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Signs, Symbols, Games, and Play

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This article justifies the study of video games with reference to the importance of the study of representations and the study of play.

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Why game studies now?

The most obvious answer is the money involved. So let me deal with that one first.

There is no doubt that the current academic interest in games and game studies is driven to a large degree by the commercial success of the video games industry. There was in fact a brief but otherwise similar surge in academic interest in computer games and gaming during the early 1980s—when Atari was in its heyday, Chris Crawford's *Balance of Power* received coverage in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* (Aaron, 1985), and I published my first analyses of computer games (Myers, 1984).

Eventually of course, the video game market went bust and, so the story goes (Kent, 2001), Atari had to bury all those E.T. cartridges in the Mojave Desert. And all the game players then went back to where they had been before: designing, playing, and writing about games in a relatively more obscure and less convivial environment.

Now, 20 years later, as the game industry reasserts prices and profit margins, we once again find games and the scholarly study of games popular and increasingly popularized. Regardless however, games have always been interesting and appealing things—and game play equally so. So, given an environment supportive of games and game studies, how do we best make use of it? How does the realization of computer games as successful commercial products transform—even invigorate—their realization as aesthetic objects?

Why game studies now? Why game studies *ever*?

Two important reasons.

The first reason is, the study of games involves the study of representations.

Games, like literature, use conventional signs and symbols in unconventional ways. Early formalists (see Erlich, 1981) focused the study of literature on the nature of *literariness*, or on those fundamental properties of literary form both derivative of and in reference to the habits and conventions of a natural language. In this same

sense, what are the fundamental properties of games? What properties of game designs and forms distinguish games from other, more conventional acts and objects of human creation and culture?

Surely, these characteristics involve the form and function of representations within games. All games—all play—are after all virtual. And in our current age of the virtual, games and play occupy central positions.

Yet, whereas most concede some fundamental role to representationalism in understanding and analyzing games, there has been to date little overlap between the study of representational form and the study of game form—much less overlap than in other academic fields involving other aesthetic domains.

Linguists, semioticians, and some in philosophy of mind have most often carried this particular interdisciplinary torch forward. But the intellectual net is in fact widespread. Early exemplars of a game-related cognitive aesthetics include Jakobson's (Jakobson & Halle, 1956) analysis of metaphor and metonymy, Lévi-Strauss's (1979) study of binary structures in myth and culture, Lakoff and Johnson's (1999, 2003) insight into analogies and the origins of language, Marr's (1982) examination of visual perceptions and cues, and Johnson-Laird's (1983) treatise on mental models. Other studies thematically similar but slightly closer to the study of games and related entertainment forms include Bordwell's (1989) essays on film, Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) psychological analysis of flow experiences, Grodal's (2003) investigation of the relationship between games and sensations, and Aarseth's (1997) identification of aporia and epiphany as common and fundamental characteristics of game forms.

Each of these reveals how representational forms function as aesthetic objects in the context of the creation, manipulation, and interpretation of signs and symbols. And, each of these studies can be usefully applied within a cognitive aesthetics, which would correlate phenomenological experiences—fun and play, for instance—with more objective, representational, and ultimately, cognitive forms. Game studies are posed to emphasize, articulate, and explain such a correlation, much to the benefit of cognitive sciences and cognitive aesthetics.

The second reason is, the study of games involves the study of play.

I had occasion on the 30th anniversary of *Games and Culture*'s sister Sage journal, *Simulation & Gaming*, to write an article similar to this one (Myers, 1999). Here's part of what I said:

> What I've found in my review of [*Simulation & Gaming*] is encouraging: the continued and resolute focus on the game-playing *process*. Perhaps this is more by luck than design. Many contributors seem to be either dedicated game designers or game players—or both. It's natural and expected, then, that much of their analysis is based on either game design or play. But, if this is luck, then it's also serendipity, for (once again) it is exactly the process of play—aside from its effects—that is at the center of the whirlpool of theory in other fields. (p. 485)

What other aspects of human behavior (other than play) are so common, so universal, so pervasive, so profound, and so critical to an understanding of human nature, well-being, and self-consciousness—yet studied so seldom?

Currently, play studies are often deemed synonymous with child development studies; and too often, theories of play remain narrowly focused within developmental models that for all their insights fail to consider seriously the implications of widespread and common adult play. Surely, play is not so characteristic of the human child as it is the human species.

Game studies clearly demonstrate that game play is a cross-generational phenomenon, and indeed, definitions of games, based on very curious and sometimes paradoxical distinctions between rules-bound and rules-free systems (see Klabbers, 1996), portend revision and transformation of our conventional understanding of rules-based systems of all sorts: governments, economies, cultures.

Sutton-Smith (2001) has been influential in extending the study of play beyond the boundaries of child education and development by emphasizing aspects of games and play—rough and "dark" play, for instance—that have been discounted by developmental theorists. But, earlier studies (Caillois, 1961; Huizinga, 1955) equally demonstrate the degree to which games and play are universal characteristics of human behavior and essential to an understanding of human experience.

And of course, here the study of representations and the study of play are strongly connected. The study of representations emphasizes formal properties of games; the study of play emphasizes contextual and functional properties of those same aesthetic forms. One of the more intriguing potentials of game studies is to closely study this connection and in the process, perhaps resolve some of the more vexing problems in representationalism and philosophy of mind. Prominent among these is what Harnard (1990) termed the *symbol grounding* problem: an information processing dilemma based on the paradoxical implications of an endlessly recursive semiotic process operating without a clear and common reference—or ground—to some objective correlative or "other."

It has long been my contention that problems and anomalies associated with human semiosis—such as the symbol grounding problem—do not result from flaws of thought or logic but rather are necessary and inevitable characteristics of human representational forms. Game studies may well help specify such problems more clearly—as well as help us come to some deeper and more complete understanding of the incorrigible nature of their at best, partial solutions.

Final Comments

While emphasizing the importance of the study of play within *Games and Culture*, I would also like to acknowledge a debt to an elder journal: *Play & Culture*.

Play & Culture, along with the *Journal of Play Theory and Research* and currently, *Play & Culture Studies*, have long been published by the Association for the Study of Play (TASP; http://www.csuchico.edu/phed/tasp/index.html). Each of these publica-

tions has been an important outlet for research on games and play that prior to the recent game studies boom did not always clearly fit within conventional academic tracks or disciplines. In those earlier, less convivial environments, TASP conferences and conventions provided an interdisciplinary gathering spot for scholars whose work now serves as model and inspiration for the writers and editors of *Games and Culture*.

I remember early in my research career being surprised and delighted to find such a sympathetic and active group of play scholars. Many important resources—Helen Schwartzman's (1978) *Transformations*, Gary Alan Fine's (1983) study of Dungeons & Dragons role players in *Shared Fantasy*, Alan Aycock's (1993) analysis of chess players, and Sutton-Smith's long-running thoughts and theories of play (see Sutton-Smith & Pellegrini, 1995)—originated (and still originate) within the conferences, correspondences, and publications of TASP.

There are of course many other, equally important influences on the current journal. In particular, I should mention *Simulation & Gaming* and its assorted and linked associations—Association for Business Simulation and Experiential Learning, International Simulation and Gaming Association, Japan Association of Simulation and Gaming, North American Simulation and Gaming Association, and Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research—that continue to motivate widely and distribute internationally rigorous scholarly analyses of games and game-related topics.

In lieu of and in dedication to such precedents as *Play and Culture* and *Simulation & Gaming*, I am pleased to be a part of this newly focused effort to formalize game studies.

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