August 2012

# Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses

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**Abstract**

Digital games are an increasingly prominent media form but are consistently ignored in critical communication scholarship. Several voices in the field of game studies have advocated the application of communication and rhetorical theory to the study of games, but this effort to cross-pollinate game studies and communication studies has not been reciprocated. This article addresses this lacunae, making the case for critical studies of communication to take up the study of digital games. I argue that digital games are both ready objects of inquiry well-suited for rhetorical methods and generative sites with the potential to stimulate thinking about communication processes in general and rhetoric in particular.

**Keywords**

digital games, criticism, communication, rhetoric, fragmentation, configuration

# Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses

Digital games are increasingly ubiquitous. According to the Pew Research Center, fifty-three percent of American adults and ninety-seven percent of American youths from all walks of life play digital games.[1] Despite their prominence as a media form, games are consistently ignored in critical communication scholarship. Several voices writing from and to the field of game studies have advocated the application of rhetorical theory to the study of games.[2] Though addressed to games scholars, this is a project with significant value for theorists and critics working at the intersection of discourse, popular culture and power. Furthermore, this initial move to cross-pollinate the study of games and communication has not been reciprocated. We have yet to see an effort to enliven or advance the study of communication with insights gleaned from the study of games.

I advocate exploration of both these areas of potentially productive interchange, arguing that digital games are both ready objects of inquiry well-suited for communication criticism and generative sites with the potential to stimulate thinking about the process of communication. I encourage critical communication scholars to take up digital game studies. Games are rhetorical artifacts *par excellence*. They not only engage in multiple levels of representation – textual, visual, aural, narrative and procedural – but also are woven into and through the discursive formations that give shape to contemporary culture.

I also make the case that students of communication could learn a good deal about discourse by studying games. This is not because game studies has an incredibly sophisticated, thoroughly discursive approach to criticism – if so, there would be little cause to encourage communication scholars to study games. It actually requires rethinking some of the suppositions and debates in game studies and abstracting lessons applicable to the study of communication. Still, it is more than a happy accident the both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault use games as concept-metaphors for discourse, and the computational foundation of digital games promises to further enrich the insight and perspective that games yield to communication.

The remainder of this article attends, in turn, to both of these intersections of games and communication.

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[1] Amanda Lenhart, Sydney Jones and Alexandra Macgill, "Adults and Video Games," *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. (2008, December 7)
http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Adults-and-Video-Games.aspx

[2] See Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Chris Paul, *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design, and Play* (NYC: Routledge, 2012); Ken McAllister, *Game Work: Language, Power and Computer Game Culture* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

## Discursive Games

Initially, I hope to make clear that games are thoroughly discursive and therefore should be studied by scholars interested in communication processes as well as the relationships between communication and culture. Digital games are not only a medium that hosts multiple modes of communication, they are enmeshed in the circulation of discourse in public culture.

Digital games often employ visual, aural and textual representation simultaneously, not unlike film and television. However, as King and Krzywinska note, "Audio-visual qualities have been dismissed by some commentators as essentially cosmetic aspects of games."[3] Indeed, focus on game art and sound detracts from gameplay, though at first glance this seems to be more of a concern for game developers than for critical communication scholars. However, we do a great disservice treating games as remediated cinema rather than emphasizing the performative dimension of play, which sets digital games apart. It is heartening, then, that game design theorist Fullerton explains that the visual and auditory aspects of games, the dramatic elements, are what give meaning to the experience of gameplay.[4] In this regard, we are best served by thinking about the activity of gameplay in its material and discursive contexts. After all, gameplay is not a (purely) noetic process. As Myers argues, games are semiotic systems; digital games are collections of signs and play is a form of semiosis, assigning and transforming the meaning of game images and icons.[5] This process is represented visually, aurally and textually.

Commonly (and colloquially) mistermed "video games," a label that places the emphasis on one technology of visual representation, digital games are platforms for multiple modes of visuality, including video and computer generated animation, as well as still images in the form of computer generated art and digitized photographs and drawings. While there are some digital games designed specifically for blind players, as a whole the medium is rich grounds for visual communication scholars. Game characters, environments and objects; title and loading screens; and graphical user interfaces are visual elements laden with significance. The act of playing often requires players to confront and come to terms with these elements, their meaning, and functions. Relating the visual iconography of games to the technological limitations of gaming devices, Wolf

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[3] Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders: Videogame Forms & Contexts*, (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 125.

[4] Tracy Fullerton, *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*, (Boston: Morgan Kaufman, 2008), 86.

[5] David Myers, *The Nature of Computer Games: Play as Semiosis*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

praises the abstraction characteristic of early games as an inducement to think.[6] Of course, players will not consciously register every aspect of a game's imagery. While there is much left to explore, some important work has already been undertaken to examine the work of game representations of gender, age, race and ethnicity to cultivate cultural knowledge.[7]

Less prominent but no less important, digital games also feature a rich range of aural experience. Game sounds include dialog, music and effects, which range from the extra-diegetic noises that accompany menu selections to the diegetic sounds of functioning objects and the ambience of the gameworld. Already, scholars have begun to examine how game music contributes to players' sense of immersion, or presence, in gameworlds.[8] Diegetic sounds can also contribute to immersion, lending a sense of realism to environments and objects. However, as Grimshaw and Schott argue, diegetic sounds also have a functional role facilitating gameplay; they cue players regarding dangers and opportunities in the gamespace.[9] Still others have explored the social impact of sound effects and voice acting, articulating game sounds to ethnic stereotypes and behavioral reinforcement.[10]

Perhaps the least analyzed form of representation in digital games is text. Nevertheless, the written word permeates games, from title screen to credit scroll and almost everywhere in between: menus, exposition, dialogue, performance feedback and objects in the gameworld feature text. However, only limited

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[6] Mark Wolf, "Abstraction in the Video Game," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 47-65.

[7] See Dimitri Williams, Nichole Martins, Mia Consalvo and James Ivory, "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games," *New Media & Society* 11 (2009): 815-934; David Leonard, "'Live in Your World, Play in Ours': Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other," SMILE: Studies in Media & Information Literacy Education, 3.4 (2003): 1-9; Andre Brock, "'When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong': *Resident Evil 5*, Racial Representation, and Gamers," *Games and Culture*, 6.5 (2011): 429-453.

[8] Zach Whalen, "Play Along: An Approach to Videogame Music," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Games Research*, 4.1 (2004): www.gamestudies.org/0401/whalen/; William Gibbons, "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams: Popular Music, Narrative and Dystopia in *Bioshock*," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Games Research*, 11.3 (2001): http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/gibbons.

[9] Mark Grimshaw and Gareth Schott, "A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of First-Person Shooter Audio and its Potential Use for Game Engines," *International Journal of Computer Game Technology*, 7 (2008): doi:10.1155/2008/720280.

[10] Chris Douglas, "'You Have Unleashed a Horde of Barbarians': Fighting Indians, Playing Games, Forming Disciplines" *Postmodern Culture* 13.1 (2002), http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.902/13.1douglas.html; Derek Scott, "The Effect of Video Games on Feelings of Aggression," *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 129.2 (1995): 121-132.

attention has been paid to the conventions of textual representation in games.[11] While it is difficult to say why written text is the least examined type of representation in digital games, this may be related to the anachronistic character of writing, the oldest medium, and the uncanniness of its appearance in such a new medium.

Such an explanation would account for the attention that game studies has given to procedural representation, a mode of representation that, according to Bogost, is characteristic of computational media.[12] Where procedurality, the code-bound execution of computational process, is a characteristic of software, procedural representation is the depiction of how things work. It "explains process *with other processes*" (original emphasis).[13] In this way, Maxis' *SimCity* not only visually and aurally represents a developing city, it also allows the player to experience a simulation that represents how decisions concerning the city's management (e.g. taxes, utilities, zoning) effect that development.

These visual, aural, textual and procedural representations enable games to communicate, both expressively and argumentatively, through narrative. While the idea that games convey stories may seem like a given to communication scholars, digital games spent just under a decade mired in what is called the Narratology vs. Ludology debate. At an impasse over the extent to which game signification, representation and narration warrant attention, the Narratology vs. Ludology debate was, in retrospect, a fairly productive exchange that brought visibility to the field of study and established both the importance of the formal, aesthetic theory of game rules and structures that has come to be known as ludology[14] and the ubiquity of the semantic processes in games. Similar to Fisher's seminal contribution to the field of communication, the outcome of the Narratology vs. Ludology debate was not to posit that games are stories but rather to encourage critics to identify narrative elements in games and to ask what insights can be gained by looking at games *as if* they are narratives. Still, games

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[11] Greg Smith, "Computer Games Have Words Too: Dialogue Conventions in *Final Fantasy VII*," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Games Research*, 2.2 (2002): http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/smith/; Douglas Schules, "When Language Goes Bad: Localization's Effect on the Gameplay of Japanese RPGs," in *Dungeons, Dragons and Digital Denizens: Digital Role-playing Games*, edited by Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock (NYC: Continuum Books, 2012), 88-112; Alice Henton, "Game and Narrative in *Dragon Age: Origins*: Playing the Archive in Digital RPGs," in *Dungeons, Dragons and Digital Denizens: Digital Role-playing Games*, edited by Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock (NYC: Continuum Books, 2012), 66-87.

[12] Bogost, *Persuasive*, 14.

[13] Bogost, *Persuasive*, 9.

[14] Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 221-236.

do not simply contain elements that facilitate sense-making through narrative, they are platforms for a range of storytelling techniques that enable game developers to exert some degree of control over the story. [15]

Digital games not only tell stories, they make arguments. Indeed, the very act of signification, in any of these modes, is an argument advocating a particular correspondence.[16] In games as in other media, 'representations' make claims: this is what a city looks like; this is what a person from a certain ethnic group looks like; this is how a successful business is run; this is how capitalism works. From a critical perspective, these are not representations but rather *articulations* of signifier to signified, which do not reflect a pre-existing relationship so much as they construct the referentiality.[17] Often these articulations appear unproblematic; in the main, they are only perceived as arguments when they explicitly take-up contentious issues.

And digital games do address issues at the heart of public controversy, though science-fiction and fantasy themes are by far more typical. Aliens, cyborgs, zombies, wizards and paladins abound in the fictional worlds of some of the most popular games (and game series). But as Burke famously argued, popular fiction is "equipment for living," an insight applicable to even the most fantastic genres of electronic media.[18] A number of games researchers have produced work articulating science-fiction, fantasy and historically themed games to present-day social and political issues including the War on Terror, racism and multiculturalism, and post-coloniality.[19] Other games are more easily connected

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[15] See Jesper Juul, *Half-Real:Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005) and Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 118-130.

[16] Gerald Voorhees, "The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric and Roleplaying Games," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 9.2 (2010): http://gamestudies.org/0902/voorhees.

[17] Ronald W. Greene, "Another Materialist Rhetoric, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 15.1 (1998): 21-41.

[18] Kenneth Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," in *Philosophy of Literary Form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 293- 304; Barry Brummet, "Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2.3 (1985): 247-261.

[19] See Ryan Lizardi, "Repelling the Invasion of the "Other": Post-Apocalyptic Alien Shooter Videogames Addressing Contemporary Cultural Attitudes," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 3.2 (2009): 295-308; Voorhees, "The Character of Difference"; Gerald Voorhees, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism in *Mass Effect*: The Government of Difference in Digital Role-Playing Games," in *Dungeons, Dragons and Digital Denizens: Digital Role-playing Games*, edited by Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock (NYC: Continuum Books, 2012), 259-277; Chris Douglas, "'Simply Fighting to Preserve Their Way of Life': Multiculturalism in *World of Warcraft*," in *Dungeons, Dragons and Digital Denizens: Digital Role-playing Games*, edited -by

to current affairs. Bullying, sexuality and same-sex marriage, social welfare, terrorism and war are taken up in digital games, which, far from the caricature of the "murder simulator," offer increasingly sophisticated models of the social and legal ramifications of violence and other more complex social behaviors. While some of these matters are tertiary to the themes that organize the games in which they appear (e.g. sexuality in the *Mass Effect* and *Fable* series) other games offer sustained engagement with controversial issues. For instance, Rockstar's *Bully* centered on the petty savagery of adolescent bullying and 2K Boston's *Bioshock* was premised on ideological conflict between collectivism and objectivism. Though designed for the popular market, games that promote social messages blur the line between entertainment games and "serious games."

Designed for the purposes of political outreach, public awareness campaigns, advertising, education and social critique, "serious games," games designed for purposed other than or in addition to entertainment, are becoming more pervasive.[20] The most famous example of the genre, *America's Army*, developed by the U.S. Army and distributed for free over the internet and at recruitment offices and expos, has been around for over a decade. The first advocacy game to go viral, *Darfur is Dying*, distributed through MTV's website beginning in 2006, inspired a multitude of non-profit organizations to sponsor games on topics as diverse as safe internet behaviors for youths, volunteerism, global hunger, and the social and political context of the humanitarian crisis created in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.[21]

Digital games are not simply catalysts for the conversations that emerge around them. By taking up contemporary issues, both allegorically and directly, games communicate. As sites where culture and identity are contested, politics are debated, and knowledge is produced and disseminated, digital games are ripe for intervention by critical scholars of communication investigating the intersections of discourse, power and social action. They are a convergent medium *par excellence*, capable of conveying several different means of representation and host to multiple modes of discourse. This quality makes digital games a rich site for communication scholars to examine but it also complicates the process of inquiry in ways that have the potential to produce insights that might push forward the study of communication as a whole.

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Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call and Katie Whitlock (NYC: Continuum Books, 2012), 278-303; Douglas, "Horde of Barbarians"

[20] David Michael and Sande Chen, *Serious Games: Games that Education, Train and Inform*, (Independence, KY: Course Technology PTR, 2005).

[21] See the Entertainment Software Association's website, "Games: Improving Social Issues," for a list of advocacy-oriented games.

## Gamic Discourse

While I have thus far highlighted the communicative dimensions of games I turn, in this second section, to foreground the gamic character of discourse. I am not proposing that communication is a (digital) game, only that we can gain a more nuanced understanding of discursive processes when we consider them from what Burke would call "perspective by incongruity," *as if* communication is a digital game.[22]

Such a move is not without precedent. Rosenfield once proposed a "game model of human communication" to understand discourse in terms of rules, tactics and customs.[23] The rules, Rosenfield explains, both regulate and constitute action, while tactics describe action with the intention of achieving particular goals, and customs refer to the conventions established by tradition rather than law. In this model, communication is like a game to the extent that utterances are formed according to rules; using the words, grammar and syntax of the language shared by a community of practice a speaker assembles a meaningful instance of communication. Whether or not the utterance is successful it is aimed to some end: to persuade, inform, express or foster identification. And, finally, the utterance will either adhere to customs or violate them producing, alternatively, comfort and pleasure or discomfort and outrage. Rosenfield's game model of communication is a productive starting point for thinking about how the study of games can inform communication scholarship but, perhaps because he does not draw from the anthropological literature on games and certainly because there was no work on digital games at the time of his writing, only the tip of this iceberg. I endeavor to expand on Rosenfield's initial theorization by highlighting three ways – ontologically, methodologically and teleologically – that criticism of digital games yield insights that push forward thinking about how communication works and discourse circulates.

My argument starts from Janet Murray's discussion of the essential characteristics of digital media: procedurality, participation, encyclopedic scope and spatiality.[24] Digital games, Murray argues, "include elaborate rule systems, rely on active intervention by the interactor and convene large numbers of simultaneous players, include vast amounts of information and multiple media

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[22] Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 308.

[23] Lawrence Rosenfield, "A Game Model of Human Communication," What Rhetoric (Communication Theory) is Appropriate for Contemporary Speech Communication? The Proceedings of the University of Minnesota Spring Symposium in Speech-Communication, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 26-41.

[24] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 71.

forms, and offer complex spaces to move through."[25] Though I do not pursue the implications of spatiality, I map the procedural, participatory and encyclopedic qualities of digital games to the telos, method, and ontology of critical communication scholarship.

## Fragmentation

Digital games exemplify textuality. In digital games aural, written and visual representation incite players to enact processes of signification, producing meaning not through mere mental interaction with a finished text but rather through the player's construction of the text in the act of gameplay. However, textual construction does not occur *tabula rasa*; game developers provide an encyclopedic catalog of discursive fragments that players utilize to construct a meaningful experience. Herein lies the first lesson to be learned from studying games: the textual fragmentation explicitly acknowledged in digital games and digital game studies is a property of all texts. Critical scholars of communication who take up digital games traverse an encyclopedic array of textual fragments and in so doing train their perception to recognize the fragmentary status of discourses typically considered unified, coherent and complete.

Digital games foreground this level of fragmentation. They are literally constructed of textual fragments; every character, object, animation, sound effect, graphical user interface, and menu item, as well as various non-interactive elements such as cut scenes, written and aural narration, intermissions between levels, performance assessment tables and tutorials are all discreet components of digital games, accessed by the game software given the appropriate player input, (or never accessed lacking that input).[26] Indeed, Aarseth describes games as "machine[s] for the production of texts," which generate assemblages of textual fragments that are made into a cohesive whole by the work of a user or player.[27] Aarseth also provides a vocabulary to think about the relationships between different fragments of text by distinguishing between textons and scriptons. Textons are defined as the total set of prefabricated textual fragments and scriptons as the strings of fragments configured by an audience or player.[28] To illustrate these concepts, consider Nintendo's classic *Super Mario Brothers* which contains innumerable textons, including the playable Mario and Luigi characters,

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[25] Janet Murray, "Toward a Cultural Theory of Gaming: Digital Games and the Co-Evolution of Media, Mind, and Culture," *Popular Communication*, 4.3 (2006), 187.

[26] James Newman, *Videogames*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 94

[27] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 3, 21.

[28] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 6.

all the toadstools and turtles, and the various environmental and interactive objects populating the levels the player must overcome to win the game. Each level, with its bricks, pipes, turtles and toadstools laid out just so, is a texton too, though a larger fragment than those of which it is made. While most players jump on turtles, collect coins and go sequentially from level 1-1 all the way to level 8-4, others play very differently. Warp rooms are an open secret in *Super Mario Brothers* and they allow the player to move from level 1-2 to level 4-1 and from level 4-2 to level 8-1. The player who takes advantage of warp rooms not only has a shorter encounter with the game, but also produces and experiences a different scripton.

Though such an understanding of textuality is not alien to critical studies of communication, it is also not terribly common. McGee's work in the American rhetorical studies discipline to adapt rhetorical criticism to the postmodern condition by reconceptualizing the rhetorical text is representative of the promises and perils of this line of inquiry. [29] Building from Becker's polemic on the cultural conditions of late twentieth century communication practices,[30] which he describes as materially dispersed, infomatically distributed and technologically mediated, McGee argues that critics and audiences no longer encounter unified, coherent and self-contained texts. Instead, he describes what we uncritically label a text as "dense, truncated fragments which cue [critics] to produce a finished discourse in their minds."[31] Both the fragment/texton and finished discourse/scripton are prime sites for critical inquiry. Emphasizing the intertextual character of the fragment makes critics more aware of the culturally specific knowledge that informs a communicative exchange. These fragments are assembled into finished discourses that are both a discreet unit of meaning and a texton yet to be articulated to another discourse. This article, for instance, would not be possible without the work of those cited herein, even as it makes a distinct set of claims that enter into a larger conversation about future prospects for communication scholarship.

While attention to digital games has the promise to bring into relief the fragmented nature of texts, it is only a starting point. In fact, this ontological understanding of textuality requires more of critical scholars because it presupposes that criticism starts with an encyclopedic quantity of fragments, some of which will be experienced by one set of auditors, some by others, and some not

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[29] Michael McGee, "Text, Context and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 54 (1990), 274-298.

[30] Samuel Becker, "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World," in *The Prospect of Rhetoric*, edited b y In Edwin Black and Loyd Bitzer, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall,1971), 21-43.

[31] McGee, "Fragmentation," 287-8.

at all. The question remains: how is a finished discourse constructed from textual fragments?

## Configuration

The study of digital games requires awareness that criticism is an immanent activity taking place coterminous with the process of textual construction. A computational medium, digital games highlight the interactive process of meaning making that is often ignored or undervalued in studies of face-to-face communication, public address and mediated rhetoric. In other words, doing games criticism means participating in the construction of the finished discourse that is ultimately experienced as the text. Herein lies the second lesson to be learned from studying games: instead of viewing criticism as an act of pure interpretation, critics need to take responsibility for the configurative practices invested in the processes of meaning making.

A foundational presumption of game studies is that the game is only experienced as a text once engaged. Eskelinen emphasizes this process when he describes the "gaming situation" as a "combination of ends, means, rules, equipment, and manipulative action."[32] In contrast to traditional reading (and listening) practices that emphasize interpretation, Eskelinen points to the important supplement of "configurative practice," the dynamic of play that moves the game forward and in so doing creates the text.[33] Aarseth equates this effort on the player's part with the game's ergodic property – from the Greek *ergon* (work) and *hodos* (path) – in order to highlight the "nontrivial effort" of textual construction so central to game studies.[34]

However, games scholars are still wrestling with the relationship between interpretation and configuration in this "non-trivial" effort; at the time of this writing the conversation at the crux of the field, which Bogost has called the "game/player problem," is whether games are best studied through game- or player-centered approaches.[35] The notion that games contain and convey a determinant meaning, which privileges correct interpretation as the means to construct the proper text, is still prevalent in game studies. The game centered

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[32] Markku Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 1.1 (2001): http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/

[33] Markku Eskelinen Ragnild Tronstad, "Towards Computer Game Studies," in *First Person: New media as Story, Performance and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p.36-44.

[34] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 1

[35] Ian Bogost, "Videogames are a Mess." (Keynote Address to the Digital Games Research Association bi-annual conference, Uxbridge, UK, September 2-5, 2009).

approach is anchored, at the very core of the ludological paradigm, to the master tropes of aporia and epiphany that Aarseth articulates to the traversal of game texts. "The hypertext epiphany," Aarseth writes, "is immanent: a planned construct rather than an unplanned contingency. Together, this pair of master tropes constitutes the dynamic of hypertext discourse: the dialectic between searching and finding typical of games in general."[36] This tendency to locate meaning in the game continues in criticism that considers the procedural operation of rules the most essential quality of games, but has always been but one approach and is increasingly contested. Other game critics refuse to locate meaning in the game apparatus, focusing instead on the play that is enabled but not determined by the game. In this view the experience is more important than the thing that enables the experience: "Play is everything about a player engaged in a game, and less about the rules of such game."[37] In this formulation, meaning is generated by the player's response to the game, not the game itself. Scholars employing ethnographic methods are the vanguard of this approach, emphasizing the dialect of interpretation and configuration by theorizing gameplay through the lens of emergence, the tendency for complex behaviors to arise from relatively simple rules and generate outcomes, actions and meanings that cannot be predicted in advance.[38] What they show is that, like the Narratology vs. Ludology debate the preceded it, the game/player problem is not unraveled by privileging either the game or the player as the site of meaning. Games do not control players, nor do players act regardless of game structures. In game studies we see a productive tension between the determinate power of game rules and the creative, agentic activity of play that points to the mutually constitutive meeting of player and game in the process of gameplay.

McGee's joining of interpretation and configuration in American rhetorical studies is typical of contemporary critical studies in general, where the pendulum is on the opposite end of its arc, countering textual overdetermination with playful reading practices. McGee acknowledges the immanent character of the critic (and act of criticism,) charging scholars who do rhetorical criticism to displace the emphasis from criticism to rhetoric and view themselves as rhetors constructing finished discourses. As McKerrow explains, rhetoricians 'address publics' by "construct[ing] addresses out of the fabric of mediated experience prior to passing

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[36] Aarseth, *Cybertext*, 91.

[37] Miguel Sicart, "Ágainst Procedurality," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 11.3 (2011): http://gamestudies.org/1103/articles/sicart_ap

[38] Celia Pearce, *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds Exploring Online Game Culture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

judgment on what those addresses might tell us about our social world."[39] To counter the potential for radically subjective criticism, the rhetorician is figured as a servant bound to the interests of the communities in which they are situated[40] and committed to an agenda.[41] At first blush these are sensible guidelines for criticism, but they nevertheless replicate a failing brought into relief by the imbrication of structure and agency in games. Even when the critic aims to serve the needs of the community, those needs are determined by the critic and not necessarily grounded in the experience of the community. This is exacerbated by the guiding telos of the critic, which further distances the critic and the community by locating the driving force of criticism in the critic. While some locate this license to play with texts and meaning in Derrida's critique of logocentrism,[42] this tactic of textual production is, in fact a form of logocentric white mythology. The critics takes his or her own mythology and generalizes it as reason, erasing the scene of its production.[43] Rather than produce a finished discourse that reflects the pattern of experience of the community we have a heliotrope, a return to the self-same; instead of reflecting the experience of the Other the text says what the critic sees in it. The most fundamental way of thinking and reasoning in the West, critical studies of communication are infatuated with self-presence, projecting the ethos of the critic into the text.

Attention to digital games might help critical scholars of communication reinvest in the text. This does not mean slavish attention to the "proper" interpretation of texts, but it does mean close, attentive readings that elucidate how texts structure the possibilities of interpretation. As Culler explains, Derrida's deconstruction is not about radically subjective, playful interpretation. Rather, it is a practice of close reading and "exploration of textual logic."[44] In game studies we have a model for this methodology. Play is neither whole free nor fully fettered; it is enabled by and emerges from the rules without unthinkingly obeying

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[39] Raymie McKerrow, "Critical Rhetoric: Theory and Practice," *Communication Monographs,* 56 (1989), 101.

[40] Norman Clark, "The Critical Servant: An Isocratean Contribution to Critical Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 82.2 (1996):111-124.

[41] Maurice Charland, "Finding a Horizon and a *Telos:* The Challenge to Critical Rhetoric," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 77.1 (1991): 71-74; Kent Ono and John Sloop, "Commitment to Telos – A Sustained Critical Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs*, 59 (1992): 48-60.

[42] Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender Skepticism," in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 226.

[43] Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 213.

[44] Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 227.

them. The critic's participation in the process of textual construction, by doing the same, can ensure that the finished discourses speak to the communities in which they intervene.

## Games of Truth

Digital games literalize technologies of truth. While game rules cannot determine player responses, the procedural execution of code does govern the deployment of game elements in response to player input. This means that studying games necessarily entails attention to the game rules that govern how play is evaluated and how feedback, which invites further play, is generated. Herein lies the third lesson to be learned from studying games: digital games model the discursive formations that give shape to what is reasonable, what is possible and what is foreclosed in a given historical moment, enabling critical scholars of communication to better conceptualize the operation of power.

With several representational modalities at their disposal, digital games often stage elaborate scenarios that not only invite but require a player's response. Whether players are tasked with building a city or becoming a more powerful warrior, progress toward goals is measured in terms of evaluative criteria programmed into the game software. This is the basis for Frasca's conception of games as simulations. For Frasca, a simulation models *some* of the behaviors of a source system – his favorite example is reality – in another system, such as a digital game. Simulation is relatively unique to the medium of games because, unlike television, radio and other representational media that allow the audience an immersive experience, a game also enables a player to interact with its model of reality and alter events and outcomes.[45] As a simulation, a game claims to represent reality at the expense of alternative constructions, but no matter how immersive and interactive the simulation it will always be partial. The very parameters of the simulation, every relation between every object and idea, are determined not by reality but by the notion of reality that humans – awash in a sea of discourse – program into the software. In short, the epistemological force Frasca assigns to simulations is derived from their capacity to both selectively promulgate and repress certain aspects of reality in order to produce a set of imperatives and probabilities for action. This theorization of simulation allows games scholars to examine how games participate in the construction of what we know of the world around us, how we make sense of it, and how we act given that knowledge.

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[45] Gonzalo Frasca, "Simulation Versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology," In *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron, ( New York: Routledge, 2003), 223.

Critical studies of communication approach language as a site where knowledge is created, disseminated, and contested, but theorizations of the relationship between discourse and the materiality of bodies and practices are haunted by the specter of domination. In the main, paradigms have shifted from the dialectical materialism of classical Marxism to Althusserian and Gramscian inspired ideology critique and again to post-Marxist linguistic analysis, but these shifts have largely mirrored the fortunes of structuralist and post-structuralist theory. As a result, agency is almost always theorized in opposition to structure, criticism is typically concerned with domination, and when agentic action is examined it is invariably constructed in opposition to power. Agency becomes a feeble tactic of evasion or form of escape rather than a potent strategy of struggle. While this critical orientation is often attributed to Michel Foucault's retheorization of power as diffuse and amorphous[46] it ignores his most essential insights and their contribution to his genealogical project to unearth and lay bare the construction of truth in western societies, the historical contingencies that lubricate the passage from one regime of truth to another,[47] and the ways in which various populations negotiate these discursive regimes, which he also terms "truth games"[48]. Discourse participates in the instantiation of power by constituting persons and populations according to the intelligible subject positions produced within discursive formations, but this is not done to subjects. A person may either subjectivate his- or herself to power or, with great care, contest it. Foucault explains, "There is a battle 'for truth,' or at least 'around truth'… 'the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the 'true.'"[49] While there is no escape from power in Foucault's theorization, there is the potential to work with or even refigure power in a manner that supports social justice.

Studying digital games exposes critical communication scholars to domination, collective resistance and the transformation of power. Games function as technologies of domination by disseminating governing rationalities through an economy of rewards and punishments that discipline behavior and train "good" players. But they also enable patterns of play, sometimes discussed

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[46] Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Political Theory*, 12.2 (1984): 152-183.

[47] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow, (London: Penguin, 1991), 76-100.

[48] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, and P.H. Hutton, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 17-18.

[49] Michel Foucault, "Truth and power." In *The Essential Foucault: Selections from the Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, (New York: The New Press, 2003), 317.

as emergent behavior and sometimes analyzed in relation to "theorycraft,"[50] not imagined by developers. This is not a matter of failing to play by the rules, but rather of knowing the rules so well that positive feedback can be gained through play that is seemingly counterintuitive or illogical. Finally, digital games are typically "patched" with software updates that respond and adapt to player behaviors, altering the rules to foreclose emergent play practices that are judged to adversely affect the game and actively foster those practices deemed to enrich the game.

## Conclusion

Critical studies of communication have much to gain from digital games, both as objects of inquiry and object lessons in communication theory and criticism. Games are an area that communication scholars have only begun to explore, but they are an increasingly common means of expression, information sharing and persuasion. Their multiple, converged modes of communicating about socially relevant issues warrant more attention. Of course, digital games present critical scholars with a unique set of challenges: they are a computational medium that simultaneously employs visual, aural, written and procedural representation.

But these very difficulties will be instructive, enabling critical scholars of communication to better grasp the operation of discourse. *Ontologically*, digital games are exemplary rhetorical texts; fragments made into finished discourses, they announce rather than obfuscate the fabrication of the text. Attention to games as texts can train the critic's perception of the fragmentary status of discourses typically considered unified, coherent and complete. *Methodologically*, digital games criticism requires both interpretation and configuration of texts. While traditional approaches reduce criticism to interpretation and contemporary cultural studies emphasize configuration, the practices of gameplay bring attention to the interweaving of interpretation and configuration in the fabrication of both text and meaning. This agentic activity, enabled by but not subservient to the rules that structure the game, suggests a productive way for critical scholars of communication to rethink the *telos* of critical practice. Digital games are instantiations of discursive formations within which knowledge is confirmed and contested as different moves, or plays, are made available, foreclosed, attempted and evaluated.

Games are thoroughly discursive and it is up to communication scholars to stake a claim to these artifacts. Though discourse is, in several important ways,

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[50] Christopher Paul, "Optimizing Play: How Theorycraft Changes Gameplay and Design," *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Games Research*, 11.2, (2011): http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/paul

gamic, it is unlikely that games scholars will make a play for communication theory. After all, this is not their concern; it is a future for communication.

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