p. 30)

Similarly, writing elsewhere, Giddings (2007) states that “to play a digital game is to plug oneself into a cybernetic circuit” (p. 1). Consequentially, in such a model, intentionality and agency cannot be tracked back to either the game itself or the player themselves (Giddings, 2007, p. 5). Instead, both the player and the game share an active agency in the way they each afford, translate, and mediate the actions of the other, and the actual actor active in

videogame play is in fact a hybrid of both player and game. Consequentially, to analyse a text that is player-and-game is to no longer analyse the player as distinct from the videogame but, instead, *as a component of the videogame text*. Such a claim is not to discredit the large and fruitful body of digital ethnographic literature that has emerged around videogame players and online player cultures (see, for example: Taylor, 2006; Taylor, 2012; Hjorth and Richardson, 2010; Pearce, 2011; Carter and Gibbs, 2013), but to say that when the focus of study is the textual analysis of a videogame work, the player and game must be considered as a singular, inseparable whole.

Hayles noted, echoing the immersion fallacy discussed above, that envisioning the human subject “as an autonomous self with unambiguous boundaries, the human-computer interface can only be parsed as a division between the solidity of real life of one side and the illusion of virtual reality on the other” (1999, p. 290). Thus, while the notion of videogame play as a set of embodied pleasures (Kennedy, 2007, p. 127) is central for the videogame critic, the player must not be understood as autonomous and distinct from the game, but as redistributed across a network of information and actors and materialities. The above anecdotes of *Metal Gear Solid* and Rogers’s (2003) essay on *Mother 2* both demonstrate the ease with which players shift their attention back and forth between worlds and bodies. During videogame play, the player embodies a hybridised body, incorporating flesh, hardware, and virtual objects and beings into their corporeal schema. While the purity complex of game studies with its values of ‘action’ and ‘autonomy’ can be traced through hacker identities and notions of a liberal human subject, the hybridity of the videogame text demands a *cyborg* identity that understands the player as *posthuman*, as a subject distributed and emergent (Hayles, 1999, p. 290). To recognise the fluidity of bodies and identities is to understand that virtual worlds, like human capability, are not imperiled by the splice, but depends on it (Hayles, 1999, p.290). When Psycho Mantis uses the second-person address to say “you haven’t saved the game often” he is not talking to either me the player or Solid Snake the character, he is talking to the cyborgian, gestalt identity that is the two of us combined across bodies and worlds (5).

This has been most succinctly explored in developer Steve Swink’s book *Game Feel* (2009), in which he forwards a preliminary concept to understand how it ‘feels’ bodily to play a videogame. Swink is concerned with understanding what we mean when we say a videogame feels ‘tight’ or an assault rifle in an action game feels ‘meaty’ or a car in a driving game feels ‘heavy’. While Swink is writing primarily for developers and does not call his model (see Fig. 1) either cybernetic or phenomenological, its focus on proprioception and kinaesthesia exemplifies the circuit between player and game where inputs and outputs are made by both, and action is initiated by neither (Swink, 2009, p. 36). What the videogame outputs as audiovisual representation via the screen, speakers, and rumble motors are taken in through the player’s bodily senses (sight, sound, touch); these senses send messages to the brain that, in turn, determines output from the player’s muscles into the game hardware’s input device. The game, again, takes these inputs and alters the audiovisuals of the game accord-

ingly. In this model, which is heavily influenced by Merleau-Ponty's (1945) work on kinaesthesia in *Phenomenology of Perception* (p. 266), the player's corporeal schema is caught up in a circuit of organic, technological, and representational actors and materialities, and the body through which the player perceives gameplay is redistributed across the circuit. What a single moment of videogame play 'feels' like is an embodied pleasure caught in an intimate coupling of bodies. A car feels 'heavy' in a driving game through the way it acts on the screen and through the speakers in tandem with the resistance of the thumbstick beneath the player's thumb and what the player believes about how such a car should act. A cybernetic understanding of videogame play, then, does not leave the player's body back in the real world while focusing on the events of an insular virtual world, but focuses on the meshing of materially different bodies into a single, cyborg body through which the player perceives the game. It is from this distributed, cyborgian, embodied perspective that the videogame critic must understand the videogame text.

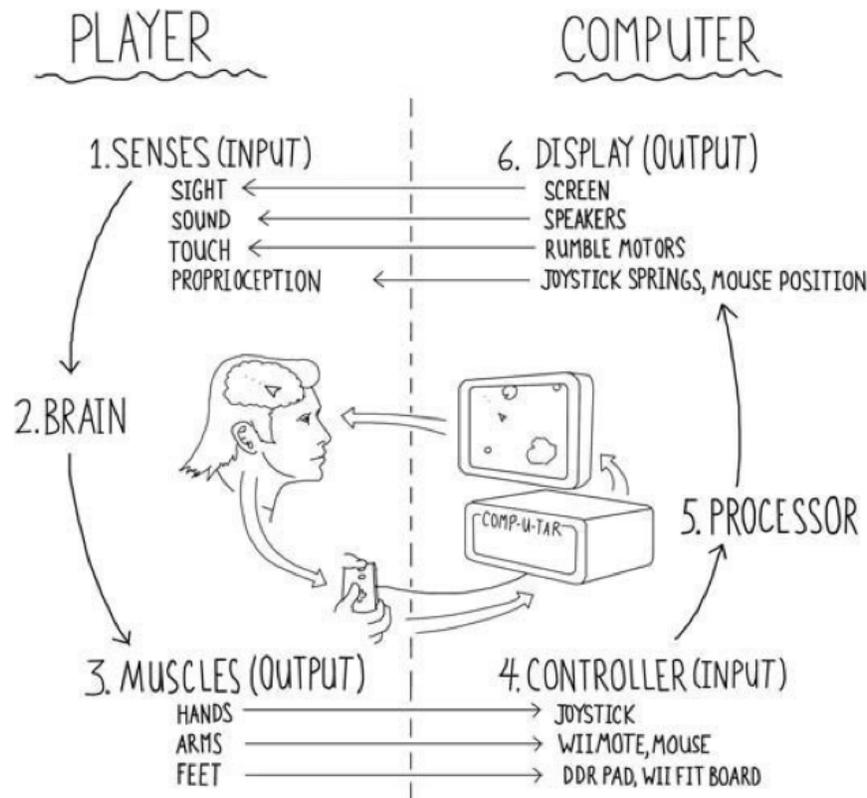


Figure 1: Swink's Model of Interactivity

There does exist a videogame text that the videogame critic is able to analyse; 'interactivity' does not render videogames invincible to textual analysis as all texts require some bodily interaction with form. The significance, however, is that this text belongs to neither the virtual nor the actual world but to the cybernetic ebb and flow between the player's body, the videogame

ame hardware, and audiovisual and haptic representation. It is in this circuit where the player has a phenomenological engagement with the videogame that the critic must ground the analysis. The videogame critic must account for the player-and-game as the object of study, as one textual machine. This resonates with Wilson's (2000) call for a hybrid aesthetics of videogames that "would move beyond the screen alone to consider gaming's involvement in multiple networks, and thus come to a consideration of its pleasures and possibilities that avoided discourses of morality and control." Even as the player may remain unconscious of the non-virtual components of videogame play to feel a sense of 'immersion' in the virtual world (Kirkpatrick, 2009, p. 135), the critic must, as Atkins and Kryzwinska (2007) note, "step back from the maelstrom of imagination of potential, and look with care at what the individual game represents, how it relates to other games (both digital and non-digital) that have come before, how it communicates its meaning, how it functions as played event, and how engagement with it through play generates pleasure" (p. 2). Such analysis demands the critic holds onto various worlds and bodies and the tensions between them: the player, the character, actual hardware, virtual worlds. With the videogame text located in the circuit, the challenge for the videogame critic is to focus on the flow back and forth across the actual and virtual worlds—form and content flattened into the videogame text as played as a flattening of form and content. By starting with the experience of play across worlds and bodies in particular videogames, an academic videogame criticism can begin to understand what a videogame is without being distracted by what it should be.

Conclusion

The original *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo) was released in 1985, twenty-nine years ago. Many of the next generation of Western cultural theorists currently emerging from postgraduate programs have grown up in a world where playing videogames at home is as common place as watching TV or reading literature. For these younger theorists (among which I include myself), videogames are not new, foreign things that we must understand, but cultural artefacts as ubiquitous as television shows or pop songs, no more or less worthy of the critic's attention. For the next generation of cultural theorists, the uniqueness or significance of videogames is not something that will have to be argued, and narrow discussions of formal definitions will appear unconstructive and unnecessary to these critics who have a lifelong experience of engaging with a myriad of videogame forms. Instead, these theorists will be less concerned with discussing "Videogames" as a concept, and more in a discourse grounded in the appreciation and evaluation of individual videogame works on their own merits, and their contextualisation within broader culture.

It is crucial to take a moment to acknowledge that such a cultural discourse around videogames is already emerging in an ad-hoc fashion beyond the walls of the academy through various intersecting online communities of professional videogame critics and journalists, and what Abraham (2013) observes as "the critical videogame blogosphere." Commercial outlets publish essays, such as Tom Bissell's (2011) close look at storytelling in *L.A. Noire*,

Jim Rossignol's (2012) diary-like exploration of *ARMA II* mod *DayZ*, and Kirk Hamilton and Leigh Alexander's (2011) series of letters on *Final Fantasy VII*. Equally important are essays published on personal or collective blogs such as Liz Ryerson's (2013) exploration of Michael Brough's many genre-defying games; Cameron Kunzelman's (2013) claim that Jason Rohrer's *The Castle Doctrine* focuses on "the legitimacy of violence of white men"; and, cited above, Samantha Allen's (2013) comparison of movement in open-world and queer games. Further, to be sure, there are no shortage of manifestos on how videogames should be written about or understood, such as Kieren Gillen's (2005) "The New Games Journalism"; developer Clint Hocking's (2007) coinage of "ludonarrative dissonance"; Aevee Bee's (2013) forwarding of a "cutie aesthetics" of videogames; or Sam Crisp and Marigold Bartlett's (2013) polemic "How to Destroy Everything." These critical scenes have crystallised around websites, such as *Critical Distance*, which has curated a weekly list of videogame criticism, and have more recently been aided by the emergence of digital periodicals, such as *Five Out Of Ten* and *Memory Insufficient*. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the forms or discussions of videogame criticism emerging across the past decade, but merely a demonstration that there already exist rich and exciting discourses concerned with videogames as a cultural and an artistic form that academic videogame critics ignore at their own peril.

These nascent discourses of videogame criticism notably overlap with game studies in significant, if not easily observable places. A significant number of videogame critics and bloggers are also graduate students, applying a humanities education to those texts they grew up with: videogames. Simultaneously, game studies is slowly but steadily acknowledging those books written primarily by and for developers as significant to understanding videogames aesthetically. Swink's *Game Feel* (2009), cited above, pre-dates game studies' current discovery of embodiment theory by several years, while Anthropy's (2012) *Rise of the Videogame Zinester* has turned heads for "eschewing the arch essentialism of coding as the centre of game production" (McCrea, 2012, p. 7). Game studies' fixation on videogames as pure forms of 'game' and 'play' is becoming untenable in the face of a medium that continues to proliferate and mutate in an ever-increasing number of forms.

As the online sphere of videogame critics and those scholars already concerned with studying videogames as videogames demonstrate, understanding videogames requires that they be evaluated on their own terms, neither assimilated purely into the values of other audiovisual texts or those of other game forms, nor utterly separated from those values of these forms. Videogames are their own cultural form—a cultural form no more or less meaningful and worthy of critical attention than every other popular medium. They demand their own criticism: one that does not conflate and does not purify.

This article lays the groundwork for such an academic discourse of videogame criticism, suggesting a critical toolkit committed to bottom-up, descriptive analysis that pays close attention to the central relationship between the player's body and the videogame's technological hardware and audiovisual representations. It has argued how 'interaction' and 'immersion'

do not render videogames invincible to critical analysis but have indeed prevented critical analysis through their uncritical uptake. This article, rather, calls for methods that look beyond reductive concepts, such as ‘interaction’ and ‘immersion,’ to account for the phenomenological experience of videogame play across worlds and across bodies. It distances itself from game studies’ industry-influenced trajectory of upgrade culture that conflates aesthetics with technological innovation to instead insist that each and every videogame is evaluated on its own terms rather than on its adherence to a preconceived formula. Both game studies and cultural studies still lack the vocabularies to properly appreciate individual videogame works. By paying close attention to specific videogames as played, showing a concern for the phenomenological pleasures of videogame play through cyborg bodies, scholarly videogame criticism will help produce the richer, more nuanced literacies around the videogame form that the medium deserves.

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Endnotes

1. For a thorough summary of the debate, see Wilson’s (2007) *Gameplay and the Aesthetics of Intimacy*, in particular “Chapter Three: Narrative, Fictional Worlds, and Visualised Imperatives” (p. 185-295).
2. On the marginalisation of queer games and developers, see Kopas (2012), Anthropy (2013), and Street (2013). On the feminisation of casual games, see Juul (2010, p. 9) and Taylor (2012, p. 119).
3. This is not to say, of course, that Murray’s reading, or any reading, is above criticism. For instance, Murray’s reading of Tetris fails to note that the game is not American but was initially created in the U.S.S.R.
4. What has been coined as the “material turn of game studies” (Apperley and Jayemanne, 2012) has in recent years seen various scholars focus their attention squarely on the material and formal aspects of gaming, such as Montfort and Bogost’s (2009) notion of ‘platform studies’, or Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s (2009) radical political critique of the actual impact of videogames through globalisation, exploitation and militarism.
5. Interestingly, the regular deployment of the second-person address both in videogames and the discourses surrounding them (and especially in hypertext games and literature) ex-

PLICITLY draws attention to the player-and-game hybrid through the player-and-character text. “You” press the A button and “You” jump and “You” know what is going to happen because “You” have played the game before. See Walker (2001) and Keogh (2012) for further discussion of this phenomena.

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