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## RESEARCH

# Let's Play: Redefining Games and Scholarship through Research-Creation, Post-Criticism, and Institutionalism

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This paper proposes that there is value in deploying video games as a form of scholarly critique, particularly in the field of game studies. I adapt the post-critical lens of Greg Ulmer and the institutional theories of Warren Beaty from comics studies to advocate for a shift of how we identify both games and scholarship. The result, hopefully, is not only a new tool for the analysis of games, but a functional definition of video games that allows this new tool a place within the form. This article begins with examples from some of the most popular games in the world that demonstrate that games can and do merge aesthetics and mechanics to convey either implicit learning or an explicit argument in combination with entertainment. Next, I outline a theoretical framework of post-criticism for games, a perspective that helps us to understand the legitimacy of such an approach. A survey of the definitional debate in games studies and a brief outline of some of the problems therein contextualizes the value of an institutional approach to the question of "What is a game?" Finally, I explore how a post-critical framework and institutional definition of games provides a fresh outlook that incorporates a new medium into scholarship and defines games in a way that causes us to ask, "what makes this example interesting?" rather than "does it fit?"

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**Keywords:** Digital Humanities; New Media Studies; Games Studies; Theory; Post-Criticism; Comics Studies; Institutionalism

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Cet article propose que l'usage de jeux vidéo sous forme de critique universitaire peut entraîner des avantages, particulièrement dans le domaine des études du jeu. J'adapte le point de vue post-critique de Greg Ulmer, ainsi que les théories institutionnelles de Warren Beaty venant des études de la bande dessinée, afin de promouvoir un changement de la façon dont nous identifions les jeux et l'érudition. Il devrait en résulter non seulement un nouvel outil pour l'analyse de jeux, mais aussi une définition fonctionnelle des jeux vidéo qui permet à ce nouvel outil de fonctionner

dans cette forme. Cet article commence par des exemples venant de quelques-uns des jeux les plus populaires au monde, qui démontrent que les jeux peuvent combiner l'esthétique et le fonctionnement pour évoquer soit de l'apprentissage implicite, soit de l'argument explicite en combinaison avec le divertissement. Ensuite, je présente un cadre théorique de la post-critique pour les jeux, une perspective qui nous aide à comprendre la légitimité d'une telle approche. Une étude sur le débat définitionnel dans les études du jeu et une présentation brève de quelques problèmes pertinents contextualisent la valeur d'une approche institutionnelle pour répondre à la question « Qu'est-ce qui un jeu ? ». Finalement, j'explore la façon dont un cadre post-critique et une définition institutionnelle des jeux fournissent une nouvelle perspective qui intègre un nouveau média dans l'érudition et qui définit les jeux d'une façon qui nous fait nous demander « qu'est-ce qui rend intéressant cet exemple ? », au lieu de nous faire nous demander « est-ce que ça tient ? ».

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**Mots-clés:** Humanités Numériques; Etudes de nouveaux médias; Etudes du jeu; Théorie; Post-critique; Etudes de la bande dessinée; Institutionnalisme

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## Introduction

(N.B. This article is one part of a larger argument present in my MDH thesis, "The Tenth Art: Game as a Form of Scholarship," in which I not only present an earlier version of the argument laid out here but incorporate my own small games as a demonstration as well. The full thesis is available here: [https://people.cs.kuleuven.be/~danny.deschreye/Thesis\\_KyleDase.pdf](https://people.cs.kuleuven.be/~danny.deschreye/Thesis_KyleDase.pdf).)

Video games have become fertile ground for cultural commentary on topics ranging from politics to games themselves. There are academics who simultaneously research games as scholars and implement that research into their work as designers. Ian Bogost and Mary Flanagan, for example, have even designed games that touch on university and academic life. However, up to this point, no scholar has explicitly developed a video game as a means to further the study of games. I propose that there is value both in deploying video games as a form of scholarly critique, particularly in the field of game studies, and a need for the field to formally incorporate these research-creations into the discourse of game studies and the definition of games.

This article is an attempt to expand upon the definitional debate in game studies through the lens of Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric in "The Rhetoric of Games" and *Persuasive Games*. I leverage Bogost's notion of the persuasive power of games to push for games as a mode of both argument and scholarship. As Bogost argues for the expansion of the theory of rhetoric to include procedural rhetoric, I argue that we ought to reposition our definitions of (video) games in order to accommodate works that contribute to game studies as scholarly research-creation but fail to meet many of the criteria listed in essentialist definitions of games. Bogost identifies and defines a particular facet of games that requires recognition within the larger theoretical field of rhetoric. I instead attempt to adapt the definition of (video) games themselves in order to accommodate games as scholarship as a part of what the scholarly community considers a game. In short, Bogost wants us to recognize "[v]ideo games have the power to make arguments, to persuade, to express ideas" and play games critically (2008a, 137). I would like us to be sure we recognize and incorporate games' persuasive power within the academic institutions and frameworks of game studies.

While not tailored to game studies specifically, the theoretical framework of research-creation provides a vocabulary for works that may not effectively fit current definitions of game studies. As part of this paper, I borrow from comics studies to provide an institutional definition of games that better incorporates the ideas of research-creation into game studies to benefit the discourse in that field.

To this end, I adapt the post-critical lens of Greg Ulmer and the institutional theories of Bart Beatty from comics studies to advocate for a shift in how we identify both games and scholarship. The result, hopefully, is not only a new tool for the analysis of games, but a functional definition of video games that allows this new tool a place within the form.

I begin with a brief discussion of research-creation—particularly the term and its subcategories as implemented by Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk—and express the need for our definitions of games to accommodate such works. I then examine two of the most popular games in the world—*Moksha Patamu* (also known as *Chutes*

*and Ladders*) and *Prosperity/Monopoly*—in order to demonstrate that games can and do merge aesthetics and mechanics to convey either implicit learning or an explicit argument in combination with entertainment. These games also serve as excellent examples that, though the terminology and theory of research-creation is relatively new, some (not all) of the most ancient and popular games can fit the criteria for research-creation. Next, I outline a theoretical framework of post-criticism for games as a means of advocating the theoretical legitimacy and benefit of exploring game studies through research-creations. A survey of the definitional debate in game studies and a brief outline of some of the problems therein contextualizes the value of an institutional approach to the question of “What is a game?” Finally, I explore how a post-critical framework and institutional definition of games provides a fresh outlook that incorporates a new medium into scholarship, allows space for research-creations, and defines games in a way that prompts scholars to ask, “what makes this game interesting?” rather than “what prohibits this object from being categorized as a game?”

## **Research-creation**

Individuals have been participating in the theory behind research-creation for some time—see, for instance, Erin Manning’s “10 Propositions for Research Creation” as a starting point for research-creation as practice. Recently, however, academic institutions have become more open to the notion of non-traditional forms of scholarship, though that discussion has been broader than the niche of game studies. Terms such as “practice-led research”, “arts-based research”, “performative research”, and “research creation” are part of a vocabulary meant to articulate the needs of scholars pushing back against rigid, traditional academic standards (Chapman and Sawchuk, 10). And such actions have met with some success: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada defines research-creation within their “Definitions of Terms” as “[a]n approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation” (SSHRC 2020). But the degree to which a research-creation receives recognition can

vary greatly depending upon one's academic discipline and SSHRC immediately follows the definition of this term with a (non-comprehensive) list of fields that might incorporate such research:

architecture, design, creative writing, visual arts (e.g., painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, textiles), performing arts (e.g., dance, music, theatre), film, video, performance art, interdisciplinary arts, media and electronic arts, and new artistic practices (SSHRC 2020).

The majority of these fields of study have a creative element already inherent in their practice. As such, SSHRC's use of the term acknowledges a long existent gap rather than welcoming new and innovative research into the traditional humanities.

Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk have created and categorized a more nuanced notion of research-creation that highlights both the creative and traditionally academic aspects of such work. Their "family resemblances," based in the same term Wittgenstein uses for his discussion that categorizes games, acknowledge the different forms that research-creation might take and those forms' emphasis on creation and research at different stages of knowledge production. While the latter two of the following terms may seem to have more obvious correlations in game studies, each of the four categories Chapman and Sawchuk present have their place in the discussion of research-creation in the field: "research-for-creation," the gathering of research materials for a creative project much in the same way one might for more traditional academic contributions (15); "research-from-creation," the generation of "research data" and results "that can be used to understand different dynamics" (16); "creative presentations of research," entailing "the presentation of traditional and creative research in a creative fashion" (18); and "creation as research," in which "the elaboration of projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge" (19). As mentioned above, research-creation and its subcategories are broader terms that serve more than just game studies, but these terms can provide a framework for understanding what games as scholarship might look like. Incorporating the

research-creation model into game studies discourse gives scholars means to articulate the different processes they employ to contribute to that discourse.

## **Games as learning**

### ***Game literacy***

Before discussing the strengths of games as a form of argument and the value of the video game in particular, it is important to demonstrate that most people already have a degree, although relatively limited compared to the written word, of literacy in the rhetoric of games. The following examples are used to express how games can function as learning tools of various degrees of complexity and demonstrate points of argument. For instance, much of the moral philosophy that *Moksha Patamu* can convey is lost when the game's aesthetics are adapted to different world views and *Prosperity/Monopoly* is an example of a modern game which acts as an argument for a certain economic system, a sort of interactive discourse concerning economic models. Both of these games are also examples of works that fit more than one criteria of Chapman and Sawchuk's categories of research-creation.

### **Moksha Patamu**

The intersection of teaching and games has existed far longer than the 'edutainment' found in the modern classroom. The argument and lesson of the Indian game *Moksha Patamu* is built around the very lack of game mechanics of agency (Falkener 1892, 257–8). *Moksha Patamu* is a game created in ancient India where players cast cowrie shells each turn to determine the number of spaces to move their piece as it races from the bottom right corner of the board to the top left (Murray 1952, 143). As they travel along the board, players may land on squares that act as a shortcut, jumping their character ahead multiple squares. Alternatively, the players may encounter a setback by landing on squares that send the player backwards. A player wins the game by reaching the square in the top left corner.

The aesthetics of the game are the 'skin' that gives it context. The 'shortcut' squares feature ladders that are traditionally assigned a virtue. The 'setback' squares feature snakes which are traditionally assigned some kind of vice (Parlett 1999, 91–93). The virtues and vices vary according to the cultural adaptation of the game: early versions

of *Moksha Patamu* featured more vices than virtues and valued traits such as 'self-denial' while despising vices like 'anger' (Wilkins 2002, 60). When *Moksha Patamu* was adapted into *Snakes and Ladders* for a Victorian English audience the adaptors rebalanced the game with an equal number of snakes and ladders and Christian sins and virtues took the place of East Indian values (Parlett 1999, 93–94; Floyd and Portnow 2014, 3:03–3:45). In the modern Western iteration made by Milton Bradley, the labels were removed completely and the snakes were transformed into chutes to seem less dangerous (*Chutes and Ladders*, 1978).

Still, as important as the aesthetics are, the mechanics are what really make the game a demonstration of its original values. As Floyd and Portnow explain, the way the game is played reinforces the religious philosophy behind the game and its original aesthetics: "... *Snakes and Ladders* basically plays itself. The player actually has no agency at all... It's just roll the dice and embrace your fate. And that's exactly it...actually one of the things it's intended to teach...embrace the concept of fate... (2014, 1:03–1:32). The game represents the karmic cycle, the final square stands in place of *moksha*, the release from the cosmic cycle of rebirth, *samsara*. The virtues and vices affect the player's journey along their path to enlightenment and release (Floyd and Portnow 2014, 1:49–1:57).

The meaning intrinsic to the mechanics of *Moksha Patamu* is somewhat dissonant when adapted to Judaeo-Christian contexts and values: one can easily change the names of vices and virtues to match sins and saintly qualities, or even remove the labels in their entirety, but the lack of control and cyclic nature intrinsic to the game's mechanics translate poorly into Western ideas of accountability and sin. The determinism present in the game does not map well onto the ideas of individualism and accountability present in the Christian, capitalist culture of the West, especially at the time of its introduction in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century (Parlett 1999, 93).

The Hindi version's moral lessons benefit not only from the aesthetics of the game but the very core of the game as well, and the mechanics of *Moksha Patamu* contribute to educating its players in *moksha* and *samsara*. In a broad interpretation of the terms of Chapman and Sawchuk, *Moksha Patamu* begins as a powerful research-creation that acts as a "creative presentation of research"



presenting foundational convictions of the Hindu religion. Over time, the game's producers removed many of the research-related elements and its recent and most familiar iteration, *Chutes and Ladders*, is a mere children's game. In one sense, it is a unique example of a game that has been developed out of its research-creation status.

### **Prosperity, Elizabeth Magie, and Henry George**

While *Moksha Patamu* operates as tool of moral instruction that implements aesthetics and mechanics to impart a lesson, *Prosperity* demonstrates how games can supplement and engage with scholarship.

Elizabeth Magie designed *Prosperity* as an argument in favour of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American economist Henry George's single-tax method, referring to George's proposed single tax on the ownership of land. Within his book, *Progress and Poverty*, a treatise on how to better distribute wealth, George extols the virtues of a single tax on land as a means of alleviating the problem of the uneven distribution of wealth (George 1935, 427). George proposes a philosophy of human nature and society in *Progress and Poverty* as a support structure around which his advocated single-tax reform is built (Books IV-IX).

George's ideas gained traction even within his own lifetime and among the ardent supporters of Georgism was one Elizabeth Magie, stenographer, writer, actress, inventor, and, most importantly for our purposes, game designer (Pilon 2015). Magie managed to incorporate Georgist activism and game design into a single project she called *Prosperity*.

Also known as *The Land Renter's Game* at the time, *Prosperity* demonstrated two different economic systems. The first version, the rules of which modern players would be completely unfamiliar with today, resulted in 'prosperity' as all players would gain money as each player progressed because rent was redistributed among the group rather than being awarded to the land holder. The game was 'won' when the player with the least money had twice as much as he or she started with, the result being relative prosperity for all players involved. The alternative 'monopoly' set of rules is much closer to the game we know today by the same name, where one tries to force his or her fellow magnates into bankruptcy (Pilon 2015). Magie had

designed a game demonstrating not only the merits of George's single-tax method, but also presenting the competitive nature of the contemporary method practiced in America. Players acted out the logical conclusion of these economic systems through playing according to the rules of the game. The simplicity of its argument could be seen as a fault, but this also made the game more accessible: the grassroots nature of Prosperity lent itself to many adapted, presumably more complex versions of the game played in university campuses such as Wharton business school, Harvard, and Columbia (Pilon 2015).

It was a grassroots version of the game that Charles Darrow eventually played, replicated, and sold as *Monopoly* until he licensed it to Parker Bros (Johnson 2012). The company still perpetuates the game's creation as a rags-to-riches story, claiming Darrow dreamed up the game during the depression era and it saved him and Parker Bros. financially (*Monopoly* 1935).

Perhaps the most troubling part of this whole tale is what happened after Monopoly came firmly into the hands of Parker Bros. In 1974, Ralph Anspach, a professor of economics at San Francisco State University, created Anti-Monopoly (Johnson 2012). The game follows similar rules to Monopoly, save that at the beginning of the game the players are evenly divided into monopolists and competitors. These divisions play slightly differently from one another: monopolists, for instance, can overcharge on properties after they obtain a monopoly (Anspach 1977). The game ends in one of two ways: either one bankrupts all others as in the original Monopoly or the winner is declared as the richest player of the team that has managed to bankrupt all players of an opposing team (Anspach 1977). After the game had achieved moderate success, Parker Brothers' parent corporation, General Mills, sued Anspach for copyright infringement. After a long legal battle, the true history of Monopoly as a folk game and invention of an advocate for Georgism came out. The result was a win for Anspach and the continued production of Anti-Monopoly (Johnson 2012). The game now serves as a counterpoint to the original Prosperity, offering an alternative to both the single-tax method and total monopoly, in which a two-tiered capitalist system operates to demonstrate a possible middle ground. As Anspach himself claims, "I'm a pro-capitalist economist, provided the economy is not controlled by monopolies" (Johnson 2012).

*Prosperity* and the games designed to engage with it constitute research-creations within the subcategories of “research-for-creation,” “creative presentations of research” and “creation-as-research” as they require research into economic models as a prerequisite to their creation, incorporate that research into the game itself, and produce a kind of research of their own as one plays out the games. *Prosperity*, *Monopoly*, and *Anti-Monopoly* are games as research-creation interventions in conversation with one another.

*Prosperity* presents or, more aptly, *is* an argument for the single-tax theory. Moreover, Anspach's *Anti-Monopoly* engages with *Monopoly* as a form of criticism. Unwittingly, the professor also critiqued the Georgist model created by Magie and produced what is perhaps the first instance of a network of games acting as scholarship. These games engage in Bogost's idea of procedural rhetoric, carrying out the processes of a system in a simplified representation as a means of critique or commentary (Bogost 2010a, 28–29).

#### **Games can teach, so scholars can use them**

These examples demonstrate how games have long served as more than idle entertainment. *Moksha Patamu* communicates a religious and moral lesson in a uniquely effective way, but this is largely lost when the game is taken out of its original context and adapted to Judaeo-Christian cultures as the core of the gameplay conveys values dissonant from the values of that society. *Prosperity* simulates a certain economic model as an alternative to the functioning *Monopoly* system and engages in a discourse with games like *Anti-Monopoly*. If these simple games can effectively communicate their arguments and lessons, the possibility that a game is capable of expressing a scholarly argument ought to be considered and scholars must accept that there could be value in learning to construct and receive arguments from such a medium. These examples also demonstrate that, while the theory of research-creation might be new, the practice of integrating creation and research is much older, perhaps even ancient. While research-creation provides a broader framework for incorporating non-traditional scholarship, we can further expand our definitions of game studies and scholarship through an understanding of scholarly intervention

that arose out of the attempt to legitimize studies in the more closely related fields of new media and comics studies in the late 90s and early 2000s.

### **New Media, print bias, and intervention** ***The concept of intervention***

This essay has already established that games, whether analog or digital, are capable of communicating an argument. What remains unproven however, are the advantages that might make such an approach appealing for scholars. In the context of my research this connotes the advantages of criticizing or analysing a form by means of that same form, an endeavour that has been proven in comics theory more than anywhere else. The following is an outline of a post-critical approach to games scholarship, borrowing from the post-critical methodology outlined by theorists such as Stuart Moulthrop and Greg Ulmer and utilized by comics scholars such as Jason Helms and Scott McCloud. This concept of intervention in comics studies can serve to supplement the notion of research-creation mentioned above. Though, like scholars did with research-creation, Moulthrop initially developed his concept of intervention to create a way to recognize unorthodox scholarship, Helms and others eventually adapted the term as an inclusive means of defining all scholarship, an approach that attempts to destabilize the bias towards more traditional forms of scholarship such as the article or essay.

Any work of scholarship is an intervention in an ongoing discourse; the term 'intervention' has been used with specific purpose by different New Media scholars and there are differences of opinion on what the term means. 'Intervention,' in the view of Jason Helms, is a broad term that should apply to all forms of scholarship regardless of the argument, New Media included:

Even the most conservative scholarship cannot argue for a simple status quo unless it argues against those who are challenging the status quo, in which case it is arguing for a new return to an old thing.. All scholarship is intervention (Helms 2015, 1).

Such an understanding sidesteps any notions that 'scholarship' has a proper form, whether that be a printed essay, oral presentation, or a digital comic. Helms's position is somewhat contrary to 'intervention' as a concept in the context of New Media. 'Intervention' was first introduced by Stuart Moulthrop as "a new category of cybertextual scholarship..." (2005, 5). Moulthrop outlined the term in order to enshrine a new kind of "practical contribution to a media system (some product, tool, or method) intended to challenge underlying assumptions or reveal new ways of proceeding" (2005, 5). Moulthrop then lays out five primary traits of such interventions:

1. It should belong somewhere in the domain of cybertext, constituted as an interface to a database and including a feedback structure and generative logic to accommodate active engagement.
2. It should be a work of production crafted with commonly available media and tools.
3. It should depart discernibly from previous practice and be informed by some overt critical stance, satirical impulse, or polemical commitment, possibly laid out in an argument or manifesto.
4. It should have provocative, pedagogic, or exemplary value, and be freely or widely distributed through some channel that maximizes this value, such as the Creative Commons or open-source licensing. Ideally, the infrastructure of the work should either be available to the receiver or documented in sufficient detail to permit productive imitation.

A fifth requirement is left implicit, namely that the value of the work will ultimately be established through robust, transparent peer review. Thus I assume both that interventions will be recognized as valid scholarly efforts and that some adequate community of reception will grow up around them (Moulthrop 2005, 5–6).

Moulthrop's outline, now over a decade old, was attempting to carve out a place in scholarship for the 'unorthodox' work taking place within the field of New Media at a time when academic credit was less likely to be given for such creations. Moulthrop points to the works of Ian Bogost and other game-making academics for

examples of intervention as well as his own cybertextual works (2005, 6). He even goes so far as to include less academic and conventional works such as the web video series *Red vs. Blue* and *The Strangerhood* (Moulthrop 2005, 6). This context is a crucial for understanding Moulthrop's work as one step in a process of legitimation for non-print forms of scholarship, much in the same way that Chapman and Sawchuk advocate for the recognition and categorization of research-creation as a means of legitimizing unorthodox scholarship.

It is important to understand Helms's statement that "All scholarship is intervention" not as a slight towards Moulthrop's definition, but an attempt to rectify it's bias toward print as the traditional form of scholarship, reinforcing the legitimacy for alternative scholarship that Moulthrop is arguing for in 2005. Helms's description and citation of Cheryl Ball and Ryan Moeller is evidence of his overall support of Moulthrop: "Ball and... Moeller conclude... New media work rejects the creative/scholarly binary, bridging the gap that has characterized English departments for generations!" (Helms 2015, 1). Ball and Moeller maintain that "we [scholars] fall back on the assumption that writing does not also merge form and content. And it most certainly does" (2008, 3). They also support Moulthrop's article by making an obvious statement that "readers use both form and content to make meaning" in a way that makes it clear print is not an exception to this rule (Ball and Moeller 2008, 12). Helms echoes this sentiment in his article when he states that "It is the false dichotomy of form and content that results in the desire for a transparent form and non-creative scholarship" (2015, 1). He then furthers our understanding of just how this affects new media scholarship:

But transparent is just another word for unmarked, and transparency needs to be questioned. Scholars bring with them a set of print-based assumptions when reading new media scholarship that no longer apply – if they ever did (Helms 2015, 1).

This discourse then, rather than identifying an issue, is about how to deal with an agreed upon problem. Moulthrop seek to resolve print bias by means of a specially defined kind of scholarship which, he hopes, will develop a form of peer review to

give it legitimacy. Helms, Ball, and Moeller's view is to address print bias via actively dissembling it in critical discourse as merely the current dominant preference of form in academia. Given that Moulthrop was writing a decade earlier than Helms and is particularly interested in New Media, it makes sense that he would focus on carving out a ground for legitimacy in unorthodox study rather than attempt to challenge the prevailing structure and form. In Helms's view, the apparatus and legitimacy Moulthrop was looking for already exists, although it has not fully developed:

Within my own field... there has been a large push towards this kind of blending of practice and theory. Alongside Ulmer's influence, journals like Kairos and Enculturation have been publishing scholarly webtexts on rhetoric and composition for over a decade (Helms 2015, 1).

Writing at a time when established avenues for non-traditional academic work are more likely to be evaluated and credited, perhaps it makes sense that scholars such as Helms find it more fitting to challenge the status quo of print bias rather than focus on protecting and further fostering Moulthrop's specialized concept of intervention.

Still, these outlooks need not necessarily be mutually exclusive: one may benefit from Moulthrop's foresight while exposing print bias. One can still follow Moulthrop's criteria for intervention as a practical guideline for how to create productive New Media scholarship by engaging form with content in a way that contributes to the intervention as a whole but use the term 'intervention' in the same broad sense as Helms in an effort to combat the print bias that often blinds scholars to the fact that print is a technological means of combining content with form with its own strengths and limitations that privileges certain perspectives and modes of thinking. The result is an approach that attends to the unique formal qualities of New Media scholarship that also legitimizes such scholarship further by placing it on a level playing field with traditional print scholarship. When we partner intervention with the broader context of research-creation, we have a frame of reference for games as scholarship that allows for both categorization and inclusion. All scholarship in game studies become interventions, certain interventions can be research-creations,

and Moulthrop provides scholars with helpful guidelines and values for how such a research-creation in game studies might look.

### ***Post-Criticism: Applications and benefits***

Print, in the sense of the written word used to convey an argument, has been established as merely one among several forms capable of communicating an intervention in scholarship. However, to state that it should not constantly be the preferred form is not enough. After all, the traditional essay does have certain benefits: for instance, it is one of the easiest forms to circulate physically and most scholars are trained to engage primarily with this form (Ball and Moeller 2008, 3). Given these great advantages which, arguably, could and perhaps should eventually be corrected in modern teaching pedagogy, there needs to be a compelling reason to present an argument in the form of one of Moulthrop's interventions. This reasoning can be encapsulated as part of criterion three of Moulthrop's guideline: "It [the intervention] should depart discernibly from previous practice and be informed by some overt critical stance, satirical impulse, or polemical commitment, possibly laid out in an argument or manifesto" (2005, 6). A post-critical approach to scholarship can be the necessary departure from 'previous practice' that facilitates a new critical stance.

Greg Ulmer lays out the core thrust of post-criticism in the introductory paragraph of his essay, "The Object of Post-Criticism." Ulmer identifies the key concern of post-criticism as "the representation of the object of study in a critical text" and "a change in the relation of the critical text to its object" (Ulmer 1983, 83).

The most important concept of this outlook for the purposes of this intervention is "the application of the devices of modernist art to critical representations" (Ulmer 1983, 83). In other words, "Post-criticism means employing the formal characteristics of the object in your critique..." (Helms 2015, 1). Several fields have employed post-criticism, including Ulmer's own studies of electric monumentality in New Media. However, one area of study that has been engaged in post-criticism for decades is comics.

The study of video games can benefit from the study of comics in several ways, in part because comics have occupied a comparable space in popular culture and had



to combat negative reactions similar to those video games have and are facing. Video games can and should learn from the post-critical approach comics scholarship, particularly that on comics theory, has taken for decades.

While there are earlier examples of comics studies using images of comics as examples to some extent, the first post-critical use of comics as a medium is Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). Since this foundational work, many comic artists have followed in the same tradition including *Understanding Comics* (1993) and *Reinventing Comics* (2000) by Scott McCloud and *The Art of the Comic Book* (1994) by R.C. Harvey. These works changed the landscape of the discussion, not only discussing the form of comics with examples from it but encapsulating the discourse within the form itself.

At least one of the features of the community that have allowed for such an approach to comics is that the majority of influential comics critics are also comics creators. In other words, some of the best academics researching comics theory are research-creators: the legendary Will Eisner was known for his work on seminal comics such as *The Spirit* long before he engaged in criticism, McCloud was creating comics like *Zot!* well over a decade before he wrote *Understanding Comics*, and, though he might be better classified as a cartoonist, Harvey's works are heavily situated within the medium. This relationship among critics and creators has fostered a post-critical framework within comics criticism that welcomes and encourages research-creation.

Fortunately for video games, there are many scholars in New Media who both create games as a form of critique and critically analyse video games and cybertext as critics. Ian Bogost is one such scholar; author of *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* as well as a video game developer in his own right, Bogost has actually released several games that critique both scholarship and games. One critique of the former is Bogost's game *Honorarium*, "a game about the lecture circuit... it's subtle, and autobiographical, and its themes include work, colleagues, family, distraction, longing, goals, and regret" (Bogost 2008b). *Honorarium* exposes the harsh, competitive nature of academia; Bogost's *Cow Clicker*, on the other hand, is a satire of the kind of games typically featured on social media outlets such as

*Facebook*. A simple description of the game's mechanics demonstrates its critique better than any summary or analysis:

You get a cow. You can click on it. In six hours, you can click it again. Clicking earns you clicks. You can buy custom "premium" cows through micropayments (the Cow Clicker currency is called "mooney"), and you can buy your way out of the time delay by spending it. You can publish feed stories about clicking your cow, and you can click friends' cow clicks in their feed stories. Cow Clicker is Facebook games distilled to their essence (Bogost 2010b).

These two games are a sample of how Bogost has used the medium itself to express concern about both games as a form and the academic climate. And Bogost is not alone: others such as Nick Montfort (*Book and Volume, Twisty Little Passages*), Mary Flanagan (*[xyz], Values at Play in Digital Games*), and Jesper Juul (*Half-Real: Videogames between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds, MMOPG [moderately multiplayer other players game]*) are just some examples of critic-developers who have created games that could potentially be considered interventions as research-creations.

Welcoming the notions of intervention and research-creation into our definitions of games in game studies could encourage further kinds of innovative research in the discipline. Jason Helms suggests that "there is a need for creative interventions in scholarship. The way we compose our scholarship changes...our thinking, allows us new avenues for thought" (Helms 2015, 1). Yet, although many games touch on the subject, scholars have yet to produce games as explicit interventions in game studies as a discipline. And one reason for this, perhaps, is that the essentialist definitions of game studies scholarship may not allow for research-creations as interventions.

### **The state of definitions in Game Studies**

This section serves two purposes. First, it acts as a summary of the definitional debate within game studies. It concludes by proposing an alternative to the formalist/essentialist approach: an institutional definition that borrows heavily from the definition that Meskin and Beatty employed in a similar debate in comics studies.

Rather than settling on an absolute truth, the value in essentialist/formalist definitions is that they are 'productive' in the sense that they promote analysing the defined object from a new perspective or somehow further our understanding of the defined object by means of its examination. This productivity is often facilitated by providing a definition in relation to other things, as in the case of Veli-Matti Karhulahti's "Defining the Videogame," where Karhulahti attempts to isolate what makes video games different from other games. In the abstract to his article Karhulahti proposes that his mission is not to provide the definitive description of what a video game is, "but to participate in the process of defining it" (2015). Likewise, the critical summary of past definitions provided in this section is not meant to tear down the important work others have done, but to expose problematic aspects of these essentialist/formalist definitions that might be explored for further productivity and understanding. Finally, I will provide an institutional definition of the video game, advocating that perspective as a productive means of identifying what it is that games scholars study.

### ***Winning and losing***

Gonzalo Frasca builds upon Andre Lalande's distinctions between 'play' and 'game,' and summarizes the key difference between the two in the following terms: "*Games* have a result: they define a winner and a loser; plays do not" (Frasca 1999, 3).

Even were we to grant Frasca that a video game implicitly assigns the inverse of the player's win/loss state to the computer, this separation still fails to account for many of the possible alternatives within games. For instance, *Space Invaders!* has no true win state: the player merely defeats as many waves of oncoming aliens as they can until they lose. The only way one can consider themselves a winner is by evaluating their score upon encountering the lose state relative to that of other players. Frasca's definition also fails to accommodate games and interactive fictions (IFs) that consist mainly of choices that produce various different end-states rather than what one might traditionally consider win or lose states. The nebulous role of interactive fiction in video game definitions has led scholars like Grant Tavinor to accommodate them as a separate entity. This focus on winning and losing has been a

point of contention in the medium's quest for validation and film critic Roger Ebert even made it the crux of what distinguishes video games from art:

One obvious difference between art and games is that you can win a game. It has rules, points, objectives, and an outcome. Santiago might cite a immersive game without points or rules, but I would say then it ceases to be a game and becomes a representation of a story, a novel, a play, dance, a film. Those are things you cannot win; you can only experience them (Ebert 2010).

Although Ebert eventually retracts this position in a later blog post, his statement illuminates an important conflict for the gaming community, the implications of which are whether or not one should include IF and other non-traditional projects in game studies and, if not games scholars, then who? Moreover, the massive wave of mainstream games emphasizing and incorporating player choice in narrative driven games over the last decade and a half have further complicated any attempt to disentangle IF from 'real' games. Regardless of how we might be inclined to exclude them for the sake of simplicity, series such as *Fallout*, *Mass Effect*, and *The Witcher* exist at the centre of video game culture.

### ***Tavinor's disjunctive definition***

Grant Tavinor clearly engages the definitional debate with the intent of determining how scholars should approach games as a medium: "The field badly needs a definitional debate to be carried out in clear, unambiguous terms so that the range of theoretical options open to games scholars is made clear" (Tavinor 2008). Tavinor proposes that narratological, ludological, and IF approaches to a definition of videogames "if proposed as conditions that are necessary and sufficient for an item to be a videogame... fail as proper definitions" (Tavinor 2008). He also contributes to the discourse by pointing out "[d]efinitions should stay silent on these normative issues so that we can count games those which we do not happen to value as games" (Tavinor 2008). Tavinor calls out Newman, among others, as conflating normative, value-based evaluations with definitional analysis.

Tavinor compares the problematic attempts of identifying a clear definition of videogames to a similar problem that occurs in the definition of art and points to the disjunctive response to anti-essentialism (an anti-definition argument) as a viable alternative. A disjunctive definition of art "is... meant to capture the intuition that there may be more than one way to be art" (Tavinor 2008). Tavinor incorporates previous attempts at definition into a disjunctive model, positing that "[m]ost central games do involve gaming, narratives, or fictions, but we cannot expect of any given game that it will contain any one of these things" (Tavinor 2008). His definition is as follows:

X is a videogame if it is an artefact in a digital visual medium, is intended primarily as an object of entertainment, and is intended to provide such entertainment through the employment of one or both of the following modes of engagement: rule-bound gameplay or interactive fiction (Tavinor 2008).

Tavinor's definition is an attempt at a sort of minimalism that describes everything that a video game must and can be, and it is a good working definition. However, it is as "prone to examples of videogames that lack the purported characteristic feature..." as the definitions it adapts and criticizes, which perhaps says more about the essentialist approach than the efficiency of Tavinor's definition (Tavinor 2008).

For instance, the definition takes for granted that "we would hardly think an artefact could be a videogame if it did not involve a computer and a visual display" (Tavinor 2008). And yet, there are a number of video games which, in an effort of inclusivity and accessibility, have forgone the visual aspect of video games altogether. Games such as *A Blind Legend*, *Lost & Hound*, and *Papa Sangre* are just a few examples of games designed without graphics in order to be accessible to the visually impaired (Brennan 2014). And while one might be inclined to dismiss these works as not truly video games, there is an inherent danger that to accommodate Tavinor's definition in such a way would mean to intentionally leave out a subset of video games developed with the visually impaired in mind from game studies, likely

hindering their advancement. This visual component will be openly dismissed by later scholars, Karhulahti in particular (2015).

Unfortunately, the visual component is a lynchpin of Tavinor's argument, specifically in his contrast between 'videogames' and 'electronic games' such as the *Furby* (Tavinor 2008). However, even were some new disjunction added to deal with electronic games as we know them, this definition, like all essentialist/formalist definitions, is still unguarded against future innovations. It is not difficult to imagine that hardware such as the *Amiibo*, now little more than a glorified memory case, and innovations in augmented reality could incorporate electronic games into video games in a more meaningful way in the future that requires an accommodation not present in Tavinor's definition. With each unforeseen innovation this disjunctive definition would need to be adapted, meaning it hardly functions better than the formal definitions it was seeking to improve upon.

Moreover, Tavinor's insistence that games be intended "primarily as an object of entertainment" excludes the serious work of research-creations this paper seeks to include in game studies (2008). Even with a game as old as *Moksha Patamu*, one cannot be certain that the intent of its creator(s) favoured entertainment over moral instruction. Defining a video game, or games in general, according to the intent of a creator presents many challenges, especially when one prioritizes entertainment in processes of creation that are frequently motivated by multiple factors.

### **Valued states**

In his work *Half-Real; Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Jesper Juul defines computer and video games as a subset of games. If one combines his straightforward definition of video games as "Generally speaking, a game played using computer power and a video display" ("Video Game" 2016). With his definition of a game, we can see just how he defines video games:

A [video] game is a rule-based system ["played using computer power and a video display"] with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the

outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable. (Juul 2005, 36).

Clearly, Juul values the video display in the same way Tavinor does, but one also requires further clarification of the notion that “different outcomes are assigned different values.” This vague notion of ‘assigned values’ needs to be clarified: Juul never clearly states whether this means or includes a win/loss state as Frasca prescribes, a traditionally numbered ‘score,’ or accommodates the notion of multiple endings. Even if he allows for a more open interpretation than Frasca’s, there are still problems. For instance, a game such as *Savoir-Faire* or *Heavy Rain* can have multiple paths and endings and in *Heavy Rain* there is little indication that any one ending has more ‘value’ than another. The game’s storyline, even the actual perpetrator in the game’s murder mystery, changes depending on choices a player makes. When one considers games with multiple endings of arbitrary ‘value,’ Juul’s contingency becomes dubious without further clarification, especially since he believes his definition is “allowing for the huge variation and creativity that we are witnessing in games” (Juul 2005, 6). A loose understanding of the term ‘value’ as something closer to variance, though it might allow us to incorporate the games mentioned above, is not sufficient. Understanding what exactly it means to assign ‘value’ to an outcome is a productive endeavour for further scholarship and worthy of being explored from the perspective of the player, designer, and game.

### ***Artifacts that evaluate performance***

In his recent article, Karhulahti defines videogames as “*Artifacts that evaluate performance...*” in an effort to differentiate videogames from games (2015). The article itself is written as a Socratic dialogue borrowing the characters and form from Bernard Suits’s monograph, *The Grasshopper* and this evaluative notion is built upon Olli Leino’s work on how a game “evaluates, in relation to a pre-defined criteria...” (Karhulahti 2015). In Karhulahti’s article, Grasshopper and Scepticus attempt to carve out a definition for videogames in relation to games while exploring the value of pursuing definitions:

S: While I agree that fighting over a definition—a rather multifaceted term in itself (Gupta 2014)—can easily turn into an unproductive dispute, it often results in valuable scientific insights concerning the identity of the defined phenomenon in relation to other phenomena (2015).

Karhulahti challenges the decades old distinction between 'rule-bound gameplay' and 'interactive fiction' that Tavinor maintains, stating "...his use of the term "interactive fiction" disturbs me to great extent. Those two words have been used to refer to a specific text-based story genre for more than three decades now (Montfort, 2003)" (Karhulahti 2015). Karhulahti observes that the dichotomy of games with and without story potential occurs as far back as Huizinga (2015). For Karhulahti, the unique aspect of videogames that make it a distinct class of game is that the 'referees' are built directly into the artifact. He adopts this idea from Sara Iversen's dissertation: her work further elaborates on how, before the digital medium, game rules, including win/loss conditions, were either evaluated by a third party as referees do in sports or else by the players themselves (Iversen 2010, 33). This is a productive distinction to make, and Karhulahti's article explores certain important aspects of videogames including that they exist as 'digital objects' that "compel their users to perform[.]" a statement made to distance videogames from video, music, and other new media (2015).

As mentioned above, Karhulahti crafts his definition with the intent of making videogames a subset or distinct class of games, but never clarifies the purpose of his endeavour, making it difficult to evaluate. If Karhulahti seeks to outline those works which scholars in the field of game studies study, then the line that he draws is problematic: it suggests that a game such as *SimCity* should only be studied when the player considers their role within the binary of winning/losing and not when they engage with *SimCity* as a "computerized playground":

S: ... As long as the artifact itself does not set evaluation criteria, be they triumph or survival, it cannot be evaluative, and thus cannot be a videogame.



These unwinnable and unloseable “paidia games” (Frasca, 1997)...are better seen as computerized playgrounds...

G: Do you imply that all winning and losing in videogames depend on which of the countless potential criteria *I*, as a player, choose the videogame to evaluate?

S: Almost, but not quite. I would say that, due to those countless potential criteria, you can never win or lose (in) a videogame, but you can always *think* you won or lost—and when that happens, *it is the videogame artifact that you consider as the evaluating judge*.

G: So if I feel that I'm winning in *SimCity*, that's a videogame because those wins are evaluated by it?

S: Be my guest (Karhulahti 2015).

Thus, as a definition, Karhulahti's proposal draws the lines of the field directly through some works and splits them into portions of a game and modes of play worthy of study and those that are unworthy. Though such a definition can be considered a productive perspective, this is not a particularly desirable outcome for designating a field of study. The implications such a perspective has for research-creations is even less promising, as the experimental quality of such work invites valuable user experiences that may defy Karhulahti's definition of a game.

***Conclusion: But what do we study? Beatty and institutionalism***

Each of these definitions have their faults when taken out of their pragmatic context: Karhulahti's definition is primarily intended to differentiate videogames from other games just as Tavinor's definition is really about separating games from other media. Many of these definitions are driving at the question “what, *exactly*, do we study?” as much as “who should study this?” or “how should we study it?” and that former question can benefit from the discourse on definitions that has taken place in comics studies.

While the essentialist/formalist debate carried on in comics studies, Aaron Meskin intervened to propose that the discourse had ceased to be productive:

“We should get on with the business of thinking seriously about comics as art. Let's get beyond the definitional project” (Meskin 2007, 276). However, prior to making his main point that the value in the pursuit of definition is relative to its productivity, Meskin proposes that there are other valuable ways of defining comics, apart from essentialism/formalism, that could and further our understanding about comics from a different perspective. Bart Beatty took up Meskin's challenge and developed one of these theoretical perspectives, the institutional approach.

Beatty formulates an institutional theory of comics based in George Dickie's institutional theory of art. Beatty postulates that “the failure of comics scholarship has not been its incapacity to establish a functional definition of the comics form, but its inability to conceptualize comics as a distinct art world” (2012, 45). Beatty proposes a 'comics world' similar to Dickie's 'art world':

a work of art is an artifact presented to the art world public... the art world public is a set of individuals who are prepared in some degree to understand an object that is presented to them as art... Dickie ... redirects our attention towards the social classification of art rather than its aesthetic quality (Beatty 2012, 36).

Beatty's counterpart, the 'comics world,' is both adaptable for the future of comics as well as more inclusive than other definitions by virtue of its social nature. Helms describes the genius of Beatty's institutionalism as follows:

In this simple, closed system of a comics world, anything that is being discussed by comics scholars as a comic is a comic. Indeed, we might point out that scripts exist within the world without in any sense being comics. However, the fact that they are part of the process of the comic would lead us to include them in the comics world without ever trying to define them as comics. Beatty has brilliantly side-stepped the question of defining comics by defining something else entirely: a comics world (2015).

So too can it be with video games:

A video game is an artifact presented to the video game public... the video game public is a set of individuals who are prepared in some degree to understand an object that is presented to them as a video game.

Despite the circular nature of what might be better understood as a concept rather than a definition, this notion has several advantages over the formalist and essentialist approaches of its counterparts above. Rather than drawing a line between traditional "videogames with significant story potential" and non-traditional "videogames with no significant story potential" as games scholars have been doing for decades, we can understand a 'video game world' that considers the medium as a whole (Karhulahti 2015). *Dear Esther*, for instance, has received criticism from gatekeeping games journalists: Luke Plunkett maintains that *Dear Esther* is "not a game", while Keza MacDonald writes that "[i]f nothing else, *Dear Esther* presents one of the most absorbing and believable worlds in gaming" but, because of essentialist expectations, sees its lack of interactivity and claims that "judged purely as a video game it has obvious failings (Plunkett 2012; MacDonald 2012). An institutional outlook can ensure that experimental titles such as *The Stanley Parable*, *Dear Esther*, and *What Remains of Edith Finch?* can readily be accepted into the video game world and discussed for their merit as works rather than sparking outrage as titles that "aren't really games." This definition also creates room for any combination of Chapman's and Sawchuk's "research-for-creation," "research-from-creation," "creative presentations of research," and "creation-as-research," so long as these research-creations are presented to the games world as a game. This is also an especially valuable perspective for understanding more complex games that hybridize traditional gameplay and interactive fiction as well as accommodating whatever creations the video game industry might innovate in the future. This social/institutional context of games can also help us to better understand video games' increase in popularity as well as intersectional issues such as Gamergate or the racism directed at professional gamers such as TerrenceM as issues and events occurring within a community (for

an understanding of the former event, see Grant [2014] and Wingfield [2014]; for the same on the latter, see Campbell [2016] and Fenlon [2016]). In short, one can consider the institutional perspective of video games proposed here as a concept for just what it is that video game scholars study, while the formalist and essentialist definitions are valuable tools for investigating the unique aspects of particular games or video games as a medium.

## **Conclusion**

The current essentialist/formalist definitions of video games and the issues they address highlight certain biases and problems in themselves. Even the problems they provoke can be productive upon further analysis, however, and an institutional model of a video games world can help us to move, as Meskin said, "beyond the definitional project." An institutional approach encourages scholars to focus on what makes a game interesting or unique rather than what precludes it from comfortably fitting within the boundaries of what constitutes a video game. Moreover, such inclusivity provides a positive environment for experimentation, whether that consists of the development of games for the visually impaired or, the primary concern of this paper, the implementation of video games as an explicit form of scholarship as research-creation in game studies. Such inclusion can only enrich the discourse in game studies and help us focus on the unorthodox features of games as points of inquiry rather than warrants for exclusion.

Video games have gained massive popularity in a relatively short time period and it is imperative that scholars apply as many useful tools and modes of analysis to them as possible to expand our understanding of what games are and can be. As I have argued, video games can present scholarly arguments about the form itself. Now that a precedent has been established and an adapted theoretical framework proposed, my hope is that other scholars may be encouraged to explore this perspective in greater depth and to more productive ends.

## **Competing interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Editorial contributions

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