AN INTRODUCTION TO GAME STUDIES

GAMES IN CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS GAME STUDIES?

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> If we apply to science our definition of play as an activity occurring within certain limits of space, time, and meaning, according to fixed rules, we might arrive at the amazing and horrifying conclusion that all the branches of science and learning are so many forms of play because each of them is isolate within its own field and bounded by the strict rules of its own methodology. (Johan Huizinga, 1938/1971, *Homo Ludens*)

Making sense of games

Playing games can be interesting and fun, but also challenging in many ways; game studies shares the same characteristics. The aim of this book is to guide its readers into the path of analytical appreciation and enhanced understanding of games. This is a textbook of game studies, which is a new field of study focusing on games, particularly in their different digital forms. As an introductory text on contemporary subject matter, it is best thought of as a 'portal in paper': it is designed to give a compact overview of the field, and equip its readers with the key tools necessary for continuing into more detailed and advanced lines of inquiry. Therefore, it will provide several information boxes with pointers into sources of further information, with more such information provided in the accompanying website (*www.gamestudiesbook.net*). The book is also designed to be used as a companion piece in an introductory course of game studies, and to facilitate that use, as well as self-study, at the end of each chapter there are concluding chapter summaries and a few sample assignments, with notes on related methodologies, which are also discussed further in the final chapter.

The structure of the book is both conceptually and historically organized. Some of the history and key approaches of game studies are introduced in the two initial chapters, after which the book will attempt to familiarize the reader with the key historical phases of game culture and related, most important game forms. Rather than aiming to be encyclopaedic or generic, the discussion of games contained in this book is based on individual and concrete representative examples of games, chosen to open the road into more comprehensive appreciation of the diversity of the field. The historically and thematically oriented chapters each introduce key concepts that are useful

for understanding a particular type of game; the discussions of this kind of specific concepts are embedded at the points where they are useful within the overall historical framework. The main framework focuses on distinctions between gameplay and representational aspects of games, and on discussing various dynamic aspects of games.

There are many ways how games and their study could be presented, partly owing to the breadth and diversity of games themselves, partly because the discipline is a newcomer, and there are several perfectly valid approaches to the study of games. My own twisty road as an academic trained originally in textual and art studies, who then moved into teaching and studying digital culture and then into heading an interdisciplinary research laboratory on game studies, has of course an effect on what kind of approach is adopted here. Rather than being mostly a book about making games, or one analysing only their structures or functions, or a study that investigates the business or legal aspects related to games, this work's principal starting point is on *games as culture*. This means that the artistic and creative dimensions of games are taken rather seriously, but since the concept of 'culture' has undergone many changes as researchers from several disciplines have contributed to its formation, the view presented here is necessarily and inherently interdisciplinary. The views that intersect in this book can be grouped into (1) study of *games* (2) study of *players*, (3) study of the *contexts* of the previous two (see Figure 1.1). In reality, these three spheres of inquiry cannot be separated, but must be seen both as mutually interacting and complementary, and informed by historical processes. In some earlier studies (Juul, 2005: 37) a three-partite division focusing on relations between the game, the player and the world is used, but here 'context' is used as a more general concept that includes multiple frames of reference, and thus also multiple possible realities.

A context relevant for understanding a game might be informed by the developments within and between particular genres, while in order to understand typical practices of play it might be necessary to take into account a certain way that distinctions between private and public spaces influence playing practices,

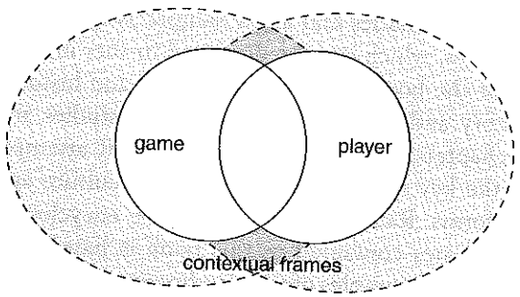

Figure 1.1 The focus of game studies in the interaction between game and player, informed by their various contextual frames.

for example. The *vision of game studies* informing this book can be described as multidisciplinary and dialectical; if and when we understand anything, it is by making connections that open up new directions for thinking about games. Bringing into contact existing but previously separate ideas, concepts, and frames of thought, we can proceed to create a synthesis of them, and see our grasp of things evolve. As new concepts are introduced, they will also re-contextualize our understanding of game–player relationship. In this way, analytical studies of games can also have an effect on the way we play games or perceive each other as players. During the course of this book, this starting point will be examined from multiple viewpoints, all contributing to a view of *games in culture* – that is, a particular model of sense-making for digital games that is aimed to help distinguish the multiple layers and processes of meaning involved in playing and discussing them.

This basic dialectical structure applies to the aims and structure of this book as well. To start, there are at least two key terms any practitioner of game studies needs to be familiar with: that of (1) *game*, and that of (2) *study*, as in scientific and scholarly practice – both of them rather complex and diverse concepts. One only need to compare a classic board game like the Chinese *Go*, *Dungeons & Dragons*, a fantasy role-playing game, *Solitaire* (style of card games popular also as a digital version installed with the Windows operating system), and a contemporary video game like *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar Games, 2001), to realize that many concepts that are very useful for describing one game can be rather useless when describing another. Similarly, scientific practice has evolved into numerous forms and there are many different approaches which one could apply into the study of games and produce interesting and valuable outcomes. Thus, even if this book presents certain concepts and approaches as useful starting points for game studies, the most important lesson it should provide for its readers relates to the fundamentals of scientific research itself: when systematically applied and critically tested, there are multiple ways into knowledge. Scientific practice is continuously created, maintained and corrected by the academic community, and the never-ending 'approach to truth' describes it much better than a declaration of any single absolute truth.

A friend of games should find this basic character familiar enough, since deep down, *science and scholarship are much like games*. Players are drawn into games because of their challenges, and playing involves creating, testing and revising strategies as well as the skills necessary for progressing in the game. Academic study can captivate in the same way, and largely for same reasons: it requires facing challenges by setting up hypotheses, forming research questions and strategies, and then revising them, as even the most promising directions can lead into blind alleys. And even the occasional discovery or breakthrough usually opens up doors into new directions and new challenges.

At the same time, it is important to realize the differences and institutionalized limitations to the 'play impulse' within scientific work. The quote of

Johan Huizinga opening this chapter is illustrative; the 'horrifying conclusion' of science becoming 'merely a game' is quickly dispelled by Huizinga: he points out that scientific work is not confined in its own reality or 'magic circle' (see Chapter 2), and the 'rules' of its play are constantly challenged and results tested against those from alternative approaches (Huizinga, 1938/1971: 203). Thus, rather than just playing a ready-made game, the work of a scholar is actually much more like that of a *game designer*, who must develop and implement a systematic structure for new ideas and then see how the creation is 'played with' by members of the academic community. The aim is that by the end of this book, the reader will have a better conception of the key elements and steps that are required to successfully engage in academic study of games. Particularly, the last chapter will provide further directions into the practical and methodological issues related with embarking on a game studies project.

Game studies is a young discipline, and there are scholars who would not grant it the name of 'discipline' at all and would rather prefer to talk about a multidisciplinary research field that is focusing on games. Regardless of how we call it, game studies has reached the point where it has become established both as a field of scientific inquiry and as a branch of knowledge that is formally taught at universities. It has its own subject of study – games and playing in their multifarious manifestations – and also its own theories, methods and terminology, which have entered into the usual process of academic application, evaluation and reformulation. In institutional terms, developing into a discipline means that a learned community has formed around game studies, with the shared aim to evolve knowledge on games. Such institutionalization is also advanced by the associations, conferences and journals which have been created in this field. At a certain point, disciplines also become realized in the form of education offered in academic degree programmes, and even if game studies at the time of writing (in 2006) has not yet reached this stage in many universities, there are already a few such degrees in existence, and hundreds of courses and minor degrees turning up, as the wide interest of both teachers and students is expanding the field.

There are many reasons why game studies is expanding in popularity. One of them is obvious: the popularity of games themselves. With the rise of digital media and information technologies, millions of people have found games as one of the most fascinating uses for these new interactive devices. As new hardware and software are being produced, games continue to be the most challenging and popular application for all those advanced features of new technology. Games push the envelope in various areas of media technology and have been a major factor in information technologies entering homes in the first place. Today, digital games[1] are a significant cultural force, which has a prominent role in the lives particularly of those people who are living in industrialized countries. The commercial success of the games industry also cannot be ignored; even if it is a volatile and risky industry, games development and publishing nevertheless has grown into a global creative powerhouse, with

a global market value regularly cited as exceeding 30 billion dollars annually. There is now also an entire generation of academics entering the faculty who grew up surrounded by arcade and home video game consoles and personal computers, and who have dedicated plenty of time both in their youth and adult life into playing games. Thus, the two key factors were there for a new wave of game studies to emerge: an important and challenging, and largely yet under-researched phenomena, plus a fair number of young researchers with the expertise and enthusiasm necessary for embarking upon study on this field.

A (very) short history of game studies

Game studies is faced with the double challenge of creating its own identity, while at the same time maintaining an active dialogue with the other disciplines. As long as there are only a few institutions dedicated solely to the study of games, the majority of game studies will continue to be practised by individuals who are nominally situated in some other field: in literary, film or media studies, or in departments of communication research, sociology, psychology, computer science, or in some other of the numerous fields where game studies is currently exercised. In a lucky case, they will find it easy to apply the traditions of their native fields into the study of games without compromising their real interests either in terms of games as their central subject of study or without conflicting with the core identity of their discipline. In many cases, the road is not so easy, and students focusing on games may find it hard to get the advice, support and understanding they need while engaging in the academic study of games. In career terms, specializing in game studies has been a difficult choice, as there have been very few job opportunities for games researchers in most universities (See Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 GAME STUDIES RESOURCES ONLINE

Digital Games Research Association – DiGRA: *www.digra.org*
DiGRA conferences: *www.gamesconference.org*
International Simulation & Gaming Association – ISAGA: *www.isaga.info*
Game Studies Journal: www.gamestudies.org
Games and Culture Journal: www.gamesandculture.com
Journal of Game Development: www.jogd.com
Digiplay Initiative: *www.digiplay.org.uk*
Game Research website: *www.game-research.com*

For more online sources, see the companion website *www.gamestudiesbook.net*

The situation is changing, and in the future the issue is likely to be put the opposite way – why should there *not* be game studies represented in a modern university? Failure to address games in academic education may also lead into research lagging behind more generally. The international academic community is directing their energies into understanding games not only because of their personal enthusiasm for them, but also in order to learn important lessons about the forms social life and creative practices are taking in late modern societies. After all, games are the most successful example of information and communication technologies becoming *domesticated*, which means that they evidence being integrated into the everyday life and practices of groups of people. Study of games and our near-universal fascination with them can also teach about the human nature and about our attraction to *interactivity*. Games are interactive by heart, to the degree that it is tautology to use the expression 'interactive games'. The makers of software and new technology in general can study games to learn about ways to make interactivity an enjoyable experience. To a certain degree this has already happened: there is a change in the ways technology is discussed by experts, and some have started to speak about *design of experiences* rather than features or applications. Games may even have important effects on the ways, particularly, the younger 'gamer generations' think and operate and to the direction our societies are developing. It is easy to come up with several answers for the question 'Why study games?'

Giving a clear-cut definition for game studies is much harder. On a general level it is simple: *game studies is a multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter.* It is only when one starts to organize this diversity into a collection of theories and methodologies or forms it into a single body of knowledge to be communicated in teaching and publication, that things get complicated. It is impossible to include all theories and approaches from every possible academic discipline even if they could *potentially* be useful also for a researcher of games; a 'science of everything' can just as easily lead into confusion and become a 'study of nothing'. Therefore we need to understand why and how game studies has emerged in a certain form and why some questions appear more central for the practitioners of the field than do others.

When we define something, we trace out the boundaries and state what is included and what excluded. Sociologists of science point out that disciplines are actually social formations, developing their own language, shared perceptions of the world and even ritualistic conventions. The identity of game studies is also a historical process, and it is evolving in time. There has been academic study of games actually for a rather long time already, particularly within such disciplines as history and ethnography. To point towards two of the classics of the field, ethnographer Stewart Culin's *Games of The North American Indians* was published in 1907, and a *History of Chess* by an Englishman, Harold James Ruthven Murray in 1913, both of them still useful and impressive works of

learning. Various games have also had an active role in the private and social lives of university students as well as academics, for a long history spanning several centuries. During these years, when professional and personal interests collided, research work sometimes sprang up, but there was no institutional support or discipline to encourage such activities.

Looking at the early disciplinary formations, it should be noted that games have a close relation to simulation (imitation of operations of a large system by other simplified system) and in this subfield the roots of the academic attention to games reach long into history. There exists a rich tradition of using various kinds of simulations for learning purposes – learning by playing may even be called the oldest learning method there is. After all, even animals learn by imitation, and play behaviour that is simulating hiding or fighting is familiar to anyone observing small kittens or puppies learning skills necessary for later life. History of research into the systematic design of games for learning purposes can be traced back to certain tactical and strategic writings from eighteenth-century Germany. Helwig, a master of pages at the court of the Duke of Brunswick, adapted chess into an early war game in 1780; he also wrote about his goal to design a game to create an 'agreeable recreation' for young pages, which would render 'sensible, not to say palpable, a few principles and rules of the military art'. (Avedon and Sutton-Smith, 1971: 272.) Later, different varieties of war games were developed and discussed, both in military and increasingly in leisure contexts. A group of American war gamers formed in the 1950s the East Coast War Games Council, an organization which arranged a series of symposia and also published proceedings, including presentations from these meetings in the 1960s. Following a later expansion, the name of the group was first changed to the National Gaming Council, but since the society was compared largely of educators interested in using particularly simulation games to enhance learning, a new name – the North American Simulation and Gaming Association (NASAGA) – was adopted. In other countries, similar developments were taking place, and the simulation and gaming research community expanded into an international network of national associations. An umbrella organization, International Simulation and Gaming Association (ISAGA), was established in 1970 and has organized over thirty annual conferences since then, bringing together researchers focusing on games and simulations and their use for various applied purposes. An academic journal, *Simulation & Gaming*, has been published since 1970, making it the oldest regular publication in the field. (Duke, 2003; Knuth, 1994.)

Another group of North American scholars gathered together in Minneapolis for the first time in 1973 and soon formed an association focused on the study of play in 1974. Changing its name to The Association for the Study of Play (TASP) in 1987, the group has been publishing proceedings of its annual meetings from early on. (The original name of the group was 'Cultural Anthropology of Play Reprint Society'.) A series of journals produced by the association has also been an important venue for developing and publishing

play research: *Play and Culture* (1988–1992), *Journal of Play Theory and Research* (1993–1997), and most recently, *Play and Culture Studies* (1998–) (Myers, 2006; TASP, n.d.). There probably exists other similar early groups around the world, within different disciplinary contexts.

There are several other routes for game studies as well, most importantly in the fields of play behaviour research, the offshoots of computer science studying graphics, simulations and artificial intelligence, and the humanities computing field. It was particularly from the last of these where the contemporary wave of game studies started to emerge. Many of the people working within this paradigm approached computers as a potential new medium. Early thinkers such as Vannevar Bush had already in the 1940s discussed their ideas concerning a tool or device that would operate in an associative manner like the human mind, rather than in a strict linear or category-based fashion. Theodore Nelson provided the name 'hypertext' for such a way of interconnecting written or pictorial material that 'could not be conveniently presented or represented in paper' (Nelson, 1965/2003: 144). The advances in human–computer interaction and the increasing availability of computers in public and private use played a role as artists and humanistic scholars embarked on examining the potentials and implications of these new technologies. For the literary scholars, digital media appeared, opening new interesting directions particularly in the experiments of hypertext fiction, and interactive fiction in general. In 1997, the Norwegian scholar Espen Aarseth published *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, suggesting that hypertexts, adventure games and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons, see Chapter 7) provided a fresh perspective to a form of textuality that requires 'non-trivial effort' from their readers to traverse the text. The same year also saw the publication of *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, by Janet Murray, an influential work discussing the future possibilities for interactive drama and narrative. Together, these two works also function as symbols for the two alternative approaches which collided in the first major debate animating the young game studies community a few years later.

Debates can be useful in making even slight differences of opinion stand out more clearly. That is also true of so-called 'ludology-narratology debate'. Ludology is a term suggested by the Uruguay-born games researcher Gonzalo Frasca in an article published originally in 1999; taking its model from narratology, which was a concept 'invented to unify the works that scholars from different disciplines were doing about narrative', Frasca proposed the term 'ludology' to refer to the 'yet non-existent "discipline that studies game and play activities"' (Frasca, 1999). However, 'ludology' appears to have already been in occasional use before this. Also in 1999, the young Danish scholar Jesper Juul completed his Masters Thesis 'A Clash Between Game and Narrative', which is one of the clearest statements of the 'ludologist' position in its early form. In contrast to some other researchers working in the field, who had set realizing interactive fiction as their goal, Juul considered

interactive fiction as a utopia (even if an interesting one), because of the fundamental conflicts between the player-controlled interactivity happening in present time, which is at the heart of games, and narrator-organized representation of events, at the heart of narratives. Juul not only claimed that 'you can have a computer game without any narrative elements', but he even concluded that 'it is then the *strength* of the computer game that it doesn't tell stories' (Juul, 1999/2001: 7, 86). Several researchers were nevertheless willing to continue pushing games exactly into that direction, developing the potentials of games for interactive drama and as a storytelling medium in general (see Box 1.2).

A student of this part of intellectual history of game studies should pay attention to the fact that many of the 'ludologists' are actually coming from the field of literary studies and narratological research, and perhaps precisely for this reason are particularly sensitive to the limitations of those approaches. Nevertheless, games are clearly different from any traditional narrative, and the counter-narratology reaction arising from the early literary studies–based ludology has helped to make those differences more distinguishable. Ludology as

Box 1.2 ON HYPERTEXT, CYBERTEXT, AND INTERACTIVE FICTION

> Well, by 'hypertext' I mean *non-sequential writing* – text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen.
>
> As popularly conceived, this is a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways. (Nelson, 1980/1990: 0/2.)

> In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to traverse the text. [...] A cybertext is a machine for the production of variety of expression. [...] Cybertext is a *perspective* on all forms of textuality, a way to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena that today are perceived as an outside of, or marginalised by, the field of literature – or even in opposition to it, for (as I make clear later) purely extraneous reasons. (Aarseth, 1997: 1, 3, 18.)

> Not everyone will immediately agree with the assertion that a work with aspects of a game, and with a history so involved with the entertainment software market, should be thought of in literary terms. Isn't the pleasure of the text adventure purely a ludic pleasure or a pleasure related to mastery – one that comes from overcoming mental challenges formed as the verbal equivalent of jigsaw puzzles, with only one set of solution? There are in fact other aspects of interactive fiction that prevent an easy affirmative answer to this question.
>
> For one thing, the puzzles in a work of interactive fiction function to control the revelation of the narrative; they are part of an interactive process that generates narrative. (Montfort, 2003: 2–3.)

a novel concept also helped to highlight how games, when considered in their own terms as forms of art and culture, were in some sense unique, and in need of their own theories and methodologies of research. This was an important realization, and at the turn of the millennium an energetic phase of theorization and research had started. An important venue for this was opened by the establishment of a new online, peer-reviewed journal, *Game Studies*, which was first published in 2001 and saluted as 'Computer Game Studies, Year One' by the Editor-in-Chief Espen Aarseth. The formation of the journal coincided with a series of mostly European games research conferences and then with the formation of the academic society to support the research community – Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA). The years 2003, 2005 and 2007 saw the first three world conferences organized by DiGRA, and a proliferation of research papers, reflecting intensive academic work, which soon also surfaced in book-length publications, as academic publishing houses started to provide room for the work of games scholars.

Despite the differences of approach, there are no real 'schools of game studies' in existence, not at least in any more substantial sense, and researchers are continuing discussions about the fundamental concepts and methodological issues across disciplinary boundaries. Even the 'ludology-narratology debate' has turned into discussion whether it ever really happened in the first place (see e.g. Frasca, 2003a; Pearce, 2005). No one actually seems to be willing to reduce games either into stories, or claim that they are only interaction, or gameplay, pure and simple, without any potential for storytelling. But the different emphases and foci for the study of games remain, and that is the single most valuable contribution of this debate for game studies: games can be several different things, depending on how one approaches them. Looking for narratives, one can find (or construct) them, and it is equally possible to search and find the essence of games in their interactive character – in their gameplay. Applying this lesson in practice, the different chapters in this book will each introduce concepts relevant for study of games and play through discussions of certain influential games. A rather general overall framework will be developed during these discussions, but no single 'master theory' will be provided to contain all conceptual aspects, since the reality of games and play does not fit in any narrow model. Games, players and their interactions are too complex and interesting in their diversity to allow for all-powerful simplifications.

Looking at the history of game studies from a geographical perspective, it is apparent that the international scope of this research has been broad from the start, but the majority of the internationally available academic activity has centred on Europe, North America, and Australia – an obvious effect of language barriers. However, broadening of the field and increasing interaction is taking place also in this respect; currently, particularly the East Asian countries, like Japan, South Korea and China are entering the research community, contributing research based on their rich native gaming cultures.

South America, India, Africa and other parts of the world will probably be following the lead at some point. There is no country or society where games would not be played and enjoyed.

Summary and conclusions

- Game studies is a new academic field and interdisciplinary field of learning, which focuses on games, playing and related phenomena. Its recent rise is linked with the emergence of digital games as a cultural force, but it is not restricted to any technology or medium.
- There are several disciplines and approaches which have contributed to the study of games, ranging from history and anthropology to psychology, sociology, educational sciences, computer sciences, and lately, particularly literary and art studies. It has been suggested that the study of games and play activities should form a scholarly approach of its own, called *ludology*.
- Recent years have meant growth for the international game research community, as research publications, books, seminars, conferences, journals and associations have been created in the field of game studies. The history of games research, however, extends far in several fields of learning.

Suggested further reading

Johan Huizinga, 'Nature and Significance of Play as a Cultural Phenomenon'. In: Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (eds), *The Game Design Reader*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2006, pp. 96–120.

Orientation assignment: Personal game history

This is an introductory assignment, designed to start you off into the appreciation of games and play cultures; and as it has been said, the foundation of all true knowledge is self-understanding. It was already known as the first piece of advice provided by the Oracle of Delphi for those seeking wisdom: 'Know Thyself'. For a researcher of qualitative phenomena such as games and playing them, self-understanding has an important double role: on the one hand, understanding the tilt produced by one's personal history and background is paramount for any informed self-critique. Researchers or professional experts are rarely 'typical' or average representatives of wider demographics, and it is good to know where one stands, as compared with various other groups with different backgrounds. (This is something we will discuss later, in Chapter 8.)

On the other hand, in order to really understand the fascination of immersive gameplay, or to be able to make qualitative distinctions between games with very different look and feel, we need to experience games and play ourselves. Understanding what are the strengths and possible weaknesses of ourselves as a research instrument are important steps in making us better in evaluating, researching and developing games.

Start by making some notes or a map on a large piece of paper on your personal games history – just freely try to jot down names and titles of games you have played. It might help if you engage in some small-scale archaeology and look into the boxes in the attic or in a cupboard for some traces of games and play sessions of years passed. Have you remembered to put also down childhood street-plays and board games played at home? How about card games, poker, or a lottery? Some of the multiple forms of games can easily escape our attention.

Write a text where you describe your personal relation to games and playing. It might be impossible to fit all the key moments, highlights and phases into a short account, but try to focus on creating an accessible summary, where you reflect on the kind of gamer you represent – or, alternatively, explain why games have not played such a major role in your life personally. Have you noticed that age correlates with interest in certain kinds of games? Have you been similar to, or different from other people you know in terms of your game playing? Do you have some particular field of expertise or certain favourites among games?

This is suitable as a joint orientation assignment for the entire course and will also work as an introduction which helps students, tutors and teachers get to learn to know each other. Everybody is encouraged to actively discuss and comment on each others' histories, pointing out both similarities and differences between them. To summarize jointly your findings, do you consider yourselves a typical sample in terms of your generation and cultural background?

(Associated research methods: qualitative methods of social sciences, biographical methods, memoir, group discussion.)

Notes

1. Note on terminology: this book uses the expression 'digital games' to refer to all kinds of contemporary games utilizing computing technologies within its operation. This includes, but is not limited to, the video games played with home console systems, arcade video games, computer games played with mainframe or personal computers, mobile games for mobile phones and various new digital devices. In some contexts and countries 'computer games' or 'video games' are used as similar umbrella categories, but 'digital games' is here being adopted into use as the most neutral of the available terms.

2

GAME CULTURE: MEANING IN GAMES

Games as cultural systems

The first of the key concepts for game studies introduced here is that of *game culture*. Contemporary game studies differ from the earlier traditions of studying games within such disciplines as history, ethnography, military simulation or educational sciences principally for the emphasis on games as a particular form of culture. This change in perception is partially due to games becoming such a noticeable part of popular culture during the last decades. Games are not only cluttering the children's rooms and arcade game parlours, but are conquering the living rooms and stepping out from the computer screen to various multifunctional devices, such as interactive televisions and mobile phones. On the other hand, the field of science has also undergone changes. It has become customary to speak about a 'cultural turn', which relates to the increasing role of linguistics and meaning for academic study. This development has often been linked philosophically to *social constructionism*, the view that our perceptions of reality are socially and culturally produced, rather than independent and objective facts. Even if its strong forms easily evoke accusations of relativism, the basic thesis of social construction theories, that our social existence affects what kind of meanings we are able to associate with phenomena, continues to gain popularity.

For the purposes of this book, culture is here understood rather generally as *a system of meaning*. One might claim that this is just passing on the problem, since 'meaning' is an equally slippery concept, which multiple traditions of thought have been addressing. In the context of game studies, it is just as important to think about meaning that is related to actions, or images, as it is to find meanings in words. The linguistic theories of meaning have often focused on the role of convention in sounds or symbols. When a community of language users establishes a convention to link certain expressions with phenomena, it can be said that these sounds or symbols start to carry meaning. The fixed convention as a vehicle of meaning, however, is not the complete truth. Language users do not wait until they master the established conventions of grammar and vocabulary of a language completely before they start to communicate. If a language system was the sole vehicle for meaning, we would not be able to understand or communicate with very small children,

and also incremental language learning would be equally impossible. Yet, even without words, we can engage with simple games, or playing behaviours with babies, like young animals do among themselves. (See e.g. Piaget, 1966/2000; Smith, 1984; Vygotsky, 1934/1986, 1980.) In a fundamental sense, playing *is* a form of understanding. We can decode messages that carry information in unconventional forms by simple trial-and-error behaviours, as the feedback we derive from our interaction tells us whether we have understood each other or not. And in many cases it is even not so crucial that we are receiving and decoding messages exactly as they were originally intended; playing is fundamentally a form of *contact by interaction*, and while playing, it is most important that we keep the interplay going, and derive its predictable or surprising outcomes. A concept of games culture can help to bring into light the mostly unspoken backdrop against which games make sense for their players.

Meaning is also intimately tied to the concept of communication, which a dictionary defines as 'a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behaviour' (*Merriam-Webster*). Meanings that are shared or produced in explicit acts of communication are nevertheless only a particular case of meaning-making. Much of the meaning or significance that is produced in human activities remains silent and, even at its best, is only implicitly or indirectly apparent for an external observer from the behaviours a particular individual is engaged in. In many cases, game playing appears permeated by this sort of 'silent significance'. An immersed player can be engaged with the game for hours on end, and yet it is hard to tell precisely what the actual meaning of game is for this player. Hands may be locked to the game controls, there are movements and maybe sometimes (conscious or involuntary) sounds, but even when interviewed, a player is rarely able to verbalize very well the exact quality of gameplay experience. The internal experience can be rich and multidimensional, and yet hard to communicate precisely (cf. Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005).

Much of the scholarship within game studies has been dedicated for understanding the similarities and differences of games to literature, cinema or other forms of storytelling. This is helpful to a certain degree, as it can help us to situate games in the ways narratives are redefined or challenged by the interactive character of games. While storylines, characters, milieu and other similar narrative elements often dominate discussions of games, there are actually many reasons why one should look for similarities also in such areas as *music* or *dance* while aiming to understand the ways in which games produce meaning. The musical experience has been characterized as 'non-linguistic' because music (at least in its instrumental form) does not use words to convey its meaning, yet it regularly succeeds in evoking feelings and sometimes also in conveying more precise ideas. The basic character of playing music, or dancing to its rhythm or melody is *performance*, as is also in the case of playing games. There are actually not very many extended discussions of a particular gameplay experience, but David Sudnow has attempted to describe the performance

of playing the arcade game *Breakout* (Atari, 1976) in his book *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983):

> I'm rising up with the shot then, the volume turned up high now, filling the room with bleeps, and I'm putting the shoulders and head into the action, singing a song with this ten-second sequence. I'll make up for the lack of heft in this knob by enveloping the frictionless calibrations in an encompassing style of undulating. Hum the sixteen-note melody created by the bleeps when the ball hits paddle, bricks, and side wall. *Bleep*, the serve ... *bloop*, the return ... *blapbleeb* ... a quick brick bounce off the side wall back down to ... *bloop*, the next return after the beat, and then up, down, off the side back up, *bleep* back down, up down, off the side down up. Throw yourself into the unfolding melody, carry the hand smoothly from one point to the next, ride with the ball through the whole five places. [...] (Sudnow, 1983: 133.)

Removed from its context of an Atari video game, which is structured around breaking down a virtual brick wall with a paddle and a bouncing ball (see Figure 2.1), the description of Sudnow's experiences becomes almost a nonsensical flow of actions, movements and sounds. Yet, playing *Breakout* or a similar seemingly simple game can be an intensely engaging experience, with the player's skills being constantly challenged and risen to a new level by the need for precisely directed and timed interaction with a computer-controlled environment. It appears that our language for describing gameplay performance is still rather limited. Sudnow's text is aiming to convey the *phenomenology* of gameplay, its internal sense and feeling for a game player. This text also reflects

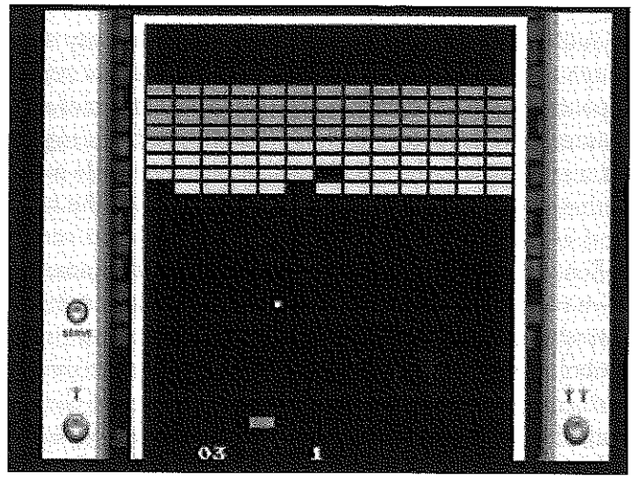

Figure 2.1 Screenshot from *Breakout* (Atari, 1976). [Image credit: *www.thocp.net*, Ted Stahl and The History of Computing Foundation.]

Box 2.1 WHAT IS GAMEPLAY?

Gameplay is what doesn't change when you change the surface: the rules. In board games this is clear: the sundry local editions of Monopoly all have identical gameplay despite the different names of the streets. In videogames this is rather more delicate, as virtually everything is gameplay, and a slight change of a single parameter (say, speeding up a character, or making a weapon stronger) may radically change the effective strategies that emerge from the game.

The gameplay isn't the entire experience of a game, but it's what makes it a game, what makes it *this* game. (Nils von Barth, in Newman and Simons, 2004: 67.)

Gameplay is what you do. It's not the interface (thus, saving your game is not gameplay), it's not the graphics and it's not the story. It's the part of the game that absolutely requires the player's participation.

Gameplay embodies the rules of the game. For example, in a game like chess, each playing piece has its own rules, and along the playing field, the chess board, these rules interact to create gameplay.

The most interesting gameplay arises from rules that have both positive and negative consequences. This means that the player must make decisions that are not always clear and automatic. Good gameplay, in effect, arises when choices are non-obvious, and the player must explore different tactics to see what the trade-offs are for each decision. (Scott Miller, in Newman and Simons, 2004: 76.)

its author's particular mindset as a jazz pianist and social scientist trained in phenomenology – a rather unique combination has left its traces to the way Sudnow approaches and describes gameplay experience.

Semiotics, or the study and science of signs and meaning-making, has traditionally mostly focused on linguistic signs and the way signification is created through the use of images. However, words, text or representational images like spaceships do not operate in the same way in games as they usually work in non-interactive medium which is primarily used for carrying messages. David Myers, a semiotician who has focused on signification in games and play, has claimed that when a space war game starts, signs like the moving images representing spaceships are still symbols of physical objects moving through space. But when the player continues to play the game, the game itself starts to impose its own rules, making the actual rules of nature governing real physical objects effectively less important. A spaceship in a game now principally stands only as a symbol of value it has inside the game and for the gameplay. Myers calls this specific phenomenon 'aesthetics of play', where the elements of game derive their significance from the performance of gameplay; spaceships or other such game elements attain their value within the contexts players themselves construct during play. (Myers, 1990, 2003, 2004, 2005.) Similarly, the aesthetic qualities of dance or music are available for those who perform them

even if it is probably impossible to translate the richness of associated, physical or performance-based meanings completely into verbal language. These kinds of meanings essentially remain embodied in their performance or action. There also remains nevertheless representational aspects in meaning-making associated with games, a topic which we will discuss shortly.

In order to make further sense of the many dimensions related to digital games, we first need to make some conceptual and structural characterizations. One of the key foci of game studies is analysis of games, which involves capacity to make meaningful distinctions within and among games, and between different factors related to playing them. In this book, games are approached as many-dimensional objects of study, additionally complicated by the fact that the full range of significance of games as objects are available only through the activities of various players. Thus, the multiple subjects and contexts of playful interaction further add to the complexity of signification, which therefore needs to be recognized as an irreducible and essential part of games and their study.

There appears to be a seemingly endless richness of uses and meanings provided by creative player–game interactions, but games also have certain structural features which make it easier to distinguish between different forms of this meaning-making. To start analysing this, a primary distinction is made here to differentiate the two elementary senses or 'layers' in the concept of game: (1) core, or game as gameplay, and (2) shell, or game as representation and sign system. Sometimes when the concept of 'game' is used in discussion, it remains unclear which dimension is actually addressed, and misunderstandings ensue. While the core, or the gameplay layer concerns everything a player can do while playing the game, and also game rules that govern these actions, the shell includes all the semiotic richness modifying, containing and adding significance to that basic interaction. For example, game board or game world, game pieces or characters all might be 'extraneous' to the core gameplay, but they belong to game as parts of the semiotic shell, where they modify the overall gameplay experience. This division is further illustrated in Figure 2.2.

Core and shell, or gameplay and representation, both form the structural key elements of a game, but they are different kinds of structures. It is important to understand that at the level of core gameplay one can find something abstract and transferable: the actual rule structure of a game. For instance, a game of chess or poker can be played with many different kinds of boards, pieces or cards, and yet it will still be the 'same game' in this most abstract sense. The identity of a game in this narrow sense is based on its rules. However, somewhat like the material used for manufacturing the chess pieces has some effect on the actual experience of playing a game of chess, the identity of a digital game is inseparably tangled with many other factors, including the audiovisual design of its game world and its objects and inhabitants. Various details in the programming code, and even the hardware and controls used to play a digital game, have an effect on how it is experienced. Player attitudes and competences also affect how the game will be realized during gameplay.

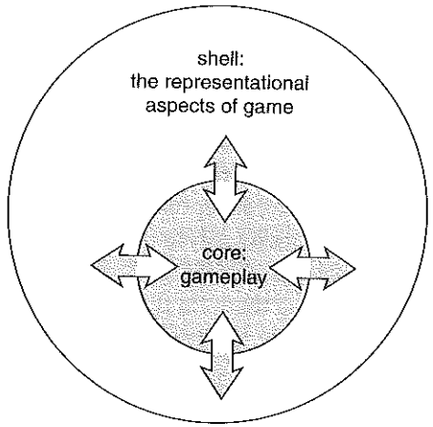

Figure 2.2 The dialectic of core and shell, or gameplay and representation in the basic structure of games.

While playing, some gamers concentrate more on the rule system and play the game to win or finish it, without much regard for the game world or its back-story, for example; but it is likely that all players are to some degree influenced also by the representational parts of the game, such as the quality of graphics or audio. Some derive intense pleasure exactly from this kind of 'secondary' element in the digital games they play, even if the 'game itself' (meaning the actual game rules, defining the gameplay at its core) would not be so original or even interesting.

As when compared with the discontinuous history of game studies, the study of music and musical meanings has been the subject of relatively sustained academic attention. Leonard B. Meyer, an American musicologist, separates in his *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956) absolute and referential meanings in music; in the former, the meaning of music is seen as being essentially intramusical (non-referential), whereas in the latter case we would look at music as communication of some referential content. Even if referential meanings are not excluded, as they include the entire field of music as 'language' utilizing its own means and symbolisms to express concepts, emotions or moral qualities, the majority of music scholars' efforts have focused on intramusical meanings. But even such 'absolute' meanings are not completely self-sustained. Meyer acknowledges the relational nature of meanings: there needs to be (1) an object or stimulus, (2) that to which the stimulus points, and (3) the conscious observer for meaning to be produced (Meyer, 1956: 1–3, 34). In reality, the structure of this meaningful linking is more complex than a simple chain of stimuli evoking reactions. Inside a musical system, notes in a composition, such as Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* or Madonna's hit song *Material Girl*, receive their meaning by their ability to connect to the earlier musical history and experience the listener has. Also, the musical system

appears in different form to a listener and to a person playing music or making his or her own compositions. Meyer talks about individuals in different cultures learning to understand the styles of music practised within them – music is in this sense a 'habit', which is also capable of evoking effective experiences, partially arising from the internal organisation of a particular piece of music, partially related to the various connotations this music has derived due to its private or collective association with various events, persons or experiences (ibid.: 61, 256–8).

Games constitute similarly interactive cultural systems, with a specific emphasis on *meaning-making through playful action* (*ludosis*), as contrasted with meaning-making as decoding of messages or media representations (*semiosis*), typical for such cultural systems as television shows or contemporary poetry. Understanding and appreciation of a game like chess is based on pleasures derived from the actions and events taking place during game playing, but there are also many other dimensions of the game. There are various social values and norms that do not belong to the actual written game rules but nevertheless regulate game playing. While learning a game, a player simultaneously adopts the explicit rules and also various implicit guidelines of chess that not only tell which pieces to move and how, but also tell what it means to play chess, in the first place. This, of course, can be many different things, depending on where you learn to play chess. In their book *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman separate three kinds of rules: operational, constitutive and implicit. The operational rules are those basic guidelines that players require in order to play ('rules of play'), the constitutive rules are the mathematical and logical structures underlying the rules presented to players, whereas implicit rules concern proper game behaviour. A child might be allowed to 'take back' a foolish move, whereas in a contest match the same rule would not apply (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004: 130). From a cultural perspective, the implicit layers of a game extend far and wide, informing the basic sense of game – what it is all about and what is the nature and aims underlying the activity of playing it, within this particular sociocultural context.

In most cases it is not reasonable to speak about the meaning of a disconnected game element, and even an entire game gains its significance only when experienced by a player in a cultural context. James Paul Gee (2003: 24–6) has argued that it makes no sense to talk about such things as thinking, learning or reading 'in general': all these things are always situated within a material, social and cultural world. The same goes for games. The phenomena this book calls 'game culture' are built upon layers of learning and experience among all the previous games that the particular group of individuals sharing this culture have interacted with before. Thus, it is similar to the 'habit' Leonard B. Meyer spoke about in the context of music: a shared frame of behaviour and understanding. Originally phrased by philosopher Bertrand Russell, this view of culture emphasizes the playful and game-like, or ludic qualities of our understanding: 'Understanding language is ... like

understanding cricket: it is a matter of habit acquired in oneself and rightly presumed in others' (Meyer, 1956: 39).

Cricket may be a particularly British game (and thereby, maybe, a particularly civilized one), but all games require a similar shared cultural frame to make sense. In his work *Homo Ludens* (1938/1971) the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga, one of the key theorists of game culture, lists the free and voluntary nature of play activities, along with a particular separation from the rules of everyday reality (what he calls the 'magic circle') as its main characteristics, but he also notes how central a 'play community' is for play behaviours to become fixed into cultural forms and be preserved as 'games'. Huizinga also emphasizes that play itself is older than culture, since animals like to play just like men do. He calls 'higher forms of play' the social manifestations that this play impulse takes within human societies, including arts, sports and rituals (Huizinga, 1938/1971: 1–12).

There are many ways of using playfully systems of various kinds. As different word games prove, a language system can offer the basis for gameplay, as do the rules and game pieces of a board game, or the programmed objects and functions in a digital game. General systems theory, mathematical game theory and cybernetics are fields that have focused on the behaviours associated with complex systems. For our intentions, the concept of *dynamics* is useful while approaching games. Dynamics is here used generally to signify 'forces or motions that characterize a system', while within the actual study of dynamic systems, it is important to distinguish between various dynamics of change and the unchanging dynamical principles needed to analyse that change (Morrison, 1991: 2). In game theory, games are considered dynamic when players do not make their moves simultaneously, but on the basis of knowledge they have about earlier actions in a game. From a game studies perspective, structures which underlie the dynamism of a game system are often based on a conflict between players, or between the goals of players and the obstacles and challenges provided by the game environment. This book discusses games in terms of multiple different dynamics, including dynamics of conflict or challenge, as well as spatial and temporal dynamics. There are also games with more extensive player populations and spatio-temporal reach, which highlight the importance of discussing social dynamics, or even economical dynamics of a game (see Chapter 7).

Within the study of culture, relations as complex as those underlying gameplay in real-world contexts are rarely formulated into mathematically precise logic. For the work in contemporary game studies most typical are the qualitative approaches. An important influence for this tradition is Roger Caillois, a French philosopher and writer, who took it up to process the broad-ranging cultural play theory of Johan Huizinga into a more defined study of games. One of the key steps into this kind of deeper and more detailed cultural understanding is the ability to separate and name the studied phenomena and to make meaningful distinctions within it. Caillois suggested categorizing games

into four main types, and also named two attitudes of play that create variety within each of them. Based on the dominant role that competition (*agôn*), chance (*alea*), simulation (*mimicry*) or vertigo (*ilinx*) have in each of them, the games within each category appear to provide distinctly different experiences for their players. In styles of play, the attitude of carefree improvisation or 'uncontrolled fantasy' is named as *paidia* by Caillois and separated from *ludus*, which stands for a tendency to bind play within the arbitrary, imperative and 'purposely tedious conventions' (Caillois, 1958/2001: 3–13). Later, Gonzalo Frasca has argued that the most useful way to conceptualize the *ludus/paidia* distinction is to consider the ludus to refer to the attitude associated with games with binding social rules, whereas *paidia* is a more 'playful' or loosely formalized form of play. *Paidia* also has its own logic or rules, but no clear-cut winning conditions as laid down by the rules of *ludus*-oriented games (Frasca, 1999, 2003a).

Nevertheless, all games have their uses, and only when situated within such contexts of play do they derive their meaning. In the scale of societies, Caillois even suggests that it would not be absurd 'to try diagnosing a civilization in the terms of the games that are especially popular there' (ibid.: 83). More modestly, one can certainly say that the games played within a particular game culture have an important role for the lives of the individuals sharing that culture. The study of games is important for understanding the game culture, and vice versa, by learning to understand better the actions and conventions of thought constituting this particular culture, we will be better positioned to understand games, the meanings they hold for their players and the reasons why people play them.

Game cultures as subcultures

As noted above, the concept of culture is wide and complex, and it plays an important role in many different research traditions and disciplines. This is partly owing to the centrality of culture for the lives of each of us; it can be said that culture is an inextricable part of our existence. For a long tradition of humanists, culture is what humans have and do, in contrast to other animals. Consequently, culture is not a neutral term, but rather one loaded with significance that is related to the values, carrying even political implications. One way to exemplify this is to look at the way concepts 'art' and 'culture' are often connected. This use is historically determined: the word 'culture' was originally used for the rearing of plants and cultivation or improvement in other concrete and figurative senses. Thus, the evaluative use signifying 'the training, development, and refinement of mind, tastes, and manners' of a civilized person is older than the more value-neutral usage standing for the customs, artistic achievements and so on of a certain people (see the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Taken in this context, discussion about 'game culture' easily becomes debate about the cultural value and merits of games. In opposition to discourse which positions digital games as harmful, industrially produced rubbish, there are many proponents of games who would like to get games placed within the 'art and culture' discourse. According to this view, it is meaningful today to speak about games being culture because of their high – or at least rising – artistic qualities. Games can offer their players experiences that range from the aesthetic pleasures of impressive graphics, music, storylines and (sometimes) even well-scripted dialogue. Many games also provide players with active experiences that are more akin to the tests of skill, strategy, strength or endurance that are typical of some sports. There are also several games where the central focus is on the building and creating activities that people in non-digital contexts have enjoyed while being engaged in arts and crafts, or in hobbies such as building miniature models. The long tradition of non-digital play and games includes a rich accumulation of various kinds of puzzles, hopscotch style of street-play, dice, card and board games; and these all hold a major influence on digital games, but whose extensive traditions are typically not included in discussions of art and culture. Music, literature and painting have a long tradition of being regarded as art, and consequently related aspects of games are relatively easy to associate with the concept of 'culture' too. In contrast, sport activities, such as children playing in the streets, or people building dolls' houses or miniature railways as a hobby have not necessarily been perceived as similarly artistic or cultural in this sense of the word.

The above view is linked to and defined by the concept of 'high culture'. Traditional art criticism often either explicitly or implicitly favours this version, and within it, the aim can be set to identify truly artistic and significant works from those which do not merit being included in the concept of culture. Classic formulation of this view is captured by the poet and literary critic Matthew Arnold when he defined culture as 'contact with the best which has been thought and said in the world' (*Culture and Anarchy*, 1869/1909). Adopting this view, a critic of game culture might approach current digital games looking particularly for aspirations or aesthetic qualities which show in some of them success or failure in becoming art, and thus a part of high culture. Such art criticism of games should also be able to discuss the basis of its criteria and standards, and thereby engage with the formation of game culture as a critical and evaluative 'meta-discourse' for game-cultural forms. The fields of normative or evaluative cultural criticism are contested, and no doubt many friends of contemporary high culture consider digital games as plain rubbish, or the opposite of culture in its 'genuine' form. An opposite example is the Italian *Ludologica: Videogames d'autore* book series, which is designed to 'honour the most significant video games of the last 40 years'. Featuring prominent game designers in their covers, these book-length studies of single games openly aim to contribute into similar high-culture aura for the

masterworks of digital games, as has been the case of classics of visual arts, literature and more recently, cinema (see: *www.ludologica.com*).

An alternative view on the concept of 'culture' to that of art criticism has been developed within the academic traditions of humanities and social sciences since the nineteenth century. As broadly encompassing and descriptive, rather than prescriptive in its approach, it can more easily accommodate such human activities as hopscotch, sports and building dolls' houses as forms of 'culture'. This view implies that such activities will be approached from a particular angle, as organized parts of a larger constellation of social and symbolic meaning-making.

An important discipline for the development of this approach on culture has been anthropology. A broad-ranging field of scholarship, it holds several sub-disciplines, with cultural anthropology being close to sociology terms of its approach and subject of study. A holistic inquiry, involved with all humanity and all its dimensions, cultural anthropology has evolved the concept of culture into a veritable umbrella of human life and thought. A typical definition of 'culture' within the field of cultural anthropology is:

> The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning (Bates and Fratkin, 2002: 7).

If the concept of culture is taken in this broad and general sense, and applied as such directly into game studies, this can lead into a rather heavy-handed way to conceptualize 'game culture'. Could games be meaningfully related to 'shared beliefs', and are game playing practices 'transmitted from generation to generation'? Even if the form and rules of many children's games are inherited from previous generations, and considering the fact that there are so-called hardcore gamers who dedicate large parts of their lives to digital games, there are many more people who simply regard them as a hobby or an occasional leisure time activity in their lives. One could also certainly argue that games do not define our existence or place in a society in a way that belonging to a traditional ethnic culture, say Bantu or Inuit culture, defines the way of life and identity for those people. But games and game playing practices do have some significance for those people who are actively engaged with games. The public visibility of digital games, as well as the numbers of people playing them, has also increased strongly for several decades. It is questionable to rely heavily on information coming from commercial interest groups, but the sales and survey figures published by the Entertainment Software Association are nevertheless often quoted. According to them, 69 per cent of American heads of households play computer and video games, the average age of a game player is 33 years, and 38 per cent of game players are women (ESA, 2006). There are only a few academic studies that survey larger populations about their relationship to

games, but some studies already appear to confirm that at least among younger demographics games do play a central part in life (see, e.g. BBC, 2005; Ermi, Heliö and Mäyrä, 2004; Fromme, 2003; Jones *et al.*, 2003; Kallio, Kaipainen and Mäyrä, 2007). To venture some characterisations at this point, it seems that particularly if card and board games as well as more physical games and sports are taken into account, games in general have a rather wide appeal for different audiences. On the other hand, enthusiasm to intensive playing and studying of digital games seems more typical for certain specific groups that include stronger representation of younger generations. Particularly among these latter groups the cultural role of digital games can even be compared to that of cinema or rock music. However, more large-scale and also more detailed studies of game playing are required before we can define the cultural roles of different games and styles of playing more precisely.

The cultural studies movement is another broad discipline, or interdisciplinary approach, which has played an important role in the contemporary conceptualization of 'culture' in academic contexts. The movement, born both in Britain and in the USA and then spreading throughout the world, attracted particularly British cultural studies scholars such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, who were initially interested in providing critique of capitalist mass culture and exposing the power relations in areas like mass media and advertising. Elsewhere, especially in the USA, some critics started to pay particular attention to the ways consumption and appropriation of media could be seen as liberating and empowering. However, differences between the British and American strands of cultural studies have largely faded away. Just to give some examples of this wide field, Lawrence Grossberg (1992, 1997) has been influential in paying attention to how complex the affects and emotions related to rock music can be. From a feminist cultural studies perspective, Janice Radway (1984/1991) has pointed out the interesting ways how even the Harlequin romances can be empowering for their female readers, regardless of their 'patriarchal' content. It seems that people are very capable of creating multiple uses for things that cannot be directly deduced from their 'intrinsic' or formal qualities (such as the lyrics of a rock anthem, or narratives of the popular romances).

There appears to be a dialectic in more recent games related research, oscillating between work that focuses either only on games, or only on play behaviour or its various cultural contexts, whereas it would be very valuable to see how these two are interrelated. Contextual studies of players and their contexts, highlighting the purposes and uses for games, are nevertheless an important part of game studies. Like rock music, games are put into meaningful uses by their players, resulting in games and playing *making sense* for these individuals. Anyone who has spent a sleepless night in front of a glowing computer screen, trying to progress through a particularly challenging and immersive game, can bear witness to the powers of games and to the strength of motivation they are capable in eliciting in their players. But how can we

find a 'game culture' behind such individual experiences, and how should we define it? For a non-gamer, games can appear just as isolated phenomena at the edges of modern life, devoid of cultural significance.

Under a closer look, games can in fact play many different roles in such overall, life-defining systems as cultures discussed by cultural anthropology, but in order to see them, the cultural analyst needs to be sensitive to the way identity is being negotiated and defined within late modern societies. The most notable way that game cultures can be interpreted to be working within this context is in their role as *subcultures*. Discussion of this concept here is influenced by branches of cultural studies focusing on forms of urban social life. Subcultures are groups of people who have some practices, values and interests in common and who form through their interaction a distinct group within a larger culture. Looking at the assortment of people living in a typical Western metropolis, we can discover how members of various religious and ethnic groups have their own subcultures even while they can simultaneously also share the schools, supermarkets, brand clothing or other outward signs of contemporary commercial 'mainstream culture'. In the streets of the same generic city, some youth groups like punks and skinheads show distinctly with the same double gesture both their difference from the 'crowd', and their belonging to the group of likeminded with their hairstyles and clothing. But also lifestyles within a workplace or profession sometimes display features of developing subcultures of their own. Contemporary studies of 'post-subcultures' have dedicated increasing attention to the fluidity and instability, which seems to characterize the late modern formations of taste and lifestyle (see e.g. Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004; Gelder and Thornton, 1997; Hall and Jefferson, 1975/2002; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2004; Trice, 1993).

Members of game subcultures rarely carry distinctive outward signs as punks or skinheads do, but one only has to participate in a meeting of hardcore strategy gamers, visit a role-playing convention or take part in a *Quake* LAN party (a gathering of gamers with their networked-together PCs), when the features of the associated game cultures start becoming apparent. People seem to share the same *language*: they play the same games, after all, and have adopted terminologies that suit those purposes. All the above-mentioned player groups also have some *rituals*: they gather together to play games and are often also interested in the *artefacts* (like original packaged games, gaming devices, books, posters and such paraphernalia) that can also be used to mark one's room or keep as display tokens that are used to produce identity and verify one's membership in a game culture. These and other objects may work as *memorabilia* that carry some private or shared moments, or capture into symbolic forms the significance that precisely those games have for these people. These days, members of game cultures often subscribe to websites or discussion boards that are produced and maintained by active gamers in their free time and which stand as a virtual but identifiable *shared space*. This sense of a game culture comes close to fandom and fan activities, and such subcultures

as have emerged within the fandom of science fiction, fantasy or horror often overlap to a certain degree with that of game cultures. Another interesting flexible cultural borderline of digital game cultures is the one that touches upon the 'techno subcultures' where the interest focuses on computers, electronic music, Internet and other digital media and technologies. From organizing games conventions to groups of people maintaining extensive websites focused on games, there is a wide and expanding range of interesting game-cultural activities, but the main 'symbolic centres' for members in game subcultures are nevertheless built around games and playing them.

Millions of digital gameplay sessions take place daily around the world, but not all of the people engaged with them fit within the afore-described subcultural framework. Most importantly, games have grown in popularity to reach significant parts of populations within a broad range of social background and in both sexes and in different age groups. A different phenomena from that of clearly identifiable gaming subcultures, these more diffuse gaming behaviours are often discussed in terms of so-called *casual gamers*. Rarely explicitly identifying themselves as 'gamers' or members of any games subculture, people falling into this vague category can nevertheless be considered to form the 'invisible majority' of digital game players (see also chapter 7). The casual gamer and her opposite, the *hardcore gamer*, are hard to define, for example, by their weekly playing hours alone. The concept is further complicated by some games being considered as 'casual games', which typically are easily approachable games, such as various puzzle or card games. Consequently, it might be that a

Box 2.2 ON SUBCULTURES

Subcultures, therefore, take shape around the distinctive activities and 'focal concerns' of groups. They can be loosely or tightly bounded. Some subcultures are merely loosely defined strands or 'milieux' within the parent culture: they possess no distinctive 'world' of their own. Others develop a clear, coherent identity and structure. When these tightly defined groups are also distinguished by age and generation, we call them 'youth subcultures.' (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts, 1975; in Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 100.)

Two basic strategies have been evolved for dealing with this threat [of spectacular subcultures]. First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied. ('Otherness is reduced to sameness'.) Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a 'pure object, a spectacle, a clown' (Barthes, 1972). In this case, the difference is consigned to be a place beyond analysis. Soccer hooligans, for example, are continually being placed beyond 'the bounds of common decency' and are classified as 'animals.' (Hebdige, 1979; in Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 133.)

'casual player' is used to refer to a person who actually invests rather heavily one's time into playing games, but is considered to be a 'casual' one because of one's preference of game style or genre (see Kuittinen *et al.*, 2007).

The crucial element here is to notice how such categorizations as 'casual' or 'hardcore' operate as cultural distinctions within a game culture. Identity is commonly produced through acts of separation as much as through a sense of belonging. I am what I am, because I feel similarity with my own group, and we can jointly define our identity through some significant difference of ours, when we are compared to others. The distinction between hardcore and casual players operates in this kind of way, providing means for people who are playing digital games to situate themselves as well as other people in terms of the intensity or 'seriousness' of their commitment into gaming. To adopt a concept from a literary scholar (Spivak, 1992), players are effective participants in 'identity talk' in their exchanges during and surrounding game playing, making visible their attitudes towards games and playing. Both words and performance of play operate in sensitive roles organizing the social nature of games; the particular extent of interest or passion governing the life of a hardcore gamer might be incomprehensible and alien for a less committed game player. Nevertheless, while playing games, both types of players infuse games with their own kinds of significance, to the degree that they utilize playing, discussing or other uses of games as vehicles for meaningful action.

While studying game cultures one should acknowledge their wide range and also look beyond those areas that are most manifest in popular gaming magazines or online forums of game fandom. There appears to be a mostly unquestioned 'hegemony' where certain kinds of games receive most of the attention in media (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006). Still largely unexamined, there also exists the 'invisible everyday' of digital game cultures in its many forms. A businessman playing *Tetris* with his mobile phone in the airport lounge, a young mother participating from her home with an online puzzle game in the Internet or a teenager developing an expensive habit with an SMS-operated cross-media game running in a television channel may all or may not move into the centre of our analysis, among those other individuals and groups engaged with games that are more familiar from the sales charts of PC or console game-oriented media. Lack of such visibility in popular media does not make those games and players insignificant if one is aiming to understand the larger picture of the digital games and play in contemporary life and society.

Summary and conclusions

- Meanings in games are created in playful interactions that take place within specific cultural contexts. Such meanings are related both to games conveying meaning in the

manner of symbolic communication, and to the non-symbolic meanings inherent in the act of playing and in the overall gameplay experience.

- Cultures are structures of meaning, underlying the language, thought and action of people sharing them. Game cultures are often recognized as subcultures organized around games and playing, bringing together enthusiastic players who organize in their speech and behaviour the meanings attached to these play forms.
- A game subculture can be recognized and analysed by studying the language, rituals and artefacts, or the outward signs and material culture surrounding the activities, including memorabilia related to games. The physical and virtual sites of game playing and game community formation also contribute to the formation of game cultures, as do relation to other centres of signification, for example, family life, school, work or hobbies.
- Nevertheless, large parts of game cultures remain mostly invisible, as significant numbers of people playing digital games do not actively participate in any communities or fan activities created around such games. The distinction between casual and hardcore gamers is used to identify and discuss these kinds of differences. However, both concepts remain somewhat ambiguous as they can mean either perceived differences in terms of playing intensity or dedication to games as a hobby, or different preferences in games and playing styles between more simple or complex games. Particularly more casual gaming practices may easily escape the attention of students or researchers, as they have not been a popular focus of attention in games related media.

Suggested further reading

Henry Jenkins, "'Complete Freedom of Movement": Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces'. In: Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell (eds.), *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998. Also available online: *http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/complete.html*.

Assignment: Game culture survey

The aim of this assignment is to uncover and compare different game cultures, and in that way to become more aware of the cultural diversity surrounding games, reaching beyond one's own personal history as a game player.

Look around in your home, visit your friends and relatives and then explore wider at your neighbourhood or in a nearby city centre and try to find evidence of two game cultures, one that you think is of more 'hardcore' (intensive, dedicated, self-conscious) and other which you regard as more 'casual' (informal, relaxed, unselfconscious). You can also turn to the Internet as a source for information, but remember that it is often more useful to go in person to locations where games are played and get immersed in all the real-world details surrounding play activities.

Write a short essay where you organize your findings into categories of language, ritual, artefact and memorabilia, and how these objects and practices are used to create meaning and identity, or not, in your examples. Compare them and give grounds for why the other is 'hardcore' and the other 'casual'.

(Associated research methods: ethnographic field research, online ethnography.)