25.
GAMES AND GAMING
Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann

Introduction: "The Play's the Thing"[1]

Video games are enigmatic by design. They are challenging objects of study because they have been purposefully engineered to withhold; they are computational sphinxes, created to tease money, time, and energy from those daring to engage their algorithmic riddles. Simply put, video games are "desire machines."[2] Take, for example, the first popular incarnation of video games, your typical coin-operated arcade game. Housed inside a wooden cabinet adorned with spirited artwork crafted to attract the wandering eye, this technical curiosity calls out to passers-by. It invites them, for only a coin or two, to interact with the characters, narratives, and puzzles hidden within its lines of code. It welcomes its pay-to-play adventures: "Player 1, press start." It holds out hope to those bested by its wily programming: "Insert coin to continue." And it welcomes: "Player 2, enter your initials," so their performance might stand the test of time (or until it's unplugged). No longer confined to the arcade, video games continue to manufacture desire, luring us in with quick plays during the morning commute or long, late-night raids with friends. As the experiential product of a computational text and a user's playful disposition, gameplay is an elusive concept that is fragile, fleeting, but fun. Gameplay is *why* people play non-electronic and digital games. And it is **gameplay**, perhaps more than any other single formal structure or design element, that is the primary analytic focus of game studies.

We both teach university courses about video games in departments focused on communication and culture to students who intend to pursue careers in film and television production or journalism. Our students are familiar with thinking about media as texts worth scrutinizing, and many are accustomed to applying critical and cultural theories to popular entertainment. And yet, they will question the academic rigor of a games course. Students confess to owning a variety of gaming devices and having multiple titles installed on their mobile phones and tablets. And yet, they are often quick to exclaim, "I am not a gamer" and assume that only hardcore players deserve such an identity label. While some class assignments require students to create games, we both stress in our syllabi and on the first day that our classes are *not* design courses. Still, students worry that their inability to program games means that they cannot be properly critical of them. This nexus of skepticism, performance anxiety, and technophobia is a challenging, but also, we think, an inspiring, pedagogical springboard from which to introduce students to the serious work of critical gameplay analysis.

Gathering up a methodological inventory and tracing the theoretical lineages of video games and gaming is a tricky business. Like many disciplines or research areas oriented around a medium, **game studies** is fraught with definitional ambiguity, not the least of which is the basic question, "What is a game?" Furthermore, relative to established medium-specific disciplines, namely television and film studies, game studies is an emerging field still working through its growing pains. Game scholars continue to ask, what exactly constitutes our object(s) of inquiry? Is there a foundational set of epistemological questions? And, what theoretical lenses are best for understanding the particularities of the medium?

We believe that these open questions and fuzzy boundaries are not to be feared, but represent exciting opportunities for conducting innovative research. The study of games thus far has benefited from its interdisciplinarity, as scholars from numerous traditions

have found their way to games via media studies, psychology, political science, anthropology, computer science, education, etc. This intellectual influx has enriched the study of games as much as it has complicated its nascent disciplinary identity. For games are never just games; they are also rules, and they are culture. Thus, like the other media forms examined throughout this anthology, video games are bound up in popular contestations for social power. This chapter outlines how scholars have endeavored to make sense of games as an expressive cultural form, and how game studies is well-positioned not just to shine a light on the meaningfulness of gameplay but to make contributions to critical media studies generally.

Historical Foundations: Theorizing Play

Because games provide players with interactive affordances and new media experiences that differ from that of radio, film, and television, the study of games demands that scholars attend to these medium-specific differences. A useful point of departure from the various approaches discussed in this collection is the notion of **play**. While most media may be consumed in playful ways—writing fan fiction that expands a fictional universe (see Chapter 15), crowdsourcing clues and solutions to complex narratives (see Chapter 3), creating and donning cosplay costumes of favorite anime characters, or remixing popular music—play is an existential prerequisite for the video game experience.

The historical foundations of game studies are located in play theory and the study of pre-electronic games. The work of Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) and French sociologist Roger Caillois (1913–1978) figure prominently in the pre-history of game studies. Both theorists contributed substantial ideas regarding the importance of play in culture and society. Huizinga's most famous and relevant work to game studies is *Homo Ludens*, first published in 1938, in which he argues that play is a formative element of culture, not merely a byproduct of it.[3] He points to the acts of play observable in animals as a primary, socializing force of many species, and finds play evident in various aspects of human society, including law, war, art, and philosophy. An idea from *Homo Ludens* that became a central—although contested—concept in game studies was his description of the **magic circle** that separates the game world from the rest of the social world. Huizinga argued that a magic circle is formed when participants freely engage with the system of rules

that constitute the game, accepting that what occurs within the magic circle has no influence or bearing on what exists outside of it. The border drawn by Huizinga's magic circle between play and the rest of social reality is a source of debate within play theory and is problematic for critical game studies, given its emphasis on investigating the symbolic connections between fantastic game worlds and everyday life. As will be discussed further below, critical game studies situates gaming within broader cultural environs that determine the kinds of games that can be played, as well as the meanings that players forge while in the throes of gameplay.

In emphasizing the importance of play to the formation of culture, Huizinga saw evidence of play everywhere in the world. He wished for play to be taken seriously, but as a result of this expansive application of play, he offered less insight toward distinguishing different manifestations of it. This is where Caillois' contribution to game studies is most helpful. In his 1958 book *Les Jeux et Les Hommes*, Caillois builds upon Huizinga's definition by proposing a play typology organized by the primary goal of each form: competition, imitation, chance, and sensation.[4] Popular games in these categories include basketball (competition), charades (imitation), roulette (chance), and merry-go-round (sensation). Caillois further suggests that these forms exist on a spectrum between **paidia** (unstructured, free-form play) and **ludus** (structured, rules-based play). For example, playing with wooden blocks is a form of free play. Where and how the blocks are placed is limited only by the weight, size, and shape of each block and one's imagination. The purpose of play may be to build the tallest structure or make the most stable shape, but more often than not there is no specific, universal goal. In contrast, chess is a highly structured form of play, governed by rules for where, when, and how players can move the pieces, all of which are oriented by the goal of capturing the opponent's king. While there may be many achievable paths toward this goal, all possibilities are delimited by the game's rules.

Caillois' typology and play spectrum are useful insofar as they provide basic characteristics from which to differentiate between "playing" and "playing a game." However, like many typologies of complex social systems and behavior, Caillois' categories fail to capture the complexity and wonderment of the play experience. Moreover, video and computer games can exemplify multiple play forms at once, while migrating back and forth on the paidia–ludus spectrum. Imagine, for example, how a "sandbox"-style

game like *Grand Theft Auto* (*GTA*) complicates Caillois' typology. The *GTA* games are designed to provide players with opportunities to roam around with no particular objective other than, perhaps, exploration and experimentation. Or, the player can engage in the game's central narrative by completing a linear path through a series of missions. At times, *GTA* adheres to more ludic play while at other moments it exhibits the characteristics of paidia. In either case, the player is always restricted by the game's programming, itself a system of rules, and hardware, which imposes creative limitations of a different sort.[5]

The difficulty in defining the experience of play and/or recognizing when behavior is or is not playful underscores the complexities of studying human behavior. Folklorist, education scholar, and play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith embraced this ambiguity and advocated against any universal definition of play.[6] Instead, he proposed that play, while present in most human societies and animal species, required scholars to consider its cultural specificities. He acknowledged the cognitive function of play in child development, such as in the influential work of Jean Piaget, but argued that the existence of certain types of play, the pervasiveness of particular games, and their attendant meanings can be traced to society's dominant values and belief systems.

While playing a game, existing power structures may be imposed or undermined, and dominant ideologies enforced or challenged. This idea has been a productive concept for critical game studies and supports the notion discussed below that games can be a persuasive platform. As demonstrated in this chapter's case study of *Spec Ops*, playing a video game may not have immediate material consequences outside of its virtual world, but engagement with a game's symbolism and play mechanics can inspire players to imagine that another world is possible, just as games can reveal the unquestioned assumptions and ideological foundations that guide and structure our lives.

Intellectual History: It's *How* You Play the Game

The emergence of a discipline, especially one that is born from a contemporary object, is often defined by what it is not. In the case of game studies, the contrast most often drawn is against the intellectual traditions associated with media studies. Any book written about contemporary media would be incomplete without an accounting of video games. However, while many of the approaches featured in this collection are applicable to the study of games—and, indeed, we point to those connections below—the form's qualities have ushered in a critical lexicon that attends to those particularities. At the most general level of abstraction, we can define video games as: interactive, rule-based structures, facilitated by computational systems that are most typically mediated by screens. Below we highlight key modes of analysis and terminology that have most significantly shaped game studies to date.

Researchers typically approach video games from one of two dominant perspectives, each with its own particular concerns: social scientists focus on behavioral and psychological issues, asking, "What do video games do to people?" while humanists are concerned with meaning-making, asking, "What do people do with video games?" Motivated by concerns over the behavioral influence of arcade games on children in the 1970s, the school shootings and violence debates around games like *Doom* in the 1990s, and moral panics associated with the diffusion of new media generally, U.S. empiricism from the media effects tradition has defined a significant body of social science games scholarship. This contrasts with the formalist tradition described below. The humanist turn in game studies begins in the late 1990s, specifically with the publication of two central books in 1997: Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext*, which explores the structural functions of interactive text, and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, which asks if and how storytelling changes with the arrival of new media technologies. These two books and the perspectives of their authors generated two competing frameworks—**"ludology"** and **"narratology"**—that shaped the early intellectual history of game studies.

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray wondered what new narrative forms computers would make possible, referencing the historical example of the novel as a form of storytelling made possible only after the arrival of the printing press.[7] To explore this question, she examined examples of hypertext, interactive chat, and video games, applying narrative theory to her analysis. She concludes that computers and other interactive, computational formats will expand the possibilities of narrative expression.

In *Cybertext*, Aarseth is concerned with the tasks that readers must complete in order to engage a nonlinear text, like a hyperlinked work of fiction.[8] The process of turning the page and scanning one's eye across a printed text, Aarseth argues, requires a trivial amount of work from the reader. His critique of Murray and so-called narratologists comes from his

emphasis on the work required for engaging nonlinear versus linear forms, which he argues cannot be understood from a narrativist approach. Instead, he contends that new modes of analysis are needed. In either case, both narratology and ludology privilege the form of a text over its representational contents.

Electronic games and computational media are fundamentally different from analog media because they are procedural in nature: designed as a set of executable instructions or rules advanced through human interaction. In order to study games, then, it is necessary for scholars to play games and experience the system under investigation. This can be a daunting undertaking since many games require twenty or more hours to play through. It is also possible to "finish" a game's narrative but not experience all of its narrative possibilities, visit all of its realms, or interact with all of its characters, objects, and side missions. Further complicating matters, persistent and massively multiplayer online (MMO) games like *EVE Online* do not have a definitive end, and the gameplay experience differs considerably with the presence or absence of other players. As a result, the researcher must approach the game not as a static object, but as a dynamic system that generates emergent and unexpected actions.

Analyzing video games as a system of actions is a central concern of digital media scholar Alexander Galloway. In his 2006 book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway outlines a classification of actions in games that includes gameplay as well as cheats, hacks, and bugs.[9] Galloway's approach provides a more precise vocabulary for understanding what happens in games, and he considers the potential real-world political consequences of in-game actions. Not only do games simulate and model real-world processes with increasing fidelity, but games also provide the spaces within which we experiment with new social possibilities. This is most recognizable in games about contemporary war, which Galloway argues are less about giving the player a sense of control over the ambiguities and uncertainties of war, and more about a new form of ideological manipulation: the perception of agency within a new system of command and control. However, for every control system governed by rules there is the potential for hacks and chaos, and in the conclusion of *Gaming*, Galloway explores the possibility of subversive strategies through what he calls "**countergaming**."

Similarly to Galloway, game designer, critic, and scholar Ian Bogost also privileges the systems of a game over its classic representational elements

(image, text, sound). In *Persuasive Games*, which builds upon the concept of **procedurality**, Bogost argues that a game's meaning comes from a player's interaction with the game's processes or computational procedures. Furthermore, these procedures represent a new form of rhetoric whose "arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior."[10] Like other forms of persuasion, procedural rhetoric can reinforce existing power structures, but they can also confront and alter these structures (political countergames). In the 2003 game *September 12th: A Toy World*, for example, gameplay invites a player to launch missiles at terrorists in a crowded village. With each "successful" hit the player also destroys homes and kills civilians. Civilians who are killed in the strikes re-appear as terrorists who have become radicalized by the martial intervention. This process repeats until militants overrun what is left of the village. This countergame uses recognizable game rules and mechanics to make the simple point that violence begets violence, and no "win state" in the War on Terror is possible.

While the attention to the procedurality of interactive media is a unique lens through which to examine games, critical analysis must also attend to the representational, contextual, and industrial components that constitute and color gameplay experiences. Jesper Juul, a former "pure" ludologist who once argued that the representation of a game was irrelevant to understanding gameplay, has amended his position. Video games, Juul now contends, are a half-real medium that fuses rule-based systems *and* fictional worlds.[11] Games are played in the real world, but players accomplish wins or losses inside of imaginary places, performing the rules as make-believe characters. So, while two games may be functionally similar, using the same mechanics and programming code, representational differences will fundamentally affect the player's experience.

As literary and media studies have established, consumption of a text is not a passive process, but requires active participation from the reader/viewer who works to decode the meanings of a text encoded by its producers. Games presuppose active participation. The player must press start to begin, and often a game will not progress without actions taken by the player. Decoding a game is, quite literally, to understand the programming code as it manifests in the rules of the game. Interacting with a game, however, is not necessarily bound by the rules of a game. Players frequently exploit the rules and hack the code to their

advantage. Mia Consalvo's exploration of cheating in games reveals how players avail themselves of cheat codes, strategy guides, and walkthroughs in order to experience the game on their own terms.[12] Players engage with, create, and trade in paratextual materials, building their expertise or social gaming capital and negotiating the meaning of their gameplay in relation to an industry and culture that enables, reveres, regulates, and disdains cheating.

The role of cheating in gameplay illustrates the importance of broadening an analysis of games beyond the game itself. Gaming and its many connected behaviors are part of participatory culture that has characterized the use and consumption of digital media.[13] For example, some players document their gameplay and record humorous commentaries in "Let's Play" videos using widely available screen capture software. These videos are entertaining critiques of games and game culture, but their popularity is also evidence of the expansive reach of ludic content.[14]

Another arena that demonstrates the pervasive, cultural influence of gameplay as well as its growing market value is the professionalization of electronic sports competitions. Online connectivity and access to ample bandwidth transformed a once niche activity into an international phenomenon. Sociologist T.L. Taylor's ethnographic study of the rise of e-Sports documents the transformation of gameplay competitions from regional video game arcade contests and local-area network tournaments, to a multi-million dollar industry with organized teams, corporate sponsors, live broadcast events, and an international audience of fans.[15] Through her analysis of e-Sports, Taylor addresses larger social and cultural concerns, including notions of labor and leisure, the influence of money on sports, the gendered construction of games and technology, the future of broadcast entertainment, and the challenges faced by subcultures as they move into the mainstream.

The transformation of video gameplay into broadcasted competition, from single-screen viewing into a spectator sport, represents a further commercialization of gameplay. But in widening an *interactive* experience for one into a *viewing* experience for many, e-Sports also signals the continued **remediation** of video games as a cultural form. Coined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to refer to the historical processes by which newer media are constantly building on and modifying pre-existing media, remediation is the "mediation of mediation."[16] Indeed, it is perhaps a telling sign of our postmodern times that games being played in e-Sports leagues contain visual

and aural elements borrowed from film and television (such as narrative "cut-scenes," non-interactive story sequences) to make them more compelling experiences. These games are then broadcast to audiences as a live televised sporting event would be, effectively fusing cinematic, televisual, and computational elements into a single media product. Furthermore, remediation possesses a "double logic" whereby it simultaneously draws attention to its own practices and hides its own artifice. Like most games, *Spec Ops* reveals the contradictory traits of hypermediacy and immediacy. For example, the game gives players information regarding their weapons and ammo using a heads-up display (hypermediacy), which allows for more precise control, even as it withholds additional narrative prompts that would otherwise guide players' choices (immediacy). *Spec Ops*, as it will be discussed presently, also generously borrows elements from multimedia war entertainment, serving as a useful reminder that researchers ought to put game studies into a wider dialogue with media and communication studies whenever possible.

Case Study: *Spec Ops: The Line*

Spec Ops: The Line makes for a fascinating case study in critical gameplay analysis because it is a duplicitous title that teases the player throughout its campaign with the promise of mission success—a moment that never truly materializes.[17] Indeed, with each "level complete" comes additional narrative confusion and tactical missteps, which beget more complications for the seemingly cursed mission. *Spec Ops* effectively inverts the standard social contract between video game and player. Instead of enjoying a sense of mastery of the game's operational logic and growing an empathetic bond with the player's hero-avatar by "leveling up" their combat abilities, this game makes it clear that enjoying any sense of control in war, even a fictional one, is a dangerous illusion. *Spec Ops* is an engaging game to be sure, as is evidenced by the voluminous praise from journalists and fans. However, it does not necessarily make for a fun experience, putting it at considerable odds with the overwhelming majority of video games on the market. One does not win at *Spec Ops* so much as one endures it.

The game's design studio, Yager Development, updated Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* for the twenty-first century's War on Terror. *Spec Ops* puts the player in the role of U.S. Army Captain Martin Walker who is searching for the missing soldiers of the 33rd Battalion (aka "the Damned 33rd") who

lost contact with military command after the city of Dubai, U.A.E. was nearly erased by monstrous sandstorms. Taking equal inspiration from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (itself greatly indebted to Conrad's haunting novella about post-colonial power), Captain Walker and his two Delta Force teammates search for Colonel John Konrad, the commanding officer of the Damned 33rd who became disillusioned and abandoned his post along with his battalion. The player's mission goes from bad to worse as Walker's exploration of the city's ruins produces evidence that contradicts the right-eousness of their "search and rescue" mission as well as Walker's mental stability. Walker's refusal to change course even after committing war crimes makes the player culpable in the horrors that befall his team and Dubai's hapless citizens.

Spec Ops' fairly conventional gameplay mechanics and its level design are fused to narrative and diegetic elements foreign to the popular military shooter genre. The narrative's downward spiral critiques the ideological pleasures of military enter-tainment writ large while simultaneously admonishing players seeking to lose themselves in the mythological canards of mediated warfare. *Spec Ops*, like the liminal state of play generally, is and is not what it purports to be. That is, the game's form and its content exist in a state of dialectical tension. Formally speaking, the game is a third-person military shooter where the player scrambles for advantageous firing positions to outflank, outmaneuver, and outgun the enemy threats level after level. In this regard, the game is exceedingly ordinary. However, because none of these tactical victories result in any lasting, positive outcomes for the player's team, the game's cultivation of displeasure makes it one of the cultural industries' first mainstream anti-war shooter games.

One of the primary attractions of video games is that the choices a player makes structure their experience. But player actions always unfold within a delimited field of play established by designers' choices. For example, the player can fight Walker's opponents using different weapons and battlefield tactics. However, they cannot freely explore Dubai in whatever manner they choose (e.g., they cannot backtrack, skip levels, select their own dialogue). It is therefore imperative that game studies incorporate into its analyses extra-textual sources that provide a fuller picture of how a game was realized, and how a studio's creative personnel (level designers, produc-ers, writers, artists, programmers, etc.) are themselves constrained by institutional structures and commer-cial imperatives. Fortunately for game studies, there is no shortage of gaming blogs, developer videos, postmortems, social media, and other materials that can enrich analyses. The *Spec Ops* study benefits from access to critic and designer commentary, just as it benefits from an awareness of how the game com-pares to others within the popular shooter genre. This *Spec Ops* study treats critic and designer commen-taries as important paratextual materials that shape players' experiences of the game, and it contextualizes the game within broader industry design practices by situating it within the popular shooter genre.
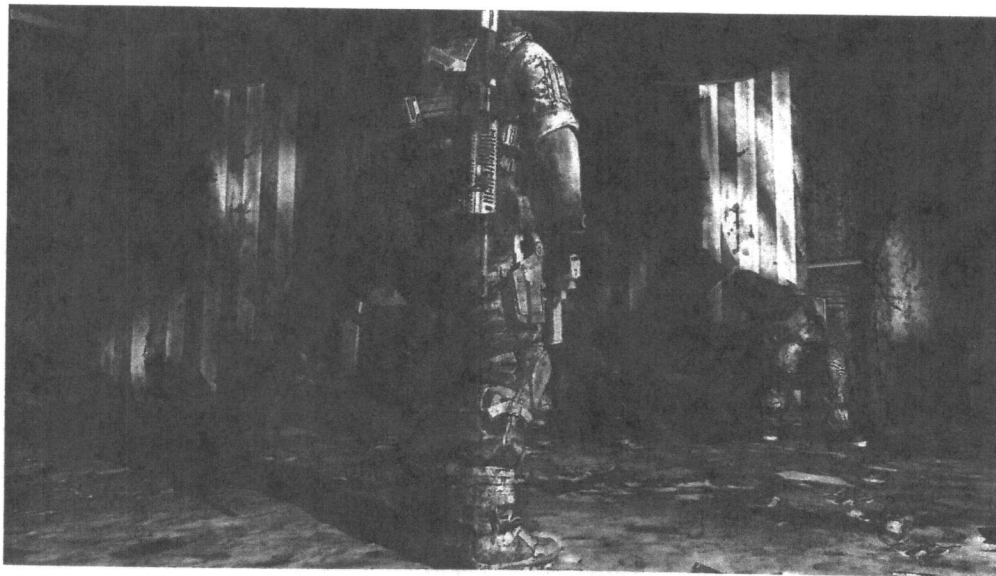

Figure 25.1 The player discovers American soldiers who have been tortured and killed (*Spec Ops: The Line*, 2K Games, 2012)

Methodologically, it is essential to know how a game is situated generically within a larger field of cultural production to determine whether its aesthetic choices and textual contours are typical, atypical, or lie somewhere in between. *Spec Ops*' Middle Eastern locale and its basic "cover and fire" combat system are clearly derivative of other post-9/11 shooters. But players who trek beyond the game's initial, tutorial-style levels will see that this is not another jingoistic bro-romp through some sandy, military hotspot. *Spec Ops*' true experiential mission is revealed gradually through its punishing narrative and its hyper-aware mode of address (more on these points shortly). Player-scholars can appreciate the radicalness of the Yager Development team only if they know the design rules that comprise the broader textual constellation of the military shooter. Thus, it behooves researchers to familiarize themselves with the title being scrutinized *and* its marketplace contemporaries to get a sense of the textual expectations affecting a given genre.

Because textual genres cohere both from within *and* from without, a game's implied social contract is evident in its design and is previewed paratextually in its promotional materials.[18] Gameplay trailers, magazine advertisements, developer interviews, and other producer-sponsored materials showcase marketers' varied strategies for selling the public on a game's attractions, while framing how said game should be interpreted. Holistically contextualizing and historicizing gameplay demands that player-scholars immerse themselves (repeatedly) in a game, examine its contemporaries, and track how supporting paratexts serve as preemptive frames of meaning for gameplay. Accordingly, the primary research materials for the *Spec Ops* study discussed here include a close examination of its single-player game mode, a survey of published interviews conducted with the Yager Development team, and the author's personal experience with first- and third-person shooter video games. Putting these varied materials into a critical dialogue enables one to connect digital games to broader cultural concerns and social forces. In the case of *Spec Ops*, the critique born of the disjunction between its generic form and its dystopic content is aimed squarely at the military-entertainment complex.

Spec Ops vs. the Military-Entertainment Complex

Following the lead of critical communication scholars like Roger Stahl, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter, the case study discussed above draws on two relatively distinct literatures: media and war scholarship, and video game studies. Fusing these areas enables the researcher to establish that shooters are emblematic products of the military-entertainment complex, before arguing why *Spec Ops*' deviation from that formulaic script is significant. What follows is a brief overview of the key terms and concepts that informed the writing of the *Spec Ops* essay.

President Eisenhower's "military-industrial complex," or the nexus of power and influence between defense contractors, the military, and congressional lawmakers following World War II, became a prime target for criticism when its power was most evident during the height of the Vietnam War. By contrast, the "**military-entertainment complex**" is primarily a post-Cold War phenomenon that describes the network of government, defense, and entertainment interests that collaborate on the production and distribution of a range of commercial and noncommercial cultural goods that paint the United States' wars, its military policies, and its service personnel in a positive light. *Spec Ops* critiques the military-entertainment complex's cultural output by transforming its banal war play into critical play. As the case study explains, "banal war" describes combat imagery and war reportage that has become disaffecting through repetition.[19] Banal war media normalize martial conflicts by making these presumptive inevitabilities entertaining, and video war games have been especially successful at engineering pleasurable, if normative, means for interacting with American Empire.[20]

But instead of embracing the mainstream design truism that a game's story and its system of play should exist in a harmonious relationship, we argue that *Spec Ops* takes the opposite tack to engender a state of **critical play**. According to game scholar and game designer Mary Flanagan, critical play means crafting "play environments or activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life ... characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternatives to popular play spaces."[21] *Spec Ops* engages in a veritable "bait and switch" over the course of its single-player campaign, trading the shooter's standard hegemonic pleasures of power and control for an affecting dissonance that highlights the disquieting contradictions that necessarily come with playing shooters. That is, while gamers combat waves of enemies in a hellish Dubai, *Spec Ops* is at war with its gamers—daring them to reflect on what it means to pleasurably play war.

But while the medium holds out the promise for advancing rhetorical claims and fostering consciousness-raising experiences, there are no guarantees that games will engender such moments. In fact, there are economic, industrial, and cultural pressures that actively foreclose critical elements from appearing in mainstream commercial titles. Game designers and producers must therefore make a special effort to integrate such elements and mechanics into their titles if they wish to facilitate these revelatory moments. Like Murray and Bogost, Flanagan too sees mediated and non-mediated games as expressive social technologies that can either reinforce or challenge reigning cultural mythologies.

The very existence of *Spec Ops* proves that, despite the economic and political advantages possessed by those interested in projecting the mythology of an indefatigable and omnipresent U.S. military presence, the medium remains a difficult one to control because it is predicated on experimentation, discovery, and play. Given the technical contingencies of the gaming apparatus, the vicissitudes of its play contexts, and the liminal state of the gameplay experience, we argue that it is crucial that scholars attend carefully to how gaming experiences emerge from specific player–text interactions and how antecedent social practices like design and marketing shape these encounters. Remaining attentive to the ways social practices are imbricated in the video game's algorithmic form *and* in the circuits of culture that swirl around it reminds gamer-scholars that ephemeral "magic circles" of play often serve material interests.

Dispelling with Realism: A Gameplay Analysis of Spec Ops

This case study argues the following: Although commercial military-themed video games produced after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks largely celebrate America's War on Terror as a grave but politically necessary undertaking, *Spec Ops: The Line* runs counter to this trend by deploying "ludonarrative dissonance" as a means of critiquing the attractions of military shooters. Coined by game designer Clint Hocking, **ludonarrative dissonance** describes the potential disagreement between a game's narrative and its operations as a gaming system.[22] In the case of *Spec Ops*, the game's shooter format and its dystopian, anti-war content are at irreconcilable odds. The genre asks players to lose themselves in a military fantasy while the narrative and mode of address repeatedly break that spell. The disquieting dissonance that *Spec*

Ops engenders is not a consequence of poor design, but is rather a pointed rejoinder to the design strategies that shooters utilize to mask over the experiential gap between playing a game and taking lives.

Spec Ops' ludonarrative dissonance is achieved principally through (1) its visual handling of the Dubai game space and the Walker avatar; (2) its intertextual references to popular war media; and (3) its real and imagined opportunities for player interaction. *In toto*, the creation of discord and dis-identification rather than immersion and escapism generate a sense of distance that questions the illusion of realism that all military shooters trade in, but one that few acknowledge.

Representation

Dubai and Walker function as allegorical proxies for the U.S.-led War on Terror and the player's symbolic participation in, and tacit support of, militainment. The once-opulent city of Dubai, presented in *Spec Ops* as a veritable graveyard of Western excess, stands in as another disastrous consequence of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Americans did not cause the sandstorms afflicting the city; however, their military-helmed humanitarian aid only increased the suffering of the civilians trapped there. Moreover, Captain Walker eventually comes to resemble the city itself, with each firefight and questionable decision leaving the player's avatar more visually ravaged. By the game's end, the non-descript, white everyman hero has been transformed into a monstrosity—from commanding his teammates with cool confidence, to hurling hoarse expletives at enemies. The player's third-person view of Walker offers a dramatic vantage point for witnessing this game-long metamorphosis, and for reflecting on how it differs from most shooters when it comes to representing the "Other."

The practice of "Othering" in games is predicated on establishing stark divides between the forces of good (i.e., the player) and evil (i.e., the AI-controlled opposition)—a divide that *Spec Ops* purposefully conflates and collapses. In military shooters, the enemy is most often depicted as fundamentally different than the player's character. They are a different color, speak a different language, subscribe to a different ideology, or worship a different god. But in *Spec Ops* the player must face down waves of English-speaking U.S. soldiers who perceive Walker and his two compatriots as the real threat to the citizens of Dubai. Fighting American soldiers and inadvertently killing unarmed Middle

Easterners caught in the crossfire begs the question, just who is the real enemy here? Walker is initially an empty vessel for the player's projection of power. However, this military fantasy becomes a nightmare as Walker emerges as the very monster that he was charged with bringing to justice. It is Walker—the player's own character and proxy—who is effectively "Othered" by the game's end.

Visual documentation is a key asset for making sense of the level design and avatar (de)construction in *Spec Ops*. Gamer-scholars should, as a practical research recommendation, consider complementing their detailed notes about characters, level design, and dialogue with screen grabs. Because Walker's mission spans eight to nine hours for a single play-through, screen grabs become incredibly useful for collecting one's thoughts about how the narrative is visually reinforced through its spatial and character constructs. In fact, over the course of the game's levels, the captured screen images become a visual travelogue chronicling Dubai's crumbling state and Walker's horrific transformation.

Intertextuality

Spec Ops contains numerous allusions to popular war entertainment, and the essay argues that the game's intertextuality serves at least two purposes. First, the Yager Development team uses intertextuality to prove that it is familiar with the cultural milieu of combat fare. For example, the game's soundtrack abounds with music tracks associated with Vietnam War media:

Deep Purple's "Hush," Martha and the Vandellas' "Nowhere to Run," and Jimi Hendrix's "Star Spangled Banner." Similarly, the game's collectible awards—called "achievements" on the Xbox and "trophies" on the PlayStation—which are earned for specific in-game accomplishments, are named after combat films (e.g., *Deer Hunter, Apocalypse Now*), recruiting slogans (e.g., Army of One, Be All You Can Be), and war novels (e.g., *A Bridge Too Far, A Farewell to Arms*).

However, the second, more remarkable use of intertextuality allows the game to alternatively erect and then puncture the diegetic fourth wall by deploying elements that situate *Spec Ops* firmly within the realm of militainment, only to reveal these choices *as* choices—in effect, transforming intertextuality into self-referentiality. The interstitial loading screens between levels, for instance, tease the player with rhetorical questions and sardonic quotes: "Can you even remember why you came here?" "To kill for entertainment is harmless," and "The U.S. military does not condone the killing of unarmed combatants. But this isn't real, so why should you care?" By alternating between moments of immersion and alienation (or Brechtian distanciation),[23] *Spec Ops* functions as a kind of meta-commentary on the rote design practices that shooter games typically pursue in cultivating their delimited sense of military realism.[24]

One of the persistent methodological challenges of tracking media intertextuality is the critic's ability to recognize a text's "winks and nods." Keeping detailed field notes and screen captures certainly helps in this regard, but these are imperfect methods for

Figure 25.2 The game forces the player to kill fellow American soldiers with incendiary rounds of white phosphorous that burn them alive (*Spec Ops: The Line*, 2K Games, 2012)

identifying references. Ultimately, spotting or deciphering allusions depends on being literate with a medium, a genre, and/or a textual universe. Further complicating matters, gaming literacy demands (at least) one additional skill: namely, the performative ability to uncover all those elements that are squirreled away in an interactive world (e.g., "Easter eggs" and unlockable achievements). Indeed, even if gamer-scholars have mastered a game, it does not necessarily mean that they will have explored or discovered all that it has to offer. Gameplay completion, in other words, *cannot* be the standard by which gameplay methodology ought to be judged. Rather, gamer-scholars should instead aim to be as comprehensive as possible by filling in their performative shortcomings with the extra-textual resources mentioned above (e.g., blogs, FAQs, interviews, walkthrough videos).

Agency

Finally, *Spec Ops* achieves its meta-commentary on the illusionary nature of player agency in games by presenting a universe that seemingly needs military intervention (e.g., Dubai's citizens need saving, Konrad should be brought to justice) but where the suffering only increases as the player pushes on. That is, the game reinforces its ludonarrative dissonance by *only* rewarding players' choices with disastrous consequences. There are, to be clear, no "good" decisions that result in a successful mission; conducting multiple play-throughs bears this out. In lieu of rewarding players for experimentation and ingenuity as most games do, *Spec Ops* punishes them for continuing their military misadventure despite growing evidence that they should put the controller down. The tacit promise of meaningful ludic action is but a specter, forever out of reach; the game is a fantastic exercise in futility. As the essay observes, the "freedom" at the heart of *Spec Ops* is summarized nicely by one of its loading screen's title cards (which is borrowed, uncredited, from Jean-Paul Sartre): "Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you."

Some of the most interesting insights about the game's engineering of alienation are found in long-form interviews with and postmortems by the Yager Development team. Across a wealth of online media, *Spec Ops'* writers and producers discuss the process of refining the game with aggravated play-testers, explaining how they set out to create something different for an over-populated shooter market that tends to reproduce the same tired form of military realism. The analytic benefit of including extra-textual sources in a gameplay analysis is that they can reveal the conditions and expectations under which game development happens. For instance, *Spec Ops'* multiplayer mode is forgettable and uninspired. But the reason why this under-produced gameplay mode was included at all is because the publisher, 2K Games, refused to distribute a shooter that did not have a multiplayer setting, believing that its omission would unduly limit sales. This is obviously not something that a researcher could surmise based on gameplay alone. And just as gameplay represents a rule-bounded playground, production histories and developer reports remind researchers that the

Figure 25.3 The player discovers that the civilians their team was trying to save have become "collateral damage," having been burned alive by the player's incendiary weapons (*Spec Ops: The Line*, 2K Games, 2012)

creation of these fictional freedoms are likewise constrained by extant industrial structures and production cultures. The unrelenting deconstruction of shooters' pleasures across *Spec Ops'* narrative campaign forces a reconsideration both of the cultural values guiding the creation of realism in mainstream militainment and of one's relationship to worldly violence. And herein, concludes the essay, lies the game's larger consciousness-raising potential.

Methodological Blind Spots

Even gameplay analyses that strive for comprehensiveness by uniting close readings of textual elements with industry discourse and production trends, such as developer interviews and genre conventions, invariably have their methodological blind spots. Gameplay's fleeting experiential nature and the basic functional contingencies of the object of study make the phenomenon of mediated play fantastically difficult to secure. How much playtime, for example, must gamer-scholars log before they can write authoritatively about a game? What happens if the researcher lacks the skill to advance even after repeated attempts? How should one handle games with branching storylines and multiple playable characters? How many times or how much time must one play before gaining the confidence to stake definitive knowledge claims about such a mercurial artifact? How does downloadable content that extends the playability of games complicate attempts to bracket off gameplay for analysis? What about procedurally generated worlds that change each time the game is launched, games that rely on user-created content, or games that are only multiplayer affairs? How do these variables change the research tack?

The *Spec Ops* case study is not without its methodological shortcomings. For example, the textual analysis does not examine the multiplayer mode. In fact, it was set aside out of analytical convenience because its conventional design muddies the argument that *Spec Ops* is an anti-war shooter. This begs the question, can one rightly call *Spec Ops* a radical game if it contains a gameplay mode that is anything but?

The essay also leans heavily on developer interviews to present a more complete picture of the thinking that went into its creation. However, the creatives at Yager Development and its publisher 2K Games are professionals who have a clear stake in authoring and authorizing their own versions of its production history. Given the precarious nature of

work in the cultural industries, researchers should remember that working professionals might have ulterior motives when presenting their takes on a game's development.

The essay's focus on the intertextuality and conventions of shooters necessarily limits its argumentative scope. Largely ignored in the case study are those popular culture texts that utilize satire and irony to critique mediated warfare. There is no discussion of the films *Dr. Strangelove* or *Three Kings*, or the web-based **machinima** series, *Red versus Blue*.[25] And besides fleeting mention in the conclusion, Hollywood films and TV series that second-guess U.S. interventionism with darker, "gallows humor" are likewise set aside (e.g., *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Generation Kill*). Focusing on shooters at the exclusion of other war media may give the false impression that there is little to learn from other forms of militainment.

Conclusion: Leveling Up? Game Studies after Gameplay

The *Spec Ops* case study was selected for discussion here, in part, because it demonstrates how multiple methods brought to bear on several sources of primary material (gameplay design, production histories, and genre expectations) can create a critical dialogue in order to deeply engage a single game text as well as to make larger, cultural claims. Military shooters not only share representational tropes and design practices, but they also demonstrate how political, cultural, and economic forces give shape to, and are represented in and by, those same algorithmic artifacts. The textual disjunction of *Spec Ops'* generic form and its dystopic content enables its critique to extend beyond the world of gaming to the wider post-9/11 military-entertainment complex. Critical gameplay analysis, in other words, demands that critics account for the form and for the content of games to establish how social power is articulated as an opportunity for play.

Given the medium-specific challenges posed by games and the limitations of this case study, what are the research opportunities moving forward? Does gameplay analysis represent the limit of game studies? Or, posed differently, what else might game studies teach us about how social power is mediated by and through these playthings? Since game studies is a relatively new field, fruitful scholarship is needed in cognate humanistic fields to arrive at more informed gameplay analyses. For example, a thorough examination of the industrial processes

involved in producing, publishing, and distributing a video game would be invaluable towards understanding the production contexts within which games are made. Important strides are also being made in game history, as scholars engage in media archeology and determine how historiography will inform their reclamation projects of lost games and gaming cultures of yesteryear.[26]

Game studies is a relatively new scholarly endeavor, but its research goals are not. There is the temptation within media studies to periodize it as an academic novelty belonging to the new century, following the course set by television studies in the late twentieth century and film studies before it. But while video games represent new objects of study, the human activity of gameplay does not. We have been playing games as a species for as long as we have been using language; in fact, most of us played games like "peek-a-boo" well before uttering our first words. Critical game studies makes the case for the cultural significance of actions too frequently dismissed as mere "play" but which speak volumes about the game worlds we choose to inhabit and the corporal world we must endure. Through the purposeful consideration of games and gameplay, critical game studies advances the ongoing human quest to understand who we are, what we fear and desire, and why we play.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 15th ed. (New York: Penguin Group, 1987).

2. Tanya Krzywinska, "The Strange Case of the Misappearance of Sex in Video Games," in *Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Game Studies*, eds. Johannes Fromme and Alexander Unger (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 158.

3. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

4. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Garash (Glencoe: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc., 1961).

5. Electronic games are programs executed on computational systems (platforms), which are a result of software and hardware design. The capabilities of a platform will significantly influence the design and development of a game. Software studies is concerned with the social and cultural influence of software programs, while platform studies investigates the relationship between software and hardware system. Both of these approaches complement the study of games. For an example of a platform analysis of a video game system, see: Nick

6. Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Study of Games* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971).

7. Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

8. Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

9. Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

10. Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 29.

11. Jesper Juul, *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 1.

12. Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

13. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

14. In 2014, one of the most popular content creators on YouTube was Swedish gamer Felix "PewDiePie" Kjellberg. His collection of Let's Play videos has attracted more than 28 million subscribers.

15. T.L. Taylor, *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012).

16. Jay David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 55.

17. Yager Development, *Spec Ops: The Line*, Xbox 360, 2K Games, 2012.

18. For further insights on the utility of using genre theory and paratexts in critical media analysis, see Chapters 16 and 17, respectively, in this anthology.

19. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

20. See Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig De Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 2009); Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne, "Online Games and Militarism," in *The International Encyclopedia of Digital Communication and Society, Vol. III,* ed. James Ivory and Aphra Kerr (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 828–34; Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

21. Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press), 6.

22. Clint Hocking, "Ludonarrative dissonance in *BioShock*: The problem of what the game is about," *Click Nothing: Design from a long time ago* (blog), October 7, 2007,

accessed February 25, 2018, http://clicknothing.type
pad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

23. German dramatist Bertolt Brecht would frequently rupture the fantasy illusion of his stage performances by acknowledging the artifice of the performance space and its social rules. His goal was to provoke the audience into reflecting on the unquestioned conventions of theater.

24. See Matthew Thomas Payne, "Marketing Military Realism in *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*," *Games & Culture* 7, no. 4 (2012): 305–27.

25. "Machinima," a portmanteau of "machine" and "cinema," typically refers to the practice of editing video game footage into new narratives. For more on this fusion of game performance and digital storytelling, see Henry Lowood and Michael Nitsche, eds., *The Machinima Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

26. Mark J.P. Wolf, ed., *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

Further Reading

Fullerton, Tracy. *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*, 3rd edition. Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2014.

Huntemann, Nina B. and Matthew Thomas Payne, eds. *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Jones, Steven. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003.

Mäyrä, Frans. *An Introduction to Game Studies*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2008.

Payne, Matthew Thomas. *Playing War: Military Video Games after 9/11*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

Ruberg, Bonnie and Adrienne Shaw, eds. *Queer Game Studies*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017.

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004.

Suits, Bernard. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, 3rd edition. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014.

Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Wolf, Mark J. P. and Bernard Perron, eds. *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2003.