

Old Dominion University

ODU Digital Commons

---

English Faculty Publications

English

---

2012

## Editor's Introduction: Playing for Keeps: Games and Cultural Resistance [Special Issue]

Marc A. Ouellette

Jason Thompson

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english\\_fac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs)



Part of the [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [Digital Humanities Commons](#), and the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#)

---

[Current Issues](#)

[Contributors](#)

[Past Issues](#)

[Call for Papers](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search](#)

## ***Reconstruction* Vol. 12, No. 2**

---

Return to [Contents](#)»

### **Games and/as Resistance / Marc Ouellette and Jason Thompson**

**Keywords:** gaming, game design, resistance, immigration

<1> This edition is as much about Game Studies as it about the games being studied. At its heart there are really two impulses behind the collection of critical thought we have been fortunate enough to gather for this issue of *Reconstruction*. First, there is the sense that games can't do anything. Second, there is the sense that games don't do anything. Their origin (and the underlying biases) makes these sentiments particularly intriguing. In the simplest terms, these premises delineate competing camps, as well. Roger Ebert notoriously asserts that video games will never be art (Ebert). Similarly, and yet quite differently, Espen Aarseth proclaims that a game has no intertext (cf. 48). Frankly, locating a project within these dismally disparate parameters is kind out like hitting water after falling out of a boat in the Pacific Ocean. It is, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant. Nevertheless, the question of games and cultural resistance is something of a loaded one given the prevailing popular and professorial positions on the subject. For his part, Gonzalo Frasca, wonders if (video) games will ever have the purchase to qualify as progressive political texts (cf. 86). Moreover, neither of the current editors began approaching games, gamers and gaming with either or even an inkling for these positions. Quite simply, we recognize that gaming is a (kind of) social act. It doesn't take a rhetorician—though one of us is—to notice that any assertion implies its negation, nor does it take someone versed in cultural theory—though that would be the other of us—to find that any discourse defines itself by implicitly disqualifying and that this signals a clear relationship of power.[1] For us this means that when

taken together games clearly have the power to move men's hearts in the classical sense. Said another way, the sign itself is ambivalent, even polyvalent. The question remains as to who is using it, how it is deployed and to what effects. It helps that we teach classes on the progressive rhetoric in game design and on counter cultures, respectively, and that we find that play is much more than a means of occupying and socializing children or mindlessly distracting oneself. Play is serious enough business for IBM to make super computers to challenge Jeopardy champions and chess wizards. It also lies at the heart of the generally agreed upon and much celebrated toolkit of any form of cultural critique and/or resistance: appropriation, détournement, pastiche, bricolage, parody, satire, and the rest. Indeed, it seems that scholars circling the magic edgeless square have forgotten the connection between the play theories of the 1950s and the counter culture and lettrist movements that came shortly after them. Luckily, neither we nor our contributors have done so, as we hope readers will find.

<2> Although they come last in the traditional table of contents, the reviews—or more specifically, the books that provide the subject of them—give immediate clues and insights towards the polyvalent potentials for games and for game scholarship. For example, Daniel Tennant's review of David Myers' *Play Redux: The Form of Computer Games* centres on the idea of "anti-play," which is curiously forbidden by rules both tacit and otherwise, even though it seems to more clearly embrace the free-form possibilities of play that Huizinga evokes in his ubiquitous "magic circle." Myers' "anti-ness" postulate nicely blends with Ruggill and McAllister's frustration laden approach which suggests that games are irreducibly and irredeemably contradictory. Yet pinning down the locus of the limitless contradictions provides insights into why, as they say, "gaming matters." Here, one is instantly reminded of Easter Eggs in *Call of Duty: Finest Hour*—a teddy bear in a war zone that the game calls "adorable"—and in *Sim Chopper*—the so-called gay, speedo, kissing men—and also the Statue of Happiness in *GTA 4*—which (allegedly) bears a striking resemblance to Hillary Clinton. The cup of coffee in the statue's hand offers further evidence of the subject of the study, given Ms. Clinton's moral outrage regarding the an earlier iteration's purported sexual content. Obviously, then, games do matter, even the most mindlessly detached, meaningless ones. At the very least, as a meaningless diversion, they must first qualify as such according to the dominant discourses of the day. That is to say, games must match, or not upset, the ruling uncritically held ideologies. Not only does this make them inherently political—for denying the constructedness does nothing other than to exnominate the text—it also affirms the presence and the possibility of texts that do not conform and that upset those ideologies. Moreover, the forcefulness of the condemnations and proclamations confirms the impact of the form. This is important because an inconsequential movement or form would not produce such vehemence. It would be ignored otherwise. Or, to borrow a visceral analogy from a friend who fled Ireland's troubles, "When someone throws a brick through your window, you know you've got their attention."

<3> Games are, however, difficult to ignore. The demand playing, even if the outcome results in a defeat, failure, or worse, a tie. In this regard, we decided very early on that we needed Francisco Ortega and his games to

be part of this project. As a game designer, he simultaneously wants players to take sides but he has no interest in the either side winning. Ortega's games challenge players to acknowledge what it really means to cross the border into another country, to be seen as an illegal resident of one's own country, and to be the victim of the numbness of bureaucracy and of the capriciousness of bureaucrats. Indeed, in his revealing and candid answers to the interview questions, Ortega acknowledges that the potential of games to exist as rationale and as outcome puts players into positions that reflect the multiple directions through which power operates and circulates. In this regard, the roundtable discussion Derrais Carter documents serves as a fitting complement. The first-person shooter, *Hey Baby*, extends the work done by activists combatting street harassment by begging the question, "How is this entertainment?" Interestingly, one of the workers admits that he does not want to go home and play games based on violence prevention—his day job—but instead wants to escape. Thus, a game like *Hey Baby*, which allows one to machine gun street harassers posits an important variation on a pair of central questions for the study of any medium. How do you represent something without representing it? Following from that, how do you imagine something without imagining it?

<4> Here, we are reminded of Ruth Orkin's timeless photograph, "An American Girl in Italy." It has been read almost universally and almost since the moment it hit the bath as exemplifying and as illustrating the sexual harassment of women. Yet in an interview with the *Today* show last year, Ninalee Craig, the subject of the photograph, dispels that reading entirely (Coffee)! The scholar in us says immediately, "Readers (for better or for worse) make texts!" In a game, they do much more. Without necessarily acknowledging it as such, Carter's participants highlight the ways in which games are and become simulations. In *Mind at Play*, one of the early academic studies of video games, Loftus and Loftus predict the potential of a game they hypothesized as "ground-level Pac-Man" to produce powerful identifications and profound implications by virtue of the simulation (82). In fact, documentary filmmaker Peter Watkins' ground level simulations of a worst-case scenario nuclear attack on Britain were so moving that *The War Game* has spent much of its life as a banned film. Ground-level Pac-Man ups the ante and instead of reading or watching someone else's decisions, the player enacts his or her own. Thus, the simulation provides practice, preparation, threat rehearsal, repetition, etc. This is not to say that playing *Trauma Center* will make one a surgeon (though the teaching hospital at the home of one of us has a 3D projection system in a classroom for simulations), but the US Army pins similar hopes on several well-publicized games. More intriguingly, *Operations in Urban Terrain*, a mod of these simulations, was among the cohort of electronic protests at the Republican National Convention in 2004. The game's action plays with America's Army to use the simulation's realism to depict the war's horrors and to evoke anti-war sentiments while critiquing the militarization of civilian space. This is ground-level Pac-Man writ large.

<5> As much as the project relies on powerful computers, latest generation batteries and portable projectors, the question still remains as to whether games, especially video games and those produced in light of their arrival, are a technological or a social innovation. Our contributors have no doubts. In examining the "retro-futurism" of *Fallout 3*, Rowan Derrick

articulates the game's thorough exploration of technological ambivalence. The wasteland simulation, which combines present insecurities with a Cold War allegory, provides practice for dealing with this ambivalence and exploring the ways that technology is a source of fear, comfort, power, and more. Moreover, *Fallout 3* reveals that technological ambivalence may be part of a greater technological anxiety in the society creating and consuming the game. The ambivalence surrounding technology in the game is frequently undermined by the negative effects of technology, especially by consistently showing how the technology of the past remains problematic and even dangerous. Thus, the game questions and even resists notions of technological determinism. Ambivalence provides a recurring theme in Thijs van den Berg's consideration of *BioShock*. Although it is strongly informed by Ayn Rand's didactic, pseudo-philosophical novel *Atlas Shrugged*, the game expresses an interest in destroying Rand's extreme version of capitalist economy by showing the moral bankruptcy of "rational self-interest," the breakdown of its utopian environment, and its decline into class struggle. *BioShock* suspends the rules of society and in doing allows players to assume a position of power in an apocalyptic setting in which the spectacle of destruction offers a new-found agency. Even so, such narratives help to protect what they set out to destroy and ensure success in the market they set out to subvert so that the disaster aesthetic appears to function as the commodification of resistance to neoliberalism.

<6> A more optimistic outlook comes from Beth Beggs and Evan Lauteria, who both enumerate the ways in which modders and resistant play provide crucial, critical discourses. For Beggs, modders demonstrate an interesting oscillation between cultural resistance and a desire for acceptance. In simultaneously embracing and rejecting gaming cultures, mainstream US culture, the gaming industry, and the rules and the limitations of the game as originally designed, modders articulate the intersection of creative independence and the need to belong within the game culture and the greater society. Moreover, modding frequently demonstrates the benevolence and civic awareness of gamers and of designers through the sharing of productive game modifications that harmlessly enhance play. The very act of freely sharing a mod—very rarely paid or given any adulation beyond the praise and gratitude of peers—resists the profit motive and acknowledges the inherent contradictions of the cult of individualism. Indeed, Lauteria's examination of "gaymer theory" explicitly connects play theory with the anti-capitalist resistance of the Situationist movement. This thought was running through our mind in creating the call for papers and in choosing the cover illustration, which depicts an impromptu game of shinny, as it were, on the ice at Nathan Philips Square during a protest against the Iraq War. For her part, Beggs also resists the institutional tradition that privileges the written word through a multi-modal submission whose textual accompaniment only exists as a bridge between the resistance of the traditional reader and the transcendence of the resistant text.

<7> Kuljit Brar attempts to walk the line between supply-side and demand-side economics in terms of the attraction of games to female consumers. He finds that just as the female avatar was the contested site of previous gaming generations, it once again surfaces as the focal point of the gaming audience's consumption, especially now that the increased reach of consoles means that the audience is increasingly female. Here, the

Nintendo Wii stands as a reminder that games are social innovations. Brar's examples of the shifts spawned with the Wii reminds us that if there is an aporia in our issue, and in the critical literature, it is the aging of the audience, as well. The Wii's interface has made gamers of thousands who might otherwise find the controllers too difficult to manipulate or the games too daunting to play. Amanda Joyal also considers accessibility issues in her look at the portrayal(s) of the Joker character in the Mass Effect series. Within the context of the game, the relationship between Joker and Commander Shepard forces players to confront, at least on some level, the relationships between "a normate and a person with a disability." As well, the game anticipates an able-bodied player so that Joker becomes a kind of inspirational figure rather than a disabled figure deserving of pity at the expense of the player's comfort. Indeed, Joyal enumerates the multiple and simultaneous ways Joker functions within the game. Most intriguing is the way the ship becomes a prosthetic for Joker, who is a prosthetic for the controller, which is a prosthetic for the player, and so on. For Joyal, the character of Joker matches the established archetype of the "supercrip," a form of heroic superachiever, capable of performing at the highest levels, and doing so despite a disability. Yet the notion that the figure must overcome proves highly problematic since it implies that disability is inherently deviant and is something that needs to be overcome. Even so, there is tremendous potential for the subversion of passing instantiated by the presence of such a figure. The issue of the player's role in the process forms the heart of Leland Fecher's study of gender and fighting games, and especially the role these games play in disciplining gender. In the event that gender is truly unknown—as in the case of Leo from Tekken 6—such an insertion into a fighting game has made players uncomfortable. Instead of embracing ambiguity and the progress this decision should represent, players attempt to discipline Leo's gender. While the makers of Tekken seem to have acquiesced to the dominant biases regarding Leo's gender, the process indicates that gender treachery offers a powerful means of disturbing cultural stasis.

<8> Acceding to the intransigence of the dominant seems a fitting way to draw this introduction to a close. One of Espen Aarseth's motives for resisting the impulse to apply or to adapt other critical approaches is the concern regarding the potential for the colonization of the field of game studies by established disciplines. The corollary is the rapid institutionalization of the area of study and then its progressive disempowerment toward the lethargy of officialdom. In the Editor's Introduction to the first issue of Game Studies, a little more than ten years ago, Aarseth warned, "Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again." This claim is not without merit given the situation one finds, especially in English departments, surrounding forays into Post-colonial Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, African-American Studies, Indigenous Studies, Queer Studies and a couple of others.

<9> However, none of these represents the immediate concern for colonization or for resistance. Adapting these to Game Studies does not seem to be a major threat. We are confident that myriad approaches will yield worthwhile analyses if and when they are truly applied. What is a greater danger is not so much colonization as it is imperialism. We have

been, among other things, reviewers for granting agencies, and several presses and journals. In these roles we have encountered proposals that rely more on the credentials of the applicant than on the analysis or on the arguments of work. One in particular, in Political Science, asked for enough money in its equipment budget alone for at least 1,000 video games at typical retail prices in order to fund the production of an American mode of conflict in popular culture. It cited one article from the field of Game Studies in what was just another study of American imperialism after WWII. The difference was the opportunity for a bigger budget to encompass the games. Apparently, like Ebert, our "colleagues" were under the belief that forms and texts come into existence only after they discover them. That is to say, that too often claims and denials are made regarding (video) games that are precisely the same arguments used in the past to deride currently established fields and disciplines, including comics, film, and television. The most important argument made for endorsing the proposal was the scholars' standing in their field, history of publications in their field, and, most importantly, their previous success in obtaining grants in their field. There was no other justification for the project or for the games. While we have no quarrel with research trajectories or with career paths, we are frustrated by the attitudes underlying this work and galled that these kinds of proposals are endorsed by colleagues and by granting agencies. If there is a threat to Game Studies, one which it must resist, it will be this kind of opportunistic imperial annexing, not an active colonization.

<10> Hopefully the authors gathered in this issue will be there to resist such a move. We thank them for their timely contributions. Thanks also go to the entire Reconstruction team. This issue could not have come together without the tremendous efforts and good will of Joe McDermott and Carole Mora. As always, Alan Clinton and his band of invisible readers informed the works with their valuable responses.

## Notes

[1] A favourite example that pretty much illustrates all facets of these two points is "Faculty Club." It need not name those who should not bother knocking while still clearly defining them and their status on a campus.

## Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen. "Computer Game Studies, Year One." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 1.1. Available [www.gamestudies.org/](http://www.gamestudies.org/)

-. "Genre trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation." *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*. Eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 45-55.

Coffee, Laura T. "At 83, subject of 'American Girl in Italy' photo speaks out." *Today*. 18 Aug. 2011. <http://today.msnbc.msn.com/>

Ebert, Roger. "Video games can never be art." Roger Ebert's Journal. Chicago Sun Times 16 Apr. 2010. <http://blogs.suntimes.com/>

Frasca, Gonzalo. "Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance and Other Trivial Issues." First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004. 85-94.

Loftus, Geoffrey and Elizabeth Loftus. Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games. New York: Basic Books, 1985.