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Chapter 5

Apportioned Commodity Fetishism and the Transformative Power of Game Studies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the ways in which the field of Game Studies helps shape popular understandings of player, play, and game, and specifically how the field alters the conceptual, linguistic, and discursive apparatuses that gamers use to contextualize, describe, and make sense of their experiences. The chapter deploys the concept of apportioned commodity fetishism to analyze the phenomena of discourse as practice, persona, the vagaries of game design, recursion, lexical formation, institutionalization, systems of self-effectiveness, theory as anti-theory, and commodification.

INTRODUCTION

From its earliest days, the video game industry has capitalized on not only the technology that drives games but also on the people who make them: Will Wright's *Raid on Bungeling Bay* (1984); Chris Crawford's *Balance of Power* (1985); Sid Meier's *Civilization* (1991); and Roberta Williams' *Anthology* (1996) are just a few of the many games in the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive that feature the developer's name—and not infrequently, a head shot—on the packaging.¹ More than for just superstar designers and skilled programmers and artists, however, the game industry is also known by gamers and many in the general public as an enterprise where exploited and harassed so-called “code monkeys” and victims of what is euphemistically termed by globalization pundits “global cost arbitrage” are employed, laborers whose job is to infuse games with cultural and economic value in return for low wages and staggering levels of stress.² If ever there were an industry in which the central commodity was commonly recognized as a product of many hands, it would be the video game industry.

Or would it? In this chapter, we propose that as a result of the unique combination of geek cultures, game cultures, and media studies cultures that have emerged since the 1980s, a curious facade has been constructed in and around the game industry that both reveals and masks the inner workings of the video game medium's cultural and political networks of production. As the byline of this chapter makes clear, we make this argument as part of a collective of game studies scholars who have been both independently and collaboratively studying games through the Learning Games Initiative since 1999. Although our respective areas of expertise vary widely, for many years we have together tracked the interactions of academic and gamer discourses as they manifest in popular, subcultural, and trade venues. Like all discourses, the ones that prevail are contradictory: they demand that one work to experience fun, to reframe tyrannical control over player behavior as the auteur's privilege, to cast technical details such as shader values and particle systems as primarily aesthetic considerations, and to define the video game medium itself in ways that are more perambulatory than specific. We accept these contradictions as predictable outcomes of a culture industry that trades in commerce-driven play and the business of fun, and each of the authors has her or his own approach to understanding these industry-culture dynamics.

It was the charge of this volume's editors, however, to examine how video games “cause players to shift perspectives.” And this charge brought into focus for us the fact that the enormously complex set of interactions among gamers, producers, industrial processes, cultural adaptations, subjectivity, and identity performance not only produces a perpetually unfurling network of contradictory discourses, but also requires a dense but malleable facade that, like a radiologist's lead apron, shields the most sensitive inner workings even as it enables a seemingly transparent perspective. In effect, the set of relationships that has emerged among game producers, distributors, and consumers is such that a discourse of labor is now a popular commonplace even though a clear understanding of how those relationships function interdependently is almost entirely unknown. We call this phenomenon “apportioned commodity fetishism,” by which we mean the perceptual tendency of the social relations involved in commodity production (including games) to be obscured, even as a discursive scaffold is constructed to give these fetishized objects a multi-dimensional cultural-economic topology that includes a characterization of the labor that assembled them. Put simply, we argue that the discourses of the game industry and its cultures operate together to give the appearance that games-as-commodities have not been disassociated from the labor that produced them—i.e., designers, artists, programmers, and so forth—when in fact knowledge about this labor has developed over time to mask a vast array of important labor-related details, from internal management practices, to workplace abuses, to wage-impacting financial decisions.

In this chapter we also argue that apportioned commodity fetishism—now pervasive in the game industry—not only helps drive how games transform players, but also explains how something like an academic discipline such as Game Studies, which lies at the industrial periphery, can simultaneously sharpen and further obscure an object’s social relations to the labor that produced it. In what follows, we detail several different ways that apportioned commodity fetishism functions, but in general it substitutes superficial personal information (e.g., age, education, job title) and detailed object metadata (e.g., genre, narrative, agentic capacity, representation) for attention to material relations. In effect, apportioned commodity fetishism is a sort of high-level consumer consciousness that enables sophisticated articulations between objects and their affiliated definitive abstractions, even as it anneals the reified intrinsic value of virtually every product of the game industry. We begin by generally parsing the industry’s use of discourse.³

DISCOURSE AS PRACTICE

In its 2015 call for papers, the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) hailed a multiplicity of gamer/subjects:

Today the popularity of games has increased dramatically, games have become more specialized and gaming is taking place in a number of divergent practices, from e-sport to gamification. In addition, the gamer position includes a number of roles and identities such as: players, learners, time-fillers, users, fans, roleplayers, theory crafters, speed runners, etc. (2015)

The focus on a plethora of possible “gamers”—the term we use most often in this chapter to signify these manifold identities—not only demonstrates academic interest in the formation of gamer subjectivity, but also represents the shifting and altered position(s) of gamer/subjects in Game Studies. Defining “gamer,” in other words, necessarily enacts a transformation of subjectivity and reveals an impulse to control the practice of play by nominating it. It also serves to expand how academics think about “the gamer,” that is, as more than just the person at the end of a game controller. It is precisely this kind of definitional expansiveness—the utility and insightfulness of which we do not dispute—that opens a door to apportioned commodity fetishism. It does so by pointing out (but not examining the relationships among) the various kinds of people—“players, learners, time-fillers,” and the like—who contribute to and comprise the identity “gamer,” in effect apportioning types of labor that stand behind the seemingly simple sign “gamer.” Thus in a single discursive gesture, DiGRA both expands and controls how academics—and the broader audience of journalists who routinely consult DiGRA—think, write, and speak about what it means to play games.

Inevitably, of course, any critical practice creates discursive effects, and discourse—in the conventional sense of written statements that are construed as knowledge—is only one facet of a broader understanding of discourse as practice.⁴ Discourses always involve a multiplicity of statements, texts, actions, or personas, and can never be assigned a single origin point. Discourses as the materialization of socially structured knowledge are never completed or closed; on the contrary, as semioticians such as Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure observed, they are continuously changing and are only ever temporarily fixed in meaning, if at all.

In *Versuch über den Normalismus: Wie Normalität produziert wird* (2013), Jürgen Link helpfully distinguishes between “special discourses” and “interdiscourses” (p. 42f). The former are marked by explicit regularity, a predominate unambiguity, and clear consistency, and their ideal can be found in the specialized knowledge of the structurally differentiated sciences. Interdiscourses, in contrast, are less strictly regulated, tend to rely on extensive connotation and polysemy, and allow for the integration of simultaneously competing and incongruent knowledges. The central product of both types of discourses, however, are certain subjectivities that are simultaneously prescribed by specific discursive currents and altered by actions inside discursive boundaries.

Addressing the question of how Game Studies transforms gamers—again, in DiGRA’s broad sense—entails reflection on the different perspectives in which this question itself can be understood. Broadly, we see at least three key perspectives, taking into account that the “how” of the question assumes that there is a transformation in the first place.

1. Does Game Studies Affect How Gamers Understand Their Play?

On the one hand, an affirmative answer to this question has to assume that gamers both perceive and reflect on the findings of the special discourse—unambiguous, consistent, and regularized—that is Game Studies. Given the number and diversity of game players in the world and the relative size and newness of Game Studies as a field, such an assumption seems improbable in the aggregate.⁵ That said, presuming that academic attention paid to games and gamer subjectivity inevitably makes an impression on at least some gamers—and periodically makes its way into local newspapers and magazines, radio broadcasts, and blogs to influence even more—such an impression might produce a subject position of self-reflexivity and possibly even pride. Gamers might feel that their play and practice is taken seriously, and therefore that play generally is a meaningful cultural practice—with gamer/subjects ennobled as cultural actors—in addition to being a mere pastime.⁶

2. How is the Gamer as an Academic Concept Transformed by Game Studies?

The notion of the gamer/subject here takes a different form than in the previous question, becoming the product of a discursive conceptualization. Just as with the production of subjectivities such as “viewer,” “spectator,” or “active audience” found in other media formations, the production of a multiplicity of different gamer/subjects influences the way subject positions are anticipated in the production of cultural artifacts, goods for economic and symbolic consumption, and how meaning is understood in analytical models. Here, too, is a paradoxical operation as the gamer/subject in the special discourse of Game Studies is transformed from actor to object, from the fetishizer into the fetishized. It is in this power/knowledge that Game Studies as special discourse operates most effectively: its presuppositions, assumptions, and discursive regularities produce the gamer as an object of knowledge. And it is here where certain powerful conditions of what it means to be a “gamer” are invented, conceptualized, transformed, and disseminated reflectively in a broader cultural and discursive context (e.g., by being addressed in newspapers or academic calls for proposals).

Critical discourse, in this instance, is performing power over the gamer/subject. Game Studies—in a much more complex way than we can account for in this chapter (though we do address it more below) is able to shape the language and self-awareness of gamer/subjects. It provides a grammar and vocabulary for meaningfully talking about games and play within the restricted boundaries of a specialized discourse,

a language that may well compete with alternative, interdiscursive articulations of gamer/subjects. While this vocabulary often makes possible the practice of taking gamers into account as gamer/subjects and hence assigns (micropolitical) power to them, it also has a limiting effect, ruling out other, alternative ways of articulating gamer subjectivity. To use a game development analogy, apportioning “gamers” as key components of game production effectively textures them onto the game industry object, giving the appearance of depth where none exists.

3. Is There a Connection That Interrupts the Special Discursive Practice of Game Studies with the Interdiscursive Practices of Gamer/Subjects?

This third question makes games the center of reflection and is perhaps the most productive avenue for considering how Game Studies as a field of inquiry shapes gamers themselves. This is so because it is (generally) games that produce the motivation for gamers to play, as well as the incentive for theoretical reflection by game scholars, and the means of earning a living for game developers. It is games that secure mediated contact between diverse and heterogeneous gamer/subjects on the one hand, and the theoretical and analytical practices of Game Studies discourses on the other. Games are a combination of material interfaces and symbolic artifacts, and the medium of negotiation among the play of gamer/subjects, the reflection of scientific practices, and the creativity, ideologies, and economic interests of developers and their industry.

The notion that discourses produce certain subjectivities, however, does not make it possible to describe with scientific accuracy precisely how Game Studies transforms gamers. Indeed, it would be erroneous (not to mention arrogant) to suggest that one might, for example, write a book chapter that would instantly and radically change the way gamers perceive play and subjectivity. Rather, the question of how Game Studies changes gamers has to imagine a circuitous, mediated relationship wherein a particular discourse both describes a distinct cultural moment and enacts a set of societal practices. It is this protean context—which simultaneously arrests and expands what we might term “gamer delta” (the amount of change a gamer experiences)—that lends a bit of movement to the phenomenon of apportioned commodity fetishism, enhancing its illusion of depth with an illusion of life. Such enactments trigger new comments, descriptions, and analyses (and thus new discursive currents), and because analysis and enactment are interrelated but do not necessarily coincide or collapse into each other, they effectively lend the appearance of a cognition of industrial labor to anyone who does less than scrutinize *who* makes video games possible. In short, Game Studies affects games (qua cultural artifacts) and the practices of playing them, and these effects influence how gamers perceive themselves, the games they play, and the relationship between the two. In the process, a discursive *trompe-l’oeil* or optical illusion emerges that seems to indicate an informed recognition of the labor origins of video games, but that is in fact a relatively controlled animation with little substance or depth.

PERSONA

If discursive processes and practices interweave to create a false (or at least superficial) impression of labor in the game industry, how then is it possible to see more than the *trompe-l’oeil* constructed by apportioned commodity fetishism? One answer might lie in an anecdote Aristotle tells about Heraclitus of Ephesus (535-575 BC). The story goes that a group of tourists, excited to meet the renowned thinker,

were taken by surprise when they reached his home and found Heraclitus standing near the oven warming himself. To their chagrin, Aristotle suggests, Heraclitus was neither preparing food fit for a philosopher (whatever that would be), nor was he lost in brilliant contemplation. His surroundings were plain, his demeanor common, his body chilled. Recognizing his visitors' disappointment that neither his abode nor his bearing were in the least impressive, Heraclitus called them into his humble kitchen saying "Don't fret. Even here the gods are present." The same might be said of apportioned commodity fetishism's labor-related *trompe-l'oeil*: even here there are depths to be sounded.

As with painted visual illusions, revealing the trickery of angles and shadows is often as easy as changing one's perspective. Coincidentally, the game industry's own characteristic contradictions—most readily observed in its promotional discourses—point the way to such an alternate view. Consider, for instance, EA Sports' marketing slogan "It's in the game!" More than a pithy tagline, it also serves as a rallying cry for much about the modes of production connected to AAA game development. At the top studios, the design emphasis is constantly directed inward, centered on mechanics, narrative, interface, control schemas, networking, and the code that constitutes and binds them all. For designers, energy and understanding are devoted to a game's constitutive components at the expense of what the game is in, to borrow Garry Crawford's (2015) equally pithy reversal of EA Sports' slogan. In other words, commercial game development is generally unconcerned with the social, cultural, and historical contexts through which a game becomes meaningful to its interlocutors, save when those contexts directly impact game production, distribution, and consumption (e.g., regulatory policy, technological innovation, and so forth). In the context of this chapter, apportioned commodity fetishism directs its audience to see "what's in the game": its play, competition, cool art, realistic rules, and all the incredible people who make such experiences possible to the player. Indeed, "It's in the game!" is arguably a form of rhetorical eclipse, where the key agents have been both disappeared and emphasized: "[We] put it in the game!" Crawford usefully shifts this perspective, however, asking in effect: "What are the conditions that empower a game studio to put things into a game so that it will be lucrative in particular markets?"

Put another way, while Johan Huizinga's (1955) concept of *the magic circle* has undergone vigorous critique by game scholars in recent years, it remains a vibrant, pervasive, and structuring mythos among game developers. Accordingly, many developers continue to create games as art, entertainment, and escape, effectively accepting Huizinga's proposition that play stands within but closed off from society and culture, occupying a space, as he says, "standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life..." (Huizinga, 1938, p. 13). Nathan Grayson's recent interview with *Heroes of the Storm* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015) game director Dustin Browder for the PC gaming website *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* provides a pointed example of this mindset:

RPS: *MOBAs [Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas] tend to hyper-sexualize female characters to a generally preposterous degree.... How are you planning to approach that in Heroes?*

Browder: *Well, I mean, some of these characters, I would argue, are already hyper-sexualized in a sense. I mean, Kerrigan is wearing heels, right? We're not sending a message to anybody. We're just making characters who look cool... We're not running for President. We're not sending a message. No one should look to our game for that. (Grayson, 2013, para. 35)*

Here is apportioned commodity fetishism being constructed in full view: a developer is being highlighted—readers of *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* now know the name of an actual person who labored over the production of the popular game *Heroes of the Storm*—yet that executive-level employee informs readers

that his team (i.e., workers) should not be thought about so intently that they are realized as agents of socio-political work in the world. In one breath, Browder says, in effect: “There are people working hard on making the game...but they are just workers making a game, disconnected from the world in which that game is played.” Game industry workers are in the world but apparently not of it.

Shifting the perspective slightly again, it becomes clear that Grayson’s important question—how are you planning to deal with the problem of hyper-sexualized female characters in your game—is also incomplete, failing to broach the larger issue of the coordination of vision and interaction. From the perspective of critical scholarship, this is a key and instructive lapse. Not only is the male gaze active in mainstream video games (as the question makes clear), but so too is the male hand that enables the player to indulge in an assumed pleasure of aggressive, even violent, action. In games, as in life, to perceive is to (re)act; this is the heart of Foucault’s idea of interpellation. Refusal to see and address this obvious articulation arguably reflects the myopic approach many developers abide within as they do their work, a refusal that only sharpens the effectiveness of apportioned commodity fetishism. Paradoxically, even as the optical illusion of apportioned commodity fetishism is sharpened for consumers, another one is created, signified by what we might term “apportioned gamer fetishism.” Here, the imagined gamer is both a kind of transcendent being—an entity floating freely outside of an historical context—and a young, white, heterosexual male. Gamers, then, are encouraged to see games as the products of nerdy-chic, lucky, talented geniuses rather than a small town’s worth of employees slogging through life in their workaday jobs, while developers idealize “the gamer” as a human type trying to escape *his* workaday job by playing their games rather than as a single unique member of the human race, each of whom is absorbed in what Martin Heidegger (2013) called “being-in-the-world.” From this latter perspective, one’s performance of and as a gamer is wrapped up in one’s sense of identity, in an understanding of gender, class, nationhood, and the like—all of which are inscribed upon the player’s body through the way one talks, walks, stands, eats, exercises, sleeps, and so on. Regardless of developer consciousness and desire, games speak, make demands, and attempt to enforce particular performances of identity. Gamers can certainly resist the performance, subvert it, and modify games through hacks and cheats, but these acts are always already political dialogues. The way the avatar, user interface, narrative, mechanics, and control scheme of a game make sense is through historicity, through the gamer’s being-in-the-world.

Subjectivities such as “mother,” “friend,” or “customer” are, then, preconfigured by society. Each is a specific mask, a suit off the rack, awaiting adornment for the existential self. But they are never creation. Every subject position demands particular performances which draw together expectations of race, gender, age, tone of voice, language (body and textual), dress, behaviour, and so on in line with social convention. To be sure, one is allowed certain latitude in an interpretation of, for example, *Hamlet*, but should one stray too far from audience expectation there is sanction, sometimes relatively inconsequential—boos, stares, guffaws, admonishment, gossip—sometimes dire—being fired, ostracised, or even arrested if the performance is deemed particularly egregious. It is the same in the roles of “office worker,” “partner,” and “parent.” And in “gamer.”

There is some precedent for at least trying to refuse apportioned commodity fetishism and apportioned gamer fetishism, that is, games and gamer-developer relationships that recognize that their contexts are invariably situated in discrete and complex networks of meaning, not ideal subjects prognosticated through psychological abstractions, material objects quantifiable and reducible to rules structured by physicochemical processes, or superficial fantasies about life in the industry. Games such as *Cart Life* (Hofmeier, 2011), where one plays a character living hand-to-mouth, or *Papers, Please* (Pope, 2013), where one plays an immigration officer in an authoritarian government, specifically avoid the game

industry's more well-worn taxonomical abstractions that catalog gamers as socializers, achievers, teammates, customizers, discoverers, and so forth. Such abstractions fail to capture or explain the deeply affective experience of games like these that effectively militate against the pursuit of system mastery, customizable characters, undiscovered mechanics, or sensory immersion. Rather, the play in these games is designed to generate a profound sense of anxiety. In the Heideggerian context:

All things, and we along with them, sink into indifference—but not in the sense of disappearing. Rather, as things recede, they turn toward us. It is the receding of the meaning-giving context of things that presses in on us and oppresses us. Without the meaning-giving context there is no hold on things. As things slip away, what remains and overwhelms us is precisely this “no....” Dread reveals the no-thing. (Heidegger, 1929, pp. 111-112)

A pervasive, ineffable apprehensiveness is meant to envelop the player of these games, and the longer one plays, the stronger it is meant to grow. In their articulation of vision and (re)action of the medium and the world within which that medium operates, games such as these give the lie to both kinds of apportioned fetishism.

Importantly, neither *Cart Life* nor *Papers, Please* offer the traditional pleasures intended to gratify the male gaze or male hand. Instead, they reach for a far more vulnerable political, historically-situated sense of self, a broader being-in-the-world. But how does one explain—let alone design a game around—a sense of being-in-the-game (so to speak) without recourse to an infinite array of specific historical, social, and political contexts? How, in other words, might games be designed to be anti-fetishizing?

While we do not have comprehensive answers to such questions, in recent years, game developers have progressed from system-centered design to user-centered design, inaugurating a long overdue recognition that audiences routinely approach games from a set of understandings and biases quite dissimilar from the designers'. Here too, however, there is a risk that the focus on the narrow subjectivity “user” will ultimately disserve the radical potential underwriting this epistemological shift. Like “gamer,” “user” is but one dimension of a multidimensional being, and is just as likely to insist that an existential self be rather more narrowly performed, less a self than a *persona*. If truly affective and non-fetishizing games are ever to be had, ones that stay with gamers beyond mere moments and impact their sense of being, such entertainments must speak not just to the player-mask, but to the being beneath.

This was precisely Heraclitus' message to his disappointed visitors: look more closely and the mundane surface will give way to bottomless depth and interconnection. We recognize that such a momentous epistemological reorientation may be easy to document in an academic context but extraordinarily difficult to enact among the all-too-real complexities of the game industry's production schedules, internationally-scoped budgets, and interpersonal dynamics. In the next section, we attempt to reframe this practical context by briefly considering the quotidian demands on an actual designer, always with an eye on the mechanisms enabling—and potentially subverting—apportioned commodity fetishism.

THE VAGARIES OF GAME DESIGN

So far, we have established that the game industry has seen the emergence of apportioned commodity fetishism—a kind of perceptual *trompe-l'oeil* that creates the illusion of visible relations between commodities (specifically, video games) and the labor that produced them—and we have offered several

examples of how the game industry perpetuates this illusion by relying on the mask made available through the idea of the magic circle, as well as through the practical reliance on an idealized user during the process of development. It is to some of these practical concerns that we now turn, particularly those of game designers—the people whose job it is to imagine a play scenario and environment, then lead the way in its development toward a deliverable and profitable product (i.e., a commodity).

In many respects, the designer is the shiniest labor fetish that gamers and the public are offered by the game industry. Names such as Cliff Bleszinski, Brenda Braithwaite Romero, Chris Crawford, Richard Garriott, Sid Meier, Peter Molyneux, John Romero, Warren Spector, Kim Swift, and Will Wright are legendary among gamers, and as we noted earlier, for a time in the 1990s and 2000s it was common industry practice to include a “dust jacket” photo of the lead designer on the back of game boxes. It makes sense in an analysis of apportioned commodity fetishism, then, to investigate how the cult of personality that often surrounds game designers contributes to this phenomenon and by ready extension to the ways that it can generate transformations in gamers.

According to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003), designers create “meaningful play,” the most fundamental element of any game. Meaningful play, they propose,

emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The meaning of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome. (p. 34, emphasis in original)

Given the significance of this role in the development process, it is understandable how the designer comes to loom large in popular mappings that connect the game-commodity to the labor that produced it.

Notably, however, this recognition of the designer’s work reveals that attention to, for example, a game’s aesthetic and technical details—details that are often what differentiate products in the marketplace and that create emotional connections between the system and the player (Reimann & Schilke, 2011; Hsieh, 2013)—is not among their primary tasks. For game designers, the production of mediated experiences dominates aesthetic and technical choices; designers lead the process whereby experiences are converted into systems through hardware, software, rules, interfaces, and narrative structures, but they typically do so without a deep understanding of each of these key development arenas. Instead, they depend on the expertise of others to translate their visions into attractive and playable content, and the act of play converts these designed systems into ludic experiences. In this way, the gamer is always in relationship with the designer, but the designer is a metonym for everyone who contributed to the production process.⁷ Designers, in other words, are both real and imaginary, actual workers and discursive constructions, and it is through this dual role that they contribute to the illusion that commodity fetishism is relatively absent from the game industry. To know the designer—her background, her accomplishments, perhaps even some of her eccentricities—is to connect at an intimate level with the *work*, done by human minds and hands, that went into the making of a game...or so the metonymic logic goes.

Consider, for example, Shigeru Miyamoto, famed designer of such games as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) and *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986). In interviews, Miyamoto often discusses his childhood—specifically playgrounds and exploration—as providing a notable starting point for his design processes. When discussing his ongoing philosophy about making games, Miyamoto states, “I think great video games are like favorite playgrounds, places you become attached to and go back to again and again. Wouldn’t it be great to have a whole drawer full of ‘playgrounds’ right at your finger-

tips?” (Arakawa, 1991, p. 32). Readers of such anecdotes are readily able to see such personal stories materialized in *Super Mario Bros.*, for instance, where bright colors, jaunty music, and energetic jumping—the stuff of the most delightful playgrounds—predominate. Moreover, Miyamoto’s well-known love of exploration—well-known because he and Nintendo’s promotional materials about him often tout it—is one of several central play mechanics in Miyamoto’s titles, appearing in both the Mario and Zelda series (together comprising more than 100 different titles) as numerous and notable secrets for gamers to discover (deWinter, 2015). And as technologies have evolved over the course of his career, Miyamoto has been vocal about how designers (in the metonymic sense) have been able to increasingly strengthen the emotional attachment between games and players by representing emotional content in games—an advancement made possible by various technical breakthroughs. In one of his earliest reflections on this interconnectedness among the designer, the (implied) team, the technology, and the gamer, Miyamoto commented, “Before, in earlier games, we couldn’t show the entire game world in detail and we couldn’t convey all the emotions of the characters. Now, we can do that on the Nintendo 64. I’ve always wanted to create realistic experiences, full experiences such as you or I could have, but in exciting worlds” (*Nintendo Power*, 1996, p. 25). Miyamoto’s vision then, presumably like the visions of less famous designers, scaffolds predictable and shared experiences within fantastic worlds and events, and connects them both directly and indirectly to popular conceptions of the relationship between a commodity and the labor that produced it.⁸

In at least two ways, then, the designer—real worker and metonym—transforms players by providing them with impactful experiences and by administrating their understanding of how such experiences are produced and packaged into the game medium. Part of how these conjoined roles evolve is through a duplicative process of fetishization, that is, as the game-commodity is fetishized, so too is the designer; since the two are already linked, the two become one, perceptually speaking, a phenomenon often amplified (as suggested above) by media coverage of designers’ extra-ludic peculiarities. In Miyamoto’s case, such characteristics include his notorious tendency to “upend the tea table” (“chabudai gaeshi” in Japanese), that is, to scrap or seriously redirect projects. The fetish power of Miyamoto is such that stories like this only add to his (literally) iconic status. Few game designers, however, command such power, and more often than not such behavior results in a decrease rather than increase in fetishizing distance. Famously, *BioShock* (2K Games, 2007) designer Ken Levine has been lambasted rather than praised in the media for his seemingly capricious control of the *BioShock* franchise; stories about his late changes to the art direction, his tendency to yell at production teams, and to demand full participation in abusive crunch time schedules are common among developers and gamers alike.

Significantly, in either version of the game designer myth—demanding genius or tyrannical but productive functionary—the upshot is the same: the designer serves as a kind of two dimensional billboard signifying the labor (as in *people who labor*) involved in any given game’s production. Importantly, however, most games do not even have a “cult of the designer” personality attached to them (there are only a handful of designers who are really well-known); all the public has to go on in such mundane instances is common knowledge about game designers drawn from the mass media and (perhaps) Game Studies. For those games that do have access to luxury labor, apportioned commodity fetishism is most powerfully at work shielding the public from seeing beyond the facade of the virtuosic Miyamoto, the autocratic Levine, the compulsive exaggerator Peter Molyneux, and so on.

Such ad hominem details about designers and their egos work to construct superficial mythologies of industrial labor, effacing in the process not only the work of people who work with designers but also of designers themselves. Masking the very real constraints that designers and their teams work under—

rigid production cycles, mercurial hardware standards, severe budget limitations, the crushing pressure of competition in the global marketplace—means that gamers are transformed in ways that buttress their ignorance of how and why the games they play look and feel the way they do. Designers are accorded responsibility for game quality (good or ill)—sometimes studios and publishers as well—even as understandings of such matters as safe and healthy working conditions, gender and racial discrimination, and fair pay are rendered invisible to consumers, disappeared behind technical specifications, promotional hyperbole, and vapid personal interest stories about “the making of. . .” Here is apportioned commodity fetishism in full bloom. In the next section, we examine one of the key mechanisms of this process, the one that most almost irresistibly ensures that no matter one’s level of critical consciousness, moving beyond the habits that attend apportioned commodity fetishism remains remarkably challenging.

RECURSION

As we have described in a number of different ways already, video game developers have long played an active role in the discourses of Game Studies, both directly and indirectly. Books such as Mark Stephen Meadows’ *Pause and Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative* (2003), Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan’s *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2004), and Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology* (2006)—all now common on new media syllabi in higher education—feature essays by and interviews with game developers. Simultaneously, websites such as *Kotaku* and *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* (among many others) have provided venues for specialized game criticism and helped push elements of Game Studies into the mainstream. Moreover, the emergence of digital games—and particularly their movement into mass culture—has been roughly concurrent with the growth of online resources, first in dial-up bulletin board systems, and subsequently into the ubiquitous use of the Internet. For many years now, online forums dedicated to game design—from early usenet newsgroups such as rec.games.design to websites such as *Gamasutra: The Art & Business of Making Games* to the proliferation of podcasts like *Idle Thumbs* and *Designer Notes*—have served as hubs of information exchange about best practices in game production, facilitating an impressive cross-pollination between the disciplines of game design and Game Studies.⁹

Of course, the intersection of game design pragmatics and theory preceded the digital era. Game designers such as Bernie DeKoven and phenomena such as the New Games movement deliberately combined philosophical praxis with the act of game design in the 1970s, creating games to implement and exemplify theoretical beliefs (DeKoven, 1978; The New Games Foundation, 1976). Following upon the advent of video games, mediumic analysis—audience, interface, experience, and so on—became an essential part of game design and development. Critically and commercially successful game creation now virtually always involves prototyping and playtesting, effecting an important and continued feedback loop among designers, gamers, and critics (often the same person). As a result, while the formalized discipline of Game Studies has evolved as an institutionalized field of study in the last couple of decades, the careful study of games—that is, their critical consideration and analysis—is as old as games themselves, and has almost always been undertaken by game players and makers.

Like its object of study, then, Game Studies is fundamentally recursive, and as with other fields of inquiry, it depends on the process of modified return—the feedback loop—to create stasis (i.e., freezing an otherwise working system in order to study it), as well as experiential variety and innovation (i.e., study leads to change). Simply put, knowledge production is inexorably self-perpetuating and self-

modifying. Consider, for example, the introductory-level game history course, a common requirement in many university game design programs. Such a course necessarily entails students becoming relatively familiar with the discipline of Game Studies: its ludic and scholarly canon, its research methods, its theoretical trends, and so forth. Just as film production students may become inspired by and mimic a film they see in a film history or theory course, game design students are influenced by and explore the conceptual and theoretical frameworks to which they have been exposed in their coursework. They make what they know plus a little something extra, or as Eileen Meehan (2005) so succinctly puts it: “tried-and-true-with-a-twist” (p. 113).

Designer Jenova Chen’s 2006 MFA thesis project, *fLOw*, offers a striking instance of the recursiveness of the academy and game design simultaneously. This game, which also became the first official release by Chen’s studio thatgamecompany [sic] in 2007, sought to enact the theories of psychologist Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi, about whom Chen had learned as a USC graduate student (Naone, 2008).¹⁰ Among other things, Csikzentmihalyi’s work explores the “flow state” which an artist or athlete might achieve while fully focused on her practice. Chen not only makes this state the centerpiece of his game, but of his master’s thesis as well, effectively reiterating and refracting the intellectual and aesthetic training he received (Chen, 2006).

Understanding, then, that the game industry, Game Studies, and gamers have from the beginning mutually moulded each other through a sometimes more, sometimes less complex process of modified return, clarifies how it is that Game Studies transforms gamers, and also how apportioned commodity fetishism itself is perpetuated through and among all three highly attentive groups. In other words, it is difficult to call capitalism’s bluff (so to speak) when virtually all of its participants have been trained *and have trained each other* to see its illusions as real: games stand outside society, have no readily identifiable origins, and are attached to systems of labor that are so straightforward that the impression of understanding (even down to the level of privities) is commonplace. Working recursively, apportioned commodity fetishism functions to shape common and critical perception alike, and in the process redoubles its own illusory power. Fascinatingly, one of the most easily recognizable sites of this ideological redoubling is also one of the video game complex’s most heavily engineered discursive realms: its lexicons.

LEXICAL FORMATION

Conceived of broadly, the field of Game Studies—typically envisioned within an academic context—also includes researchers working in industry, as well as critics publishing in newspapers, magazines, and online outlets. Writers working across this spectrum participate in public discourse around gaming and in turn help define that discourse at fundamental levels. Together, those working in Game Studies both within and outside the academy form a constellation of contributors that has helped cultivate a shared critical language of gaming. This language has shaped not only critical discourse, but also gaming discourse more generally as players articulate their desires and experiences using this recognized vocabulary. For example, players on game company message boards regularly (and, again recursively) discuss products using a technical and critical framing gleaned from a now decades-old set of media analysis discourses. In this way, players learn to speak their desires through a codified vocabulary through which they can legitimate not only their interest in games but themselves as gamers.

Some of the curation and cultivation of gaming’s critical vocabulary has been deliberate, as in the case of *Critical Distance*. Launched in 2009, *Critical Distance* curates computer game writing and criti-

cism through features such as “This Week in Videogame Blogging” and “This Month in Let’s Plays.” Featured content of the website includes pieces from established news and information outlets such as *Kotaku* and *Al Jazeera* alongside independently produced material ranging from comics to blog posts. According to the *Critical Distance* Mission Statement:

Back in 2009, Critical Distance was founded to answer the question: “Where is all the good writing about games?”

Now in our sixth year of operation, we’ve seen the proliferation of thoughtful, incisive criticism, commentary and analysis across dozens of sites and publications. However, our goal remains the same: to bring together and highlight the most interesting, provocative and robust writing, video and discussion on games from across the web. In addition to providing our readers with a consistent level of quality and critical insight, we want Critical Distance to be as inclusive as possible, to accommodate as many different perspectives and unique voices as we can. It’s our belief that a diverse pool of writers and thinkers produces a much more interesting conversation than the alternative.

At our heart, Critical Distance is not here to create a canon of “best” works.

Instead, we want to facilitate dialogue. (Critical Distance, 2015 , para. #1)

While presenting a diversity of content, the site’s curatorial efforts still point toward a shared, public understanding of what it means to “keep up” with games writing, and the pieces highlighted in *Critical Distance* often extend ongoing discussions.

For example, in a “Blogs of the Round Table” post from April 2015, Mark Filipowich highlights a series of posts that question the utility or purpose of people in games, linking to Ian Bogost’s deliberate provocation, “Your Games Are Better Without Characters” (Bogost, 2015) and presenting John Osborne’s “Video Games without Characters” (Osborne, 2015) as a counterpoint. Rather than homing in on this particular debate, however, Filipowich includes a handful of pieces from other writers, both well established and unknown (Filipowich, 2015). While some of these pieces—Bogost’s and Osborne’s, most notably—were in deliberate conversation, others were related only in that they addressed related issues. By placing them in a shared context, Filipowich invites a cross-publication discussion about shared issues that highlights a diversity of perspectives. In this way, *Critical Distance* is engaged in engineering community discourse, not by controlling it but by making it visible and inviting further discussion.

Discussion of games, of course, takes place across a wide range of venues. Children discuss video games on the playground, co-workers talk about games around the proverbial water cooler, and scholars analyze them in publications and conference talks. Social media, including platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as official channels such as corporation-sponsored message boards, are an important arena for this kind of discourse, and their significance at least in part accounts for the increasing visibility of, for example, community managers in the game industry. The effort to frame discussion in venues such as *Critical Distance* is an extension of a broadly diffuse process that contributes to, among other socio-cultural dynamics, enmeshment in apportioned commodity fetishism. This discussion about games, as diffuse as it is, contributes to a shared vocabulary of games, a mutuality that, as with the mechanism of recursion, reinforces the general perception that commodity fetishism is minimized (rather than amplified) around games.

One particularly impactful instance of this phenomenon was initiated in 2002, when Mark J.P. Wolf carefully laid out a number of game genres in *The Medium of the Video Game*. Today, it is common for gamers—even casual gamers—to demonstrate a fairly subtle knowledge of genre distinctions even in informal settings. In one discussion thread concerning the Big Fish Games release *Antique Road Trip: American Dreamin'* (Boomzap Entertainment, 2013), for instance, players with usernames such as “caseymom” and “sleep lady” pick apart gameplay, praising, for example, the integration of minigames while singling out the game’s music as inferior to the audio incorporated into earlier games in the series. This kind of specific, pointed critique is made possible because of a growing shared vocabulary of games criticism that crosses boundaries between professional Game Studies scholars and others who do the critical work of Game Studies as journalists, bloggers, and fans. This shared vocabulary, in turn, has become foundational to the work of Game Studies at every level; it is, to return to Jürgen Link’s helpful designation discussed earlier, a special discourse, but one decreasingly rarified as it moves out of the academy and into use by gamers across a broad cultural spectrum and who are interested in engaging in critical discussions about games. Paradoxically, these emergent critical discussions fracture some ideological framings that are operative among games, their makers, and consumers, even as they temper others. Perhaps the most pointed of such fractured framings is the one that most directly shapes the industry’s troublesome labor relations.

INSTITUTIONALIZATION

Thus far, we have shown from a variety of perspectives how the phenomenon of apportioned commodity fetishism works within the context of video game production and consumption. We have done this primarily by analyzing the game industry’s role in creating and maintaining the fetish aspect of its primary vendible, but we have also gestured toward the fact that the field of Game Studies plays a role in masking the labor relations embedded within games as commodities. In fact, this role is highly significant, routinely elaborating on—typically in modest detail—the work that goes on in the game industry. Like any other academic field, Game Studies embodies a larger sociopolitical desire to describe, measure, quantify, and ultimately discipline its subjects.

As suggested earlier, Game Studies is a lexicographical and ontological project. Working through definitions, genres, canons, discourse, and many other apparatuses (critical and otherwise), it attempts to “fix”—that is, limit—the free play of otherwise fraught terms such as “games,” “gamers,” “rules,” “story,” and, of course, “play.” Game Studies works to establish the rules and police the boundaries of what is arguably the larger enterprise of making meaning from an otherwise impossible subject: the complicated and increasingly decentralized modes of production that intersect with the broader game ecosystem. In so doing, Game Studies produces and maintains its own magic circle of sorts: a consensual fantasy defined in dialog with a presumably larger, external reality, yet insulated from this reality via an assemblage of rituals, fictions, and other chicaneries that is as complex as it is carnivalesque.

This preoccupation with definition and difference is evident in some of the earliest works of Game Studies—attempts on the part of ludologists such as Espen Aarseth (2004) and Markku Eskelinen (2004) to establish Game Studies as a discipline in its own right. Imaging the field as “virgin soil, ready to be plotted and plowed by the machineries of cultural and textual studies” (Aarseth, 2004, p. 45), they invoked and ritually exorcised the specter of “scholarly tribes” (Eskelinen, 2004, p. 36) of narratologists who, trained in literary and film studies, were eager to colonize video games as the latest front in

a grander project of cultural reform. But what the ludologists produced was in some ways more of the same. Working through rigid definitions of terms such as “simulation,” “time,” and “order,” they produced a version of Game Studies that, in its games-as-games emphasis, was unfortunately as hegemonic and institutionalized as that which they had hoped to vanquish. Much of the same can be said of Eric Zimmerman’s (2004) aptly titled essay, “Narrative, Interactivity, Play, and Games: Four Naughty Concepts in Need of Discipline.” In it, Zimmerman argues that the key to achieving a middle ground between the otherwise binary extremes of narratology and ludology is “some good old-fashioned discipline” (p. 154). “[T]his essay,” he writes, “is about identifying a desperate need for discipline and the delivery of that discipline to its well-deserved targets” (p. 154).

Unsurprisingly given its academic welcome (tepid though it may sometimes be), Game Studies scholarship continues to emphasize difference, definition, and discipline. Consider Ian Bogost’s (2007) work on procedurality, or Miguel Sicart’s (2011) response, “Against Procedurality.” In an attempt to formulate ruling principles, both scholars distill games to what Kenneth Burke (1969) would describe as God-terms—either rules or play—around which almost every other aspect of the medium is subordinated. As a result, they diminish what L. S. Vygotsky (1966) understands as the fundamentally dialectical relationship among play, games, and rules. For Vygotsky, the rules of a game are the outward manifestations of an imaginary situation that is constructed around unsatisfied desires (and vice versa). As he explains, “every game with rules contains an imaginary situation in a concealed form. The development from an overt imaginary situation and covert rules to games with overt rules and a covert imaginary situation outlines the evolution of children’s play from one pole to the other” (Vygotsky, 1966, np.). More significantly, the antithetical God-terms that Bogost and Sicart privilege function to define the outer limits, the extremes of the arena within which the quotidian discourse of Game Studies plays out. As with the so-called ludology and narratology debates, the result is something like what Bruno Latour (1993) understands as a “Middle Kingdom” (p. 48) in that everything of significance takes place in the middle between binary positions that, no matter their labels, in one way or another emblemize “purification” (p. 11) and “hybridization” (p. 41), respectively.

Importantly, the goal of disciplining Game Studies is to provide gamers, designers, and the scores of other denizens of the game ecosystem with a common framework through and against which to understand and discuss video games—and their attendant cultural and industrial para-phenomena—critically. This is a crucial and to some degree unavoidable undertaking. However, it is also and inevitably mystifying and repressive in the sense that what is at stake is not simply a question of what video games mean, how they make meaning, or even how they work. What is at stake is the question of how people should construct themselves as productive subjects, both in relationship to games themselves, and in relationship to the larger decentralized networks of late-capitalist production within which video games are ensconced.

Whether Game Studies succeeds in this project—and perhaps to the extent to which it does not and cannot succeed—it reinforces a more subtle and pernicious message: that institutionalism is inescapable. It is a prerequisite to and a consequence of any activity, no matter how productive or unproductive, and one must therefore construct oneself accordingly. It does not matter if one is a good gamer, a bad gamer, or a middling one. In order to exist as any or all of these things, gamers (and game scholars for that matter) must imagine (and thereby fantasize and police) themselves in the image of the institution as it is ritualized and disciplined through the spectacle of Game Studies and other political and cultural endeavors through which knowledge and desire are universalized and commodified as critical praxis.

Apportioned commodity fetishism—with its filter tuned to see just enough of the labor machinery driving the game industry that one can perform (but not actually possess) expertise—is thus central to

the process by which Game Studies transforms players and scholars alike. As noted earlier, there is a fundamentally recursive quality about this process, a driver that rewards—institutionally and personally—such self-policing. We close this chapter with a set of examinations that are now perfectly positioned to extend an analysis of self-policing's transformative role in the gamer/Game Studies configuration, particularly as it establishes how the discursive triangle formed by the academy, industry, and consumer is able to depend so heavily on what seem to be acceptable levels of ignorance.

SYSTEMS OF SELF-EFFECTIVENESS

“Ignorance” is typically not a term used to describe gamers, except perhaps as a way to mark the liminal stage prior to their understanding of how a game's rules, narrative, interface, and so on are working. Such liminal ignorance is usually transitory, and would better be characterized as anabatic awareness rather than ignorance. Indeed, almost everything about video games is designed to advance players from a state of not knowing to knowing, and to function as experiential spaces of self-effectiveness, that is, spaces where players receive direct responses to their actions and thus discern and adapt their performance within the system. This experience requires an appropriation of technical and symbolic systems, to be sure, but it is also a point of entry into a complex discursive system of self-effectiveness moderated by intrinsic and extrinsic rules, protocols, and patterns. In the context of a discussion of apportioned commodity fetishism, the examination of self-efficacy offers a helpful explanation for why gamers willingly accept their ignorance of industrial labor relations, even as they voraciously consume most other types of game-related information.

The concept of “perceived self-efficacy” can be traced to the work of psychologist Albert Bandura (1977). He describes it as a phenomenon in which the subject looks to itself as the impetus for a solved task or an effected performance rather than to external circumstances, other people, chance, luck, and/or other uncontrollable factors. The concept of self-efficacy or its anticipation is often seen as an anthropological constant—humans are always making assessments about whether or not they can accomplish various tasks—but it is relevant beyond anthropological or psychological contexts, particularly when dealing with questions of subjectivity and agency.

In the face of neoliberal (Foucault, 2010), self-control oriented (Deleuze, 1993), or entrepreneurial (Bröckling, 2007) societal structures, self-efficacy may not seem like a meaningful or politically suitable term for clarifying agency. In the context of digital cultures, however, and especially gaming culture, the ambivalence of self-efficacy is very useful.¹¹ Video games produce a strong concept of rapidly reciprocated *action*: interface inputs are articulated to system outputs with decidedly short couplings. When a gamer clicks at just right the moment using just the right vector, the marauding monster drops dead; mission accomplished (e.g., *Neverwinter Nights* [BioWare, 2002]). Push a button and the avatar jumps. Dance around and your moves are scored (e.g., *Dance Dance Revolution* [Konami, 1998]). Swing a virtual 9-iron and you are on the green (e.g., *Lee Trevino's Fighting Golf* [SNK, 1988]). This is a far cry from less ludic computer usage, wherein a given action is answered by a digital system designed to provide users with an immediate experience of *efficiency*, less “I'm really acing this level” and more “I'm really being productive.”¹² In contrast to the gameplay examples above, when one clicks in a Google Spreadsheet, the software simply enters a state in which it can accept a number as part of a perpetually unfolding work task: doing taxes, tracking budgets, monitoring sensor data, and so on. Gilles Deleuze, in his 1993 work on societies of control, observes that “In the disciplinary societies one was always starting

again...while in the societies of control one is never finished with anything” (p. 5); games discipline both players and play, to be sure, but almost always within the context of control societies.

It is helpful here to think of Ralf Adelman and Hartmut Winkler’s (2014) extension of Norbert Elias’s (1939) civilization theory and imagine the “short chains of action” of the video game as opposed to the infinitely unfolding chains of modernity. They point out that a complex labor environment, marked by specialization and differentiation, distances subjects (through time and space) from moments of fulfillment (i.e., task performance) and the performance of their own efficacy. The video game is a compensational system, where the (post)modern alienated subject reconciles with a world of self-inefficacy. In this way, the experience of self-efficacy in video games (“I can do this”) represents a kind of emancipation, a place where gamers can engage a comprehensible and prescribed system and have moderate confidence that they can effect change within it.

Such emancipation can quite feel empowering.¹³ Ulrich Bröckling (2007) has examined the close relationship between self-empowerment and the experience of self-efficacy. In both processes, he observes, there is an externally motivated steering effect which is then internalized by the subject. In certain cases, this external governing effect may be rendered invisible when internalized, then confused for intrinsic self-indicated drivers of intention. In the context of video games, for example, this process may well be operative when gamers justify volunteering to test unreleased games with the rationale that their free labor will help produce the kinds of quality games they like to play. The player converts the company’s need (external) into a self-benefit (internal), and in the process forges a link that both contributes to the production of—and creates a defensive shield around—a marketable commodity.

A good example of this curious reconciliation can be found in business games and economic development simulations. Such titles are characterized by a “dual control principle”: on the one hand, the control requirements of the simulated economic processes and causal relationships are carried out by the regulatory and rule-governed decision action of the game; on the other hand, there is the self-regulation of the playing subject who, by taking over action roles and positioning, is internalizing specific actions and ways of thinking. In this way, the video game becomes a covert learning environment. Similar to other neoliberal control techniques (such as personal empowerment rhetorics and mediation), such environments have to be positioned in an ambivalent (or dialectical) relationship between self-empowerment and self-government.¹⁴ When they are, subjects (e.g., gamers) experience action as autonomously motivated. Seeing self-efficacy as a kind of ideological hub, then, shows how game action simultaneously reconciles the gamer to the industry’s labor-related discourse (e.g., that working in the industry is stressful but worth it) and deters gamers from avenues of inquiry that would undermine their own agential power.

In some of the original psychological work on perceived self-efficacy, this sort of efficient circularity—a high perceived self-efficacy leads to high demands on the self, which then motivates seeking out more demanding, difficult challenges—was noted and described as a “high performance cycle” (Locke & Latham, 1990). Such a cycle is not only useful for exploring recent trends like gamification, but also goes a considerable way toward explaining why apportioned commodity fetishism works so well in the context of video games.¹⁵ Between the rapid response systems that drive games themselves, and the highly competitive industry out of which they emerge, the epistemological optimization of the gamer is completely rational. For a gamer to know not just that developers exist but that they work in certain ways—that they deal with certain kinds of technical, workplace, and marketplace constraints—is for that gamer to have inside knowledge of a game, a more *efficient* repertoire of possibilities from which to choose in order to progress. For developers, being able to count on gamers to have certain kinds of industrial knowledge diminishes the onus on them to design systems capable of responding to any kind

of input, which is to say, it allows them to design more efficient systems. More efficient systems make for more efficient experiences that make for more efficient players who want more efficient systems in which to play. In this way, apportioned commodity fetishism helps drive the industry (which here includes gamers themselves) into a high performance cycle, first by masking off most details that are unconnected to in-game engagement, and second by carefully selecting extra-ludic details aimed not at producing a more efficient gamer (e.g., tight level design) but rather a more efficient consumer (e.g., brand loyalty).

The limit to these efficiencies precisely demarcates apportioned commodity fetishism. Expose the player to too-comprehensive an understanding of the industry's labor relations and she is bogged down (and potentially repulsed by) such practices; too little and the gamer's affinity for the company, its star developers, and its products are diminished.¹⁶ Critical to identifying how Game Studies transforms gamers, then, is an understanding of how this academic field helps drive—particularly through one-dimensional industrial analyses—the epistemological optimization of gamers by deploying education as a mechanism to increase perceived self-efficacy. In the next section, we document a curious reaction formation to this process, one in which Game Studies produces not just certain kinds of gamers but certain kinds of games.

THEORY AS ANTI-THEORY

It should be clear by now how, in a variety of ways, Game Studies not only changes players' understandings of games, it also precedes and conditions their cognitive and affective responses through a cause-effect reversal. Instead of commentary, analysis, or caution, Game Studies—like most media criticism—often serves to produce its critical subjects and how they are engaged, especially through their depictions of race, class, gender, sex, and violence. From its earliest days (e.g., Provenzo, 1991; Griffiths, 1999), studies have critically (which is not to say correctly) documented popular and academic concern over such representations in video games. Video game genres, for example, serve not only to identify particular productions for the purpose of marketing and sales, they also have become some of the discipline's primary analytical categories. In this way, cultural critique maps onto and shapes expectations about genre and game alike, and the effects of this relationship can be seen most pointedly when the institutional study and criticism of games occasion the very responses they wish to avoid. This reactive phenomenon has grown increasingly common as Game Studies has gained a more robust institutional foothold in the academy and society. From *Grand Theft Auto* (DMA Design, 1997), *Duke Nukem* (Apogee Software, 1991) and *Gears of War* (Epic Games, 2006), to the *Rayman* series (Ubisoft Montpellier, 1995-2013)—especially through its various *Raving Rabbids* spinoffs (Ubisoft Montpellier/Ubisoft Motion Pictures, 2006-2014)—video games now anticipate, include, and respond to the study of games in and through their own visual, auditory, and programming codes.

In the interactive television show/game *Rabbids Invasion* (Ubisoft Motion Pictures, 2013-present), for instance, the show/game's instructions form a series of commentaries and responses aimed at the perceptions and criticisms of the *Rabbids* video games found in the popular press. The game portion of *Rabbids Invasion* is designed to work with either the Microsoft Kinect or the PlayStation Move, requiring players to perform specific corporeal motions and activities since, as the hardware vendors suggest, the player's body is the controller. The *Raving Rabbids* games are rife with running jokes and gags, and the instructions are no different. In them, an octogenarian woman appears on screen, offers an explanation of each level's objective, and demonstrates the necessary moves players must perform. In instances

requiring full body movement and not just posing, she comments on the action and the player's involvement. For example, she implores players to "stand up" and to "be fit" (while doing chin-ups as she talks).

Here, the message is twofold: first, both the on-screen activity and the character on the screen relate to the oft repeated notion that in addition to their antisocial content and effects, video games contribute to the obesity of children through a lack of actual exercise (cf. Miller, 2006); second, the presence of the stereotypical "blue haired old lady" presents a comment on the definition of "gamer" insofar as the almost universal presumption is that games attract and affect only young people. Not infrequently, game scholars themselves invoke and (re)inscribe the construction of such stereotypes and clichés about gamers—the categorical diversity of which was discussed earlier—lending an academic heft to them that then accords with pop culture's too often determinist paradigms. When placed in the cartoonish atmosphere of the *Raving Rabbids* world, complete with toilet plunger arrows and assorted slapstick paraphernalia, this phenomena begs the question of how seriously any of these charges—or any of these games—can be taken.

In cases like this, then, Game Studies plays a role in shaping the cultural discourse surrounding games generally, which then leads some developers to respond, not through the press but through the game medium itself. Such a blurred boundary between the fictive game world and the people who created it—blurred because the diegesis is, at least to experienced gamers, clearly tainted by extra-diegetic discursive incursions (i.e., academic research and journalism)—exacerbates the apportioned commodity fetishism of games by using games as a medium for reminding gamers that real people are responsible for the product they are playing with. Yet true to the superficiality of apportioned commodity fetishism's indexical capacity, such diegetic play only serves to further cement the stereotype of developers themselves, namely, as creative apologists for the medium that is their bread and butter. As gamers are tickled with inside jokes and meta-commentary through the course of a game, in other words, they are simultaneously being congratulated for their expertise and being constructed as sufficiently semi-knowledgeable subjects.

Such self-referential work has been undertaken in innumerable games in virtually every genre, from the *The Secret of Monkey Island* (LucasFilm Games, 1990) and *Portal* (Valve, 2007), to *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004), *Psychonauts* (Double Fine Productions, 2005), and *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007). Two game series, however, have blurred the diegetic boundaries most instructively: the *Duke Nukem* and *Grand Theft Auto* franchises. The influential *Duke Nukem* series, initiated with *Duke Nukem* (Apogee Software, 1991), routinely mocks itself and its genre (first-person shooter) through its cartoonish style and its famously controversial violent and sexual content. In addition to their animated imagery, the *Duke Nukem* games draw heavily on other popular cultural productions for themes and, most notably, the eponymous character's frequent droll and self-congratulatory remarks. A quick scan of the Wikiquote (Duke Nukem, n.d.) listing of Duke's wellknown lines indicates his—or rather, the games' designers—preference for quoting well known and/or catchy statements from action and cult films. As much as Duke the character is designed to resonate as the ultimate mediated masculine figure—as do the prevailing criticisms of the character—his plethora of catch-phrases and taglines prove him to be a shameless regurgitator. Moreover, the fact that the character borrows so unapologetically from *Die Hard* (Gordon, Silver & McTiernan, 1988), *The Terminator* (Hurd & Cameron, 1984), and other action staples makes Duke part of the joke, adding to the perceived joke on his detractors. The boldest statement the *Duke Nukem* series makes is that film and television now constitute the lingua franca of the generations that produced and consumed Duke.

These various threads come together most prominently in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Almost from the beginning, the series was designed to include replies to critics both real and imagined. The in-game radio in several installments tells as much: a series of commercials tout the “Degenatron” video game system in which young minds are destroyed by the addictive power of games such as *Defender of the Faith* and *Penetrator*. These messages are reinforced in and through a talk-radio program featuring a reactionary mother who blames the Degenatron for corrupting her children while being oblivious to her own bad, absentee parenting. The *Grand Theft Auto* series is an equal opportunity offender since it also features rightwing conspiracy theorists who suggest that games include subliminal messages to warp children’s minds.

No other franchise has received more critical attention, both from scholarly and popular sources, for its content. Yet, as Steven Poole explains in an article for *The Guardian* magazine (2012), this was all part of an orchestrated campaign developed by infamous media strategist Max Clifford, who hoped to increase the games’ publicity through their notoriety. Clifford not only responded to criticism, he planned for it and helped the games’ designers build their franchise around it. In this regard, the critical common-places of violence and sex(ism) become both rationale and outcome: the study of games produces games.

Ultimately, criticizing games, particularly for their violent and/or sexist content, elicits games that offer metacommentary on their role and contribution to the cultural circuit. At the same time, they establish a seemingly intimate link between the sides of labor and consumer—intimate because inside jokes and metacommentary are only recognizable as such by those privy to the industry’s secrets. This process essentially interpellates gamers into a pro-industry (rather than pro-labor) subject position: “Hey gamer! Isn’t it fun that we’re all on the same page about the high strung and reactionary critics of video game violence, racism, and sexism?” This alliance forged, no deeper understanding need be pursued by the gamer; the game exists, not discreet unto itself, but rather conjured by developers who purportedly have gamers’ best interests at heart, even as these developers are assailed by so-called knee-jerk media watchdogs and unsophisticated conservative pundits who clearly do not understand the postmodern condition. This is the manufacture and maintenance of apportioned commodity fetishism, humorously packaged, in one of the most influential video game series of the industry’s 50-year history. In our concluding section, we wrap up our examination of apportioned commodity fetishism by looking squarely at the process of commodification itself, asking in the process what it is about capitalist modes of material production that so readily facilitate the conjunction of desire and ignorance.

COMMODIFICATION

Like a number of other game scholars (e.g., Kerr, 2006; Zackariasson & Wilson, 2012), in this chapter we have turned our attention specifically to the production of games (including their ideological production) and to the consequences of that production and consumption on gamers, the industry, and cultural trends generally. Thinking of games not just as sites of play or as purveyors of narrative but as actively produced artifacts raises a host of issues: that which is produced consumes resources; that which is produced by others represents the decisions and ideological priorities of others; and most pointedly for this volume, that which is produced changes those who consume it. This material turn moves Game Studies from strictly cultural concerns toward the political and economic arena, from games qua games to media commodities that increasingly rely on the productive power of players for their value. Predictably, as consumers increasingly participate in the production of the very commodities they purchase—for

example, gamers volunteering their labor to test pre-releases of forthcoming titles—the necessity for establishing mechanisms that will mask the inner workings of the industry become increasingly necessary, including barriers like apportioned commodity fetishism.

One of the major challenges in understanding any media artifact, therefore, is moving beyond the relatively simplistic notion of perceived use—and as such, use value—to include what was required and ignored in the artifact's production, as well as the ways the artifact functions within wider circles of meaning-making. Often, games are seen primarily in terms of player experience. Considering games from the perspective of production, however, can also be immensely illuminating from a critical standpoint, as can (as we have mainly tried to do here) thinking about the dialectic that exists among producers, consumers, and the political-economic context within which the exchange of goods and experiences alike take place. This latter approach not only yields useful critical concepts such as apportioned commodity fetishism, but also raises questions about, for instance, how it is that video games can facilitate social inclusion even though their production depends on exclusionary practices, or how calculations of value might be developed that offer critical alternatives to conventional pricing methods, cost/benefit (i.e., price/play time) ratios, and the monetization of pleasure. Indeed, discussions of gamification and the rise of the Serious Games movement emphasize an implicit economic value that can be extracted from gameplay, irrespective of questions of pleasure. While all too often gamers—and as we illustrate above, some developers—resort to the old canard that games are “just entertainment,” Game Studies has provided considerable complication to how games mean, demonstrating that the focus on pleasure and entertainment is a fiction that masks a wide variety of social and economic relations.

Nonetheless, many of today's games (digital or otherwise) are purchased, rather than passed down through rituals of lore sharing and community building as they once might have been. As such, they emerge from an industrial context as commodities designed to be sold. This is true even for most independent and serious games, which are positioned as distinctly different from mainstream offerings but in fact still carry the same need to be profitable—directly through revenue streams or indirectly through cultural capital of some sort—for the developer. Seen this way, Huizinga's magic circle entails not just a price of admission but also an implicit set of rules related to commerce. And like all commerce, the exchanges involved carry different consequences according to circumstance, a point well illustrated by Nina Huntemann and Ben Aslinger's recent (2013) anthology which documents how gaming varies considerably from one locale to another for players and producers alike. Moreover, as Nick Dyer-Witford and Greig De Peuter (2006) have pointed out, the resources used to produce games are derived at significant cost and consequence for laborers and the environment, a terrifically important register of industrial comprehension; yet one that most gamers are likely to comfortably situate behind the protective facade of apportioned commodity fetishism: “I know those issues are there, but that's for the studios [i.e., the company's people] to deal with.”

Similarly, the interactive stories that games present to players have grown up in the palliative shadow of decades of Hollywood focus groups, television audience ratings systems, and other scientific measures of manufactured satisfaction. As Robert Alan Brookey (2010) argues, modern game development owes as much to Hollywood production as to the computer and toy industries. For reasons like this, it can hardly be surprising when gamers concurrently complain about a lack of originality among the industry's latest offerings even as they line up to purchase the sequel to the game they bought last year: a blockbuster is a blockbuster, ubiquitous and hard to ignore regardless of the medium. And as noted earlier, like Hollywood films, the artistic nature of games has become less a goal than a defense against unwelcome criticism, even as more direct economic strategies such as region locking and localization

have become the norm—strategies that, in part, are designed to curtail bottom-line reducing catastrophes born of globalization’s inevitable culture clashes. Here also, phenomena like apportioned commodity fetishism serve as bulwarks against too much information about labor; again, “tried and true with twist” protects producers and consumers alike, not only from the vicissitudes of the 21st century marketplace, but also from the ethical burden of ensuring that the workers who produce the goods that are purchased are fairly treated and compensated.

By foregrounding the industrial and commodity origins of games and articulating them with the ways in which Game Studies has, in a variety of ways, contributed to how gamers (academic and otherwise) increasingly understand the production contexts of their games, we have meant in this chapter to offer a new framing of the production/consumption dialectic. We have aimed to concurrently celebrate the critical advances the discipline has lead and acknowledge the discipline’s responsibility for the ways in which Game Studies has contributed to gamer transformations that have been more rather than less patient with the industry’s turpitude, from its defense of demeaning imagery to its encouragement of what Kathleen Kuehn and Thomas F. Corrigan (2013) call “hope labor,” i.e., free labor given in hopes of someday gaining fairly compensated employment. Through its reliance on desirability—of game production as the latest alluring form of information labor—the industry has long sought to secure not just legitimacy—one of the most common tropes for explaining why the industry is so retrograde in its labor practices—but also help and protection from the State in its efforts to be profitable rather than innovative, experimental, and inclusive. Apportioned commodity fetishism is but one significant element in this system of interlinked stages and transformations, but it is one that we think warrants continued examination for the good of gamers—players, producers, and scholars alike—everywhere.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Commodification: The process by which use value is transformed into exchange value.

Culture: Communally established ways of seeing and doing, as well as the products of this seeing and doing.

Discipline: The subjugation of desire, agency, or ideology.

Discourse: The materialization of socially structured knowledge.

Game Studies: The interdisciplinary scholarly field whose object of study is the video game complex.

Gamer: A person who plays video games.

Recursion: The act of self reference and modification.

ENDNOTES

¹ For more about the Learning Games Initiative Research Archive, see <http://lgira.mesmernet.org/about>.

² See, for example, the now legendary post by “EA Spouse”: <http://ea-spouse.livejournal.com/274.html>.

³ While our focus in this chapter is principally on the critical political economy of the video game complex, it is important to consider the studio/developer culture side of the equation too. We are very grateful to the anonymous reviewer who reminded us of this analytical opportunity, and though we do not have the space here to conduct such a study, we look forward to doing so in a subsequent project.

⁴ For an authoritative explication of the concept of discourse as practice, see Foucault (1972, p. 46) or (1972, p. 117). For a discussion of this concept and its conflicted relation to discourse as a linguistic concept, see Woolgar (1986).

⁵ In his editorial “Computer Game Studies, Year One,” Espen Aarseth proclaims that “2001 can be seen as the **Year One** of *Computer Game Studies* as an emerging, viable, international, academic field” (2001, emphasis in original).

⁶ Gamer/subjects might dismiss such attention as paternalistic infringement, but that is another question.

⁷ This phenomenon is not unique to the game industry. Film directors, music composers, and athletes routinely serve as metonyms for small armies of labor that go largely unrecognized.

⁸ For a detailed study of Miyamoto, see deWinter (2015).

⁹ <http://gamasutra.com/>; <https://www.idlethumbs.net/>; <http://www.designer-notes.com/>.

¹⁰ <http://thatgamecompany.com/>.

¹¹ For a cogent example of Bandura’s work in Game Studies, see Klimmt & Hartmann (2006).

- ¹² From a media theory perspective, perceived self-efficacy presents a problem in the sense that it suggests that an abstract sensory motor action is also an abstract representation. To be precise, one would need to speak of a “sign-based perceived self-efficacy,” because the homogenized acting (e.g., pressing a button) simulates a broad variety of action-representations (e.g., jumping, diving, shooting, building a house, and so forth).
- ¹³ For more examples of perceived self-efficacy, consult virtually any management skills or self-empowerment book, which routinely draw on self-efficacy research to encourage readers to believe in such self-statements as “I always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough”; “If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want”; and so on. See Schwarzer & Jerusalem (1995) for how such self-efficacy assessment instruments are created.
- ¹⁴ See Bröckling (2007).
- ¹⁵ By “gamification” we mean the use of features common to games—racing, collecting, score keeping, and so on—in non-game contexts.
- ¹⁶ Indeed, pushed to its limit, the isolation of the consumer from understandings of the industry describe the conventional sense of commodity fetishism.