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Understanding Video Games

An Honors Thesis

presented by

Nicholas Cameron Edwards

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College

New London, Connecticut

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Acknowledgments

Although the formal academic creation of this thesis took place in only one semester, the thoughts, discussions, and experiences that made it possible began a long time ago. Lots of people have contributed along the way, but four in particular stand out.

Thanks to my mom, endless kitchen-table debates are reflected in most of the arguments I make in this paper, and endless linguistic bantering is reflected in most of the sentences I write in it. This is also true of just about all of my thinking and writing (though explaining how would require many discursive asides), and nothing could be better for it.

Rather than try to thank my little sister as loquaciously as she deserves, I'm just going to try to enjoy the five years from now until she inevitably shows me up with her own (brilliant) work. Though it probably won't take that long.

With my dad, I'm looking forward to continuing this, and so many other, discussions. I don't know that we'll ever finish any of them, but isn't that the point? On all the best topics, we haven't gotten any finished answers yet, and I can't wait to not-find a whole lot more.

And last, but certainly not least, my academic advisor, Simon Hay, has contributed more than any teacher I've ever had to my intellectual growth; it is a testament to the breadth and insight of this guidance that only a fraction of it is visible in this project.

Abstract

In this thesis, I attempt to offer an introduction to the medium of video games. I begin with the seemingly-simple, but actually quite impossible, task of defining games, drawing upon, but ultimately rejecting, a number of proposed definitions. I then attempt to explain the complicated nature of the medium and its equally complicated relationships to other media in light of Roland Barthes' theory of the Death of the Author, and I conclude that games are fundamentally new and worthwhile. Having made the abstract argument that the medium is capable of producing art, I acknowledge Roger Ebert's point that it has not yet done so, and explore the obstacles preventing game art. Drawing upon the theories of Raph Koster and Jason Rohrer, I propose a revised philosophy of game-making that seeks to unlock art in a new and unique form. I conclude by pointing out the multitude of other questions that I have left unanswered, and with the belief that these questions are worthy of critical attention.

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I’ve been playing computer games literally since before I can remember. I played lots of backyard and community sports, too, and growing up as the son of two college professors, I was naturally also constantly surrounded by books and music and art; but games were there from the beginnng. I grew up alongside the personal computer, so the games I played at the beginning were laughably rudimentary by current standards. Then, even the seemingly-obvious step of just starting the game was complicated by the text-based intricacies of MS-DOS, and many of the games were thinly-veiled flashcard quizzes. Still, the veil was intricate enough to be captivating for a young mind, and even though they were “merely” digital, the rewards for correct answers and critical thinking were incredibly compelling.

Soon I was playing more complex games that were accessible not with text commands, but with a mouse (the now-standard graphical interfaces of both Windows and Mac operating systems were first released around this time). The first of these “real” games was Sid Meier’s Colonization, which, I would later learn, would be the precursor to the famous Civilization series, and whose titular creator is widely considered one of the greatest designers in the medium’s (admittedly short) history. None of that mattered to the young me, though: it was only about playing the game.

Colonization is categorized as a “turn-based strategy game,” a genre that is perhaps most straightforwardly comparable to traditional board games like Risk or Diplomacy (it is fortunate that I can begin with a TBS, since most other game genres cannot be easily analogized at all). As the genre's name suggests, the player and his computer-controlled opponents take *turns* commanding armies, building cities, and generally executing *strategies* in pursuit of national victory; as the title suggests, this particular TBS takes place during the age of imperialism, and specifically seeks to recreate the American War of Independence. Its attention to historical detail was impressive (a trend that continues throughout the Civilization series), and it included a book-length manual packed with contextual information (one of the interesting trends in the development of the games industry is the progressive shrinking of game manuals; more on this later). For an inquisitive young mind already fascinated by the American Revolution, Colonization could have been simply a colonially-themed flashcard quiz and still have been of interest.

But Colonization was so much more than that, as I quickly discovered. The game begins with the player controlling a single merchantman (flying the flag of one of four Home Countries) sailing the Atlantic Ocean as it reaches the New World, and the player's immediate goal is to found, and develop, a successful colony on American shores. Even on "Easiest" difficulty, the obstacles of resource gathering and city management were initially insurmountable, and they were quickly surpassed by the challenges of regional exploration, periodically-hostile Native American tribes, and – above all – the other three European nations competing for control of the New World. When I had finally begun to master the art of peacetime colonial development, I made the alarming discovery that I was expected to then fight, and win, a war with my previously-benevolent European sponsor (complete understanding of principles like liberty and democracy somehow escaped my childhood consciousness).

Now the ongoing, and still daunting, challenges were infinitely compounded by an invading army of Dragoons, a kind of elite gun-toting cavalry unit that still conjures images of inevitable defeat in my mind. When all of my national resources had been occupied with simply building cities and trade routes, and I had perhaps three or four improvised militia units to fight off what certainly seemed like hundreds of cavalrymen, democracy died a rapid and resounding death. As it turned out, the introductory stage that I had finally conquered was, in fact, just that – the preface to the larger challenge of leading an incipient America to glorious freedom.

Eventually – with the help of (supposedly-)timely French intervention, and frequent game resets – I managed to throw off the shackles of unrepresented taxation (a concept I finally began to understand when I realized just how much stronger my military could be if I wasn't sending half of my income back across the ocean), and the first time my best friend and I won the game, it was the sweetest of victories. The game's representation of this was, in retrospect, comically underwhelming –

a ten- or twelve-frame looping animation of a cheering crowd and fireworks – but, in the moment, was the zenith of youthful fulfillment. (And of course we immediately started another game, this time on the next highest difficulty (“Easier”). That, of course, initially ended in disaster, and so the cycle began again.)

Since then, technology has moved on to games with high-resolution 3D graphics, accessed through animated, translucent menus, and I’ve continued to play, exploring new genres and new formats, orchestrating ever-more-complex strategies and overcoming ever-more-sophisticated digital enemies. At the same time, of course, I was also still reading books and doing all of the other things professorial progeny might be expected to do.

Once I went beyond the “Language Arts” of elementary school and began to learn not how to read words, but how to read thoughts and ideas, the act of reading books, predictably, took on new dimensions. Substantial critical analysis was still a long way off, but even in rudimentary form, the possibility of *examining* books, trying to figure out what they were really saying and how they really worked their magic, was simultaneously brand-new and familiar. As a gamer, I had already become accustomed to figuring out how games worked, the rules that governed them, and, most pragmatically, how to get the highest possible score. I couldn’t apply any of these skills directly to literature, but the pattern of deciphering hidden meaning was familiar, so it was simply a question of understanding the (vastly more complex) logical structures of linguistic syntax and structural rhetoric. (In fairness, I wasn’t consciously setting out to do this. I’m applying labels to my thought processes retrospectively, but I think this is what was at work.)

I did find my way to substantive critical analysis, eventually, with the instrumental assistance of talented teachers (and later, professors), brilliant peers, and, most importantly, my parents. Towards the end of high school, and throughout college, I’ve continued to take classes in English and other disciplines that have developed my abilities in scholarly methodologies, and, in light of my continued enjoyment of games, I wanted to turn the critical skills that I’ve learned to apply to novels, films, fine art, and other media to the task of figuring out why games have held my interest for so long.

The chapters that follow attempt to answer that question, and, along the way, explain some important things about how games work and how we can talk about them. First, I attempt to define games, and relate them to other media; second, I try to parse the distinction between a game’s form and its content; and finally, I lay out a strategy for game criticism in light of the unique characteristics of the medium of games. Had the process of figuring out all of that led me to a succinct explanation of games’ appeal, I might have just written that down here and saved us both the time and effort, but in the absence of such insight, a more long-winded exploration will hopefully suffice.

"Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature."[1]

Almost as soon as I set out to uncover the appeal of games, I realized that I first had to articulate a definition of the thing I was trying to understand. My first instinct was to try to understand games using the terms that I had learned to apply to other media, pursuing what I thought would be a logical extension of that kind of scholarly criticism. More precisely, I wanted to use those skills to substantiate my intuition that games represented something fundamentally than all of those other media. After all, my reasoning went, even if the things I do while a game are just digital (both in the sense of "using a computer" and in the sense of "using fingers") manipulations, I'm still *doing* things when I play, things that necessarily and dramatically change the shape of my experience. Books, films, art, these were all things that, as a reader or viewer, I simply *consumed*.

Working out, and trying to articulate, the implications of that thinking, the first stumbling block I encountered was the simple difficulty of coming up with a term that I could use to refer to non-game media collectively and descriptively. The most popular rendition of the distinction I wanted to make seems to be "old media" and "new media." This was problematic, though, for a lot of reasons. Most broadly, "old" and "new" have evaluative connotations that I didn't want to evoke – I didn't have any problem with "old" media, I just thought (and still think) that games are fundamentally different. More specifically, "new media," in particular, is an astonishingly poorly-defined term. Depending on the context, I've seen it used to refer to internet journalism, new varieties of performance art, and any number of other things that have nothing to do with games (and in some cases, are structurally identical to what would otherwise be termed "old" media). The only effective definition of "new media" – i.e., any form of expression enabled by, or involving, computers or other modern technology – is precisely ineffective for any sustained analytical purpose. (“Old media” might be similarly complicated, but its only functional definition seems to be “not-new media,” so instead of being complicatedly-useless, it’s just straightforwardly useless.)

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[1] Barthes, 148.

Trying to come up with my own precise (and meaningfully descriptive) term, I set about figuring out what exactly it was that all of these obviously-different media had in common for my intuition. Novels were the most familiar of these forms, so I started with them. My earliest English classes periodically featured creative writing assignments, and while I remember very little of what I wrote and almost none of the more nuanced instruction I received, one pithy guideline did still come to mind: **when writing stories, the author should remember to “show, don’t tell” the reader what was happening.** The implied and acted-upon corollary was that **critical writing *should tell* the reader directly and concretely what creative writing sought to (indirectly and figuratively) do.** Analysis and creation, as two sides of the writing coin, had correspondingly opposite modes.

Embedded in this conceptual approach to literature, I concluded that the function of the medium in general was quite simple: Author A had an idea, and used literature to get that idea into Reader B’s head (in ways that Critic C can analyze and explain). Convenient, straightforward, and linear. Likewise, convenient and straightforward to apply to other media. Film, I decided, was similarly structured, although its execution was, of course, dramatically different, shaped by the nature of the medium.

Complexity arose, I thought, when applying the same thinking to fine art, or to music. Unlike a novel or a film, a painting or a sculpture doesn’t have a clearly-defined beginning or end, there isn’t a generally agreed-upon point at which a viewer is “done” looking at art. And music, although it has a beginning, middle, and end, isn’t even viewed at all! At first I thought that my attempt to lump all of the “old” media together was simply a mistake, and that I needed to reconsider my initial assumption that it could be done. Then I decided that no, “old” media did still have things in common, and I just had gotten distracted by cosmetic (or, rather, structurally profound, but conceptually irrelevant) differences.

My newly-enlightened idea was that my first instinct was actually correct, and while all these media did differ dramatically in form, their function was the same. They all existed to get an idea – or emotion, or sense experience, or really any **inner "thing"**– from one person's head to another person's, having been **translated** into an intermediary, the medium. Envisioned so simply, I thought, it made perfect sense. All of these media were just variable responses to the basic human need – we *are* "social animals," after all – to **express ourselves**, to communicate. And that was my new term: "old" media really ought to be instead labeled "communicative media." They are all linear, static, passive vehicles whose sole purpose was to replicate in one person's head what happens in another's. With this in mind, I could finally get around to defining games, and explaining why they're different.

Games are an interactive medium. The person experiencing the game is not passively witnessing the content of the game, but actively playing it. Certainly, there are occasional exceptions, like cinematics and explanatory text, that break this pattern, but they are brief and indeed are generally faulted by reviewers as being archaic interruptions to a game's flow (cinematics, for instance, traditionally served to advance a game's narrative in between segments of "actual game," but are now being mostly abandoned, in complicated ways, in favor of "live" story development). As the only interactive medium we have invented so far, games offer a unique mode in which authorial control disappears, the "message" disappears, and consumers are the arbiters of their own individual experiences. Communicative media were to buying a chair what games were to buying lumber and tools, a completed experience as opposed to a toolkit for building an experience.

What I didn't realize was that, even before juxtaposing "communicative media" with games, as I jumped to do, my invented term was already disastrously complicated for literary critics. I had constructed a distinction under which the introduction of games implied the death of authorial influence on media consumers. I phrase it specifically that way because "The Death of the Author" was, unbeknownst to me, already an important critical text, one that had nothing to do with games. Roland Barthes argues that the critical approach in which I had been trained, and the assumptions upon which it was based, are misguided (sections of my previous descriptions rendered in bold were specifically derived from Barthes' critique).

Rather than seeking to convey a concealed meaning, Barthes argues that any text exists independent of an Author, and lacks a single goal. For Barthes, the old mode of criticism assumes that the text is "through more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us" (143), that "the Author ... is always conceived of as the past of his own book ... in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (145). Such thinking "suits criticism very well ... allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author ... beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic" (147). Instead, Barthes argues, we must come to understand that "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God)" (146), and that "once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile" (147).

The implications of this approach for my term are clearly destructive: what I had understood as, and chosen to label, "communicative media" are, for Barthes, nothing like that. "Writing [and by logical extension, anything else that might otherwise be labeled "communicative media"] is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin," and "as soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs" (142). Now texts are subject to as many interpretations and experiences as they have readers, because the "one place where [a collection of experiential influences and contextual cues is] focused ... is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (148).

Interestingly, the interactivity of Barthes' reconstructed conception of literature seems to parallel, in some ways, the interactivity that I had used to set games apart. The reader is the “one place” where the “multiplicity” of interpretive perspectives “is focused,” just as the player is one place where a game’s multiplicity of undecided choices become decided past experiences. The game, like a Barthian text, is a “multidimensional [literally, for games] space in which a variety of writings, none of them original [more on how this applies to games later], blend and clash” (146). For Barthes’ evolution of literary criticism, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148), whereas for my brand-new instantiation of game criticism, it is the birth of the *player* that must be at the cost of the death of the Author.

Under this new mode of thinking, not only was my original term false, but so was my original distinction! Not only are “communicative” media not communicative, but they also could be seen to operate in forms structurally comparable to games. In the apparent absence of a consensus even within the long-established creative and critical traditions of “old” media about what *they* are, a reliable comparison between “old” and “new” seems impossible.

Throughout this section, I've implied that the “texts” described in “Death of the Author” are exclusively textual works, for the sake of expediency and since I am most familiar with literature. I've rendered games and “old media” as opposites in order to highlight the differences that are important to me, and literature is an intuitive proxy for all “old media.” Doing so sells short the significance of Barthes' work, though, because the same principles have been applied to many other forms of art; contemporary art is rich with pieces that deeply complicate both my initial hypothesis and the more nuanced understanding that Barthes facilitates.

The idea of inescapable interactivity – that the perspective of the audience of any work of art is necessarily implicated in its experience – has influenced countless artists. Affiliated with Dada, Fluxus, and other movements, they have created works that challenge precisely the narrow interpretation of art with which I began this project. Their works either directly demand or implicitly invite the participation of viewers, and are often inter-active in a very inter-personal sense. Further complicating any distinction is the frequency with which “intermedia” pieces employ technology. My instinctual response was to define games as being unique precisely because they were interactive and dependent on technology, but much of contemporary art richly refutes this definition.

I still want to hold on, though, to the fundamental distinction between the interactivity of games and any other form of interactivity in art. Although these other artists have certainly produced works that are inextricably linked to their audiences, the interactivity of games maintains two importantly-distinct traits. First, games react to player input in predictable and orderly ways: game developers seek to create an experience, or a category of experiences, for all of their players, in contrast to those contemporary artists whose work is defined in negative terms, in opposition to existing standards. Second, and more important, games present each player with the same starting point. Almost immediately, individual experiences begin to diverge, but the tabula rasa from which each experience begins is endlessly, and identically, reproducible. “Old media” like literature and film can be reproducible, and contemporary media can be interactive; only games can be both.

"Even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. ... All play means something."[2]

While I wanted (and still want) to hold on to my original distinction, however, my primary goal wasn't to relate games to other media; doing so was simply a means to the end of figuring out how games are special on their own. So I turned to the task of establishing a definition of games not in the terms supplied by literary critics to explain literature, but in terms meant exclusively for games.

Having never encountered any evidence of scholarly attention to games before beginning to work on this project, I assumed that even when I actively sought it out, there would be little to find. To my (happy) surprise, there have actually been numerous books written about games, but, to my (unsurprised) disappointment, much of what does exist is fragmentary and put forward a coherent incremental analytical discourse. Rather than take for granted any shared starting points and use common assumptions to build new ideas or theories, most every book begins with its own attempt to define games, or set its own rhetorical stage upon which to construct a new medium-wide understanding of everything. Predictably, with so many voices clamoring to be heard, redundancy is frequent, yet, (also predictably) with such a complex subject, there is little consensus. (Admittedly, what I'm writing here, despite acknowledging this problem, would also be a part of it, were it ever to be published.)

That being said, there are some common themes that can inferred from the multitude of definitions that have been proposed. Games are based on conflict; whether it be between two contestants or twenty, depicted in medieval history or conducted in person, or any of the countless other ways games can vary in association, they are all based on a struggle for some kind of dominance. This struggle is always structured around some set of rules; in some cases the rules can be broken, in others they are collectively agreed upon, but always there is a framework of common expectations. This framework, and the activities within it, are artificial; games are not naturally derived, even when they are inspired by, or performed in, nature. Finally, games are quantifiable; sometimes this means that the game ends with a single comprehensive scoreboard, in other cases it is more abstract, but games are always numerically-structured.

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[2] Huizinga, 1.

Out of all of these traits, only the last two actually ring universally true, and even then, only distantly. Because games are delivered on a digital medium, on their most basic structure level, they are binary creations, 1’s and 0’s, the presence or absence of an electrical current. Anything represented through them must necessarily be rendered in algorithms and numerical values. But the complexity of these numbers can certainly approximate chaos, and this is not what “quantifiable” is attempting to describe. Similarly, while games, human creations, *are* obviously artificial, some games exist specifically to recreate reality as directly and completely as possible. They remain artificial, but they are not the same artificial as games that invent alternate realities or ignore reality altogether. Games that aren’t based on conflict abound – cooperative gaming, in fact, is one of the currently-popular marketing points to which publishers seek to cater – and, even ignoring games that abandon “traditional” game rules, the (often conscious, intentional) susceptibility of the medium to cheating means that any declaration of rules is immediately complicated.

More importantly, though, none of these distinctions point clearly to why games are interesting or important. At best they can serve as rhetorical foils within a discourse that takes the medium’s validity for granted. I wanted to find a definition that effectively captured not just (or simply 'not') the structure of the game, but its significance. Some of the best of these came, naturally, from game designers.

The most clinical is that offered by Chris Crawford, one of the first people to write at any length, or with any authority, about the theory and practice of game-making. He defined a game as “an artifice for providing the psychological experiences of conflict and danger while excluding their physical realizations" (Salen et al, 77). Like one of the common themes amongst the more pragmatic definitions, he fixates on the importance of conflict, but for him, it is couched in experiential terms, and accurately reflects the character and potential of the medium. However, although the definition is structurally sound, "conflict and danger" preclude a multitude of other possible experiences. Crawford's definition, therefore, is certainly productive, albeit incomplete. Bernard Suits offers a similarly-oriented definition that highlights a different, but equally important, aspect of the experience of games. For Suits, "playing a game is the voluntary effort to overcome obstacles" (Salen et al, 76). (Already, this definition is one of "play" rather "game," but it is a useful juxtaposition.) Conflict is softened here to struggle, but the important aspect is the inclusion of "voluntary:" agency must rest with the player. Additionally, this definition encompasses the possibility of puzzle- and problem-solving (though this is itself complicated, as I explain later).

Fittingly for this paper, the most evocative definition of games that I have yet found comes from the creator of Colonization, Sid Meier. He defines games as "a series of meaningful choices" (Koster 14). Such a broad definition can obviously also encompass any number of non-game activities, yet highlights three of the most important traits of games collectively, as I see them. Choice, holding on to my pre-Barthes version of games as a uniquely interactive medium, is what sets a player apart from a reader or a viewer. Of course, if the player's choices lack any meaning, then the medium lacks any utility. And one of the most important sources of that meaning is the consequences of a player's choice: a "series" of choices is where this becomes visible. Yet even this wildly-broad definition remains subject to the same rhetorical useful-flaw as the superficially arbitrary definitions I dismissed earlier. Choice in a game manifests in complex ways (more on that later), and there is always the question of who decides what is "meaningful," and for whom.

Stretching all the way back to my original intuitive distinction between games and non-games, the only thing these definitions and explanations have in common is their shared failure to answer the question, “what is a game?” Each offers a circumlocution of some aspect of games, and taken together, hopefully a working understanding can be inferred. Yet, it seems, games cannot be definitively defined.

All of that being abstractly and headily stated, let’s lay out a few basic facts for the record. When I say “games,” it is shorthand for “computer games,” which are presented on a digital screen and facilitated by a computer (the other common term “video games” implies a game console and a television, but a machine like a PlayStation 3 is just a specialized computer, and TVs and monitors are both video displays; the terms are essentially interchangeable). They are experienced by players, and the player uses one or more controllers (keyboards, mice, gamepads, etc.; physical interfaces attached to, but independent of, the computer; admittedly, even this is complicated – by Microsoft's forthcoming Project NATAL, which further develops the Nintendo Wii motion-sensing model to do away with physical controllers altogether) to “do” gaming.

“If you're not there for the gameplay, why are you playing a game instead of watching a film or reading a book?”[3]

In the preceding two sections, I attempted to encapsulate some of the ways that defining what games are is an incredibly complex task, but I took for granted a quality that, for me, is perhaps more important. In fact, I have always taken for granted that any human medium of expression is capable of including art. Especially within Western culture, it's difficult to argue against this being true of traditional media like painting, literature, and music. Attempting to extend this acceptance to games, though, proves quite complicated.

Roger Ebert sparked a controversy in the gaming community in 2007 with a series of sweeping declarations about video games. Most prominently, he declared that games are “inherently inferior to film and literature,” and that “the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art.” His argument, interestingly, is predicated on precisely the assumption that I originally held about “old” media: “Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control” (Answer Man). Or, more succinctly, “I believe art is created by an artist” (Games vs. Art). Setting aside the Barthian complications to this perspective, Ebert's assessment is obviously accurate. And if his argument were based entirely on his definition of art, the debate would simply be an entirely reasonable, but also entirely unresolvable, ontological question. However, Ebert extends his criticism of games, and his celebration of “art,” far beyond this simple binary. As he argues, “ the real question [about video games versus other media] is, do we as their consumers become more or less complex, thoughtful, insightful, witty, empathetic, intelligent, philosophical (and so on) by experiencing them?” (Games vs. Art). And for Ebert, the answer is clearly “no.”

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[3] Rohrer, Game Design of Art.

Ebert's claims inspired a host of responses from within the games industry and community, most of which sought to prove Ebert wrong by attacking his argument (or his character). (Of the former, that offered by N'Gai Croal of Newsweek is certainly the most effective.) Ignoring the logical and *ad hominem* arguments against Ebert (as I've done here), though, he invites an entirely different form of response, one offered by Jason Rohrer, a writer and self-described "game artist." Rohrer takes Ebert's critique as a call to arms for game designers, saying that "instead of dismissing his position, however, we should tackle it head-on with the explicit goal of proving him wrong," and "present [Ebert] with a game so artful that it makes him eat his hat" (Art).

(As an aside, Rohrer's manifesto also highlights one of the important realities of the current state of games: vigorously though I defend the potential of the medium, games that wholly and straightforwardly exemplify what is great about the medium, for the most part, don't yet exist; as Rohrer more bluntly puts it, "Let's face it, games, in general, suck" (Art). Popular games exist, entertaining games exist, and games that contribute new capabilities to the medium exist. But the technologies and techniques of game development are so new, and are still changing so rapidly that, while a hotly-debated canon of "important" games has begun to take shape, there isn't a generally accepted canon of great, or meaningful, games that are still worth playing for their own sake alongside their more-advanced descendants, or that compare to the pinnacles of other media. Game developers have not yet reached the level of craft-mastery that creators in most other media can claim. Similarly, even literature and film, despite encompassing great works of art, also include vast volumes of trash; the potential of a medium depends not on its worst, or even its average production, but on its best representatives.)

Rohrer's challenge to game designers productively defends the potential of the medium and charts a way forward (and also offers a useful contribution to the ongoing project of defining games). The problem with current games is that their creators are trying to replicate in interactive form what other media, particularly film, do, juxtaposing the proto-[film, literature, etc.] with the actual gameplay, i.e. the activity of the player. Instead of attempting to subsume or surpass other media, games need to embrace what, for Ebert, is the medium's defining flaw: a game's mechanics should be intimately tied to its ideas, “the gameplay, should be [game designers'] primary vehicle for expression” (Art). Games as they are understood currently are categorized by mechanic (e.g. first-person shooter, real-time strategy, etc.), rather than by content, as in film (e.g. drama, comedy, etc.), and this is reflective of creators' backwards approach.

In established media, the tools of each medium are leveraged by their users to contribute to the overall goals of a given piece. In film, cinematography, costume design, script writing, and all of the other specializations that can contribute to the final product do precisely that: they *contribute* to the film, but they don't define it (particularly distinctive achievements in any of these categories may set a given film apart, but even then, the achievement is in addition to, rather than in place of, the nature of that film itself). When films are (generally) categorized and discussed, they aren't categorized based on whether they were shot digitally or on 16-milimeter film, or any other technical variable, but by their content.

In games, the tools of the medium typically come first: a game is designed to be a shooter, and *then* to address certain themes, to the point where game genres aren't genres in the traditional sense of the word. Rather than being sorted by content, theme, or tone, games are sorted simply by their play mechanics, by the category of actions available to the player. This leads to an unfortunate, and unfortunately self-perpetuating, set of mistaken allegiances, and a high barrier to entry for the medium. Each genre of games has adopted a set of conventions particular to the genre, and the player's familiarity with those conventions is assumed. Developers of new games are faulted when they abandon those conventions, and praised when they subtly evolve them, and gamers take for granted that their abilities in one game will translate to similar games. Of course, for those new to the medium and lacking this established base of knowledge, these conventions function not as facilitators, but as obstacles. While the establishment of shared knowledge certainly enables meaningful and interesting developments, the medium as a whole must evolve as an array of expressive tools, not embedded assumptions. Film has structure-bending films like *Memento* or craft-bending films like *The Blair Witch Project*, but they are the exception and not the rule; games should follow suit.

Rohrer echoes this need, concluding his argument by returning to the task of persuading Roger Ebert of the art-potential of games. Demanding player participation as they do, games are the only medium that “places such high hurdles in the way of simple start-to-finish consumption” and “in order to make games that everyone might appreciate as high art, we first need to figure out how to make games that are playable - start-to-finish - by everyone” (Art). Ebert believes that “video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic” (Answer Man). The medium has the potential to be so much more than that, though, and only by embracing its most fundamental characteristics can developers demonstrate this. From design to discussion, both creators and players are still bogged down in learning the grammar of games; only when we move on to the semantics, and rhetoric, can the medium see real progress.

*“How does mapping "jump" to the X button contribute to the overarching themes of a game?”*4

While I do believe it's important to acknowledge that the state of the games medium is profoundly lacking in important ways, and that collective inertia isn't encouraging any rapid change, there certainly are games that offer exciting glimpses of what can be accomplished through an effective marriage of video game medium and, eventually, any content at all.

Described in unsubtle terms, Shadow of the Colossus sounds like a multitude of other generic games: in short, the player must ride around a vast fantasy landscape, encountering a series of the titular Colossi, and killing them. The only character in the game with a name is the player's horse, and the plot is similarly threadbare; judged by the familiar standards of film or other media, there is little to be celebrated. But the game is able to offer an insightful and moving perspective on the natures of loneliness and friendship, because its control scheme, and therefore its gameplay, rather than its “content” is the source of its expressive power.

Games, especially modern games, have developed a deserved reputation for being incredibly complex in rules and controls. Even stereotypically “dumbed-down” console games have numerous conditional and modal control shifts, and these are often applied to more than a dozen buttons and multiple joysticks. Adventure games akin to Shadow of the Colossus in content are often among the simplest to control, though, because often the only actions the game supports are movement- and (simplistic) combat-related. One joystick controls the player's position and two to three buttons control their fighting technique (if that sounds complicated, consider that strategy games and simulations, for instance, can have dozens or even hundreds of individual button commands). One press of a button can execute a digitally-complex attack, and strung together, on-screen combat can become a ballet that belies the simplicity of the player's actions.

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4 Leray, Shadow of the Colossus.

Shadow of the Colossus bucks this trend of disconnection between physical action and digital action. Rather than associating a single button press with a complete action, when the player wants to swing his sword, he must press a button to raise the sword and press it again to land a blow; to grab a ledge or climb, the player must continuously hold down the relevant button. These distinctions may seem arbitrary, but their effect is profound because the result is that there is always a connection between the actions of the player's hands and the actions of the character's hands. And thus, when it comes time to dispatch the Colossi, "killing your enemies is far from automatic or easy – it's a concerted effort and a pre-meditated choice. You have to *want* them to die" (Leray). The violence isn't graphic or gratuitous; more importantly, though, it *matters*. It requires conscious choice and entails the implication of guilt.

In a similarly straightforward comparison, Shadow of the Colossus also treats player travel dramatically differently than other games. Both in single- and multiplayer games, mounts (i.e. horses, cars, any kind of vehicle) are considered to be parts of the character. While riding in or on them, the player's control scheme shifts to a vehicle-specific variation (the existence and the genre-particular nature of this variation are both elements of the shared-knowledge conventions of most games, and thus, again, both an obstacle to new players and an opportunity for superficial innovation). Shadow of the Colossus treats the player's horse, Agro, as an independent entity to be guided, rather than a dependent entity to be subsumed. Once the player has chosen a direction, the game controls Agro's movement and in doing so, the creators rejected the established expectations for mount controls, to the frustration of some veteran players; "common knowledge" is a double-edged sword for both designers and players.

Co-operative play quickly builds an emotional attachment to Agro, and this actual, organically-grown relationship between the player and the horse is where the real beauty of the game can be seen, where loneliness and friendship are explored. Unlike "traditional" games, wherein the controls are simply means to an end (and typically a film-aping narrative end), “the artistic merit of Shadow of the Colossus is *inextricably* linked to its control setup” (Leray). Only through the co-operative play mechanic does the emotional relationship develop, and only through the visceral control scheme does the psychological weight develop. Without relying on the independent activity of Agro, defeating the challenging enemies late in the game would be effectively impossible, and so the game essentially becomes a “one-player co-op campaign” (Leray) (in contrast to the standard understanding of co-operative games as being played simultaneously by two human players).

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, for the most part, is exactly the opposite of this kind of structural sophistication. It is a simple blockbuster first-person shooter with astronomical production values, which on their own dramatically improve it, yet simultaneously reflect its misdirected filmic aspirations. Enormous energy was spent on elaborate scripted sequences and extraordinary graphics that are glamorous and engaging, but not interactive. Games that pursue this philosophy can only asymptotically approach films, without ever exceeding them or truly being games. Modern Warfare epitomizes the player-simple/character-complex disconnect that Shadow of the Colossus fixes. Most of the game is simply the work of very talented craftsmen operating within established genre norms. One sequence, though, oddly and self-referentially achieves a very different version of the formal nuance that Shadow of the Colossus displays.

Around the midpoint of the game, the player is a British SAS soldier attempting to escape from behind enemy lines with a rescued informant. After breaching an important checkpoint, though, the player's perspective shifts to that of an aerial gunner in an AC-130 Spectre tasked with providing fire support to the SAS man the player was previously controlling. AC-130 gunners control their weapons remotely and while viewing their targets on an infrared video screen. Since the game is displayed on a video screen and controlled by a joystick, the experiences are essentially identical (apart from physical presence on board a plane). The verisimilitude is further reinforced by the game's audio, which consists of “gunner and pilot emotionlessly [exchanging] congratulations and confirmation of every enemy taken down, in much the same way…well, in much the same way that gamers congratulate one another during cooperative play” (Burch). Whereas Shadow of the Colossus achieves its gameplay-idea synergy in an abstract sense, Modern Warfare achieves the same thing by depicting something that is itself, by definition, conveniently similar to a video game.

In Shadow of the Colossus, the unity of gameplay and ideas creates an array of profound emotions; in Modern Warfare the opposite is achieved, and this is its brilliance. Recorded video feeds of AC-130 gun cameras have been widely distributed on the internet (see “AC-130 Spectre kicking ass”) and occasionally broadcast on television, and the synchronicity of the two experiences is nearly too close to distinguish between them (see “Call of Duty 4: AC-130 Gunship”). As such, hearing the fictional chatter and seeing the fictional combat, “the player sees the reality of the level, and emotionally reacts to it” (Burch). Modern Warfare uses the emotionally-engaging capacity of the medium to capture an experience that is precisely emotionally detached, and in so doing, “[Modern Warfare developer] [tells us] more about the life of a gunner than all the news stations in the world” (Burch). The rest of the game returns to interactive-cinema fare, but, especially juxtaposed with the content-opposite but structurally-parallel Shadow of the Colossus, Modern Warfare demonstrates the unique expressive strengths of games as a medium.

One of the interesting complications to Rohrer's manifesto is a game that he himself created – Passage, 2007 – and one of the most compelling forms of interactive art I've ever encountered. Rohrer describes it as being intended as a “memento mori” (Latin: “remember you will die;” the length of even the Wikipedia entry on this concept is an index of its complexity and longevity in art historical discourse) game, and a reaction to both his thirtieth birthday and the death of a close friend. The game is entirely unconventional, at least by comparison to contemporary releases. It was made and released for free, its two-dimensional graphics are vintage-1985, and it has just four (keyboard-only) controls.

There is no plot and no multiplayer, and every game of Passage is strictly limited to five minutes of play. Every player's experience of the game is necessarily different, because the game world is randomly generated every time the game begins, and more importantly because the experience of the game is fundamentally constructed in the player's own mind. And yet every player's experience of the game is also exactly the same.

The long rectangular field of play (100 pixels wide by 12 pixels high) represents a life's timeline; as the five minutes progress, the player's relative position in the rectangle shifts from left to right. At the start of the game, the distant right side of the screen, the future, is blurred and difficult to interpret; by the end of the five minutes, as the player has lived an entire life, and knows its path, the future has become clear, and unreliable memories make the left side of the screen, the past, become blurred and illegible. Only the area immediately around the player, the recent past and near future, is ever clearly visible. And the limited horizontal view of a vertically-traversable world also captures the narrowness of one person's perspective on the world. When the game begins and the player takes control, the entire (randomly-generated) game world is open to exploration. In it can be found treasure chests, some of which contain gold stars (scoring points), some of which contain just dust. Players who choose to venture downwards find a landscape made difficult to navigate by progressively denser barriers, but more frequently populated with treasure chests (and because their view is vertically-limited, it's often hard to figure out how to reach treasure chests). If instead the player stays near the top of the field, they can move more freely, but less profitably. Near the beginning of the game, the player (always represented as male) can *choose* to encounter another person, his wife, and with that choice, to control the movements of two people instead of just one. Navigating the lower reaches of the game for treasure chests is now doubly difficult, but exploration earns more points. When the five minutes are nearing their conclusion, the player's wife invariably dies, and the player is left hunched and alone, moving much more slowly, until death reaches him as well. The essentially-arbitrary number of points the player scored is recorded only as long as the game remains on the screen.

The essence of the game is the process of discovery as the player experiences the complementary elements of the game's metaphor. As Rohrer declares in his Creator's Statement, “there's no "right" way to play *Passage*, just as there's no right way to interpret it,” and the ability of the player to intuitively relate the game to personal experience reflects the potency of interactivity; “[players] don't even notice that their guy is slowly balding, because it happens so slowly. And that's how it works in real life! You get older and older and then one day, you look in a mirror and you're like -- 'Wow, how did this happen?'” These realizations, themselves dependent on interactivity, are the foundation of Passage's metaphor. Wired critic Clive Thompson argues that the mechanics of Passage's gameplay are themselves the (“delicious”) metaphors, but this makes a crucial mistake. Although the player can engage in any number of abstracted activities – marriage, career-building, etc. – the only thing the player is actually doing is choosing directions of movement. Since “death is still coming for you … at the very end, and you are powerless to stave off this inevitable loss,” the impotence of the player's freedom completes the metaphor. And it is in this sense that Rohrer's game aligns with Rohrer's manifesto: the one game mechanic present in Passage is (powerless) choice, and the purpose of a “memento mori” work in any medium is to engage with precisely that.

However, an alternate interpretation of Passage's structure would hold that Passage is not, in an important sense, a game at all, despite being interactive. Thompson himself, despite his discussion of Passage as being proof of the artistic capacity of the medium, invites this reading: while Passage is presented as a game, “it's psychically and aesthetically closer to a superb and tightly crafted sonnet” (Thompson, Passage). And indeed this is the case. Although interactivity changes how the poem is expressed, the poem's content does not ever react to the player's input, only its presentation does. In a sense, the interactivity Barthes proposed for all literary texts is the same interactivity that Rohrer leverages in Passage: the same “content” is at stake for everyone, but the way it is experienced by a given player changes depending on any number of psychological factors, and because of this, the perceived nature of the “text” can dramatically change.

Regardless of how Passage is interpreted, though, all three of these – Shadow of the Colossus, Modern Warfare, and Passage – are examples of games whose content has dictated their structure, rather than being grafted onto a previously-decided structure, and this is the most important thing that games need to change. There are important discussions to be had about how to construct the relationship between a game's content and its structure, but the most important thing is that there simply *be* a relationship between the two, where currently, for the most part, none exists. Many games that are enormously entertaining have been produced in the grafting style, but they do not do the medium justice. The only way to produce a game that would persuade Roger Ebert of the utility of the medium is to embrace what the medium truly represents.

“But Bungie's designers aren't just making a game: They're trying to divine the golden mean of fun.”[5]

My attachment to Jason Rohrer's ideas about games stems in great part from the fact that he eloquently transcends two important philosophies of game design, and in so doing, has the potential to redirect fundamentally-mistaken thinking. A given work in any medium can be analyzed for its form or for its content, and a medium can be advanced by works that cover new ground in either category. Treating these two elements independently has been, and remains, the standard operating procedure for most of the industry. The theoretical work of Raph Koster, a celebrated designer famous for his involvement with Ultima Online and Star Wars Galaxies in particular, and the applied techniques of Bungie, developers of the bestselling Halo franchise, exemplify the formalist approach, whereas the role-playing game developers of BioWare advocate for the “content.”

Koster constructs games as being based on “fun.” For him, games are formal systems, and the player's function is to learn those formal systems through gameplay. Thus, “games are, in the end, teachers” and “fun is just another word for learning;” thus, “the definition of a good game is … 'one that teaches everything it has to offer before the player stops playing” (46). Koster's definition lends itself, to a certain extent, to answering critics like Roger Ebert, who call upon art to better its consumers – learning, after all, is doing just that. But Koster's definition has more implications, both theoretically and pragmatically.

If games exist entirely as formal systems, then what might otherwise be labeled the “content” of the game – stories, or themes, or topics – instead become extraneous distractions. Or, as Koster labels them, “dressing” (84). Game developers may attempt to shoehorn narrative and content types from other media into the same package, but the very nature of games means that “they train their players to ignore the fiction that wraps the patterns” (80). And because their purpose in doing this is to teach their players how to make a certain set of choices, "*the destiny of games is to become boring, not to be fun.* Those of us who want games to be fun are fighting a losing battle against the human brain because fun is a process and routine is its destination" (118). For Koster, games exist purely to create and extend fun, and everything else is irrelevant: "The best test of a game's fun in the strict sense will therefore be playing the game with no graphics, no music, no sound, no story, no nothing. If that is fun, then everything else will serve to focus, refine, empower, and magnify. But all the dressing in the world can't change iceberg lettuce into roast turkey" (166). This extreme formalism productively parses the structure of most contemporary games, but most contemporary games are operating under mistaken premises, and Koster's philosophy can only exacerbate this.

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[5] Thompson, Halo 3.

That being said, practical application of this philosophy does offer interesting insight into how games are, and can be, constructed. Bungie institutionalized this clinical approach on an unprecedented scale during the development of (record-settingly successful) Halo 3. Bungie's running target during Halo development was the so-called "30 seconds of fun" doctrine (Thompson, Halo 3), which proposed that if the developers were able to perfect (an abstract ideal of) thirty seconds of engaging gameplay, the same mechanics could be tessellated throughout the story mode and repeated in multiplayer. In order to methodically test this, they built a game-testing facility that could record every action taken by hundreds of game testers over thousands of hours and statistically analyzed the results to hone their designs.

The specific problems they solved with these data were precisely the kinds of problems developers are likely to encounter when their game mechanics and "dressing" are not designed hand-in-hand. Their own stated design process embraces this misdirection, though: "First dream up the new weapons, levels, and situations. Then monitor hundreds of people as they play the hell out of them in [the game-testing lab]" (Thompson, Halo 3). Rather than create mechanics that inevitably lead to players encountering the ideas a developer has at stake – building gameplay whose structure inevitably creates the desired results – this trial-and-error strategy is methodologically flawed and will never purely harness the medium.

The opposite philosophy drives the game creation done at BioWare, a studio famous for producing critically-acclaimed role-playing games and shaping that entire genre. For founders Drs. Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk (who abandoned medical practice in favor of game design in 1995), games are at their best when they are at their most psychologically affecting, when they "have emotionally engaging consequences that really pull you in and grab you on an emotional level" (Fahey). BioWare games have uniformly high production values, with excellent writing, voice acting, and character development being the norm; natural at a company that collectively believes that "story is one of the best tools for ["emotionally engaging the player"]" (Zungre). The practical consequence of this, though, is that the games are stories first, and games second, and the BioWare teams approach their work as a mechanical craft – "creating a shooting game is actually a craft like creating an RPG game … so every time we do that we get better and better" (John) – rather than an expressive form. While their "games" consistently succeed in their pursuit of emotional engagement, in practice they lose their interactive spark, ceasing to be games in the truest spirit of the word.

Each of these approaches – formalist and narrative – engender specific categories of results. The formalist approach, when taken to its extreme, will ultimately produce games that are essentially well-dressed technological toys, stimulus-response creations that distract their consumers but do not meaningfully contribute to their lives – precisely the kind of frivolity that Roger Ebert has rightly, if ignorantly, criticized. The opposite extreme will produce, and is beginning already to produce, games that are essentially interactive movies, and this kind of content is best left to the medium that got it started.

The answer is not to to attempt to synthesize the two, to find a happy middle ground, but to reject both. Toys serve a purpose, and films serve a purpose, but games serve an entirely different purpose. Other media, refined in craft and sophisticated in application, are the best tools that we have to convey and explore facts and ideas. Games, though, allow us to explore ourselves in relation to facts and ideas, and – perhaps most importantly, though certainly least visibly, in contemporary fare – to others (American air support gunners, for example, among the vast multitude of possibilities). Approaching this realm of possibilities in games from any perspective inherited from another medium is to hobble their potential.

"[Games] are tricky to study because they are so multidimensional. There are so many different ways you can approach them. ... To really understand what games are, you need to see them from all these points of view."[6]

For most old media, there is an established body of criticism, and an established methodology under which this criticism has been created. And in a very narrow sense, this is true of games: we do have an expanding body of game reviews and game journalism, and these operate under the relatively strict formulas that govern most magazine and internet publications. In the broader context of medium theory and social theory, though, game discourse is essentially bankrupt. Part of this lack can probably be chalked up to the commercial nature of the medium. The games industry recently surpassed Hollywood's gross annual revenues, and market analysts periodically debate whether games are "recession-proof." Whether or not that is the case (though recent evidence would suggest that it is not (Economist)), games are unquestionably enshrined in the country's entertainment business, and thus subject to all of the market pressures associated with blockbuster movies and music.

The deleterious impact of commercial interests on art-making are also compounded by the youth of the medium. The form of early games was in great part dictated by the (limited) functions of early computers, and as computers have become more and more powerful, games have become commensurately more sophisticated. If this had happened in a commercial vacuum, experimentation may have been more common. Instead, though, games almost immediately became commercially colonized, and the market pressures that dictate what games *are* made also apply to the technology that is developed. This in turn influences what games *can be* made. Only commercially-viable designs and technologies warrant the enormous investment of a large production studio.

The biggest obstacle to a productive discourse about games, though, has nothing to do with the

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[6] Koster, ix.

(hopefully temporary) problems of the medium, it is that established critical approaches cannot be straightforwardly adapted, if at all, from other media. On the one hand, the logistics and techniques of game-craft are an order of magnitude more complex than any other medium, and cannot be handled traditionally; on the other, and more importantly for this discussion, the experience of games is dramatically different, and thus the medium's significance and meaning are also impossible for old criticism to parse.

For the same commercial reasons just referenced, by far the most common form of game criticism that currently exists is the review. And while the form of the typical game review is intellectually superficial, they can, collectively, still offer some insight into techniques for talking about games. Game reviewers usually narrate or summarize their experience with a game and use that experience as a rhetorical frame. Usually, the game in question is narrow enough that the critic's experience is likely to parallel any reader's experience, or at least internally consistent enough to characterize in broadly evaluative terms. The purpose of a review, after all, is to answer the question “should I buy this game?” not questions like “what is the essence of this game?” or “what is this game trying to grapple with?”

When the goal of a writer is, instead, to answer these “bigger” questions, attention needs to shift dramatically. Rather than attempting to simply capture a single possible experience within the game, or use just one to make broad comments, the critic must instead seek to address the entire “possibility space” of a game, the entire range of stories and experiences the game might allow. For a games-formalist like Koster, this would entail analysis of the game's underlying structures and their implications (since these are the territory in which designers can engage in communicative commentary); for content-seekers like BioWare, this would call for analysis of the emotional resonance of the story, relationships amongst characters, and the player's engagement with the “content” (since the “entertainment” value is king); but for a sophisticated critic studying a mature game, this will eventually be the examination of how game mechanics and game dressing are applied together to involve the player in self-exploration.

"Art and entertainment are not terms of type *– they are terms of* intensity.*"*[7]

In my introduction, I wrote that Colonization was the first "real" game I ever played. That was the way I felt about it at the time – responsibility for an entire nation rested on my shoulders, instead of responsibility for correctly answering a quiz question, surely that represented a huge change – and for a long time afterwards: most games I've played, and defended, since then have been engaging for essentially similar reasons. In retrospect, though, Colonization exemplifies the toy-film modes of game design pretty straightforwardly. It's merely a standard turn-based strategy platform decorated with (admittedly lush, at least for its time) historical trappings, and it doesn't engage with substantial issues in any particularly insightful ways. (And as it turns out, Sid Meier, while he might not subscribe to all of Koster's formalist arguments, certainly takes a methodical, Bungie-like approach (or, chronologically, Bungie takes a Sid Meier-like approach) to design. (Takahashi)) While my engagement with it, and dedication to it were certainly real, it wasn't a "real" game as I now understand the medium (though, for all practical purposes, that category remains empty), it didn't help me to understand anything, least of all myself, in new ways.

And yet, despite this, Colonization still serves to illustrate the importance of the medium. Even without any unity in their gameplay and ideas, the fundamental fact of (non-Barthian) interactivity still allows contemporary games to stumble upon moments of brilliance and do novel things. Colonization may not have drawn me into sophisticated grappling with the nature of empire, but I did learn to appreciate some of the complexity of the American Revolution, and I had a different kind of fun doing it than I have ever had reading a book or watching a movie. And, depending on how long it takes children to reach conceptually-meaningful self-awareness (Rochat), it's debatable whether or not I was even yet *capable* of properly engaging with games, but that's another issue entirely.

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[7] Koster, 190.

And it is the multitude of these “other issues entirely” that continue to catch my attention. In the interests of presenting a coherent and focused paper, especially for those new to games, I've excluded a whole lot of issues. Some have been discussed extensively, like the psychological impact of violence in games (some argue that it causes real-world violence, others argue the opposite, and both sides can cite numerous studies), while others haven't been discussed much at all, like the sociological implications of massively-multiplayer online games (Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft, for instance, has over eleven million active subscribers all remotely gaming “in the same world”). There are technical developments (for instance, the 3-D technology pioneered in James Cameron's Avatar lends itself naturally to game graphics) and structural developments (so-called “freemium” games, which are distributed online for free, and which generate profit through in-game transactions, are rapidly becoming popular) that may soon change how games work. There are philosophical questions about whether or not (video game-)play is, or can be, worthwhile; how the form of gameplay relates to the form of other media (are game experiences sense experiences comparable to traditional sense experiences or media experiences comparable to books or paintings?); and about the complicated relationship between games and work, especially for MMO games.

I haven't tried to answer any of these questions here (and some might not even be answerable). Instead, I've simply tried to establish that there *are* these kinds of questions, that the medium is capable of the same level of importance and sophistication as any other medium, and that they, and it, are worth paying attention to. Even when games are simplistic diversions, they have entirely un-simple implications and complications, and when they become more than simplistic diversions, the results can be pretty spectacular.

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