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The active audience, again: Player-centric game studies and the problem of binarism

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Abstract
This article intervenes in video game studies' recent turn to (and enthusiasm for) player-centered approaches to understanding video games' social, cultural, political, and economic implications. Such approaches repudiate ostensibly formalist or 'structural' game studies and insist that analyses of gaming situations emphasize ways in which gaming subjects' playful acts of appropriation or subversion allow those subjects to resist complete determination by game-structures and act ultimately as arbiters of a video game's meaning, utility, or effectivity. The author demonstrates how player-centered discourses in video game studies participate in a rich history of 'active audience' research in media and cultural studies. Arguing that research on player practices does not completely escape the forms of reductionism it sets out to avoid, the author offers additional conceptual tools for engaging the complexity of contemporary gaming situations. The article concludes with a discussion of ways in which one such situation − gold farming − might be examined as an assemblage through an approach that responds to this complexity and avoids a particularly constraining model of agency inherent in player-centric game studies.

Keywords
Active audience, assemblage, audience studies, interactivity, meaning, power, video games, video game studies, video gaming

Introduction

Video game studies have (re)discovered the figure of the active audience. Recently, several researchers have turned toward meaningful player practices as key sources of insight

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into video games' social, cultural, political, and economic ramifications, a turn characterized by concern not with games' formal, structural properties – matters at the heart of the field's so-called 'ludology/narratology debate' (for overviews, see Mäyrä, 2008; Newman, 2004) – but rather with 'the full range of human practices through which players actively inhabit those worlds of rules and texts and render them meaningful' (Steinkuehler, 2006: 97). By declaring this new direction for research, game studies researchers participate in a decades-old tradition in media and cultural studies, one that takes seriously the notion that audiences are not merely passive recipients of the media content they encounter, but are rather active participants in co-constructing that content through various acts of creative interpretation, resistance, appropriation, negotiation, and co-optation. Video games' supposed 'interactive' nature makes the medium a particularly appealing object around which research regarding the 'active audience' might emerge.

Invoking the active audience charts for game studies a future that yokes the field to research programs entrenched in binaristic models of the gaming situation[1] (Eskelinen, 2001), models that do not completely escape the forms of reductionism that an emphasis on player practices is meant to avoid. Imagining video gaming as a collision between two pre-constituted entities – a player-agent and a game-structure – player-centric game studies couch their analyses in conceptualizations of the reader–text relationship elaborated in early structural linguistics and later mobilized by cultural and media theorists to account for ways in which audiences are not determined by media messages or artifacts but rather negotiate their relative relationships to ideological apparatuses. Situating player-centric game studies amid this broader history of audience analysis in media and cultural studies demonstrates ways in which critiques of its implicit agent-structure model can be brought to bear on academic and popular discourses surrounding what Juul (2008: n.p.) has pronounced 'the new conflict in video game studies... between those who study players and those who study games'. Specifically, it points to the need for revised understandings of agency in gaming situations.

In what follows, I describe game studies' recent fascination with player practices and analyze the player-centric research discourses this preoccupation has produced. I situate these discourses as part of a longstanding 'active audience' tradition in media and cultural studies, then offer a critique of the figure and the assumptions implicit in it. Next, I highlight game studies research attempting to avoid the binarism inherent in the player–game relationship developed in player-centric research on video games, and briefly discuss ways in which additional conceptual tools – namely, notions of articulation and assemblage – can broaden the theoretical and political purchase of research on contemporary gaming situations. Through an examination of the phenomenon of gold farming, I explain ways in which these tools might permit studying video games in ways that do not immediately default to dichotomous agent-structure models – models that too frequently constrain discussions of video games' effectivities.

To the players themselves

Recent research and theorizing in video game studies inaugurate a turn toward player practices and experiences as crucial objects of inquiry. These player-centered approaches typically position themselves as repudiations of research concerning video games'

formal or structural properties – research that emerged amid one of the field's founding debates over the nature and function of video games. During this brief (but contentious) period of foment, some (Murray, 1997; Ryan, 2001) argued that video games are the fragmented, nonlinear storytelling structures native to postmodernity, principally *representational* mechanisms ordering experience according to 'narrative' devices (story, character, setting, etc.). Others (Eskelinen, 2004; Frasca, 1998, 2003; Juul, 1999, 2001) insisted that video games were configurative, 'ergodic' (Aarseth, 1997) structures spatially and temporally distinct from narrative, principally *simulational* mechanisms ordering experience according to 'ludic' devices (rule, goal, etc.). While both camps – dubbed 'narratology' and 'ludology', respectively – disagreed about the *specific* nature of games themselves, both seemed to (even implicitly) agree that games are 'fairly formal structures that in complex ways spawn and feed player experiences' (Juul, 2001: para. 49). Better understanding these structures was thus tantamount to investigating the nature of the experience they produced.

Recent player-centric research responds to what it perceives as a problematic preoccupation with structures at the expense of agents. 'Structures may be necessary to begin gameplay', writes Mia Consalvo (2009: 415) in an essay evaluating the scope and trajectory of research in video game studies, 'but we cannot stop at structures as a way of understanding the gameplay experience'. Consalvo insists that regarding video games as hermetically sealed virtual worlds – discrete worlds separate from everyday life by virtue of what classical play theorist Johan Huizinga (1950) calls 'the magic circle' – is a mistake. For video games (particularly massively multiplayer online games) never exist in isolation. Indeed,

> such worlds must inevitably leave the hands of their creators and are then taken up (and altered, bent, modified, extended) by players or users – indicating that the inviolability of the game space is a fiction, as is the magic circle, as pertaining to digital games. (Consalvo, 2009: 411)

Consalvo's essay depicting video games as malleable cultural artifacts is also an exhortation. By illustrating the plasticity and permeability of video games' once-sacred structural boundaries, Consalvo encourages fellow researchers to abandon their investigations of video games' formal elements and to begin instead the work of analyzing players' 'meaningful experiences' with and around video games. By placing players' activities at the center of analyses, she contends, game studies can better address video gaming's cultural, social, political, and economic consequences.

To this end, researchers sharing Consalvo's conviction have investigated a diverse array of player activities. Such activities might include, for instance, players' generating game 'maps' or avatar 'skins' (Banks and Humphreys, 2008); preparing 'walkthroughs' to help other players complete difficult games (Consalvo, 2007); constructing fan websites (Humphreys, 2005); producing modifications or 'mods' to game hardware and software (Consalvo, 2007; Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2003, 2007; Taylor, 2006a); forming 'guilds' of fellow players with whom they share resources (Castronova, 2005; Williams et al., 2006), negotiate play norms (Chen, 2009), and form social bonds (Juul, 2010); developing signature 'play styles' (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009); and enacting 'cheats' to subvert technological constraints, social norms, or designers' preferences for gameplay

(Consalvo, 2007; Kücklich, 2008) – all of which occur inside, on top of, in conjunction or contradiction with, or alongside the video games players engage.

While these player-centered approaches engage myriad objects of analysis, most foreground a similar figure: the active audience member or player who does not *merely consume* media contents or artifacts, but also *produces* something – an experience, social or economic capital, new meanings – by engaging with a video game. For instance, Taylor (2006b: 133) insists that 'players do not just consume, or act as passive audience members of, the game but instead are active cocreators in producing it as a meaningful experience and artifact'. Likewise, Consalvo (2009: 411) calls video gaming 'a contextual, dynamic activity, which players must engage with for meaning to be made'. Such active engagement is inevitable, according to most researchers, because video games insist upon it. That is, as 'new media', video games do not simply *afford* or *invite* audience participation but *require it* in order to function completely. Jansz (2005: 222) notes that 'the active gamer stands in relative contrast with the consumers of television entertainment who can enjoy the program in a passive way if they like'. For Jansz (2005: 222), the video gamer is 'the ultimate case of the so-called "active media user"'. And gamers are 'productive players' (Humphreys, 2005; Taylor, 2006b) in an additional sense: 'This is more than the active interpretation we engage in with conventional media texts, more than identity construction through consumption; this is an engagement which serves to *create* the text each time it is engaged' (Humphreys, 2005: 38, emphasis in original). Through acts of 'playbor' (Kücklich, 2005), the active gamer is involved in the material production of media content itself. Players are keenly aware of the essential role they play in both producing game-commodities and sustaining their longevity and popularity in various markets. They strategically negotiate their relationships with capital, brokering deals and leveraging their influence over a game's production process (Banks and Humphreys, 2008). Active players are an affront to deterministic theories of media production and reception. They are not simply passive recipients and uncritical consumers, but essential components in the 'co-construction' of video games as texts, artifacts, commodities, experiences, and sites of community formation.

Player-centric theories of video gaming have not, of course, invented the figure of the active media audience. By rejecting formalist modes of analysis and attending instead to audiences' productive capabilities, these video game studies participate in a long history of both inventing and problematizing the 'audience'. Audience-centered research arose initially in response to the perceived limitations of several approaches to media study: 'hypodermic needle' approaches couched in linear models of message transmission and reception, psychoanalytic structuralism, socio-psychological behaviorism, political economy, and ideological critique (see Bratich, 2008; Livingstone, 2003). Researchers concerned with audiences insisted that the latter approach, for instance, tended to apprehend subjects as mere products of ideological apparatuses – as 'victims of an overwhelmingly powerful ideology machine' (Bratich, 2008: 36). This work – inspired typically by Althusserian or Gramscian theories of ideology – worked to illuminate ways in which dominant systems of meaning were (seemingly innocuously, often imperceptibly) encoded into, reproduced by, and naturalized through media texts. At the time, writes Fiske (1986: 391–392), 'the power of the dominant ideology, whether working textually or socially, to inform the sense-making processes of its subjects seemed irresistible'.

Audiences were subjects-in-ideology, determined by and inserted into the field of available subject positions that media texts made available to them.

The figure of the active audience emerged to complicate the seemingly transparent relationship between subject and structure presumed in these models – to introduce 'disjunction between processes of encoding and decoding' (Livingstone, 2003: 343) that would destabilize the integrity of a media text or apparatus (see Hall, 2006). The active audience permitted research foregrounding the resistive, creative capacities of agents able to locate and exploit contradictions and indeterminacies of texts once presumed monolithic. Using various historical, literary, semiotic, and ethnographic techniques (see Allen, 1992; Ang, 1991; Radway, 1991), cultural and media theorists have for decades analyzed shifting relationships between media technologies, institutions, practices, and subjectivities, and in doing so have constituted and reconstituted the audience as an object of study (Allor, 1988 schematizes these constructs). The audience has been a laborer (Meehan, 1990; Smythe, 1977), a set of reading practices (Fiske, 1989), a process of collective sense-making (Hartley, 1996), a site of cultural work (Shimpach, 2005) – and, more recently, a collection of semi-autonomous 'textual poachers' (Jenkins, 1992), 'prosumers', and 'produsers' (Grinnell, 2009; see also Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b). By repudiating what it perceives as formalist, structural approaches to analyzing video games characteristic of both ludology and narratology, player-centric game studies register their own displeasure with reductionist and excessively deterministic explanations of the gaming situation. Like various media studies before it, video game studies are experiencing their active audience moment.

An account of *how* game studies arrives at the 'active audience' is however of less concern here than are the reasons *why* that figure has appeared when it has (and *what* work it performs when it does so). For as Grossberg (1997) notes, the figure of the active audience has emerged repeatedly throughout the 20th and 21st centuries in response to specific social, cultural, and political crises. Theories of the audience are never neutral concepts; rather, they are historical constructions that produce the very relationships they purport to describe. Key to recognizing the active audience's political and conceptual consequences is understanding both the conditions under which the figure is invoked and the problems it is mobilized to address.

Contemporary player-centric research in video game studies responds to various discourses that connect video gaming to moral, social, and political issues. It serves as a counterweight to effects-oriented, socio-psychological research attempting to link gameplay with increased levels of aggression in male players (see Anderson, 2004, for an overview of this research) by highlighting gaming's 'positive potential' for development of alternative subjectivities. It responds to ostensibly widespread crises of civic engagement by demonstrating how video gaming might reinvigorate flagging community participation (Williams, 2006). It intervenes in changing practices and protocols of knowledge production by insisting that gaming functions as a motor for new forms of collective intelligence and distributed problem-solving (McGonigal, 2011). It rebuts claims that video games promote infantilization by insisting on an appreciation of their unrecognized sophistication (Johnson, 2005). And it offers empirical examples of ways in which 'new media' supposedly afford new opportunities for 'interactivity',

understood in most cases as a democratizing, liberating capacity to 'talk back' to power (Andrejevic, 2007).

Recognizing the active audience's effectivity – the functions it performs in its various instantiations and, specifically, the way it works to unify heterogeneous, often contradictory discourses and practices – is important. In short, the figure functions as placeholder for researchers' uninterrogated epistemological assumptions and political commitments. Indeed, Grossberg (1997: 321) warns that

> We take too much for granted when we start talking about 'active audiences', as if it guarantees something about the theoretical, empirical, or political inflections of our research, as if one can assume that the relevant political sites to which the active audience is articulated (e.g., citizenship, nation) are somehow there in advance.

Thus, as player-centric video game studies champion the active audience as corrective to purported theoretical and methodological shortcomings in game studies, they must consider not only *why* meaningful player activities have come to occupy such a central place in research on video gaming, but also *precisely what* the active player both allows them to *presume* about the nature of the gaming situation – and what it *guarantees them* by doing so. Next, I unpack some of the assumptions implicit in recent renderings of the active audience – assumptions about the nature of and relationship between player-agent and game-structure, as well as assumptions regarding the nature of agency.

The limits of the active player

> Why is there so much writing in game studies that reacts against any discussion of rules and systems, yet nearly no writing that reacts against the discussion of players? It would be great if someone could explain this asymmetry.
>
> (Juul, 2011)

Player-centric research proceeds according to several presumptions. The first of these can be explicated from descriptions of the gaming situation as a 'collision' or 'clash' between diametrically opposed, pre-formed entities – typically player-agent and game-structure (where the game-structure is rendered variously as a set of rules, a system of inflexible algorithms, or a commodity designed and produced by capital). In most accounts, these entities are counterposed, locked in antagonistic struggles. Arsenault and Perron (2009: 109) write, for instance, that 'the simplest way to conceptualize the gaming activity is to see the game and the gamer as two separate entities at a junction point, which is commonly referred to as "gameplay"'. In these dichotomous depictions of the gaming situation, game-structures appear as the objective stuff of play, the raw materials players appropriate in order to reinterpret a video game, to thwart the intentions of its designers, and to wrest control of it from capital. As Steinkuehler (2006: 97, emphasis in original) writes:

> Whereas rules and stories partially constitute the designed object or little *g game* at the center of a given individual's play experience with it, it is the emergent culture or big *G Game* around them that renders them meaningful and consequential.

A video game without a player is an inconsequential one. It may even be a non-existent one. In her research on player activities in *EverQuest*, Taylor (2006b: 133, emphasis in original) suggests:

> Outside of any individual player's time the [online game] account is, in fact, devoid of meaning or game status. It takes a player to create a character, and it takes the time of the player to develop that character. Through her labor she imbues it with qualities, status, accomplishments. Indeed, while the owners of a game provide the raw materials through which users can participate in a space, it is in large part *only through the labor of the players* that dynamic identities and characters are created, that culture and community come to grow, and that the game is made animate.

Here, the player seems to breathe life into an otherwise inert game-thing. Consalvo (2009: 415) echoes this perspective on the player-game relationship when she insists that 'games are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on acts by players'. It is in the dynamic clash of agent and structure 'where the game occurs and where we must find its meaning' (Consalvo, 2009: 415). Games *qua* games are for Consalvo an abstraction; while one might *describe* these objectively existing structures, such description is necessarily a second-order activity, for these gamic structures are always already taken up as part of meaningful player action through which they become whole.

Bogost (2009: n.p.) addresses the ontological assumptions inherent in these depictions of the gaming situation: 'Games', he writes 'are really just limp skins that may exist, but only in lesser form, until they are filled out and activated by players'. A video game's active audience is constantly 'reallocating formal properties according to their own particular personal and play contexts'. In order to avoid the structural determinism (and in some cases *technological* determinism; see Slack, 1984; Slack and Wise, 2005; Williams, 1974; Wise, 1997) inherent in formalist work on video gaming, player-centric studies stress that while video games may be constructions, they are, at the very least, *social constructions* that 'emerge' through the interplay of agent and structure. The gaming situation is for Pearce and Artemesia (2009: 31) 'a confluence of imagination: that of the designer and that of the players', but 'the paradox [is] that the game designer can never entirely anticipate the player's imagination'. This 'is the very essence of emergence' (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009: 31). Privileging the active player's creative capacities serves to protect the subject from *complete determination* by the game-structure, guaranteeing its resilience in encounters with that structure. It also ensures the submission of the game-structure, its passivity (see Bennett, 2010). Player-centric approaches frequently render structure negatively, as inert constraint or enabling background. In doing so, they secure a specific understanding of agency.

This notion of agency – agency as the autonomous, self-possessed subject's intentional action undertaken willfully in pursuit of a goal – is the second presumption reinforced by the active audience's recent (re)appearance in game studies. Considering agency as the exclusive province of the human player construes that player's practices as the only source of novelty or change in a gaming situation. Indeed, such research celebrates players' abilities to resist determining structures (rules, code, capital) and locate avenues for an otherwise authentic expression of self (even if that self is admittedly 'socially constructed'). In this case, the subjectivity of the voluntaristic player entails

what Grossberg (1992: 116) calls 'an essential creativity, a principle of uncaused causality, of an undetermined power of determination'. The purported value of player-centric video game research, then, lies in its ability to understand precisely how players can transcend the pre-given, objective limits of the structures they encounter – how they can (re)gain control over these structures, (re)assert their autonomy within them, and (re) negotiate their ownership of them.[2]

Most research on player practices links agency with subjectivity. 'Player cultures' – loosely defined in this research as sets of shared practices, norms, values, and identities emerging from cooperative gameplay both online and off – are sources of an unpredictable, uncontainable, 'out of control' (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009: 31) generativity; they are a perpetual source of change that exposes the limits of a particular structural determination. Describing the struggle between one player community and a corporation threatening to discontinue support for popular online game *Uru*, for example, Pearce and Artemesia (2009: 280) write that 'we see the unique case of a community whose profound connection to each other and the content that gave them their new home and identities has transcended its creators and their institutional framework. This is the power of emergence'. Symbolic activity here belies a capacity for possessing and wielding agency – the power to transcend the objective limits of an otherwise inert, determining structure, to willfully enact a degree of control over it, and to generate meaningful effects within it.

This particular conception of agency is characteristic of approaches to media that model the relationship of agent and structure on the relationship of reader and text elaborated in early structural linguistics. Here text and reader correspond to the Saussurean distinction between *langue* (the syntactical organization of relations in a system of signs) and *parole* (the pragmatic invocation, use, and recombination of those sign-relations). As Bennett (2007) has shown, analyses predicated on such a relationship tend to presume the nature and function of these entities from the outset. They also focus on *either* the syntactical, structural properties of the text (presumed to organize experience and determine certain interpretations) *or* the pragmatic, generative, 'subjective' interpretations of that structure (presumed to challenge the univocity or integrity of the text itself). Consequently for theories of agent−structure relations, the text/structure is often conceived as pre-given and objective, embodying an essential meaning that acts as material constraint on agential activity and is merely 'distorted' by subsequent readings, appropriations, and interpretations. Studies of the reader/agent, on the other hand, are studies of subjectivity and contingency, 'of the random and chance determinations which animate the text via the person of the reader' and through which 'the reign of the subject, excluded from the analysis of textual structures... is triumphantly re-installed' (Bennett, 2007: 46). The juxtaposition leads to research that 'continues to oscillate... between the voluntarism of a conception of the full human subject as agent of meaning making and the determinism of a conception of the individual as the object of socialization processes' (Allor, 1988: 217). Explanations of interactions between reader and text – between agent and structure, or player and game – thus involve a notion of agency as the capacity to overcome determination by the objective stuff of structure, to reconfigure infinitely the material constraints imposed on some kernel of undetermined creativity.

Such assumptions are therefore not without a certain political impulse. Recall Grossberg's (1997) suggestion that invoking an audience is often a means of making

guarantees, of simultaneously performing and obscuring articulatory work that constitutes relationships between people, technologies, texts, institutions, and power. Left uninterrogated, the presumptions introduced to video game studies alongside the figure of the active audience guarantee the continued success of player-centric research by ensuring that such research perpetually discovers what it claims always already exists: active player-agents whose intentional and willful practices subvert, dismantle, co-opt, or otherwise challenge the dominant prescriptions, representations, and interpretations of the games they play. Additionally, research often celebrates a kind of egalitarianism made possible by video games' 'interactive' nature (i.e., their insistence that audiences actively engage them in order for their effects to be realized). Of course, these observations are not necessarily novel; they informed the very same critiques media and cultural theorists have for decades leveraged against the active audience and the text–reader architecture coupled to it (see Morley, 1986, 1996; Morris, 1990).

Player-centered discourses and projects ultimately encourage reductive, binaristic images of gaming situations. By insisting that gaming consists of contests between diametrically opposing forces, such projects urge researchers to identify one of these as ultimately dominant, and establish relations of negative difference between that dominant force and other forces acting in a gaming situation. Moreover, games studies that understand agency as the internal property of the active gaming subject often have difficulty accounting for the complex arrays of additional bodies and forces whose activities just as actively constitute the situation. Guiding questions become: Who *has* agency? Who doesn't? And how can players accumulate more of it? Or, in Taylor's (2006b: 125) words, 'Whose game is this, anyway?' Additional conceptual tools might assist game studies in addressing the epistemological and methodological limitations of the active audience for analyzing contemporary gaming situations.

The video gaming assemblage

The limits of the active audience become more apparent, for instance, in the case of 'gold farming', a widespread phenomenon addressed frequently in game studies literature. Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter (2009) note that at any given moment 400,000 to 500,000 people worldwide are routinely generating economic value by playing massively multiplayer online games for the sole purpose of acquiring virtual weapons and currencies they can eventually exchange for dollars. Some estimates indicate that profits from such 'real money trade' reach US$1 billion each year (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009; see also Dibbell, 2006). Eighty percent of these playborers live in China, and many have been compelled to relocate from farmlands to urban spaces by both the promise of lucrative jobs and the erosion of the legal protections securing their rural futures. As such, these players are part of 'the largest migration in the whole of human history' (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009: 145). Forced to find work in high-tech industries, many young migrants choose to earn meager wages working in 'gold farms', sweatshops in which they play video games like Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* for days at a time, amassing huge stores of virtual items and currencies for sale to North American players whose day jobs often keep them from devoting adequate time to the task of advancing in the game. Gold farmers earn as little as $40 per shift from bosses who

collect these virtual spoils and sell them on internet black markets. Many farmers report loving their jobs (Chan, 2006).

Blizzard Entertainment has declared gold farming practices illegal in the *World of Warcraft* End User License Agreement (EULA), the contract every player must accept before beginning to play the game. The company frequently alters the software's underlying code in response to various player practices. Recent changes, for instance, prohibit the use of 'bots' – digital automatons gold farmers deploy to perform repetitious but lucrative tasks without human intervention (Consalvo, 2007). To curb this practice, Blizzard has even been known to dispatch representatives on visits to the private homes of bot-makers themselves (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009). *World of Warcraft* players aid in policing the game's online population, locating and killing characters whose syntactically incorrect English they find suspicious (Brookey, 2007). This is a complex gaming situation in which 'exploitation is entangled with empowerment and productivity is entangled with pleasure' (Chan, 2006: para. 39).

Placing gold farmers' practices at the center of analysis, we might conclude that by creatively exploiting the structures and resources provided in *World of Warcraft* these players represent a challenge to an oppressive capitalist structure. Viewed this way, 'gold farming is a... revolt against the futuristic accumulation of digital capital, reappropriating the value-creating capacity that publishers privatize and fence around with intellectual property rights' (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009: 149). However, celebrating the creativity of not only the gold farmers but also their abusive bosses seems like a naïve, myopic, and ultimately unproductive way to begin understanding the nuanced interplay of forces at work in this gaming situation. After all, 'gold farming is not a revolutionary repudiation of ludocapitalism but itself a capitalist venture' (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009: 149). The emancipatory politics characteristic of player-centric approaches to video gaming may therefore be inappropriate here (and subjects for whom gold farming has become a lucrative livelihood may even find such a politics unwelcome or objectionable). Models of a gaming situation couched in logics of relations between readers and texts cannot completely account for the complex, variegated operations of power crisscrossing this particular situation, whose domains entail the juridical, protocological, infrastructural, racial, geopolitical, algorithmic, cultural, and economic. Approaches capable of accounting for elements of the situation not necessarily reducible to struggles between player-agents and game-structures can extend research in this area.

Such work has already begun (see Ash, 2009, 2010; Colman, 2008; Galloway, 2006; Giddings, 2009; Giddings and Kennedy, 2008; Millington, 2009; O''Donnell, 2011). While individual projects in this emerging trajectory vary in both scope and subject, they share a commitment to dislodging both humans and 'meaning' from the privileged positions they tend to occupy in analyses underpinned by a reader-text imaginary. Each attempts to avoid the trappings of an anthropocentrism that posits the activity of human players as principal determinants of a gaming situation's utility or significance, as well as a singular focus on the ways in which this figure's practices mediate (via representational or symbolic economies) that situation's various determinations. These approaches, as well as the one I now wish to offer, work to address the complexity of gaming situations whose effects seem irreducible to models of text–reader interaction.

One way to account for this complexity involves apprehending a gaming situation as an assemblage, a term developed by philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Broadly speaking, assemblages are constellations of heterogeneous elements, 'living, throbbing confederations' (Bennett, 2010: 23) of bodies, actions, signs, affects, and enunciations. As Wise (2005) stresses, these constellations are dynamic; 'assemblage' names not so much a noun as a verb, an ongoing process of organization and arrangement (*agencement* in the original French). An assemblage is a drawing together of elements that are not stable unities but lines of tendential force – of speed and slowness, movement and rest – into particular concrete, contingent relationships, such that they enact a common rhythm, express a character and 'are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within' (Bennett, 2010: 23–24). Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 503) explain that assemblages are 'basically territorial'; they carve spaces, circumscribe boundaries, arrange lines of mobility, and establish conditions of possibility – even as they are dismantling (or, in Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) terms, 'deterritorializing'). They are characterized not by inherent sets of reproducible characteristics (what they *are*) but by their exteriors, movements, and effects (what they can *do*). And they are not governed by any single authority or 'prime mover', nor by any pre-given plan or *telos*; assemblages are rather immanent to a specific territory (they don't pre-exist the territorializing processes they enact) and radically a-subjective.

Understanding video gaming as an assemblage means conceptualizing it not as the meeting of stable, bounded, autonomous unities colliding in pre-given space, but as an ongoing process of arrangement that organizes elements in ways that determine their effectivity (their capacities to affect bodies, be affected by bodies, and influence the assemblage as a whole). Seen this way, video gaming is a process that draws together various '(part)icipants' (Aarseth, 1997) – configurative practices, human and nonhuman bodies, algorithmic logics, circuitry, enunciations, marketing discourses, juridical codifications, mythic narratives, architectural formations, affects, flows of both electricity and capital – and produces connections between them.

These connections are *articulations*, linkages that are 'not necessary, determined, absolute, essential for all time' but rather 'forged or made' through practices producing the context itself (Hall, 1986: 53). While these connections are non-necessary, the effects they produce are nevertheless real and concrete; they not only construct the field in which an assemblage seems to operate, but also establish ways in which elements connected in and to that assemblage can move, operate, appear, and otherwise affect other forces. As Grossberg (1992) explains, articulation 'is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located' (p. 54).

Examining a gaming situation means attending to the multiplicity of forces organized by, in, and through that situation's assemblage. Studying it involves tracing the lines of force constituting the space in which the 'video game' is made to appear, in which subjects and objects are constituted in relation to it, and in which certain forms of knowledge, movement, and investment are made possible or foreclosed with regard to it. This is to say that analysis of gaming situations begins not by presupposing them as the meeting point of two entities whose natures and capacities are somehow prefigured in advance. Rather, a diverse set of often contradictory and tenuously linked practices,

knowledges, movements, affects, and signs – continuously (re)articulated through, on top of, and against other practices and discourses in the ongoing production of the situation – can be unified by the work of historically specific and contingent processes that organize and momentarily stabilize a dynamic field of heterogeneous forces. Video gaming, for instance, often articulates situations in which certain logics (binary, zero-sum, often brutally reductive), engagements (configurative, akin to databasing), propensities (speed, flexibility, informatic manipulation), affects (ludic, playful) and enunciations (competitive, antagonistic) can find expression, can resonate across a contingent concatenation of bodies as it draws them close or pushes them apart.

O'Donnell's (2011) recent work provides a vivid description of the way in which a particular assemblage both articulates and is articulated by a gaming situation. In his account of Nintendo's early efforts to regulate the Nintendo Entertainment System, O'Donnell notes ways in which specific bodies and enunciations (re)arrange to facilitate certain possibilities with regard to both playing and developing software on an influential early gaming platform − the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). The gaming assemblage O'Donnell (2011) traces has myriad elements: transistors, technical schematics, symbols (like the Nintendo Seal of Quality), juridical documents (court decisions, SEC filings, hardware patents, non-disclosure agreements), sales data, consumers, development hardware, game studios, and bureaucrats – many of which are dispersed across geographic space but brought into tense alignment through the assemblage's territorializations. The assemblage's arrangement results from and produces asymmetries of power with regard to elements' relative abilities to influence the situation (Nintendo, for example, attempted to organize the assemblage such that flows of data, capital, and power moved at speeds and in directions advantageous to it; it mobilized elements like the Nintendo Seal of Quality to regulate actors' operations). In many ways, O'Donnell argues, these arrangements – contingent and yet stubbornly resistant to alteration – continue to organize gaming knowledges and practices made possible in and around Nintendo's video gaming platforms.

O'Donnell's (2011) analysis decenters the intentional activities of players from the center of analysis in order to highlight the articulations defining both the contours of a gaming situation and the types of relations made possible among its various entities. In this way an approach to video gaming situations as assemblages involves an understanding of agency that differs from that presupposed by agent-structure models of video gaming. Here, agency is not a 'property' or 'possession' of any element within a video gaming assemblage that one might use to somehow transcend the effects of an assemblage's articulations; rather, 'agency' names the organization of capacities for action that a specific arrangement of elements might afford. As Bennett (2010: 24) explains, assemblages have 'uneven topographies'; the power to make or unmake particular articulations is differentially distributed. Thinking of video gaming as an assemblage focuses critical attention on the ways in which particular gaming situations privilege certain connections and relations while discouraging others, the ways in which they make certain relations possible and others impossible. Agency here is a matter of a gaming situation's ongoing unfolding and assemblage, of elements' differential codification in and articulation to uneven topographies of access, control, and power.

Certainly, player practices are elements of a gaming situation, but they are not the sole determinant of that assemblage's character or valence. Player practices may be creative and intentional, but the complexity of a gaming assemblage's effectivity is not reducible to them. Agency is distributed unevenly across gaming situations through complex and mutual processes by which human and nonhuman bodies rely upon, fold back on, and transform one another – processes difficult to represent as 'a stand-off between a person and a machine', processes that resist attempts 'to determine on which side lies the central point of agency, the fulcrum of power on which the social rocks' (Wise, 1998: 424). Gaming structures do not unilaterally determine players' actions, and players cannot transcend, overcome, or dominate a game-structure; rather, gaming situations are articulations of bodies, technologies, codes, practices, affects, and other materials that have been brought together to constitute 'player' and 'game' as such, as elements with characteristics and abilities made to seem natural and eternal.

Understanding gold farming as an assemblage does not involve merely demonstrating *that* elements in the assemblage have been connected (for they are in some way *always* articulated to ongoing processes of arrangement in a field of forces). Instead, this approach addresses the *nature of the articulations* that have been forged between heterogeneous elements: *how*, in *what ways*, with *what effect* and *to what ends* have elements become linked, coded, and organized by and in gaming situations. Examining gold farming this way would involve mapping the connections that articulate the conditions of its possibility and give it some tenacity – that draw bodies, practices, knowledges, and qualities together and dispose them in particular directions.

For example: How has an arrangement of forces – statistical indexes, cultural values, juridical regimes, discourses of modernization, methods of population management – come together to make gold farming a worthwhile or necessary pursuit? What forms of knowledge and practice are articulated in and by gold farming, and how has it managed to activate the repertoires of behavior and sense it channels into the production of value? On what notions of value and labor does gold farming depend, and how does it rearticulate these through its continued operation? How does gold farming secure and propagate specific racial and economic regimes, and how are the territories it produces organized to encourage particular flows of power, pleasure, and capital? How does gold farming cultivate necessary investments of resources and energies? And how does it articulate to (and accelerate or deflect) the operations of other assemblages? Investigating player practices is one way to begin answering these questions, but doing so completely would benefit from a model of the gaming situation irreducible to the relationship between willful agent and objective structure(s). Thinking of the gaming situation as an articulated assemblage allows game studies to interrogate ways in which particular forces have been marshaled and aligned such that some have more mobility or stability, more presence or potency, more power to influence the gaming situation, than others – and address the complex ways in which video gaming has been articulated to contemporary regimes of power.

Conclusion

In the midst of its active audience moment, player-centric video game studies commit themselves enthusiastically to questions they are not the first to raise. This article serves

to historicize player-centric game studies and to suggest that recognizing this history allows researchers to confront the epistemological and political consequences of the figure they construct to authorize and mobilize their efforts: the figure of the active audience. Certainly, such game studies must critically address the role of this figure if scholars are to make the kind of empirical, theoretical, and political contributions they aspire to make. But doing so almost inevitably prompts rethinking the subject-centered theories of agency imported into game studies alongside the figure of the 'active audience', and doing so seems imperative for understanding the complex issues of power and pleasure that circulate in, around, and through contemporary gaming situations. I have offered one set of conceptual tools capable of accounting for this complexity – one that does not disregard issues of identity, identification, symbolic attachment, or intentional appropriations, but rather recognizes these for what they are: powerful but contingent articulations among myriad others attempting to compose, secure, disperse, and otherwise organize the gaming assemblages whose effects are never predetermined in advance of their investigation.

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Notes

1. Eskelinen's evocative phrase names the concrete contexts produced through 'the manipulation or the configuration of temporal, spatial, causal, and functional relations and properties in different registers' (para. 3). A gaming situation is a particular organization of bodies, affects, signs, codes, logics, symbols, and materials whose connections characterize the situation's qualities and effects.
2. This notion of agency is also salient in more cautionary, skeptical descriptions of player agency. For instance, Charles (2009: 285) calls video games' interactivity an 'illusion which re-envisages the immutable, impersonal edifice of the game as an extension of the gamer's own subjectivity – as if the gamer could somehow reconfigure the programmatic structure of the game, could escape its pre-programmed linearity'. He echos Krzywinska's (2008: n.p.) statement that in video gaming 'you are promised some kind of agency, but your agency is taken away from you'. While such discourses question players' abilities to transcend the algorithmic and ludic structures they encounter while gaming, these accounts leave the agent-structure dichotomy firmly in place (by privileging the operations of the game-structure) and reassert the notion of agency as a possession.

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