**The Contagion of Reality: Video Games and the End of Art**

The closest thing to a meaningful public debate over whether video games are art kicked off nearly twenty years ago, in the autumn of 2005. *DOOM*, a film based on a game series that had all but popularized the first-person shooter, had just arrived in theatres. It was helmed by one of the most inept directors in Hollywood—Andrzej Bartkowiak, a man best known for squandering the talents of Jet Li on bewilderingly awful works like *Romeo Must Die*—and was a vehicle for Dwayne Johnson, one of its most indiscriminate stars. As this sounds like a recipe cooked up—quite appropriately, given its infernal environs—in cinematic hell, *DOOM* naturally attracted terrible notices. Yet a review by Roger Ebert stood out not for its dislike the film—judged by its box office returns nobody liked *DOOM*, not even its adolescent target audience—but for his rhetorical strategy: essentially, deriding the film by likening it to the game it was based upon. Describing a frantic scene in which the floating gun format of the first-person shooter is emulated cinematically, Ebert declares it to be a sequence that “abandons all attempts at character and dialogue and uncannily resembles a video game”[[1]](#footnote-1)—which is a bit odd, given this is clearly the point (indeed, Bartkowiak started as a cinematographer, and this scene is ironically perhaps the *only* interesting thing about the movie). “I haven't played [DOOM], and I never will,” Ebert added dismissively. “But I know how it feels not to play it, because I've seen the movie. ‘Doom’ is like some kid came over and is using your computer and won't let you play.”

Ebert wasn’t saying that *DOOM* was a bad game. His real point was that films shouldn’t be like games, since—shorn of actual gameplay—this makes them no more entertaining than watching someone play one. While this may seem like a strangely quaint perspective in today’s age of millionaire Twitch streamers—as if your middle-aged Dad had asked you why you’d play *NHL* when you could just strap on your skates and take to the rink—the idea that films increasingly resembled games, albeit without the payoff of playing them, was more of a critical cliché of the period than a singular innovation by Ebert (*The New Yorker*’s Anthony Lane for instance made similar remarks a few years earlier, citing 2001’s *Black Hawk Down* as exemplary of this decline[[2]](#footnote-2)). But as he was the biggest film critic in the world, and *DOOM* as sacrosanct a gaming series as there could be, Ebert’s comments attracted a fusillade of angry letters. Why condescend a youthful medium that—like film once upon a time—was besieged by conservative authorities, and still vying for legitimacy?

From a strictly professional perspective, the smart thing for Ebert to do at this point would’ve been to issue a graceful clarification, and bow out of the debate. His status as a film critic did not require him to hold a view of games one way or the other; by his own admission, he didn’t even play them. Instead, he doubled down. “Video games,” he wrote in a response to a letter he deemed “civil” enough to respond to, “by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

What followed was a five-year war. Endlessly derided on in forums and upstart gaming websites, Ebert became the bane of gamers everywhere—the embodiment of an old media that, rather than using its cultural cachet to bolster video games, instead seemed intent to bury them. In 2007, Clive Barker—a renowned horror scribe who’d lent his talents to several, varyingly successful game projects—likened Ebert’s prejudice towards games to the common prejudice towards horror films. “If [an] experience moves you in some way or another,” he stated at the second annual Hollywood and Games Summit, “Even if it moves your bowels... I think it is worthy of some serious study." The problem with Ebert, according to Barker, is that he sees narrative linearity as a *sine qua non* of artistic practice: *Romeo and Juliet* would not be *Romeo and Juliet* if it had a happy ending. What this ignores is that ability to offer to players a spectrum of possible experiences; “to go through every emotional journey available,” strengthens rather than weakens their expressive capacity.“[[4]](#footnote-4) A curmudgeonly Ebert shot back on his website that a bowel movement isn’t art, and that the ability “to “go through ‘every emotional journey available,’ […] devalue[s] each and every one of them.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Three years later, in April 2010, Ebert launched another volley in his ongoing battle with gamers—an article titled, with characteristic subtlety, “Video games can never be art.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Prompted by a TED Talk by game designer Kellee Santiago in which she provides examples of games that, in her view, already reached the level of art—namely *Waco Resurrection*, *Braid*, and *Flower*—the article finds Ebert drifting somewhat from his initial thesis. No longer are games derided as beneath art due to their narrative malleability: there is no universal consensus on what ‘art’ is, and one can credibly argue for a definition that includes games. But this does not change the fact that to compare games like *Flower* to watershed silent films such as George Melies’ “A Voyage to the Moon”—as, indeed, Santiago does—is deeply insulting to the latter. Exemplars of a profit-driven industry that’s “artistry” and “imagination” pales compared to Melies, the trio of games are, as Ebert acerbically puts it, “pathetic.” This doesn’t mean that games can *never* be art—the future lasts a long time. But the term “never” is rhetorically justified in so far as the puerility of the games that exist today suggests that “no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form.”

While styled as a stubborn defense of his initial position, “Video games can never be art” really found Ebert coyly stepping away from it. Having admitted that there is no categorical means of denying that games are art, he is forced to premise his argument on a subjective judgement—that they’re just not very evocative. The obvious crack in his argumentation being that this point is, precisely*, subjective*. Santiago thinks the most artistically accomplished games are on par with the most superlative of early silent films; Ebert does not. Who’s to say who’s correct?

Faulty logic or no, few could predict what would happen next. In July 2010, Ebert suddenly withdrew from the discussion. Noting that the comments his blog attracted a barrage of comments longer than “Anna Karenina, David Copperfield and The Brothers Karamazov” combined, he admitted that he was not equipped to deal with the onslaught, and that he should not have passed word on games with so little knowledge of the subject. Ebert had not suddenly transformed into being an admirer of their lofty artistry: in large part, his opinion remain unchanged. But if “abstract art” can be art without satisfying the conditions of narrative linearity, then there was no way to deny “that gamers can have an experience that, for them, is Art.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

That Ebert’s retraction was a bit backhanded didn’t too much to trammel up the triumphant proclamations of gamers at his capitulation. Forums were set ablaze, with the Grandpa in The Simpsons shouting at a cloud being the meme of choice to ridicule his position. The gaming press relished the victory, often with sarcastically titled news releases: “Acclaimed cinema critic admits he should not have dismissed games without playing them.” But in 2013, when Ebert died of cancer, he was quickly retired as a whipping boy for the gaming fandom. Many gamers praised him for having been willing to backtrack on a position he’d taken so publicly. Even if he was wrong, they concluded, he had been a worthy adversary—someone who’s ruthless scrutiny of the medium was necessary to push it forward.

II

The admission that the Ebert debate had helped games wasn’t just a polite condolence. For even if it was violently rejected by gamers, Ebert’s critique coincided with a change in the way the gaming medium perceived itself. Prior to the invention of video games, analog games from chess to Monopoly were an expressly *social* ordeal. Without computation to conjure up digital opponents, one was forced to locate other people to play with.

Though often unacknowledged due to their obscurity, this was—to a large extent—also true of the first video games. When Manhattan Project veteran William Higinbotham unveiled *Tennis for Two* in 1958—a mechanical nightmare with an oscilloscope display—it could not be played by oneself. The same is true of 1962’s MIT-developed *Spacewar!*, which required two players to engage to pilot pixelated spaceships while being sucked into a gravity well in the centre of the screen.

By 1970, advancements in artificial intelligence allowed for video games to begin to include enemies who could perform simple, script-based actions. Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney’s 1970 *Computer Space* had the player maneuver a rocket ship around white pixels fired by stippled saucers, firing back at them in turn. Taito’s 1974 *Speed Race* forced you to barrel down a two-dimensional track, weaving through fields of drivers who oscillated skittishly from one end of it to another. Still, the limitations of AI in this period meant that—while many of the signature games of the “arcade revolution” kicked off by Bushnell and Dabney under the aegis of Atari forced the player to reckon with prefab patterns—many of the signature titles of this period did not. 1972’s *Pong* became a cultural phenom, transforming Atari from an experimental start-up to a bustling business. While today a showdown with a ruthlessly efficient AI opponent is just a few clicks away for anyone with the Internet, the original 1972 *Pong* cabinet, much like table tennis itself, required two players. Sega’s 1976 *Heavyweight Champ*, which featured two punch-drunk boxers with point counters over their head besottedly clubbing each other, was the first game to feature hand-to-hand fighting, and greatly bolstered both the financial coffers and credibility of the fledgling arcade upstart. It could not be played by oneself: if you wanted to play it, you’d need to find someone else to man one of the two pairs of boxing gloves each cabinet came equipped with.

One significant consequence of the relatively low level of AI development in the seventies is that video games were largely designed for venues where people congregated, such as bars and arcades. They were not a source of solitary entertainment; they were digital versions of social pastimes like table tennis or air hockey, meant to be enjoyed amongst others either during a night out drinking or, for the more enthusiastic, in a designated coin-op facility. While different in so far as they were not monetized until later, the same can be said of the computer games of the period. Built by precocious college students on mainframe computers such as the PDP-10 and PLATO, the computer games of this time—after a few dry runs like *pedit5* and *dnd—*made the leap to networked multiplay (the likes of which was made possible by the spread of the ARPANET, a less widespread forerunner to the Internet). This made sense, because—like the arcade titles by Atari— they took their cue from a social activity. Albeit one more germane to the nerdy subset who designed them, who’d emerged out of the weed haze of Tolkien and Zeppelin: *Dungeons & Dragons*. Jim Schwaiger’s 1977 *Oubliette* allowed players to roam around a visually rendered castle corridor system populated with shops, taverns, hotels, and temples—and was so unforgivingly difficult needed to play with others to have any chance at success. Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle’s text-based *MUD1* (Multi-User Dungeon 1) differed from *Oubliette* in that it was entirely played by entering text in a command line—an approach groked from earlier text-based games like *Adventure* and *Zork*, and that its creators deemed more expressive than a threadbare graphical setup. While its premise was the same as *Oubliette*, this allowed it to be less combat-driven and more focused on puzzles, which players would solve by feeding possible solutions into a text parser (typing “\*key” for example to use a ‘rusty key’ to open a door that had been previously locked).

If the earliest video games were fundamentally social, the obvious question this raises is: how did the single-player shift occur? That is, how did games intended to be played by atomized individuals become the de facto commercial norm in the ‘80s and ‘90s? The answer lies in conjoining of commerce with complex forms of technological pathway development. By the late ‘70s, AI had become sophisticated enough that challenging games could be created without the crux of an additional player—take the swarm of patterned enemies in *Space Invaders*, who migrate downwards on the screen while firing at the player. At the same time, the increased affordability of microprocessors meant that it was possible for the first time to develop computational devices that were small enough, and cheap enough, to be available to at least an upper middle-class stratum of consumers (while first created by Intel in 1971, microprocessors would not become commonplace until a few years later). In April 1977, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, in a story that’s now been widely mythologized, launched the Apple II—the first home computer to sell in the millions. Both Jobs and Wozniak had previously done work for Atari, and the computer’s incorporation of color graphic commands, circuitry for paddle controllers, and 1-bit speakers left little doubt that it was meant for gaming. Yet the sheer success of the Apple II, which went on to sell a groundbreaking six million units, meant that its programming scene was able to elevate itself above the hobbyism of the mainframe computer era into the lofty domain of consumer retail. Indeed, with millions of Apple IIs in existence, a successful could sell tens or even hundreds of thousands of copies. Game designers were no longer wasting time, they were professionals, with titles like *Lode Runner* and *Choplifter* reaching an audience that—if not quite mainstream—still were capable of supporting a small ecosystem of developers.

The blossoming of gaming as a commercial medium was not an unambiguous advance. Many of the earliest computer games, due to the networking capacities of college mainframes, were social in nature, recreating tabletop games for a digital context. But the lack of anything like the Internet for personal computers in the ‘80s and early ‘90s meant that, if games were going to be mainstream, they had to be solitary. This doesn’t mean multiplayer games suddenly went extinct—the Apple II had several notable ones, with nothing to stop designers from supporting two joystick inputs or making turn-based games that could be played on the same system. On the whole, though, the climate had shifted: it was simply more convenient to play a game by oneself than to have to find someone else to play it with, especially if this involved acquiring additional hardware or fiddling around with the computer’s setup. Early RPGs like *MUD1* and *Oubliette* had used networking to synthesize the experience of playing *Dungeons & Dragons* with other people. By contrast the *Ultima* series, which led the computer RPG industry for over a decade and a half, remained single-player from its inception in 1981 until the release of *Ultima Online* in 1997. Once a social experience, RPGs in the 80s and 90s now featured a sole opponent: the prefabricated scenario created by the designer, which one often had to engage in dreary sessions of ‘grinding’—the rote killing of AI enemies—in order to surmount. So it was with computer games in general: the birth of home computing, the abandonment of the ARPANET, caused an exodus from online multiplay that lasted nearly twenty years.

While monetized prior to their migration to the home, a similar upheaval occurred with arcade games. In April 1977, there was the Apple II. In September that year, Atari launched the Video Computer System, or VCS—the first widely popular home console, and the first one to normalize the changing of games by swapping out carts. Many of the earliest VCS games resembled Atari’s arcade offerings, in the sense that they required another person to play. Others, such as Alain Miller’s *Basketball*—which allowed the player to control a stick man, chasing a bouncing pink pixel across a green court—played well solitaire or with another person. Yet while AI opponents initially appeared as a supplement to games that were modeled upon the agonistic experience of the arcade, as the VCS’ lifespan wore on designers increasingly took to privileging the experience of the isolated gamer. In this matter, all they had to do was learn from observation. *Space Invaders*, while originating in the arcades, sold over six mix million copies after its 1980 release, raising both the profile of its source material and the console as a whole. While a competent port, its exceptional success in this format had much to do with the fact that—even in the arcade—it was primarily a single-player game, with relatively sophisticated AI implementation. Developers took note, and by 1982 the bulk of the VCS’ most popular new releases were either single-player focused arcade ports like *Donkey Kong* or, even more ambitiously, single-player games tailor-made for the console, such as the Indiana Jones-inspired platformer *Pitfall!*

As games changed, so too did the way designers saw themselves. The earliest game designers didn’t think they were creating art. The games they created lacked in cultural prestige, with arcade games in particular being often exceedingly austere and simplistic. More cynically, there just wasn’t that much money at stake—a fact which rendered questions of artistic ownership largely moot. But as both the technical complexity and sales of games grew, so too did the demands of their creators. With his 1979 *Adventure*, Warren Robinett sought to translate the expansiveness of early text-based adventure games—namely, 1976’s *Colossal Cave Adventure*, from whence it derived its namesake—to the more visual, arcade-derived format of the Atari VCS. With limited graphical resources at his disposal, he did this by having the player guide a solitary pixel across a polygon catacomb, picking up keys to open doors and slaying dragons with a sword that suspiciously resembles an arrow pointer. *Adventure* was a strange hybrid: while in some ways reminiscent of the early graphical RPGs that appeared on mainframe computers, it was not an RPG, in the sense that its gameplay eschewed the turn-based, statistically dense combat that was the hallmark of the genre. It was rather an early version of what we’d today call an action-adventure game—without it, there would be no *Legend of Zelda*, no *Assassin’s Creed*, no *Red Dead Redemption.* Fully aware that Atari’s policies precluded any kind of personal accreditation for his work—Atari wanted to avoid doing anything that would strengthen the case for a royalty structure—Robinett, having perhaps an inkling of the game’s importance, decided to act alone. So he placed buried in the game a ‘key’—really, a tiny pixel—that if one placed in a specific room with two other objects, a sidewall would open. What one saw when they entered it only became known to Atari in August 1980, when a 15 year-old fan wrote to the company to reveal what’d he’d discovered: a vertical row of flickering, neon text that spells out “Created by Warren Robinett.”

Robinett’s inclusion of a hidden chamber in *Adventure* in lieu of credit sequence is well-known today for being the first “easter egg”—that is, item of deliberately concealed content—to ever appear in a game. But if it continues to resonate, it’s also because it compresses some of the larger changes afoot at Atari—and in turn, the industry as a whole—into an easily repeatable anecdote. As *Adventure* was being created, the company was riven by fierce internal conflict. Sixty per cent of the best-selling Atari games in 1978 had been created by just four of the company’s meagerly paid thirty-five man design staff—David Crane, Larry Kaplan, Alan Miller, and Bob Whitehead. From Kaplan’s *Air-Sea Battle*—which had the player control a turret, piloting guided missiles to try to pick off airborne enemies—to Miller’s aforementioned *Basketball*, these games were, in addition to being highly lucrative, at the forefront of the shift to authorial, single-player design that was beginning to take hold in the late seventies. This naturally put Atari’s four most illustrious designers on a collision course with the company. Forming a clique informally referred to as the “Gang of Four,” they demanded that they be treated like musicians, with royalty cheques and their names on boxes. Atari, which had been bought out by Warner in 1976, was in no mood to budge. Wanting to instill discipline in an outfit that had previously been known for its hippie ethos, Warner had—in 1978—delegated day-to-day control of the company to Raymond Kassar, a New York businessman who’d spent nearly three decades in the New York textile industry before joining the nascent Silicon Valley scene. Kassar was incredulous at the idea that game designers should be treated like artists. When Kaplan described the other three as "the best designers for the [VCS] in the world,” his response was terse: "anyone can do a cartridge,” he snarled, adding that the four were, at bottom “towel designers,” “no more important […] than the guy on the assembly line who puts [the game] together.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Not fully appreciating Kassar’s benevolent assessment of Atari’s manufacturing staff, the four left Atari and—with the help of former music industry executive Jim Levy and venture capitalist Richard Muchmore—founded Activision in October 1979. But unlike other developers—who created games that Atari in turn would publish—Activision had a more ambitious plan: they would publish games *themselves*, maintaining tend-to-end control of the titles they created. After fending off a bevy of legal challenges launched by Atari in order to squelch the company, this strategy yielded salutary results, with Activision going on to make seven games which sold over a million copies on the VCS (of which *Pitfall!* is the best-selling, and most creatively well-regarded). Nor did it ultimately hurt Atari. Free to creatively stretch out, Activision’s games enhanced the prestige of the console, helping push further in the direction of single-player design. Atari, meanwhile, simply drafted in new talent to replace their outgoing staff, or—barring that—just licensed external titles for the VCS. From there on out, the idea that of “third-party” developers—companies that created games for pre-existing hardware, rather than creating their own—become an industry norm.

Atari managed to weather the founding of Activision. Their own poor decision-making was another matter. In 1982, the company committed an embarrassing form of corporate suicide by mass-manufacturing two misbegotten carts: a shoddy port of *Pac-Man* that was an offense to arcade aesthetes, and an adaptation of the film *E.T.* that had been cobbled together on a ludicrous five-week schedule. Consumer confidence was irreparably damaged. So many copies of E.T. went unsold that they had to be deposited in a landfill in New Mexico. Warner washed their hands of the company, swapping it to Jack Tramiel in 1984 at no cost other than the assumption of its debts.

The implosion of Atari created a void that Japanese companies, having benefitted from years of free U.S. technology transfer intended to obstruct China’s rise, promptly filled. In 1985, the Nintendo Entertainment System—the NES for short—launched in the United States. Buoyed by a brilliant launch title—Shigeru Miyamoto’s *Super Mario Bros.*—Nintendo carried the industry to new commercial heights, defying premature obituaries that had labeled games a “fad.” But while Nintendo’s achievements in this period are justly lauded, any discussion of them must contain a caveat. Nintendo did not single-handedly create the climate in which artistically ambitious single-player focused games were king—their excellence is having stepped into it with confidence and gusto. *Super Mario Bros*., while endowed with fluid horizontal scrolling, had several antecedents. Not just Nintendo’s own *Donkey Kong*—the first game to feature cutscenes—but also Activision’s *Pitfall!* (which didn’t scroll but instead switched screens when the player reached the end of one). While *The Legend of Zelda*’s nonlinear natural environs and cryptic puzzles were supposedly inspired by the childhood romps of creator Shigeru Miyamoto through the Japanese countryside, it clearly channeled Robinett’s *Adventure*. The decisiveness of these earlier genre readymades was not confined to Nintendo’s own NES releases, either. Enix’s spectacularly successful 1986 *Dragon Warrior*—*Dragon Quest* in Japan—may have made role-playing games culturally palatable to a Japanese audience, laying the groundwork for later series from *Final Fantasy* to *Suikoden*. But apart from a few gameplay innovations and an anime aesthetic, it didn’t diverge too much from the foundations assembled by single-player computer RPGs like *Ultima III*.

Maybe this isn’t surprising. With the shift of the focus of design from the arcade and the ARPANET to the home, video games had only one direction to go—that of increasingly elaborate single-player campaigns, which required a high level of authorial control. The years that stretched from the early 80s to the early 2000s were thus largely defined by the strategic reduction in player freedom. The first single-player text-based adventure games forced one to listlessly type random commands into a parser; the point-and-click adventures of the nineties smartened this with a built-in list of commands one could select from with their cursor, in order to experiment on a visual display (clicking “give” on a raw fish in your inventory, then feeding it to a bridge troll in order to pass for instance). RPGs as far back as *Oubliette* allowed for the first-person visualization of dungeons. id Software filling them with enemies one had to mow down with stylized firearms, eschewing more diverse forms of interaction—a design decision that birthed the first-person shooter. *The Legend of Zelda* let one wander around a non-linear fantasy setting, completing important tasks in a makeshift order; later iterations fleshed out the narrative, jackbooted it into 3D, and jettisoned the non-linearity altogether (at least until 2017’s *Breath of the Wild*). By the turn of the millennium, games had spawned an auteur class of designers, who enjoyed the veneration of fans and venture capitalists alike. It had become practically an industry cliché: the aesthetic improvement of games meant they were now an art form, worthy of comparison to film and literature. But this narrative would be troubled by the rise of the Internet.

**III**

The furor generated by Roger Ebert’s claim that games are not art had much to do with *when* he made it. Had he said games were not art in 1995, he would’ve been shrugged off for stating the obvious, as if he’s remarked that Charlie Brown was less accomplished than Caravaggio. Had he made it in 2015, it likely would’ve led to a more compelling, and less divisive, debate. In 2005 however the public discussion on video games could only accommodate two possible positions. Either they were an expressive, authorial medium—an art, that is. Or they were just a form of commercial tripe, which had yet to come anywhere close to the level of artistic works hailed as canonical.

This impasse itself requires some explaining. From the late nineties onward, video games largely split into two divergent trajectories. On one hand were those games that took advantage of the dial-up Internet accesses rapidly spreading to American homes. Building on the equivocal successes of *Neverwinter Nights*, 1997’s *Ultima Online* was the first RPG to credibly pull off online play, establishing a foundation that *EverQuest* and *World of WarCraft* would later build upon. December 1996’s *QuakeWorld* brought the first-person shooter online, with the real-time strategy genre following suit just three months later, in the form of the *Gold* version of *Command & Conquer*. Most important of all though for the popularization of Internet play was another real-time strategy game: Blizzard’s 1998 *StarCraft*.

For a game so crucial to the mainlining of online multiplay, the early stages of *StarCraft*’s design were surprisingly uncertain. The real-time strategy genre is thus named for the fact it—in contradistinction to turn-based strategy games from chess to *Civilization*—requires players to make strategic decisions *simultaneously*, building a base and micromanaging a small army to take out an opposing army on an aerially or isometrically viewed map. After its first press reveal in 1996, *StarCraft* seemed like it didn’t have much to add to this genre. Indeed, it was panned by critics at first as being little more than a cosmetically adjusted science-fiction do-over of Blizzard’s last game, the fantasy RTS *WarCraft II*. Two years later in 1998, when the game came out, many of the concerns were put to rest: while still built atop the edifice of *WarCraft II*, Blizzard at least had the good sense to include a number of forward-looking additions, from isometric graphics to a deepened narrative to—most decisively—three diverse factions one could play as (in *Warcraft II*, there are only two, and they’re essentially the same).

Yet it was with online play that *StarCraft* really defied expectations. Blizzard’s proprietary online service, battle.net, was capable of running *StarCraft* relatively well even on a 56K modern—and was also entirely free. Other online games of the period were less accessible. *Ultima Online* was still highly experimental, with players often being killed instantly once they spawned into the game. The high-intensity action gameplay of 3D first-person shooters like *Quake* chafed against the sluggish modems of the period. *StarCraft* found the sweet spot system. And in doing so, created an entire ecosystem. By analyzing data culled from battle.net, Blizzard were able to continually improve the game—first with an expansion pack, *Brood War*, and later with balance patches that followed until 2001. Throughout this entire period and for several years thereafter, *StarCraft* didn’t die. Fueled by the adoption of broadband, it even grew *more* popular. But not for the single-player—what kept the game going on was the online play, which was constantly renewing itself both with evolving strategies and player-created content. The inclusion of a map editor with the game meant that anyone was capable of designing maps and using them in online matches. Once balance patches stopped, amateur mapmakers picked up the slack by building maps that helped account for new tactics which had been deployed—the ability of the Zerg faction, for instance, to build units en masse and throw them mercilessly at the opponent was offset by the construction of choke points at the entry of bases. They also took advantage of the ability to construct elaborate scenarios by turning *StarCraft* into a kind of hack-and-slash RPG, eschewing base construction in favour of head-to-head combat between units. In South Korea, competitive StarCraft become so popular that—by 2003—players began to receive sponsorships from major companies, marking the beginning of modern e-sports. The practice of pitting units against one another proved to be equally influential, becoming a fixture of the RTS scene before eventually birthing an entire genre—the MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena), of which 2009’s *League of Legends* is the foremost exemplar.

With *StarCraft*, Blizzard had pioneered a model that anticipated not just later games, but also later platforms from Facebook to Instagram—lining your pockets with the proceeds of user-created content, reducing the role of corporate to a curatorial one. Though *StarCraft* is the most salient example, a similar pattern was characteristic of the other major online games of the period. *Quake* got considerable traction from its 1997 “Rocket Arena” mod, which transformed matches into a nonstop succession of explosions worthy of a Michael Bay movie while addressing some of the game’s outstanding balance issues. An early advocate—or more cynically, exploiter—of fan-created content, Valve went so far as to release an official version of a tactical multiplayer mod for their game *Half-Life*, *Counter-Strike*. They also didn’t shy away from poaching modders whose principle work had been on titles by other companies, recruiting two of the designers of the class-based Quake mod *Team Fortress* to create a licensed build for the same game (this same team would years later use the *Half-Life 2* Source engine to create the far more iconic *Team Fortress 2*).

The online gaming communities that flourished in the late nineties posed a problem for the orthodoxy that had grown up around games. Because video games were first commercialized in an environment where online play wasn’t possible, they had largely taken—from the early eighties through to the two thousands—an auteurist trajectory. If increasingly large budgets and increasingly baroque art assets were available, the function of these—so it was imagined—was for a gifted class of designers to create immersive, single-player experiences worthy of cinema. The word “cinema” is used here deliberately, since—particularly after the proliferation of CD-Rs as a storage media, which permitted the inclusion of full-motion video in games—this was the medium which single-player games most naturally invited comparison to. At times this meant cribbing freely from cinematic lore. Intent to churn out a knockdown classic just as the genre was on the cusp of commercial obsolescence, Tim Schafer’s 1998 *Grim Fandanago* draped its storyline about the journey of calaca skeletons through the Aztec afterlife in the aesthetic of the film noir tradition, channeling the smoky interiors and tense exchanges of cultural touchstones like *Casablanca* and *The Maltese Falcon*. Fresh off his firing from id software, American McGee transmuted the dark Disney ethos of Tim Burton into *Alice*, a nightmare about the titular character’s journey through a Wonderland disfigured by her own psychic trauma. At other times, it meant *literally* filling games to the brim with unskippable cutscenes, thereby bringing video games and cinema ever closer to the horizon point. Seeking to capitalize on CD-R technology, Squaresoft’s 1997 steampunk RPG *Final Fantasy VII* included nearly an hour of 3D, full motion video, with the rest of the game’s narrative being conveyed through dialogue boxes that could be read through speedily. Four years later, *Final Fantasy X*—in what the designers presumably thought was an improvement—took advantage of its DVD format by substituting text dialogue for *over nine hours* of dramatically stilted, voice-acted dialogue scenes. A similar tendency towards FMV bloat can be seen in the *Metal Gear Solid* series, with its fourth entry in 2008 featuring a single cutscene that lasted 71 minutes—a record to this day.

It’s with this context that we can begin to understand the historical character of Ebert’s intervention. From 2005-10, when the debate played out, the game industry was going through a period of soul-searching. Some of the biggest blockbusters of the 2000s had been deeply cinematic in character—there was no denying the appeal of series like *Final Fantasy* or *Metal Gear Solid*. But an undercurrent of unrest was beginning to foment against the perceived indulgence of these titles, with many gamers remarking that, if they wanted to watch a movie, *they’d rent a movie*. Moreover, the spread of broadband meant that social games capable of renewing themselves with user-created content were more viable than ever before. A key factor in guiding decision-making when it came to what kinds of projects got approved was, naturally, cost. From inception, commercial home gaming had been guided by a single model: you pay a one-time fee of what today would be between $60-120, you get a game (though used and discount games served as alternatives for the cash-strapped). In an age of ballooned budgets this model hadn’t aged well. Early games had cost almost nothing to make. 1988’s *Super Mario Bros. 3*, on a development budget of $800,000, went on to sell 18 million copies at a price point of $49.99 ($113.98 when adjusted for inflation from its 1990 US release). By the late 2000s, not only had game prices experienced a relative decline, having stabilized at sixty dollars from the mid-90s onward even as inflation continued. They also had far higher budgets, with it being not uncommon to spend between 10 and 50 million on a mainstream game. Seeing the writing on the wall, Blizzard broke with this model with its online RPG *World of WarCraft*, instead opting for a $15 per month subscription and rolling content updates. By the second half of 2010 the game sported 12 million subscribers—enough to make it effectively pointless for Blizzard to bother with a conventional release model, focusing only on *WoW* for several years.

The disruption of the linear, single-player arc caused an identity crisis for the video game industry. The watchword of the past few years had been that *games were art*. But “art” had predominantly been construed by gamers and designers alike to mean *narrative art*, with single-player RPGs in particular undergoing a positive reevaluation in the West in the late 90s and early 2000s. But in the climate of the mid-2000s commercial trends were moving strongly in the other direction. Developed in the tumult of the Ion Storm’s crumbling corporate empire, Warren Spector’s *Deus Ex* thrust the player into a cyberpunk universe where they were could complete objectives in a multitude of different ways—by hacking, persuasion, shooting their way through, or simply stacking crates on top of one another to inventively bypass a scripted challenge (at one point in the game, you can simply run by a boss fight—something you’re mocked for later on by the boss in question; a good example of how *Deus Ex* blends non-linearity with narrative exposition). While poor graphics and negative press surrounding Ion Storm caused it to slump out of the gate, a smattering of near-perfect reviews and Game of the Year awards eventually led to an uptick in sales—and gave a big victory to the principle of player freedom. A renewed, three-dimensional *Grand Theft Auto* series—with its autonomous logic of traffic accidents and desultory pedestrian brawls—had rendered obsolete level-based design, selling millions in the process. And with the Wii, Nintendo had shifted focus away from traditional, narrative design, instead electing to foreground a motion-sensing, “casual” gaming experience that would appeal to an untapped audience. An interview profile on Shigeru Miyamoto from *The New Yorker* in 2010 provides fascinating insight into the motivations that drove this change. Noting that games differ from movies and novels in that “the players […] have to find their own road,”[[9]](#footnote-9) he states that:

 […Miyamoto] doesn’t have much time anymore to play other games. He noted, with what seemed to be some annoyance, that the long pregame movie sequences that come with most games—prologues that establish the narrative and the scene and that involve no gameplay at all—take what little time he has actually to play. (As it happens, Donkey Kong was among the first games to have a pregame sequence.) […] What impressed him most about the early manga artists of his youth, aside from the fact that they created a genre “from nothing at all,” was how they later subverted it. “When they became much older, they started to destroy the style they themselves had created,” he said. For example, they began to ignore the cartoon-panel framework or combine multiple narratives or else use the manga form to explore macroeconomics or their own private thoughts. “When I started working for the company, I thought that someday I would like to do the same. I wanted to destroy the styles that we ourselves created. I don’t think we can do so completely, but I think that in the way that we are making video games today we might be getting closer to my idea of destroying the original style.”

Miyamoto’s remarks here are a little cryptic. But his gist is clear: that while Nintendo had played a formative role in establishing linear, narrative games, they were moving to “destroy” this legacy. The austere minimalism of a game like *Wii Sports* offers proof of concept. The game has no narrative. It features just five motion-sensing ‘mini-games’ to choose from: tennis, baseball, bowling, boxing and golf. In the context of the designers’ intuitive—if still occasionally imprecise—use of the Wii’s motion sensors, this simplicity is not a weakness but a strength. Anyone can play *Wii Sports*. There is nothing to hold you back: not wearysome narrative exposition, not sports realism, not complex controls. In its simplicity, it recalls the joy and immediacy of the arcade games of a bygone era.

Ironically, Miyamoto’s stance then was not entirely different than Ebert’s. Video games, Miyamoto implies, had lost sight of the balance between “information” and player freedom. The result was games that failed to take full advantage of the most important attribute of the medium—playability itself. What this suggests is that, for Miyamoto, games are at their best when they’re not trying to imitate other mediums—an approach which is bound to give rise to unflattering comparisons. For Ebert, judged as art—which he defined as narrative art, in the vein of films or literature—video games are, as he puts it, “pathetic.” Not that this is the sole criterion of their value. “Why are gamers so intensely concerned, anyway,” he asks rhetorically, “that games be defined as art?, Bobby Fischer, Michael Jordan and Dick Butkus never said they thought their games were an art form. Nor did Shi Hua Chen, winner of the $500,000 World Series of Mah Jong in 2009. Why aren't gamers content to play their games and simply enjoy themselves?”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Ebert debate did not persuade gamers that gamers weren’t art. Its achievement was more humble: it demarcated the moment when the industry as a whole began to realize the limitations of perceiving video games as above all a *narrative* art. This change in attitude had both aesthetic and economic causes. Aesthetically, the abandonment of narrative as an artistic benchmark was partly an admission of defeat. The late 90s and 2000s had seen a glut of narrative games, rife with cinematic pretension. But had any of these really succeeded in accessing the high conceptual terrain of the best cinema or novels? Few sober observers would compare Shinji Mikami to Murnau, or *Metal Gear Solid* to *Gravity’s Rainbow*. If an entire generation of designers had failed to reach this plateau, this suggested that the problem was not that they lacked for intelligence or skill—it was that the unique demands of video game design precluded this kind of streamlined storytelling. Economically, the case against treating games as synonymous with narrative was even stronger. Narrative games had amassed a considerable following, with their being enough Final Fantasy fangirls (and fanboys) to help fuel a frenzy of anime conventions across the country. But so far as these games did not nourish themselves on user communities, and so far as they were bound to traditional distribution models, it was hard to say just *how big* their following would have to be to fully justify the exaggerated budgets which had become the norm. By 2010, the year the Ebert debate ended, the narratively bereft indie hit Minecraft had reached the Alpha stage. In the next several years, it would make billions on the back of its basic premise, which allowed users to collectively remodel their blocky, LEGO-like environs—thereby definitively setting the issue of whether linear storytelling or user outsourcing was the more economically viable. Yet the conundrum still remained: if games were not a narrative art, just what kind of art were they? Ebert had, for the most part, left this question open. Games were not art *for him*. But, as he ultimately acknowledged, the criteria of what art *is* is too supple and amorphous to rule decisively on this matter. Naturally it was the inclination of gamers and designers to say they were. This required however that they possess an alternative vision of what game art was.

By 2010, the question of what games should aspire to had become something of an industry-wide fixation. Nowhere was this more visible than at the Game Developer’s Conference Europe 2010. In a keynote delivered by Warren Spector— “What Videogames Can Learn from Other Media…What We Can't…And What We Shouldn't.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Declaring that "if you want make your game as a movie […] you should be making movies” he went on to add that:

We are in a sense an amalgamation of all these other media. But is that all we are? That question has always really bothered me. I just can’t believe that. We don’t want to make games like other media. We cannot be bound by the conventions of other media. We have to make our own conventions.

And, more clearly:

If we embrace what is unique about our own medium, we allow our own audiences to express themselves creatively. We are unique in the human history in allowing audiences to be creative with their entertainment. We need to stop telling players what to do. We need to get them to tell their own story.

Taking aim at game theorist Janet Murray’s view of games as a more sophisticated means of conveying stories, Spector provides a number of examples throughout his talk of how they diverge from other mediums—above all film, the one games have been most regularly compared with. Alternating camera angles, he contends, might be appropriate to the fragmentary, dreamlike logic of cinema. But when used in games—in what amounts to a thinly-veiled shot at *Metal Gear Solid*—they tend to break the immersion necessary to project a continuum of experience (where many games are ‘one-shot’, in the sense the camera angle never changes, films done this way have been painstakingly boring). Spectacular visual sequences have a place in films—indeed, they often serve as their centrepieces. But their utility for games is more secondary: while they can help invigorate the events portrayed onscreen, the focus of game design has to be on the implementation of repetitive actions that the player is rewarded for refining.

Spector ends his address on an optimistic note. Films, he claims, took decades to establish an identity independent of theatre. So too will games, so that we can expect that in the future the medium will more fully realize its potential. He deliberately stops short, then, of defining exactly what *kind of art* games are. The answer, he seems to suggest, will only be known in time.

**IV**

By 2010, games were a medium in need of a theory. Judging them on their ability to convey narrative, it was becoming increasingly clear, wasn’t adequate—it not only downplayed much of the experience of playing them; it was also out of touch with overarching commercial trends. Yet where could such a theory be found? The answer was not so simple. In his lecture, Spector points out that creatives involved in producing narrative works—including his own wife, a novelist—very often *think they know more about games than they do*. This is because they simply transpose hallmarks of narrative assessment onto the video game medium as a whole, as if Mario could be reduced to a fusty yarn about a man having to save a princess.

On the surface of things, this shouldn’t be a problem. Who cares, after all, what novelists or filmmakers think about a medium that isn’t theirs? The issue faced by the industry, however, as it limped through an identity crisis, was that narrative-based assessment was so entrenched that it had become commonplace amongst the exact class of people it might otherwise turn to provide insightful theorization—academics. Arguably the most iconic text on video games published prior to the twenty-first century was Janet Murray’s 1997 *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Written once games had acquired enough clout to be deemed worthy of analysis, but before the snare shot of *StarCraft* had blown open the door of online play, Murray’s argument leaned heavily on the cyber-utopism ubiquitous at the time. Linear narratives, she contends in the book, have become outmoded due to changes both scientific and cultural. With his theory of relativity, Einstein showed that space and time were woven into a single continuum that was warped by massive objects, so that time itself could be experienced differently. And we are all—in the postmodern age of media oversaturation—acutely aware of the presence of competing narratives; that there is no single one that can do justice to reality. Exposed to these pressures, linear narratives have increasingly given way to multiform narratives—narratives which are not exhausted by a single trajectory. While these appeared early in other mediums, computers—with their ability to render into existence rule-governed, participatory worlds—are where they’ve been most decisively realized.

For a flitting moment, it seemed as if Murray’s view of games as polymorphous stories might prevail. Her book was warmly received by academics; it also received a swath of gushing reviews in major media outlets. But in hindsight, the industry was still changing too fast to anoint enduring intellectual representatives. *Hamlet on the Holodeck* uncomfortably straddled the line between two eras—the auteurist one characteristic of the atomized single-player gaming of the 80s and 90s, and the online one that developed from the late 90s onward. With quasi-coherent narrative sacrificed on the altar of games driven by monetizable user communities, it was only natural that the symbolic and abstract properties of games would become more and more foregrounded. Thus within just a few years, a backlash began to foment against her signature work. Murray, it was alleged, was guilty of *narrative reductionism*—of being so disposed to literary analysis that she would downplay, or worse ignore altogether, the technical properties of games. Exemplary of this defect was her commentary on the famed block manipulation simulator *Tetris*. Though designed by Alexey Pajitnov while an employee of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in the mid-1980s, Murray reads Tetris as a “perfect enactment of the overtasked lives of Americans in the 1990s—of the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Characterizing Murray’s reading as an act of “interpretative [sic] violence,”[[13]](#footnote-13) Markku Eskelinen remarked in a well-known article published in *Game Studies* in 2001 that

It would be equally far beside the point if someone interpreted chess as a perfect American game because there's a constant struggle between hierarchically organized white and black communities, genders are not equal, and there's no health care for the stricken pieces. Of course, there's one crucial difference: after this kind of analysis you'd have no intellectual future in the chess-playing community.

As far as strange takes on Tetris go, Murray’s isn’t even the most adventurous. That distinction likely belongs to Bill Loguidice and Matt Barton, who in their book *Vintage Games* compare it with Freud’s “anal stage,” whereas “the disappearing lines of tetrominoes [are] analogous to our solid waste being flushed away in the toilet”[[14]](#footnote-14) (which seems to confirm the status of Tetris, with its total deficit of exegetical content, as a Rorschach blot for theory-inclined game scholars). Still, Eskelinen’s barb stung because it efficiently exposed the core weakness of her work—a willingness to resort to perverse forms of theorizing so as to make even the most narratively threadbare games conform to the multiform story model.

Unphased by this ridicule, Murray’s response in subsequent years was, essentially, to double down. Faced with a new generation of games less narratively conventional than those of the 90s, in a 2004 essay[[15]](#footnote-15) she described one of them—*The Sims*[[16]](#footnote-16)—as a “novel-generating system” due to its multiform possibilities, and its creator Will Wright as “a Charles Dickens or Charlotte Brontë of the digital medium.” But does *The Sims* really have the narrative coherence to even warrant description as a multiform story of this type? Starting with a preset amount of money (“simoleons”), in the game the player must acquire the material goods necessary to meet the needs of the “sims” they (partially) control—say, buying a fridge so they can eat, or placing a painting on the wall so they can profit from the elevated feng shui. This is done for no other reason than to enable further consumption: if your sims are happy, they can be more easily shepherded to work, and will thus be able to make money to buy *even more things*. Murray is quite right to see within this setup a socially critical undercurrent—“an ambivalent vision of consumerism and suburban life” hidden “inside a structure that seems simply to celebrate it” (though one might question, in a rather Žižekian way, how much actual critical distance is afforded by this ironization of suburban consumerism). Still, *The Sims* is so indifferent to narrative content, so intent on being a digital dollhouse that one can at best project onto, that it seems an ill fit for her theoretical apparatus. It is easy enough to see how one can draw a line between a multiform film like Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* and a narratively structured adventure game like *King’s Quest*. The former shows us the same narrative through different, unreliable perspectives; the latter invites us to explore a textured, narrative world, creating an experience that—while different for each player—will still reliably follow certain plot beats. If by contrast *The Sims—*a game without fixed characters, without plot events, and without an “ending” to speak of—is a narrative, then anything is. Of course, in some sense, everything *is* a narrative—if I use a putty knife to fill pinholes in my wall with spackling, this is part of the narrative of me as a domestically responsible adult in a capitalist society, just as if I score a triple-double on a basketball team with friends this is part of a narrative of our shared camaraderie. But home renovation isn’t just the self-discovery of *homo economicus*, and sports isn’t just a means of shoring up tribal affiliations. If we foreground these too much, we risk losing sight of what *else* they are.

Nothing in Murray’s subsequent writings, then, did much to diffuse the force of Eskelinen’s critique. This doesn’t mean his article is without its own problems. Eskelinen claims that Murray’s aloof and spuriously political style of analysis would—if applied to chess—earn her the dismissal of the “chess-playing community.” The implication here is that those engaged with games have been too tolerant of voices like Murray, who theorize from afar and have little interest in the inner workings of the games they wax rhetorical over. Against this, he courageously proposes an upheaval against the academics. “Outside academic theory,” he writes, “people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories.” Left unanswered by this is—whether one agrees with Murray or not—the goal of commentators on games should really be to mirror the values of the “game-playing community” (for whom, we can surmise, *a game is a just a game*). For isn’t the risk here that we go too far in the opposite direction, ignoring the way games reflect—and affect—our collective lives, and neutering any kind of higher-order political critique? In his article, Eskelinen evinces passing awareness of this trade-off, describing the more theoretical forms of analysis common to literature and drama as “slightly beyond” the more technical approach that we must take to games as a new medium. Yet he sees it as unavoidable: while formalistic analysis doesn’t have to the end point, it is still a “necessary […] phase” that game studies must pass through en route to its maturation. He is also quick to note the salutary effects formalism could have on commerce. Of video games, he writes, there is “very little understanding of what [is] actually going on, not to mention lots of money to be made and lost […] in the long run [the focus on narrative] may turn out to be even commercially incorrect.”

Here we have an interesting upheaval—one against the narrative and political formulae of academic elites, that styles itself as *for and of the people* but is still poised to benefit commerce. In 2001, when Eskelinin’s article was published, the full meaning and scope of this gesture could not be understood. Even today, strikingly few attempts have been made to relate it to latter-day political events.

Understood or no, Eskelinin’s call for formalization was not—and is not—just his. In 1997, the same year Janet Murray put out her magnum opus, and mainstream games began their migration to the Internet, the Norwegian scholar Espen Aarseth published a Comparative Literature thesis he’d finished at the University of Bergen—*Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. On the surface of things, Aspen’s work was not too different than Murray’s. Both analyzed games using the hermeneutic tools of literature. Both stressed the importance of non-linear or multiform narratives. And both saw the participatory structure of games as being antedated by earlier aesthetic works.But whereas Murray tended to be unbothered by the use of literary tools to investigate games, *Cybertext* was riven by an acute tension. Literary criticism, Aarseth argued, has—ever since the poststructuralist turn—become more and more conscious of the fact that signifiers do not mean the same thing to everyone; that the reading of a text by two people does not guarantee the same outcome. While this shift in perspective is important, these novel forms of criticism nevertheless took for granted the privileged status of the “unicursal,” printed text—that is, books that are read linearly from back to front (while the dominant model, not all books are this way, as examples from the *I Ching* to schlocky eighties ‘Choose Your Own Adventure’ novels attest). The result was that *nonlinearity* become synonymous with *ambiguity*—a nonlinear text was construed as one that invited differing interpretations of the same sequence of events. The proliferation of digital “cybertexts,” however—of which computer games are arguably the most important expression—has made clear that there is another, more expansive definition of nonlinearity available to us. Cybertexts are not just ambiguous, actively involving the user in their interpretation. They also call upon the user to work upon the material of the text, making decisions that influence which aspects of it they will be exposed to—say, whether one will insult an NPC they encounter or flatter them in a text-based adventure game (this is why Aaspen refers to these works as “ergodic literature”—a combination of the Greek *ergon* or work, and *hodos* or path). Faced with this shift, scholars have tended to respond by reading cybertexts through the prism of poststructuralism—as seeing, them, in other words, as empowering the reader. Such a view is not *wholly* untrue. The player of a game, unlike the reader of a unicursal book, has an active—as opposed to merely interpretive—role. But to see games uncomplicatedly affirming the agency of the audience is to lose sight of the way that they are at bottom a social contract, in which one surrenders a great deal of the freedom they otherwise enjoy in order to adhere to their rules. The study of cybertexts thus requires—in addition to an analysis of their narratives, and the role the users play in them—an understanding of their functional properties. At stake here is more than just cybertexts themselves. For at bottom they are just a catalyst, that will allow us to sensitize ourselves to the diverse means through which texts *in general* are transmitted.

*Cybertext* is a strange work. Inspired in particular by text-based games, it draws from the conventions of literary theory. But it also chafes constantly against these limitations, calling for functional analysis as a means of remedying the narrow focus on narrative characteristic of the genre (or of the reader *qua* narrative, as with poststructuralism). In an interview with Patrick Crogan in 2003, Aarseth openly questioned whether *Cybertext* had been successful—whether it’s really possible, as he puts it, to “put literary works, digital literary works and computer games into the same basket.” “[*Cybertext*] started out as a Master’s thesis within comparative literature, so I guess I had to do something to make it look like literature. That’s what I did.” In hindsight, though, “I may have been sidetracked by the literary theory stuff and the literary perspective which may not have been the most valid approach. But in fact there were many text-based games discussed, so the literary perspective made sense with those. As a perspective on games in general, I think it might be a detour.”

Aarseth’s sense that *Cybertext* might be a detour was no doubt partly informed by the commercial collapse of text-based games. When he started writing it in 1989, their heyday—roughly the first half of the eighties, when games like *Zork* and *The Hobbit* enjoyed wide fanfare—had already elapsed. But they still had *some* commercial purchase, as the release of titles like 1989’s *The Hound of Shadow* attests. By the time it was finished, in 1995, text-based games were no longer part of the landscape of mainstream publishing. And by the time it was published, in 1997—a year defined by the increasing adoption of 3D graphics—they redoubled as relics from a bygone age. While *Cybertext* generated interest upon publication, then, this interest *did not have to do with its application of literary theory*—an application that was the natural extension of its anatomization of a dead genre. Instead, what was focused upon was the way that Aarseth, by conceptualizing game as “material machines,” had assembled the basis for a new kind of analysis—one capable of being wielded against the narrative approaches that Murray’s work epitomized.

The repurposing of *Cybertext* didn’t take long. In 1999, a Uruguayan game designer and researcher, Gonzalo Frasca, published an article that attempted to parlay Aarseth’s findings into a new model for studying games—as well as splice them with the work of the iconic French intellectual Roger Caillois (who in his influential pre-video game 1961 work *Man, Play and Games* had developed a typology of their different forms). Titled “Ludology Meets Narratology: Similitude and differences between (video)games and narrative,” its argument is—as is typical of Frasca’s work—concise and eloquent. Noting approvingly Aarseth’s call to analyze “games” and “narrative” as separate—yet interconnected—phenomena, Frasca characterizes as ”narratological” the tendency to treat games *primarily* as narratives. This is problematic because a game—or *ludus*, in the terminology of Caillois—is not the same thing as a narrative. The fundamental characteristic of a *ludus* is the availability of different options—while some of these will achieve the desired result, other will not. Either way, they are not—as with narratives—a “set of chained actions” (though they may appear so, if one watches them without playing). Yet games do not just consist of a set of actions one has to perform, which are either ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ They also involve play for play’s sake, or what Caillois calls *paidea*. If I play *SimCity*, there is no way to ‘win’. I can try to max out my city’s coffers by raising taxes, or eliminate pollutants as much possible, or—should I wish to satisfy a sadistic impulse—wreak nuclear havoc upon my citizens by triggering a reactor meltdown through a click of the menu. This is the other side of games: the way that, in addition to prescribing conditions for success, they compel us to engage in freeform experimentation, determining our goals as we see fit. Whereas *ludus* is the means through which *plot* manifests itself in games, *paidea* is the mean through which the *setting* does. But—contra the views of the narratologists—*ludus* is not plot, and *paidea* is not *setting*. To rectify this, what is required is a new discipline: a field of “ludology” capable of addressing itself to these specific characteristics of games.

With his founding of ludology, Frasca seemed to have—like Mario bounding down another pipe—opened up a new vista for scholars interested in games. Thereafter, things moved quickly. In May 2001, Frasca founded a blog, *Ludology.org*. It was visually clumsy and unassuming—if you logged into in it the month of its creation, you would’ve been greeted by a stock image of a water droplet on a blade of grass and some meanderings about how life in Uruguay stacked up to the Latin-American banana republic simulator *Tropico*. It soon became a crucial resource for game scholars interested in the upstart discipline of ludology, even acquiring occasional citations in the mainstream media. Two months later, the debut issue of the first peer-reviewed journal dedicated to computer game studies, *Game Studies*, appeared. In its opening statement, editor-in-chief Espen Aarseth unambiguously aligned himself with the triumvirate of ‘ludologists’ who had so absorbed his influence—namely Frasca, Eskelinen, and Jesper Juul. Other disciplines, Aarseth claims, have repeatedly attempted to “colonis[e]” video games. That they have done “nothing” with the medium in “thirty years” proves beyond a shadow of doubt that video games are in need of a new discipline, their *own* discipline.

Within a couple of years, this ad-hoc coalition would be rounded out by another member: Ian Bogost. While dwarfed initially by the likes of Aarseth and Frasca, by the late 2000s Bogost would emerge as arguably the most well-known among them—a feat that owed both to his snappy, magazine-friendly prose style, and to the intrigue generated by his forays into philosophy. Indeed, for Bogost ludology, with its formalistic focus on *things* over human narratives, was a natural compliment to the fashionable—some would argue, pseudo-intellectual—philosophy of OOO (“object-oriented ontology”). First developed by Graham Harman, OOO contends that twentieth century has erred in its privileging of humans over nonhuman object. The famed German philosopher Martin Heidegger claims that our default state is to *use* objects rather than to *analyze* them—and that in this sense, they only appear to us as more than instrumental when their use is obstructed (say, when a hammer breaks). But doesn’t this indirect experiencing—as we can glean from the philosophy of Bruno Latour—also occur between objects themselves? When a storm shakes a tree and it brushes against a metal fence, isn’t in some sense experiencing the part of the fence it brushes against? Or when a vending machine rumbles and ejects a can of Coca-Cola for the person standing in front of it, aren’t all three agents partially experiencing one another? While this may all seem like esoteric stuff, for Bogost Harman’s work helped to legitimize the sort of ludological analysis he favoured. Harman’s philosophy vouches for the fact it is not enough to—as Murray does—fixate on the narratives players devise while playing games. Instead we have to understand how games function materially—how the lack of a video frame buffer, for instance, meant that programmers who made games for the Atari VCS had to write each line of video output to the TV, one line at a time (“racing the beam”).

In the decade and a half that lasted from 1999 to 2014, there’s little doubt that ludology helped galvanize the nascent field of game studies, supplying a much-needed dose of formalism to a discipline that too often had dominated by dilettantes. Still, while its purchase on the culture endured longer than the narratology of Murray, it too would eventually encounter serious problems. To understand these, it is necessary to examine its core influences. In separating out *ludus* and narrative, Gonzalo Fransca leans heavily upon the writings of Roger Callois. Yet these writings themselves built upon foundations already established by Johan Huizinga in his 1938 work *Homo Ludens*—a classic in the field of game studies. In it, Huizinga defines play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly.” This is not so controversial; what is more novel is the relation Huizinga describes between play and culture. Whereas play—and by extension, games—are usually seen as *products of culture*, Huizinga asserts that it is in fact *anterior* to it. What is a legal system other than a game that—by establishing rules we have to follow, and doing away with the inevitably subjection criterion of ‘truth’—staves off unironic acts of violence? And can’t we say the same of philosophy, which subordinates truth to formal standards of argumentation? While archaic societies well understood the need for play, modernity has increasingly lost touch with it—and with it, the mutual respect between participants it entails. Writing on the eve of World War II, Huizinga—who had been jailed for his opposition to the Nazi regime—describes the world as having been overtaken by “puerilism”: a form of “false play” in which moral standards are shed, and unspeakable acts of cruelty become commonplace. Fascism, with its aestheticization of war and disregard for international law, is one such expression. So too are the “revolutionary enthusiasms” which emanate out the French Revolution, which—by denying the place of play, and adopting an attitude of arch-seriousness—only enable its reappearance in the form of grotesque persecutions.

It is often claimed that Huizinga, by defending the rights of the “magic circle of play,” renders play—and, by extension, games—apolitical. This is, at best, a sloppy critique. For in fact heassigns to play a clear political function. Though it may not be quite ‘serious,’ the role of play is to—by establishing rules of conduct, and rewarding excellence rather than brute strength—to prevent the “levelling down and democratization” of culture, and to offset the negative effects associated with, among other things, “the entry of half-educated masses into the international traffic of the mind.” It’s for this reason why he invokes play as so crucial to the fight against the twin pincers of communism and fascism: only the re-establishment of bourgeois protocols, it would seem, can prevent the world from sliding further into disaster. This overt concern with the productive character of play forms the crux of the critique Caillois levels at Huizinga in the text of his Frasca draws from—1961’s *Man, Play and Games*. A fellow travel of the Surrealists, Caillois had long been convinced—due to the influence of Durkheim—of the need to revive the collective effervescence that individualistic modernity had dispensed with. In the 1930s, he had followed the siren of his peers at the French College of Sociology, including George Bataille, in seeing the remedy to modernity as lying in the restoration of rituals which resist the injunction to mindlessly reproduce. Much of this owed to the influence of the aristocratic philosophy of Nietzsche, for whom “waste […is a] necessary consequences […] of the growth of life.” Indeed, it is “the teaching of Nietzsche,” as Bataille wrote, that “bring[s] about free human destiny, severing it from […] its rational enslavement to production.”

While he would later distance himself from certain aspects of the philosophy of the *aristoi* propounded by the Surrealists, it is notable that—in his writings on games—this is exactly the tack Caillois takes in critiquing Huizinga. Huizinga, he claims, purport to be putting forth a theory of play in general. But the conspicuous omission of games of chance such as gambling, as well as other types of play which are not agonistic and skill-based, reflect a prejudice deeply lodged within industrial society. “Money spent on gambling,” for instance, “is not used for buying furniture, household utensils, tools, clothing, or dietary supplements, any one of which would result in hastening the growth of agriculture, commerce, or industry. It is expended wastefully, retired from general circulation, and merely circulates rapidly and constantly in a closed circuit.” The apotheosis of this hostility towards waste can be seen in socialist states, which “rest entirely upon *agôn*” due to the fact the “accelerated production of goods” is their “principal, if not exclusive, vocation.” With this in mind, he proceeds to broaden Huizinga’s analysis, delineating four types of games: *agôn* (competition), alea (chance), mimicry (simulation), and ilinx (vertigo). Sports and gambling are perhaps the archetypal expressions of the first two categories. The third “mimicry,” refers to games such as charades, or the masking rituals so common to pre-capitalist societies. The fourth, “ilinix” refer to games that deliberately cause physical disorientation, such as when children spin around in circles, or when adults (hopefully adults!) play drinking games.

In Huizinga’s admiration of the agonistic spirit, then, in his positive appraisal of competition, Caillois finds a more cynical motive: a need to protect the economic axioms of bourgeois society, by licensing play only in as much as it reinforces a meritocratic ethos. Caillois by contrast characterizes play as fundamentally an *aristocratic* activity, in the Nietzschean sense—one that remains an essential respite from drudgery and responsibility even if “no goods are produced.” Echoing Nietzsche almost directly, he describes play as “occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money for the purchase of gambling equipment or eventually to pay for the establishment.” One can dispute the politics of this. Caillois has long suspected of having been sympathetic to fascism; if *Man, Play and Games* is anything to go by, it seems likely that by the 1960s he had followed Bataille in embracing post-war consumerist dirigisme as being (relatively) capable of providing waste for all. Still, in spite of their differences, what can be said of both authors is that they attempt to conceive of play as a form of escapism that, paradoxically, must be accounted for in terms of its relationship to society as a whole.

With the ludologists, the relation to society is less clear. Wanting to analyze *games as games*, their formalistic approach followed Huizinga and Caillois in treating these as self-enclosed systems which reside outside of social reality. But it went further than this in failing to conceptualize the relationship of these to social reality at all. In Bogost’s case, this was compounded by his enthusiasm for object-oriented ontology. For if a game—or for that matter, the world—is just a composite of things, of diverse objects, what role is there for higher-order political structures? Can’t one just say, as Latour does, that capitalism doesn’t exist; that we need to “follow the actors themselves” by examining phenomena like “[stock] trading rooms” rather than resorting to explanation through virtual and shadowy agencies? Perhaps aware of this defect, in his 2006 text *Unit Operations*—and later, 2012’s *Alien Phenomenology*—Bogost takes tentative steps to resolving this dilemma. The problem with Latour, he explains, is that he conceives of actors (or actans) too statically—as if the relations they enter into do not change them in the core of their being. What he proposes instead is a thinking of *units*, which are constantly in flux, and that function at multiple levels. A human for example is composed of an array of cells, which are constantly dying and being replaced. And a social institution—say, a school—is comprised of an array of humans, which are also dying and being replaced. Furthermore the school may cease to exist, just as humans— through evolutionary processes—may at some point in the future cease being human.

Part of the goal of Bogost’s theory of unit operations is to provide an account of *structure*, or how things are directed from on high into systemic patterns—something woefully absent in the work of both Latour and Harman. But what is one to make of Bogost’s claim—made of social networks, but true of his approach more generally—that “individual relationships between friends or colleagues form the groundwork for a social network, not the other way around”? One of the hallmarks of capitalism is that—unlike past economic systems—it does not simply work with *what’s there*. Rather, it transforms the fabric of reality, orienting it towards the production of profit. If you’re living in an industrial or ex-industrial region, as I did for many years in Southern Ontario, this is hardly subtle—one only need to look at the industrial ruins or smoke billowing out of factories to see how the landscape has been terraformed. It would be strange to describe this kind of complex as a case of “discrete unit[s]… forming the foundation for emergent structures.” For in the cases the structures in fact *presage* if not all, then many of, the units in question. It is equally strange to suggest that a social network is something defined above all by the individualized social relations that structure it. Perhaps this is more obvious today, given the many scandals that have plagued Facebook and other networks since the publication of *Unit Operations*. But when one considers the extent to which profit-driven algorithms guide social media behaviour—how videos of Jordan Peterson lecturing about Disney films or racial IQ gaps, for instance, are relentlessly diffused by YouTube—we have to ask the question: are “individual relationships” driving social networks, or are social networks driving individual relationships?

There’s another explanation here. As far back as the nineteenth century, Karl Marx had observed that, when goods are sold on the market, the different portions of labour required to produce them assume “the fantastic form of a relation between things.” What this means is that when one buys a soccer ball from Wal-Mart, they don’t see children behind barbed wire in Bangladesh stitching them for forty cents an hour—instead they see a commodity, which has a price and thus resembles every other commodity. Read cynically, one could argue that Bogost—and by extension the ‘object-oriented’ lineage he hails from—enact this same mystification. Albeit philosophically: when faced with a world united in lockstep as never before under the same economic system, all they see are Starbucks Pistachio Lattes, orange plastic NERF guns, NFL-branded mini-footballs, Dyson V11 vacuums. Of course, they don’t *just* see commodities in their readymade, market form—they also see things which are *not* commodities, from glaciers to giant sequoia trees, as well as those parts of commodities which aren’t typically experienced by the consumer, such as—and aptly, in Bogost’s case—the RAM chip and RF modulator of an Atari VCS. We should give them some credit, then: by examining the atomic elements that shape our reality, they’re sometimes able to provide striking insights—even to things which our dominant discourse neglects (such as the importance of our natural environments to society, or the importance of the material aspects of games Murray so freely ignores). The issue here is that, even when they’re at their most perceptive, their analysis still remains bound up with a denial of the social relations which undergird society. *They see even non-commodities as commodities*. So ingrained is this tendency that—when Bogost reaches into himself, and tries to produce a solution—all he comes up with are half-measure. Yes, structures exist. But they’re emergent, and—we must always remember—ultimately issue from individual things.

All of these theoretical liabilities came to a head in what is surely Bogost’s worst book, as well as arguably the worst book of ludology as a whole: 2016’s *Play Anything*. The problem with our modern world, Bogost contends, is that—while we’re increasingly prepossessed by the idea of ‘fun’—we don’t really know what it means. Fun isn’t just mindless pleasure; rather, it fundamentally arises from assigning limitations to things in a way that allows us to play with them—the way his daughter, while on languorous trips to the mall, avoids stepping on the cracks in order to amuse herself. This practice of turning different aspects of reality into *playgrounds* promises a rapprochement of object-oriented ontology and ludology, since—when we play—we “submit [ourselves] to the same system as the elements [we] have drawn into [our] magic circle.” But to do this, we have to overcome “ironoia”: the tendency to keep ourselves at arm’s length from the world, viewing it only with cynical detachment so as to insulate ourselves from its inauthenticity—or the dangers it entails (the clichéd caricature of which is the hipster who wears a gaudy Céline Dion t-shirt, more to mock the overemotive singer than to identify with her). You think a Filet-o-Fish from McDonald’s is boring? Wrong! Once you reverse engineer it in your kitchen, it becomes “remarkable.” You think Wal-Mart is a banal repository of superfluous products, manufactured under grueling conditions? Well you may be right—but it’s really fun to convene with its limitless supply of consumer objects, or make a Tumblr blog chronicling its “bible of prosaic miracles.”

There is much to be said about the limitations of irony as a means of engaging with the world. And Bogost is likely correct when he interprets this pathology as arising from exhaustion with the commodification of seemingly every aspect of reality, so that even the visage of Che Guevera can be spotted on t-shirts manufactured with sweat shop labour. But the injunction to *play anything* goes awry when it shifts from critiquing irony to undermining more substantive political objections. Take his view of Walmart: he freely admits that it’s full of needless products, bad for the environment, causes precarious jobs and the outsourcing of manufacture, and destabilizes local businesses. Yet he still justifies his view of the need to play Walmart on the grounds that “the universe doesn’t care how […] much gratification we derive from” it. Things won’t change, Bogost seems to be telling us, so the best you can is enjoy them. Granted, it’s likely true that looking down our noses at Walmart won’t do anything to alter our society—for that, these objections would have to congeal into a more meaningful form of political practice. But it still seems quite dubious to ask that we suspend such doubts entirely, or to—as Bogost repeatedly does—dismiss them as a form of snobby posturing, as if politics can’t be more than a species of fashion.

On this point we can observe a marked difference from the work of Huizinga and Calliois. For Huizinga, play is a means of raising society to maturity; for Caillois, it is a necessary release lest we degenerate into automatons driven entirely by the monolithic demands of industrial production. Bogost tips his hat—or maybe lofty mane—to Huizinga, arguing that his thesis of *playing anything* is indebted to his notion of the “magic circle to play”. But he wants to emphasize its conceptual dimension—the way that, beyond just describing designated sites such as the “arena” or “theater,” it also denotes “a more ordinary process of material or ideal circumscription.” “The circumscription of play,” he writes, “is really just the context of particular uses or states of things”—be they shopping mall tiles or Filet-o-Fish burgers. But the difference that separates Huizinga and Bogost becomes subtly apparent when one considers examines closely how he contextualizes his work. Take this passage, which quotes from the first chapter of *Homo Ludens*:

In the middle of this passage Huizinga lists a series of examples of these sorts of deliberately marked-off playgrounds, many of which illustrate his larger argument about play’s central role in the development of human culture: “The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc.” Most of these are quite specific, naming particular locations where the stakes of culture play out, so to speak. Gladiatorial combat and sport take place in the arena and the tennis court; gambling at the card table; ritual and religion in the temple; mimicry, representation, escape, and carnival on the stage and screen; justice and corruption, absolution and incarceration in the court. But one of these playgrounds is not like the other, and we’ve encountered it before: the *magic circle*.

Via a detour into “Wicca” and the “Hindu and Buddhist mandala,” Bogost proceeds to explain how the magic circle refers to a more general process by which ordinary situations are turned into what he calls—in an attempt to deflate the bombast of Huizinga’s trad bourgeois phraseology—“playgrounds.” What he never stops to consider is that, while ‘circumscription’ is clearly alluded to within *Homo Ludens*, there’s a reason why Huizinga’s examples are by comparison with Bogost’s “quite specific.” Unlike Bogost—or Caillois, for that matter—Huizinga was the product of a pre-consumerist society. The “golden age of capitalism” had not yet occurred, and daily life was not yet governed by the injunction to consume—and its corollary, the injunction to enjoy (this is to say that consumerism had not been trotted out yet, as in the *Mad Men* era, as the solution to how to get people who had enough to live already to buy more). While acknowledging that the “play-element” is a pervasive feature of different cultural rituals from religion to war, Huizinga thus tends to see play proper as occurring at its margins—in specific, culturally sanctioned zones. This goes hand-in-hand with another aspect of his work: the fact that he is deeply concerned that play has begun to migrate too far outside of its traditional confines, serving as cover for “social or political design[s].” Not because of consumerism, but because of war. In contrast to drilling or even diplomatic overtures, war is a matter of great “seriousness.” Modern warfare however, by treating violent conflict as the sole vocation of seriousness, erases the line between play and seriousness, making war—in spite of its avowed intention—into play. Our society, he writes, has “lapsed into the old agonistic attitude of playing at war for the sake of prestige and glory.”

The point here is not that Bogost is a fascist—it seems unlikely that a college-tenured scholar of the cyber arts and enthusiast of almost exclusively apolitical philosophies would harbour these views. But it’s worth of posing the question of whether Bogost is as much a partisan of the conflation of play with consumerism as a Nazi theorist like Schmitt—who Huizinga criticizes—is of the conflation of play with war. When he insists that we can even make McDonald’s fun by playing with its products, his remarks seemed aimed at a particular kind of personality—basically the sort of disaffected leftists he likely regularly encounters in a college environment. Outside this context, his comments seem decidedly less provocative. Is it worth noting that McDonald’s is a company that shows adverts of children having fun playing with their food? Or that they literally sell toys with meals? Of course, Bogost never says at any point that *to play is to consume*—this isn’t his thesis. But when he presents it as an activity enabled by the leisure and material acquisitions afforded by middle-class existence, he comes close enough.

Perhaps the most glaring example in the book is Bogost’s description of his effort to maintain his “perfect American lawn.” Early on in the book, he recounts at length how—after installing and culturing new sod, due to a fungus that spread through his lawn after snowfall—he is devastated to discover that his inept application of chemical fertilizer had caused fertilizer burn, leaving it blemished with yellow patches. Regarding the doubts he experiences at this moment, he writes that:

It’s Mark’s fault, or the Scotts Company’s! Why didn’t Mark tell me exactly what I needed to do in intricate detail? Why were the Scotts Turf Builder with Halts instructions unclear or incomplete? Someone is to blame, and it’s not me. “Where’s Mark’s contract?” or “I’m going to write a letter!” dads everywhere might intone. (Don’t worry, I didn’t write a letter.)

Suddenly, the ascetic arguments against home ownership and the ecological ones against landscaping feel newly relevant. Why do I even have a lawn? What a waste of water and space and money, and at a time when so many have so little, and when climate-change-driven drought and superstorms promise to forever unseat the silly, midcentury dream of home ownership and lawn-care obsession. I could sell the property, rent a more modest one within biking distance of work, and donate the time I would have spent doing lawn care to local cycling-ordinance advocacy.

In spite of being tempted to blame the neighbour who recommended the fertilizer in question, or the overly vague instructions on the packaging, or himself for engaging in activities both frivolous to unconducive to environmental conservation, he ultimately realizes that the solution is simply to go about methodically fixing the problem. He has to *play the lawn*. In passages like these, it’s clear that Bogost views legitimate political concerns—regarding the future of the planet, for instance—as little more than petty ruses we conceive to distract ourselves from what really matters: convening with the objects—and as is often the case, commodities—in our environment. Seriousness becomes play, and so there is no space left for seriousness. Mocking students of suburban lawn care such as himself, he writes, is simply a way of “avoid[ing] even wanting to own a house you can’t afford anyway.”

Equally suggestive is *when Play Anything was written*. The book was published in September 2016. Beginning in August 2014, the video game industry suffered its greatest setback in decades. With neo-fascism at the gates, and the industry in urgent need of political intervention, Bogost—and ludologists as a whole—were tending their lawns.

**V**

The worst crisis the gaming industry suffered since the crash of Atari in 1983 began inauspiciously. In August 2014, a game by upstart indie designers Zoe Quinn and Patrick Lindsay was published on the online distribution service Steam. As its ironic title suggests, *Depression Quest* is not a conventional game—it is, rather, a work of therapeutic interactive fiction; *Zork* as a self-help book (part of game’s proceeds are donated to the The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline):

*You are a mid-twenties human being. You have a significant other named Alex who you are rather fond of, that you have been seeing exclusively for the past few months. The rest of your social circle consists of a variety of friends and acquaintances, some of whom you met at your day job which is a little boring, but pays the rent. You'd like to be doing more with your life, as would your parents, but you're still in the process of figuring out what that means and how to go about it.*

*Depression Quest* is not, admittedly, a milestone achievement in interactive entertainment. Nor is does it seem like it was intended to be. Almost willfully shoddy and primitive, it seems to have been made with the narrow goal of creating a conversation about the kinds of storytelling approaches—such as those that deal with mental health and the subtle dynamics of interpersonal relationships—that the mainstream industry, with its often prefab genre titles, has largely forsook.

Such a charitable view was not shared by *Depression Quest*’s critics. As the game attracted progressively more mainstream attention, eventually culminating in its high-profile Steam publication, it was increasingly cited by a rabble of online detractors as being indicative of the malaise affecting the industry; the pernicious invasion of it by politically correct SJWs, or “social justice warriors.” Such acrimony reached a head when Quinn’s former boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, published a 9,500-word blog post which quoted from personal correspondence and alleged, in so many words, that Quinn was a slut. Shortly after, his post was linked to on the imageboard website 4chan—a site known for its regular incitement of Internet vigilantism.

There, commentators quickly drew an erroneous connection between Gjoni’s claim that Quinn had initiated a relationship with game journalist Nathan Grayson (of Kotaku) and the positive press *Depression Quest* had received (in fact, Grayson had never reviewed Quinn’s games, and the only article in which he had mentioned her was published before their relationship began).

What followed was collective mania. As stories of Quinn’s infidelity and supposed infiltration of the gaming media spread from discussion group to discussion group, the backlash against Quinn soon came to be seized upon by the vanguard of the alt-right (the term “Gamergate” itself was coined on Twitter by actor and self-described “small-government libertarian” Adam Baldwin, an avid follower of conservative provocateur David Horowitz). Rape and death threats were made, virtually all of Quinn’s online accounts were hacked, and—due to the doxing of her persona information—Quinn was forced to flee her home. “Next time she shows up at a conference we … give her a crippling injury that’s never going to fully heal … a good solid injury to the knees. I’d say a brain damage, but we don’t want to make it so she ends up too retarded to fear us,” bravely wrote one poster on 4chan, anonymously. Nor did was it only Quinn who was targeted: in short order, other women in the game industry who could be yoked into the social justice agenda—such as game developer Brianna Wu and feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian—came under fire.

For an industry that had for years tried to present itself as being comprised of more than social maladjusted young males, Gamergate was an unprecedented PR disaster. Since the scandals that had engulfed—as well as likely aided the sales of—the *Mortal Kombat* and *Grand Theft Auto* series in the mid-90s and mid-00s, the mainstream media had begun to moderate its tone regarding games, even contemplating at times that they might have positive effects. GamerGate gave it a new moral cause to champion. No longer were games the cause of politically ambiguous acts of mortal violence, such as the mass killing at Columbine. Instead they were a tool which the far right was using to recruit new members, spreading organized misogyny and white nationalist ideology.

To be fair, there was certainly more to this than the idea that *video games caused violence*—a charge for which there has never been a shred of proof[[17]](#footnote-17). Though the extent to which the gaming community as a whole were to blame was invariably exaggerated by the media, GamerGate was clearly the consequence of the convergence of disaffected gamers and alt-right ideologues; moreover, by 2016, many of these began to shift their support to Trump. 4chan became a veritable repository of pro-Trump memes; his diagnostic of an America suffering from a surplus of political correctness was taken an affirmation of the effort to expel SJWs from the industry. On 4chan, games are often presented as a means of coping with an otherwise meaningless existence—how men without much direction in life, and who receive little attention from women, fritter away their days. This doesn’t mean that they function as objects of derision—inherently ambiguous, they are typically presented in memes and on dialogue in the forums as a regrettable if necessary ‘safe space’ for men who couldn’t find a place in a society that ostensibly doesn’t need them. The critique of games as overly preoccupied with male fantasy—a critique explicit in Sarkeesian’s commentaries, but also taken to be implicit in titles like *Depression Quest*—was thus seen as a last straw: *they are trying to take away even this.* Trump’s grotesque life, magnified by his grotesque wealth, made him—and continue to make him— an object of disdain for liberal aesthetes. He’s a winner and loser at the same time: someone who, no matter how much success he achieves, will never fully win the approval of his peers. In this sense he is—for the perpetually adolescent readership of 4chan—both ego-ideal and object of identification. And could we say he’s even something of a gamer? With his narrow focus on ‘winning’ and ‘making deals,’ he has little regard for the seriousness of politics, instead treating it as an extension of his brand marketing. He won the Republican primarily by shrewdly exploiting whichever positions were more popular amongst the base than amongst party-vetted candidates. Some of these, like his call to ‘build a wall’ and ruthlessly root out illegal immigrants, were odious. Others, such as his deriding of foreign wars as costly and unproductive, were not. In either case, they seemed to have a tenuous relationship to what he actually believed.

Then there’s the question of the industry itself. Though the online flash mobs that targeted the likes of Quinn and Wu were hardly rational actors, no analysis of GamerGate would be complete without noting that video game journalism is a notoriously corrupt field, with publishers often pulling ads or press credits as retribution for low review scores or otherwise unfavourable coverage (the sordid details of this are widely available online, and scarcely need to be recited here). Yet this compulsion to control the media—though to some extent inevitable—likely owes to the deeper economic problems the mainstream industry is confronting. Prior to roughly the year 2000, video games—in spite of yielding a lower *mass of profit* than in later years—had a higher *rate of profit*. It has always been the case that most games lose money. But the colossal success of titles 1997’s *GoldenEye 007*, which made $250 million on a $2 million development budget easily offset this, insuring that the industry to continued to attract new investment. Moreover, for a game with a 12,500% profit rate, *GoldenEye* didn’t have to sell very much, at least by today’s standards: eight million copies were shipped. As time passed, though, things began to change. To stave off upstart developers and to remain competitive with other firms doing the same thing, it was necessary to raise budgets. Without a corresponding (inflation-adjusted) increase in game prices, this had the predictable effect of causing publishers needing to sell far more copies to break even—before we even discuss making a profit[[18]](#footnote-18). Indeed, today an AA game typically needs to sell between 2 and 5 million copies just to not lose money. It may sound impressive to say that a game like 2020’s *Cyberpunk 2077* has—by selling twenty million copies—made one billion dollars in revenue. But it cost $313 million to market and develop. If you have that kind of money lying around, there are—in a world inherently favourable to capital investment—far more efficient ways to multiply it.

Feeling the profit squeeze, over the past two decades the game industry has adopted more and more aggressive strategies for shoring up their bottom line. Piracy was *proven* by large publishers to be the source of the problem, with intrusive ‘digital rights management’ software often being required to run games[[19]](#footnote-19). The ‘middleman’ of physical retail was cut out of the equation by online distribution services like Steam and GOG. Alienable property in the form of used games were declared a sin against the industry—an issue that tidily resolved itself once the arrival of digital distribution services signaled the end of resale rights. ‘DLC,’ or downloadable extra content, was employed as a roundabout way of raising game prices (even when the extra content was already on the disc). A subscription-based model like that used by *World of Warcraft* became en vogue, effectively financializing game purchases so you could pay, say, $600 over five years. ‘Free to play’—but, as is often the cases, pay to win— games became normalized, with titles like *Fortnite* or *Overwatch 2* being distributed for free, on the grounds that it’s more lucrative to maximize the player base then charge them for perks and extras. And the media was clamped down upon, with publications who had the guile to dole out negative reviews to big budget projects being treated as ‘irresponsible,’ like infants who hadn’t been adequately potty-trained. *Don’t you know people could lose their jobs?* But because there’s no reasonable amount of money game publishers could extract from consumers to restore the old profit rate, these efforts were never fully successful (indeed, the only thing that could do that would be the wiping out the major firms, and the rebooting of budget levels). The result has been, disinvestment from the mainstream industry, with even storied firms like Konami concluding that it’s better to kill off key properties like the *Metal Gear Solid* series than compete under these conditions (they’d rather make gambling machines, an investment that certainly has a higher profit rate). It’s also led to increased monopolization, as firms scramble to insulate themselves from the risk of bankruptcy engendered by expensive projects. This is not a *new trend*: Electronic Arts absorbed and crushed underfoot several acclaimed developers in the nineties, from Bullfrog[[20]](#footnote-20) to Origin[[21]](#footnote-21), and Squaresoft was essentially taken over by Enix in 2003 after the former’s *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* bombed at the box office. But it’s reached rather insane proportions today. In 2020, Microsoft purchased ZeniMax Media for 8.1 billion dollars—a video game holding company most famous for the *Elder Scrolls* games, but that also had acquired the assets of id software in 2009 (*Wolfenstein, DOOM, Quake*). At the time, it was the second-largest acquisition in the history of the industry. Eager to top themselves, in January 2022 they announced they were buying Activision Blizzard for 68.7 billion dollars (as the disjunctive name suggests, the company was itself the product of a 2008 merger). Far and away the biggest acquisition ever, this instantly bequeathed Microsoft with about one-fifth of the best-known video game franchises—*Call of Duty*, *Tony Hawk*, *Guitar Hero*, etc etc. Of course, Microsoft’s rivals are unpleased, and it’s possible that the purchase will yet be reversed due to the threat or actuality of anti-trust proceedings. But in any case it sends a clear message regarding the direction of the industry.

This crisis is not just commercial. The nineties was a golden age for the mainstream industry, because—whatever concessions were made to linear design—they represented a sweet spot between innovation and financing. Investors had caught on to the fact that the industry was a goldmine, and—while they imposed some constraints—they still were largely content to allow developers a level of autonomy. After all, the high profit rate was a surefire sign that game developers knew what they were doing. And who wants to toil day and night interfering with a project that only costs two million dollars? Especially when you don’t know anything about it? This situation, coupled with the technological leaps of this period—from 3D to the Internet—meant games from this time tend to disproportionately represented on ‘best ever’ lists. On IGN’s 2021 list of the top 100 games ever, for instance, four of the top ten come from this decade[[22]](#footnote-22)--not bad for a fifty or sixty year-old industry. The situation here is likely quite similar to the sixties for music—it’s a decade celebrated because it represents the moment when mass interest was piqued, but before corporate suits swooped in to swallow it whole. But today, when budget rates are higher, when the profit rate is abysmal, when even many ‘financial professionals’ have grown up with games, there cannot be mainstream innovation of this sort. To get fifty million dollars means making *Mario but better, Grand Theft Auto but better, Fortnite but better*. It’s true that indie games have carved out a niche for themselves, and it’s there where one is likely to find titles that reprise the creativity of this earlier period (which makes sense, given that a million dollars was the budget of a mainstream game in the nineties, but is the budget of an indie game now). But staggering successes like *Minecraft* are the exception, not the rule. Dwarfed by the development and marketing budgets of their mainstream peers, indie games seem bound to remain a sideshow, with a small stratum of titles slipping in and out of public consciousness.

The issue of economics equally cannot be separated from that of corporate-mandated ‘diversity.’ When the budgets of games were low, a high profit rate could be maintained without appealing to a cross-section of demographics—all that was needed was a base of ‘gamers’, whose numbers were in any case steadily expanding. For anyone who’s thrown the controller aside in frustration at the unforgiving difficulty curves of older games, this should be obvious enough. The designer here isn’t trying to seduce the player. Their relationship with him—and the male pronoun is used deliberately—is an adversial one: *yeah, try all you want, you can’t beat my fuckin’ game* (though John Romero was probably the only one to do this explicitly, by displaying taunting onscreen messages in *DOOM* when the player went to exit the program). There were premonitions in the ‘80s and ‘90s of the vast riches that lied in store for anyone who was able to broaden the scope of the gaming market. Nintendo, with its eschewal of violent martial themes, was the most successful publisher of that era, with *Tetris* in particular attracting a large female fan base. Maxis’ games—which focused on construction rather than destruction—did similarly well with women; a commercial crossover that culminated in *The Sims* becoming likely the biggest hit ever with this demographic (though it’s arguably no less depressing that women like a game about interior decoration and wooing the neighbour than that men enjoy military shooters). But as development costs increased, there was more and more pressure to appeal to both genders, lest any segment of the market be left behind. This doesn’t just pertain to gender, but also to ethnicity and nation. As long as one needed a $400 console or even more expensive gaming PC to play, the market for games predictably remained dominated by the U.S., Europe and Japan (though poorer markets sometimes participated less directly by acquiring older consoles, which explains e.g. the enduring popularity of the Sega Mega Drive/Genesis in Brazil). Mobile gaming has to some extent shattered these barriers, and game streaming – in which someone pays say twenty dollars per month to access a gaming service analogous to Netflix—may yet go further. But if Western publishers want to beat out the domestic competition in emerging markets like China, they’ll need a heightened level of—how shall we say—‘sensitivity.’ ‘Woke gamers’ like Sarkeezian or Quinn aren’t therefore really *rebels* to the industry. If anything they better reflect its corporate diktats than the trolls who assailed them. This, not some elaborate conspiracy, explains why a threadbare game like *Depression Quest* would be showcased on Steam. The industry has already made palpable efforts to reach beyond its traditional audience. But it knows—given the scale of the economic problem—there is much work left to be done.

GamerGate, therefore, reflected an objective crisis of the industry. This crisis is not unique. Almost all capitalist sectors eventually succumb to monopolization, as a glut of investment depresses the profit rate and forces mergers and acquisitions. Coke and Pepsi are the only significant soft drink manufacturers; for a more pertinent comparison, one could look at the way that the tech sector, after a few decades of vibrant competition, condensed into five firms (Google, Amazon, Apple, Meta/Facebook, Microsoft). Yet far from this generality making the industry crisis moot as a cause of GamerGate, it’s actually what allowed it to politicize itself. Beneath all of the calls to end corrupt games journalism, beneath the misogynistic vitriol directed at Quinn or Sarkeezian, there is a discernable unease with an increasingly abstract and iniquitous late capitalism. But having grown up at the end of history, when there is no ideology but the right to consume, and being—like myself—middle class white males easily disposed to chauvinism, they could not map the real causes of their anger. With fascism, the Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno wrote, the personalization of abstraction becomes a “substitute for knowledge”—the problem of capitalism becoming the problem of the Jew, for instance. The problem of the game industry of the game industry became the problem of ‘SJWs’ and feminists. From there, it was only natural that they be deemed the problem with reality as a whole.

Several years on, the situation has barely improved. Gamer-friendly platforms like Twitch and Discord have become noted hubs for reactionary activity, with these positions becoming a fixture of the culture. Even ‘apolitical’ streamers like PewDiePie have copped to the use of far-right imagery to spur outrage and exploit YouTube’s algorithm. The Gamespot short squeeze of 2021—in which a group of Redditors organized online to buy up stocks of the beleaguered physical retail outlet, thereby sending its value sky high—was less malevolent than GamerGate, and even won the approval of many on the left. But it was still a confirmation of its logic. The ragtag group that assembled on Reddit to enrich themselves, and make a mockery of Wall Street, had fond memories of spending time at the store before the Internet and COVID sounded the death knell of physical retail. The protest against capitalism here—insider trading, the loss of retail jobs, of *de facto* communal spaces—takes the form of the personal. With no other means of organization readily available, it also necessarily occurs within its circuits: if you don’t like what capitalists doing, then play the same game against them.

Given all this, it seems appropriate to ask: why has the gaming community as a whole been so unable to resist the encroachment of the far right? Or, relatedly, formulate a coherent critique of the industry? There are different factors we could point to here—the fact the industry has never had much of a history prior to neoliberalism, the lack of genuine independence enjoyed by the gaming media, and so forth. One would hope, though, that this is where intellectuals would step in, helping shed light on a situation badly in need of illumination. They did not; moreover, it is unsettling that the mantra repeated by the regnant of school of ludology for years—that we want *games as games*, to not ‘make them political’ as the adage goes—bore a resemblance to that of GamerGate. Eager to score points after years of jibes, Janet Murray did not hesitate to suggest this parallel in an interview with *The New Yorker* in 2017:

They want Tetris—or Candy Crush, or perhaps the screen itself—to be a refuge from narrative, she argues, because they’re embroiled in too much narrative already. “It’s a seductive fantasy, very fragile,” Murray told me—the idea that games or other software “can protect us from any reference to the life world,” and just be “an immersion in manipulating symbols.” The fantasy is pervasive: she suggests that GamerGaters, old-school cultural gatekeepers, ludologist hard-liners, and people on the subway are all alike in their implicit desire to imagine games as an otherworld, a playground separate from wider cultural forces.

One does not have to be a partisan of Murray’s views—or even remotely understand the remark about “people on the subway”—to think there’s something to this. Ludology correctly identified the need for a more rigorous analysis of the formal elements of games. The best politics could hope for in this new dispensation was to be deferred “slightly beyond” the present state (in Eskelinin’s parlance). History, however, does not wait. And so the ludologists were put in the uncomfortable position of having *furnished theoretical cover* for a reactionary turn they wanted nothing to do with. This has never been accounted for. Nor has the complicity of Bogost’s thought with capitalism as a whole. In Marshall McLuhan’s seminal 1964 *Understanding Media*, he recounts the story of how, after the Second World War:

an ad-conscious American army officer in Italy noted with misgiving that Italians could tell you the names of cabinet ministers, but not the names of commodities preferred by Italian celebrities. Furthermore, he said, the wall space of Italian cities was given over to political, rather than commercial, slogans. He predicted that there was small hope that Italians would ever achieve any sort of domestic prosperity or calm until they began to worry about the rival claims of cornflakes and cigarettes, rather than the capacities of public men. In fact, he went so far as to say that democratic freedom very largely consists in ignoring politics and worrying, instead, about the threat of scaly scalp, hairy legs, sluggish bowels, saggy breasts, receding gums, excess weight, and tired blood.

This vision of democratic freedoms fits well with Bogost’s object-oriented enthusiasms. God forbid we succumb to ironoia, and focus on the battle between communism and capitalism raging through civil society after Togliatto joined Badoglio’s government at Stalin’s behest. The highest calling of thought is to pay attention to the little things which drive reality: cornflakes, cigarettes, scalp creams, dentals gels, lady’s razors, and diet pills. Of course, it’s unlikely that these sort of views would’ve taken seriously in post-war Italy—the uneasy alliance that was its democracy meant politics remained an indispensable reality, for right and for left. But after the rooting out of disparate factions necessary to—as McLuhan says—“push Cadillacs” has been accomplished, what kind of political expression remains available? The horizon of collective transformation vanishes, and—so far as any lament can be expressed—it speaks the language of commodities. The political becomes so personal it suffocates the lucidity of the political. Can’t you just let us enjoy our games? Can’t we just return to the air-conditioned interiors and stainless glass counters of Gamespot circa 1997?

Though it lacks imagination, there is nothing inherently fascistic about wanting to substitute the capitalism of today with a state of “domestic prosperity or calm,” in which the *right* kind of consumption prevails. Just as there is nothing inherently fascistic about Bogost’s philosophy. For fascism, one must take the next step, and—having committed oneself to restoring this calm—find in the faces of the marginalized the source of its perturbation. Individuals like Sarkeezian weren’t—at least prior to 2014—terribly oppressed. Nor were they terribly interesting, with their talk of “toxic masculinity” and “trigger warnings” being as alien to gaming culture as they were anodyne to liberal, individualistic discourse. But as feminists who called for a less sexist climate, they sufficed to divert attention from the real crisis of the industry. And so a new crisis was created, founded upon diversion. If it lacked seriousness, so too does our boundless magic circle of commodities. Ask many online alt-righters: they’ll tell you they don’t care about the core issues, they’re doing it “for the lulz”; to “own the libs.” Bogost asked us to play anything, ignoring politics. A benign vision, until politics itself collapses into this vertigo.

**VI**

There is one question we have not yet answered. This is: why, in the personalization of abstraction, have games played such a central role? That is, why have they became a source of political intrigue in episodes ranging from GamerGate to the Gamespot short squeeze? To answer this requires that we address another question, one that this book started out by interrogating: what kind of art form are video games?

It would likely be uncontroversial to say that the closest thing to an explanation of the *sui generis* status of video games as an art form can be found in Aarseth’s 1997 *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. It is, after all, the book that inspired ludology—and by extension shaped the dominant critical impulse of the past two decades. With the simplicity characteristic of brilliant arguments, he establishes one by one the axioms that would guide subsequent inquiry. No, cybertexts—the term he uses to describe video games, but also earlier texts that respond to player input like the *I Ching*—do not afford uninhibited freedom. They permit us to take variable paths within a space governed by rules; though some games are freer than others, there must always be a circumscribed limit. These choices are not the same as the *interpretive* choices made by a reader. The rubric of poststructuralism has—focusing on the twin poles of reader and author—alerted us to the importance of the latter. But in doing so it almost always presupposed the unicursal, codex text. To get beyond this will mean acknowledging the role of the text as a material machine, “a device capable of manipulating itself as well as the reader.” This is not strictly a question of cybertexts: *all* texts have a material structure, even those which do not tolerate branching pathways.

Aarseth’s key achievement was to transmute fashionable vagaries and buzzwords—“interactive,” “nonlinear,” “digital text”—into a well-articulated thesis. But, as he would surely admit, *no work of literature is innocent.* Ludology was undeniably a technical advance compared with what came before it. It was also a political regression; one that foreclosed game studies’ engagement with the broader world in a way that proved more damaging than Murray’s sometimes shambolic speculations in the long run. Far from being an invention of the ludologists, though, this political silencing can in fact be traced back to Aarseth’s book. For while he understands clearly the unique character of cybertexts, as well as the video game medium, he refuses to impute to this any kind of political significance:

It is already clear that cybertext (like textuality in general) cannot be narrowed down to either a liberating or oppressive position but must cover both sides of the politicocommunicative field. A developed concept of cybertext thus becomes a tool for the study of the politics of communication, and this potential responsibility must be kept in mind as we proceed. But the politics of the author-reader relationship, ultimately, is not a choice between paper and electronic text, or linear and nonlinear text, or interactive or noninteractive text, or open and closed text but instead is whether the user has the ability to transform the text into something that the instigator of the text could not foresee or plan for. This, of course, depends much more on the user's own motivation than on whatever political structure the text appears to impose. These transformations may occur in any medium and are not governed by the "laws" (technical and social conventions) of that medium but, rather, exploit and subvert such laws for esthetic satisfaction directly connected to this kind of trespassing and subversion.

The “perceived gap between consumer (reader) and producer (author) is,” is for Aarseth “one of the most profound ideological divides in the social reality of modern Western society.” It is not a natural reality, but—following Foucault—something which became increasingly established in in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with a system of strict copyright rules and ownership arriving in the nineteenth. It is historically variable: in the Middle Ages scientific tracts—such as those by Pliny or Hippocrates—were assigned authors but literary ones were not; within modernity, these roles were swapped. The author in this context, as Aarseth puts it, is has “configurative power over not merely content but also over a work's genre and form.” The works of Homer, for instance, were likely not the product of a titanic genius, Homer, but instead oral tales that were refined by various bards overtime. If one were to do this today, adding a few lines to a text then reproducing it for commercial gain, you would—provided the works in question were of any commercial value—almost certainly be shuttled off to the nearest copyright court. The author is also not just a writer: their existence resides in the distinction between the *I* and the author himself. This ethereal presence that lurks in the shadows is also culturally mediated: should a text be too different from the others—too good or too bad, too stylistically or ideologically divergent, too anachronistic with respect to when it was written to make authorial attribution easy—it can be stricken from the canon.

Aarseth, then, politicizes the gap between “author” and “reader.” It clearly represents a hierarchy that is not ‘natural’ in origin. But he refuses to do the same with cybertexts—or the Internet, for that matter—as a whole. One can reject the norms of authorship within any medium—the Soviet Union, for instance, refused to honour foreign copyright laws prior to 1973 (though Aarseth does not mention this). The question is thus always that of the political will of the actors involved. If someone like Michael Hart wants to give away free texts via his Project Gutenberg, this is “not technologically but ideologically motivated, the work of an idealist rather than of electrons.” Likewise, using technology to allow students to communicate directly with academics is “not a technological, but a political, ideological decision, since the technology could just as dispassionately facilitate segregation as integration.” This is connected with Aarseth’s view that, even if technological changes have occurred, it would “be irresponsible to assume that this [author] position has simply gone away, leaving a vacuum to be filled by the audience.” The author’s role may be obscured or changed by new technologies. But in so far as there is still a system of rules which are established, a set of pathways we have to choose from, this can be still be manipulated from above.

Aarseth’s position is clearly a reaction to the cyber-utopism ubiquitous in the nineties—the presentation of “technical innovation” as “a cause of social improvement and political and intellectual liberation” in contradistinction to “the old repressive media.” In an age where the Internet is increasingly enclosed by states working at the behest of corporations, and in which the manipulation of social media algorithms have been essential to the ascendance of the far right, the notion that Internet and games do not contain within them a liberatory ‘essence’ seems intuitively correct (it is striking that Aarseth passingly mentions “neo-Nazi exploitations of the Internet” as far back as 1997). And he is certainly right about one thing: there is no *guarantee* they will create a better world. But is it possible he goes too far in dismissing the idea that they might have a tendential political character—that their internal structure is more compatible with certain political structures than others? In Aarseth’s analysis, technology is nothing more than an instrument through which politics functions. This would be an absurd way to describe the printing press, or the steam-engine, or the birth control pill—even if these could’ve been used in other ways than they were, one cannot separate out the political changes which they influenced from the technology itself. And in fact he seems to acknowledge the delicate foundation upon which this thesis is premised:

The cognitive aspects of hypertext cannot be elaborated here, but in terms of literary theory, it is fair to say that the hypertexts we can observe today, from the novels published by Eastgate Systems to those freely available on the World Wide Web, operate well within the standard paradigm of authors, readers, and texts. Of course there are interesting side effects and novel possibilities resulting from the migration from one medium to another, but hypertext, especially when compared to other new digital media, is not all that different from the old world of print, pen, and paper. Hypertext is certainly a new way of writing (with active links), but is it truly a new way of reading? And is all that jumping around the same as creating a new text?

The term “hypertext” here describes texts which contain “active links” such as text-based adventure games and the Internet, rather than cybertexts in general (which only require player input, and so could be non-text based as with e.g. contemporary video games). While these are not so “different” from the world of “print, pen and paper” in their deployment of the author-function, Aarseth acknowledges passingly that this is eligible to change—or may already be changing. Today, we can observe this. A text-based adventure game like 1980’s *Zork* uses a parser to gauge whether the player has overcome the problem in question; while branching pathways exist, each of these still must be overcome by resolving a puzzle for which the answer is predetermined (giving the jewel-encrusted egg you find in a bird’s nest to a thief who assails you later on so as to appease him, for instance). Many games still conform to this formula, even as they supplement it with a more elaborate graphical interface. But the diffusion of the Internet served as a tremendous impetus for the creation of more emergent gameplay structures—that is, structures that are more loosely rule-governed, and that reward actions the designers may not have envisioned. At the low end of this spectrum are online games like *StarCraft*, in which strategies may be devised that upset its authorship by defying the balance it strives for between factions. At the high end are games like *Minecraft*, where players actually are responsible—within certain limits—of creating the worlds in which they play. In the march towards a capitalist model in which content is infinitely renewed by players themselves, who are effectively charged to become an unpaid class of designers, it is clear that the high end is where the greatest profits lie (and indeed, *Minecraft*—with 238 million sales—is now the best-selling game ever).

One could always say, of course, that none of this proves the author has really disappeared. Minecraft, after all, still has a set of rules one must conform to, and its internal ecosystem is still managed by a corporation. But how appropriate is it—as traditional authorship increasingly disappears, and is replaced by user-generated content—to continue to describe this as a reprisal of the author? “Today's complex media productions,” Aarseth admits, “are seldom, if ever, run by a single ‘man behind the curtain.’” This is true to the point that “we can no longer use the word *author* in a meaningful way.” Yet in spite of freely admitting these changes, Aarseth insists that “the real author must be hiding somewhere else.”

In truth, the real authorship of the most advanced titles today—of which *Minecraft* is one—belongs to the players themselves. The role of the individual author has been hollowed out to a husk of its former self. All that remains of it is the provision of a basic toolkit for creation. And, above all, the assertion of ownership over property. One can spend hundreds of hours toiling away at building strategically airtight maps in *StarCraft*, or elaborate vistas in *Minecraft*. At the end of the day, your efforts will not only have been used to drive up their owner’s stock—you’ll also own nothing. In this way, games highlight profoundly a conundrum characteristic of our entire late capitalist economy. Most of the largest firms today are speculative, kept alive on a drip feed of money printed in semi-regular cycles by central banks. Elon Musk is the richest man in the world. But Tesla ships nothing compared with Ford, SpaceX remains pinned to vague hopes of Mars’ colonization, and cryptocurrency may be worth nothing more than the energy required to mine it (if the recent collapse of FTX is any indication). So far as they’re organically profitable at all, the way they do this—from AirBNB to Uber to Google—is by selling user-created data. Or, alternatively, setting themselves up at the interstices of exchange, so they can extract a toll from transactions they are only indirect involved with (the amount Uber takes when a driver is paid via their app).

Should this lead us to conclude that these new technologies are politically neutral instruments, that have simply been seized by the bad guys? Not at all. Cyber-utopism is not just a fantasy, to be replaced by the sober scholars’ flattened political field. It is rather an overoptimistic reflection of the capacity of cybertexts (or hypertexts) to transform political reality. This is not *separable* from the technology itself. It is *Minecraft*’s structure, not the ‘ideological’ decisions of the users, that dictate that they create the bulk of its content. The same observation can be made of the Internet more generally. A market is, at bottom, a means for distributing goods of which there exists a finite amount. Air? Not so good to sell (though we’ll see in the future). Diamonds? Well, now we’re onto something. But once cultural products with no determinate physical ‘form’ can be freely and infinitely reproduced and distributed online—songs, for instance—there is no organic basis for them to be objects of monetary exchange. In terms of pure technology capacity, we have gone even further in this direction in recent years—the blockchain, for instance, with its decentralized, secure transfers, theoretically renders redundant the existence of toll booths like PayPal or Uber. But time and time again, the same strategy has been used to obstruct these—crippling the technology. One can justify this however they like. They can say that downloading music illegally deprives the author of a wage—even if anyone with a cursory knowledge of Spotify’s royalty structure would know they never had much of one anyway, shy of being Drake. They can say that cryptocurrency can be used to evade tax, or finance terrorism. Some of these reasons may even be valid, in the world we live in. But the result in any case is that the Internet in most of the West is only freer than that of China if you subscribe to the grossly ideological premise that hobbling technology is okay—provided it’s backed by a bourgeois state with an independent judiciary (unlike in ‘totalitarian’ China).

The idea that the new technologies lack are not prepossessed by any political impulse, that they are simply instruments, must therefore be rejected. This does not we can simply succumb to the sort of “technological determinism” Aarseth is so allergic to. In a brilliant essay on the famed analytical Marxist G.A. Cohen, Ben Burgis provides an interpretation of his work that can be helpful. For Marx, the “means of production” consisted of two elements. On one hand, the productive forces—the tools and machines used to create things, as well as the labour and capital this creation requires. On the other, the relations of production— employer/employee, the technical division of labour in a factory, property relations, and so on. For Burgis, these two elements interact, in that there is an “upward” force exerted from the productive forces to the relations of production—the way the centralization of workers in a factory provides them with a potent setting in which to organize, for example. As well as a “downward” force that runs from relations to forces—the way these efforts can still be obstructed by concerted efforts to ‘individualize’ workers; by, for instance, making sure that union membership cannot be compulsory. Whether building maps in *Minecraft* or writing about the latest celebrity scandal on Facebook, it seems safe to say that the Internet and have graduated to being productive forces. But they still remain fettered by *relations of production* which have little to do with their capacity. If one fails to observe this, if one treats technology as ‘neutral,’ the result can only be the total effacement of their political potential. This explains, e.g. the transformation of games into nothing but composites of their formal elements by the ludologists. And, by extension, the complete idiocy of just about everything they’ve ever written about politics. We can take some consolation, though: Burgis follows Cohen—who himself purports to be following Marx—in seeing the productive forces as being more decisive in the long run.

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16. Classifying *The Sims* as part of a new generation of less narrative games is perhaps risky, given that its roots go back to 1989’s *SimCity*—another game that tasks the player with accumulating resources and constructing their environment, and that spawned a cottage industry of Maxis-designed spin-offs starting in the nineties (*SimEarth*, *SimCopter*, etc.) However it makes sense in the context of Murray’s piece, which treats it as exemplary of changes to the industry that occurred after the writing of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*—in this case, of the fascination with “interactive characters” supposedly kick-started by *Tamagotchi* in 1996-7 (though strangely, she makes no direct mention of Pokémon). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. While the obvious culprit for the decline in the rate of profit in the mainstream video game industry is the fact game prices have not risen in accord with budgets, a more Marxist economic analysis would also lay blame on the less labour-intensive nature of game creation today (since, seen through this prism, labour is the basis of value). In the ‘90s, game development was often a hothouse—a few developers would be squirreled away in a cramped suburban building, working 80 hours a week. Today the industry has become more bureaucratized, with less pressure on individual employees (though it’s still hardly a leisurely career choice). More cents on each dollar invested are also spent on costs such as development tools and marketing budgets. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. DRM often requires the player to remain constantly online in order to insure the game they’re playing is not pirated—even if it’s single-player. The result is sometimes an actual crippling of the product in question: the pirated version of 2021’s *Resident Evil Village* (Resident Evil VIII, that is—Vill is like VII, get it?), for instance, ran faster than the retail version due to its culling of DRM. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Arguably Britain’s most celebrated designer, Bullfrog developed Peter Molyneux’s 1989 ‘god game’ *Populous*, which was credited with creating a new subgenre.s [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Founded in 1983 by Richard Garriott, Origin was most famous for the acclaimed *Ultima* and *Wing Commander* franchises. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Super Mario World* (#2), *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (#4), *Super Metroid* (#5), *Super Mario 64* (#7). That these are all by Nintendo suggests they’ve come to dominate the retrospective perception of this decade; but in reality, Nintendo’s creative successes in this period—while remarkable—reflect a climate in which development was not defined by economic concerns to the same degree. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)