Introduction

A Game Genie for Game Studies

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When we think of games we often think of words like play, and fun, and pleasure. But to play games is to willingly invite frustration into our lives. The feeling is a common one. You stare blankly at a weekend crossword puzzle convinced that the missing word is just out of reach. You restart a boss fight in the hope that it will be less menacing this time. You leap to your death again, and again, and again, barely missing a ledge in pursuit of a hard-to-reach collectible item. The scenarios differ, but the feeling is the same. So too is the solution to these problems. Indeed, once we’ve become sufficiently exasperated, many of us will turn to the internet for help. There, resources abound. A thesaurus, online videos, walkthroughs, how-to guides, and arcane button sequences promise to aid our analog and digital struggles. We quickly become online sleuths because we want to win; we want to finish what we have started. Of course, a less charitable interpretation is that this is not resourcefulness—this is cheating. In the spirit of play, permit us a quick indulgence—a side story that will frame our goals for this collection.

Beginning in 1990, Lewis Galoob Toys produced a series of pass-through devices for home game consoles called “Game Genies” that allowed players to manipulate data stored on cartridges to gain some gameplay advantage; usually this meant scoring extra lives, enjoying temporary invulnerability, accessing potent weapons, and so on. Galoob produced its Genies for a number of popular systems in the early to mid-1990s, including the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), the Super NES, and the Sega Genesis, as well as the Nintendo Gameboy and Sega Game Gear handheld systems (see figure I.1). It was called a “pass-through” device because the Genie would be inserted into the system as any cartridge would, and a game would then be plugged into the top of the Genie. Upon powering up the system, the user would enter a series of codes that would temporarily “patch” the game data to create some desired effect. It was a fairly ingenious and popular means of manipulating the programming that had been black boxed in the cartridges’ plastic housing.
In addition to extra lives and ammunition, the Game Genie also gave us a landmark court case: *Lewis Galoob Toys, Inc. v. Nintendo of America, Inc.* Nintendo accused Galoob of manufacturing a device that altered the code and created a derivative work, thus constituting copyright infringement. But in a 1992 ruling by the US Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, it was determined that owners of copyrighted goods could manipulate those items for their personal use and that temporarily altering and experimenting with game code was a legally acceptable form of play.

*How to Play Video Games* is an analytic Game Genie for game studies and media studies courses. It aims to give its readers—students and instructors alike—an analytical pass-through device for making sense of video games and gaming culture. The “how-to” in the anthology’s title is an admittedly audacious one. However, this collection is not intended to operate in the same prescriptive manner as a walkthrough guide. The “how-to” is closer in spirit to a “how-about”—it is an intellectual provocation, not a preordained solution. The anthology’s chapters present a range of pithy, accessible ways of thinking about games, their stories, play mechanics, characters, and creators, as well as the technologies and practices that bring these experiences to life.

This anthology foregrounds the utility of *play* as a means and as a method for reflecting on, thinking about, and researching video games. Framing this collection as a veritable Game Genie is offered in the hope that these chapters will open new pathways for appreciating how and why games might be taken seriously as objects of study. Furthermore, we’d like for the book’s underlying design conceit—the pairing of a keyword with a game title, gaming artifact, or gaming practice—to encourage readers to crack open the cultural code of games to assess why they matter in the ways that they do.
Despite its description as a cheating tool (or “video game enhancer” as its label advertises), the Game Genie was always more than a device for altering code or a technology that challenged beliefs about copyright and notions of fair play. The Genie amplified one of the most salient experiential elements of gameplay, namely, boundary exploration. When players search for hidden items, when speedrunners exploit glitches to find faster paths through levels, or when hackers modify titles to reimagine how they might look or play, they are engaged in forms of boundary exploration. Sometimes that exploration is highly instrumental, as when a defensive end in American football uses split-second timing to anticipate the snapping of the football without being caught offsides; sometimes that boundary exploration is far more playful, as when the reptilian heads atop the menacing dragons of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) are replaced via a texture modification (mod) with the bearded visages of famed wrestler “Macho Man” Randy Savage (and with it, the dragon’s roar is substituted with Savage’s signature “Yeah!”).

Boundary exploration is, in effect, informal playtesting (i.e., the testing of play). Moreover, these actions run the spectrum from being hegemonically functionalist on the one end, with actions that support the game’s underlying goals and ideological disposition, to free-form play on the other, including actions that may subvert or ignore a game’s rules and its goals. We wish for this collection to serve as a catalyst for pedagogical boundary exploration, as something that might encourage instructors who are building syllabi, creating assignments, and fostering classroom discussions to *think playfully* when it comes to teaching about and through video games.

In a similar fashion, we wish for this collection to encourage students to *act playfully* when learning about video games. We are particularly interested in connecting with those students who may not think of themselves as gamers or game players for any number of reasons. Acting playfully means exploring, wandering, wondering, failing often, and trying again. When learning is playful, obstacles are recast as opportunities for trying a different approach, making adjustments, questioning assumptions, taking stock of what is visible, and considering what is hidden. In short, play-as-method means a willingness to test new ideas in ludic (or playful) spaces where failure is permitted because it is a means of learning winning strategies.

Our aspiration that this collection inspires readers to be playful comes, in part, from our own experiences enjoying games in our youth as playthings and, later, as students of media and cultural studies, interrogating the social and cultural impact of games. Our intellectual development as media and cultural studies scholars has influenced our scholarly orientation toward games and game criticism—a critical disposition reflected in the humanist focus of this anthology.
Broadly speaking, game studies is divided into two dominant perspectives that shape the questions and methods that scholars apply to the study of games. Social scientists are largely concerned with the effects of games on players, asking, “What do video games do to people?” These researchers employ empirical methods drawn from behavioral, cognitive, and neuropsychology. Research about the influence of playing violent video games on the behavior of young people or assessing the cognitive benefits of playing puzzle games for older adults are examples of a social science approach to game studies. In contrast, humanists are mainly concerned with how players create meaning with and through games. This approach asks, “What do people do with video games?” Humanists employ a range of interpretive methods drawn from anthropology, philosophy, political economy, and literary and cultural studies, among others. Further theoretical and methodological developments in the field include platform and code studies, discourse analysis of game culture, and ethnographic accounts of live gaming events. These are only some of the approaches that have been used to understand how making meaning happens in virtual spaces and how identities, narratives, and communities are forged through acts of play. Readers will find the richness of humanistic game studies and criticism—its questions, issues, and approaches—represented in the 40 chapters included here.

It is perhaps an inevitable result of a 40-chapter anthology that different scholarly voices, originating from different countries, informed by different critical commitments, and analyzing gaming objects pulled from different platforms across decades, would produce a diversity of commentary. We’ve attempted to give readers some direction by organizing the chapters into four thematic units: formal properties, representational issues, industrial concerns, and gaming practices. Yet, given how frequently we reshuffled these chapters during the editorial process, we will be the first to admit that these boundaries are porous at best and that the groupings are ultimately a subjective matter. Yet we don’t see this inherent flexibility as a liability. Rather, just as we played (and replayed) with the book’s organization, we believe readers will chart their own paths based on their needs and interests. Digital and analog games are often pleasurable precisely because they cede to players the agency to make their own choices. We hope that readers will “choose their own adventure” when it comes to exploring this collection. Furthermore, it was never our goal to curate a canonical list of game titles or establish a critical vocabulary for game studies. Others have attempted those projects; see, for instance, 100 Greatest Video Game Franchises, Debugging Game History; and The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies. Instead, we see our chapters’ syntheses of concepts and gaming objects as being an instructional and conversational beginning.
When we first embarked on this project, we had confidence that uniting 40 game and media studies concepts with an equal number of gaming artifacts would result in something useful for classroom instruction. Much of our optimism was owed to this collection’s spiritual predecessor: How to Watch Television, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell. As media professors, we were impressed with their anthology’s versatility as a teaching tool. The modular design of Thompson and Mittell’s collection made it easy to integrate into our course syllabi. Moreover, because of our universities’ media collections and access to streaming services, it was easy to complement their chapters with visual fare. Rare indeed is the academic anthology where one can assign students multiple chapters a week. Yet we discovered that students engaged with How to Watch Television because the essays clearly demonstrated how various key terms could reveal the layered complexities (e.g., narrative, cultural, industrial) of TV programming across genres and eras.

Yet one of the foremost challenges of iterating on How to Watch Television for game studies is the variability of the video game itself. Gameplay—understood for our purposes as the dynamic interactions between a person at play and a rules-based gaming platform—is a medium-specific experience that introduces unique logistical and pedagogical considerations. First, games don’t always scale well in the classroom. Screening a film or TV show for a dozen students or for several hundred is easy. This is not the case if we’re asking students to actually play the games being analyzed.

Second, some games take only a few minutes to play, while others require dozens of hours to master. The rules structuring arcade classics like Pac-Man (Namco, 1980) and Space Invaders (Taito, 1978) or mobile hits such as Candy Crush Saga (King, 2012) and Crossy Road (Hipster Whale, 2014) are relatively easy to comprehend. Contrast this to strategy games such as Sid Meier’s Civilization VI (Firaxis Games, 2016) and sandbox games such as Minecraft (Mojang, 2011), where complexly layered rule sets and item-crafting systems invite players to invest countless hours designing their personalized approaches to running a nation for more than a millennium or to designing a sturdy fortress from basic resources.

There are also genres that are built around multiplayer competition and collaboration. Multiplayer online battle arena (or MOBA) titles like Defense of the Ancients 2 (Valve Corporation, 2013) and League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009)—which are exceedingly popular in esports leagues—or massively multiplayer online (MMO) games such as World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004) and EVE Online (CCP Games, 2003)—which contain vibrant in-game marketplaces—are predicated on the collective activity of thousands of players. Similarly, there is no escalating drama in battle royale games like PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds.
(PUBG Corporation, 2017) and *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017) if there aren’t dozens of players hunting one another while thousands spectate live on streaming sites.

Furthermore, watching fixed media such as film and television requires a relatively simple technical proficiency that is nearly universal: turning on a TV and pressing (or clicking) play on a DVR system or streaming service. Although many teachers have encountered ornery audiovisual systems in unfamiliar classrooms that required an emergency call to media support services, the anxiety of turning on a digital projector and setting the correct source pales in comparison to the performance anxiety of demonstrating to a lecture hall filled with undergraduates the game mechanics of a two-dimensional (2D) platformer like *Super Meat Boy* (Team Meat, 2010). When a speaker stands at a podium, audiences assume a level of expertise about the subject under discussion. Yet with video games, more so we would argue than with film or television, to be an expert about video games assumes an expertise at playing video games. At least for one of us (Nina) this is far from the case. She still aspires, after four decades of playing games, to complete a game above a “normal” difficulty setting. Moreover, even when gameplay skill isn’t an issue, playing with and, especially, against students in a formal learning environment like a university classroom has the potential to trouble established boundaries. The other editor (Matthew) has faced off against students in frenetic combat games and sports titles. Although this kind of experience has the potential to affirm and grow interpersonal bonds, the passion of competition also stands to upset relationships. Gameplay is an undeniably messy thing.

If the anxiety of playing in front of students introduces a precarious state for instructors, this same concern is no less the case and is perhaps even more acute for students. We rarely hear “I don’t watch TV” as a reason for not watching a show as part of a class. Yet students are frequently quick to declare, “I don’t play video games,” in an effort to avoid picking up a controller. One need only roll out a media cart equipped with a cathode-ray-tube (CRT) television connected to an NES console or Sega Genesis to paralyze normally tech-savvy students.

There are likewise financial and technological considerations when playing games in the service of media and game studies. Video games can be expensive. Gaming platforms and their operating systems change over time. Certain titles, like casual, mobile, and flash games, have a way of disappearing if not supported by their publishers. Collecting older systems requires more and more physical storage space (and an increasing array of adaptors). In short, there are numerous challenges when it comes to introducing games and gameplay into classrooms.

And, yet, there are also solutions. For the aforementioned reasons, we encouraged our contributors to select games for analysis that could be easily accessed. This concerted effort resulted in a table of contents that features games that can overwhelmingly be played across desktop computers and mobile devices.
Moreover, many of these games are either free or are fairly inexpensive. The mobile games can be downloaded for play on iOS and Android devices through their respective app stores. And many of the other games explored in this collection are available through popular digital distribution sites including “Steam” (http://store.steampowered.com), “Good Old Games” (https://www.gog.com), and “itch.io” (https://itch.io).

Of course, not all topics lent themselves to this goal. For those games and gaming experiences that might be prohibitive—be it because of price, technological access, or skill—streaming sites such as YouTube Gaming and Twitch.tv host scores of “Let’s Play” videos. Watching others play is no substitute for one’s own virtual exploration, but it can give inquisitive readers a vicarious sense of a game’s rules, mechanics, art design, and so on.

Despite the challenges of integrating gameplay into course curricula, we strongly believe that the educational benefits of play—as boundary exploration, as the iterative testing of ideas, as the adoption of new identities and the collaborative cultivation of narratives and magic circles—are simply too great to ignore. If games are engines for play, then play is the experiential Geist that fuels lifelong learning processes. How to Play Video Games is less about playing video games than it is about the doing of game studies. To that end, we humbly suggest that readers consider experimenting with the collection’s combination of game titles and keywords. One might mix and match the chapters’ pieces to create new combinations.

For example, Shira Chess analyzes Kim Kardashian: Hollywood through the lens of intersectional feminism, but how might we think about this game through the lens of gamification, the keyword of Sebastian Deterding’s chapter about Cookie Clicker? Or swap the keyword and game pairing of Mark J. P. Wolf’s world-building look at Bioshock Infinite with Soraya Murray’s focus on masculinity in The Last of Us. One could just as easily scrutinize BioShock Infinite’s rescue narrative through the lens of masculinity while assessing the bleak world-building choices on display in the post-apocalyptic The Last of Us. Of course, not all chapters are amenable to easy substitutions. Yet the fact that so many are underscores the collection’s implicit invitation to readers to craft compelling game-keyword combinations and quick-start their own game criticism.

The table of contents may also be “modded” for different ends. Some readers may want to approach the chapters in a chronological order that foregrounds changes over time—changes affecting the medium’s form, industrial concerns, and its cultural discourse. Alternatively, one might rejigger the table of contents by genre, an approach which could reveal how prevailing textual properties and play mechanics structure our thinking about gaming experiences. Finally, one could easily introduce new words and games not explored in this collection. Forty
chapters is a good start, but there are many more useful keywords and thousands of video games that could be analyzed. Ours is merely a beginning point.

It is an exciting time to play games, as gaming technologies such as virtual reality become affordable consumer products, as game designers innovate genres and modes of storytelling, as indie studios redefine commercial success, and as the gaming population continues to expand well beyond traditional markets. It is also an exciting time to study video games.

The vibrancy of the field is reflected, in part, by the rapid emergence of series and anthologies that are pushing game studies in new directions. These projects offer sustained attention to subjects including individual games, designers, technologies, cultural histories, and gaming identities. The following is merely a handful of recent examples that readers of this anthology might consider exploring: the “Influential Video Game Designers” series, co-edited by Carly Kocurek and Jennifer deWinter for Bloomsbury; the “Landmark Video Games” series, co-edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron for University of Michigan Press; and from MIT Press, the “Platform Studies” series, co-edited by Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort, and “Game Histories,” co-edited by Raiford Guins and Henry Lowood.

Finally, theoretical and critical approaches adjacent to game and media studies are advancing our understanding of gaming’s identity politics. For example, Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg’s edited collection *Queer Game Studies* uses queerness to challenge heteronormative ideas that have long-dominated gaming discussions. In a similar intellectual spirit, Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm’s *Gaming Representation* connects questions of race, gender, and sexuality with how we make sense of game design, interactive narratives, and contested sites of play. We are humbled that *How to Play Video Games* features contributions from many of these scholars.

Let’s return to the beginning. If playing video games invites frustration into our lives, these experiences carry with them an implicit promise that there are solutions to be found. In his masterful *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, philosopher Bernard Suits defines gameplay as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.” Analog and digital games are often powerful experiences precisely because we willingly subject ourselves to rules and to situations not of our choosing. The pleasures of gameplay emerge from the productive tension between freely giving ourselves over to a set of temporary restrictions while exercising choice in navigating those unnecessary obstacles. Suits identified this embrace of game rules to facilitate a state of play as the “lusory attitude.”

As you explore the following chapters, keep in mind that our contributors’ insights are the dynamic result of bringing a diversity of critical commitments and personal experiences to bear on a range of playful experiences. The vagaries of
gameplay and the idiosyncratic craft of scholarly interpretation mean that no two readings of a single game or ludic experience would necessarily be the same. Nor should it be. Although How to Play Video Games is intended to introduce readers to the craft of game studies, it is also an invitation to embrace the lusory attitude as a player and as a critic. It is a call to study games and gaming culture, playfully.

NOTES
2 To watch a gameplay video of this texture mod, see Ross Mahon, “Skyrim—‘Macho Man’ Randy Savage—Dragon Mod,” YouTube video, 4:44, published November 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QljULkof9xA.
3 People who play video games often reject self-identifying as a “gamer” because the term is frequently associated with an exclusionary and toxic subculture that is hostile to women, people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people. It is also curious that engaging with games has inspired a classification of people (i.e., “the gamer”) that other mediums, such as television and books have not. As Ian Bogost observes elsewhere, we do not think of people who watch television or read books as a group set apart from the rest of us. Why, then, do this for “gamers”? We encourage instructors and students to interrogate the “gamer” identity directly, unpacking the history of sexist, racist, and homophobic discourse often universally attributed to people who play games. For Bogost’s reflections on the gamer, see How to Do Things with Videogames (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). For those looking for more on this topic, we recommend the work by a number of this collection’s contributors; specifically, Adrienne Shaw, John Vanderhoef, Carly Kocurek, Bonnie Ruberg, TreaAndrea Russworm, and Shira Chess have written elsewhere about the intersectional complexities of gamer identity.
4 Robert Mejia, Jaime Banks, and Aubrie Adams, eds., 100 Greatest Video Game Franchises (Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield, 2017).
8 Another potentially useful resource is the Internet Arcade at the Internet Archive; see https://archive.org/details/internetarcade.
9 Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg, eds., Queer Game Studies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
Further Reading

