Introduction to Game Analysis

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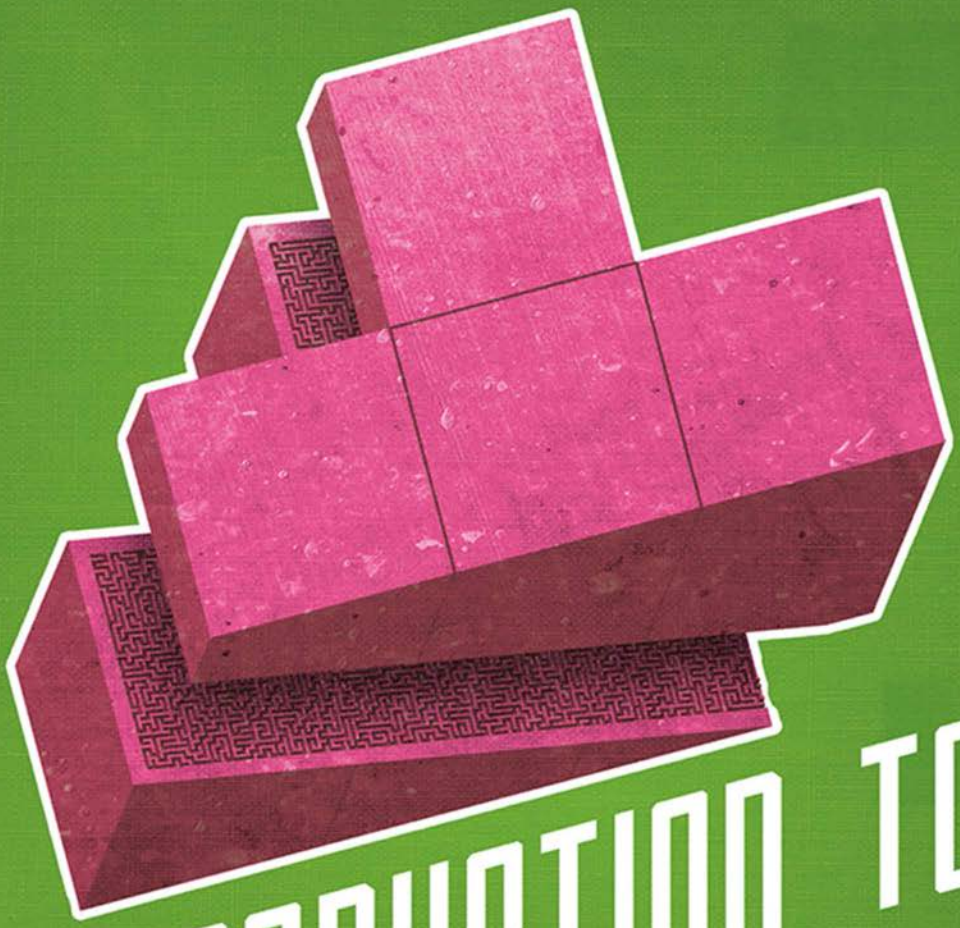

INTRODUCTION TO GAME ANALYSIS

SECOND EDITION

CLARA FERNÁNDEZ-VARA

ROUTLEDGE

Introduction to Game Analysis

This accessible textbook gives students the tools they need to analyze games using strategies borrowed from textual analysis. As the field of game studies grows, videogame writing is evolving from the mere evaluation of gameplay, graphics, sound, and replayablity, to more reflective writing that manages to convey the complexity of a game and the way it is played in a cultural context.

Clara Fernández-Vara's concise primer provides readers with instruction on the basic building blocks of game analysis—examination of context, content and reception, and formal qualities—as well as the vocabulary necessary for talking about videogames' distinguishing characteristics. Examples are drawn from a range of games, both digital and non-digital—from *Portal* and *World of Warcraft* to *Monopoly*—and the book provides a variety of exercises and sample analyses, as well as a comprehensive ludography and glossary.

In this second edition of the popular textbook, Fernández-Vara brings the book firmly up-to-date, pulling in fresh examples from ground-breaking new works in this dynamic field. *Introduction to Game Analysis* remains a unique practical tool for students who want to become more fluent writers and critics not only of videogames, but also of digital media overall.

Clara Fernández-Vara is Associate Arts Professor at the NYU Game Center, New York University. She teaches courses on game studies and narrative design, and works as a freelance game designer and writer. As a researcher, her main interest is in exploring the integration of stories and gameplay, as well as developing theoretical frameworks to understand games better.

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Second edition

Clara Fernández-Vara

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Foreword to the Second Edition

Those of us who study games are in for a ride every day. Game studies involves many disciplines that must be in constant conversation, even though at times each field may use what sounds like a different language. Games—digital and non-digital—transform through the participation of players; in the case of videogames, they use technology that is constantly evolving and creating new opportunities to play. The economic models of games change constantly and strive to find new ways to both finance their creators as well as reach new audiences.

Because of the ever-changing nature of our object of study, a book on game analysis is but a snapshot of the state the field at the moment of writing. Even though there is a core of works and concepts that are well known, the field does not remain the same for long. In the interval between the initial release of this book and this second edition, the world of games has transformed in ways that impact their study and analysis. The revisions in this volume are a response to these transformations—expanded sections, new game examples, and updated bibliography and ludography.

The growth of certain trends and the appearance of new phenomena needed to be reflected in this textbook. Some of these changes and evolutions are the widespread use of video streaming as a way to understand and critique games, which has also become a mode of surrogate play, the increased ease of access to virtual reality and augmented reality technologies, or how diversity in game makers and players has become a mainstream discussion that both the games industry and academia are addressing. New games also have given me the chance to illustrate some of the building blocks that make up the analysis in certain ways as well. Last but not least, the appearance of new types of resources, such as the repositories of magazines and computer games at The Internet Archive, has also changed the way that we access games, particularly older titles, that had remained hardly accessible before.

In the time since this book was first published, I have also been a full-time professor at the NYU Game Center, where I have been teaching game

studies and design classes. Many of the tweaks and additions to this book are responses to feedback from my students in these years, as well as tricks I have developed to help them learn to think about games critically and improve their academic writing.

In the writing of this second edition, I would like to thank the reviewers of the first edition, who sent me feedback that I have tried to address as best as possible. I also owe a big thanks to Janet Murray, Todd Harper, T.L. Taylor, and Austin Walker, who provided essential feedback in key updates of the text. I am also very grateful to my editor, Erica Wetter, for her enthusiasm and support, without which this revised version would not have been possible. My students in the last five years, with their effort, struggles, and brilliance, have also contributed to the expansions in this book—my thanks to all them for helping me become a better teacher every day.

The biggest and warmest thanks must go to my son Mateo and my husband Matt, who tolerate me absconding to write in coffee shops, and always welcome me back home with cuddles. I would not have been able to do this without you.

Acknowledgments to the First Edition

This book started as a class handout for undergraduate students, whose goal was to provide some guidelines for analyzing games as part of their assignment. I kept expanding the handout until it was actually longer than the assignment students had to write, when I realized that I had a lot to say about the topic.

First of all, thanks to my students over the years who have written game analyses, from whom I have learned the most in order to write this book.

Thanks to Mia Consalvo, who was the first to suggest that I should turn the handout into a book, and has provided a lot of support and feedback throughout the whole process of production.

The concept of this book and a good deal of its writing took place while I was a researcher at the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab. My colleagues there, as well as collaborators and visiting scholars, provided much of the support and feedback that kept this book going: Doris Rusch, Geoffrey Long, Jason Begy, Konstantin Mitgutsch, Todd Harper, Abraham Stein, Pilar Lacasa, Jaroslav Svelch, David Finkel, William Uricchio, Philip Tan, Chor Guan Teo, and the rest of the GAMBIT staff and participants in our weekly research meeting.

Many thanks as well to Nick Montfort, who lent me a space to continue researching at The Trope Tank in MIT, and provided constant inspiration and challenges that have found their way into the book.

Thanks to all who provided resources and feedback as the manuscript was taking final shape: Jesper Juul, Mikael Jakobsson, Brendan Keogh, Chris Dahlen, Mattie Brice, Joel Goodwin, Nina Huntenman, T.L. Taylor, and the anonymous reviewers of the proposal.

My editor Erica Wetter and Simon Jacobs, editorial assistant, have been supportive and patient, and always had ideas and solutions whenever I was stuck. To both, many thanks.

The inspiration from this book comes from many years of writing literary analyses, which helped me come up with my own model to analyze media as texts. Thanks to my literature professors through the years, especially: mi padre, Jesús Fernández Montes y el otro Jesús en el Instituto Parla III, Robert Shepherd, Manuel Aguirre, and Philip Sutton, whose handouts on how to analyze a theatrical performance were the model I used for the original guide.

And of course this book would not be here without the unfailing support of my husband Matt, who is my living encyclopedia of games and gives me cuddles so I can keep going.

To all of them goes my gratitude. The faults in this work are my own.

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The Whys and Wherefores of Game Analysis

▶ INTRODUCTION

Waiting in line on the first day of PAX East 2009, I overheard two videogame fans talking about *Dragon Age*. They were sharing their opinions about the game, which they had enjoyed. They talked about how the writing was great, as one could expect of Bioware, but the graphics still needed another pass; the smooth gameplay made up for some of the graphical glitches. The game was the right length; this mission was fun. Then they moved on to talk about a series of fantasy novels, whose title I did not pick up. According to these fans, the novels had very engaging characters, whose story across the novels was consistent but also surprising; they particularly loved how believable the dialogue was, which managed to blend contemporary language with a fantasy setting. The writing style was not pretentious, and it built a world they wanted to be part of. They recapitulated their favorite chapters, and why they liked them.

What shocked me about this overheard conversation was the difference between how they discussed videogames and novels. While their opinion of *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) rated a laundry list of high-level concepts of game reviews, they discussed fantasy novels from their experience as readers, using a much more specific vocabulary, and providing arguments

based on specific aspects of the novel. Their opinion of videogames was based on a series of sliding scales (gameplay, graphics, story), whereas their discussion of the novels centered on a more nuanced discussion on why they liked them.

The difference in discourse made me realize one of the main problems of videogame analysis and criticism. Videogame fans talk about games by borrowing terms from game reviews, which at the same time cover the talking points provided by marketing: Fantastic graphics! Immersive gameplay! Hollywood-like stories! It is not a problem of literacy—these two fans were able to provide thoughtful criticism, and they knew the game well. However, their vocabulary to talk about games was not on a par with how they discussed novels. In my own experience as a teacher, I have seen the same shift in students who can produce a thoughtful and solid film analysis, but then shift to a casual, shallow register when they write about a game.

The guidelines presented in this book are based on my own experience as a media and game studies teacher, as a researcher and as a developer. Conversations like the one I overheard at PAX are part of my inspiration for this book—I want students who are passionate about games to snap out of their shallow discourse and use their knowledge to discuss games with the depth and nuance they deserve, since they often demonstrate the knowledge and capacity they need. My goals also include reaching out to those who may not consider themselves "gamers" or "board game geeks," but who would like to learn more about games by playing them. A third group this book is intended for are scholars with a background in the humanities and social sciences, who want to extend their appreciation of media to games, both digital and non-digital. Although they may feel comfortable applying the theories and methods of literature, film, or communication studies to games, the aim here is to highlight what the aspects of games are that not only define them, but also distinguish them from other media.

For those readers who may already come from an established humanistic or social sciences field, the main hurdle to entering game studies is perhaps a pervading skepticism about whether games, digital or not, can become a medium worthy of study, as literature, theater, or film already are. Games discourse is not usually associated with academic conferences or specialized journalism, but rather online streamers talking over the games they are playing for their audience, or newscasters talking about the uproar about the violence in the latest bestselling game. The academic study of games,

however, is much older than people may think—Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, one of the foundational texts of game studies, discusses play as an essential aspect of cultural practice, and was first published in 1938;[1] psychologist Jean Piaget discussed the role of play in child development in his book, *La Formation du Symbole chez l'Enfant: Imitation, Jeu et Rêve, Image et Représentation* in 1945.[2] Although the field of game studies is relatively young in comparison with other disciplines, it is also becoming an established academic field rather fast. At the end of the 1990s, scholars like Espen Aarseth or Janet Murray started calling attention to games as their focus of study;[3] the first issue of the academic journal *Game Studies* was published in July 2001,[4] while the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference started back in 2003.

As we will see in the following chapters, a sophisticated discourse on games does exist and it is becoming more widespread. Unfortunately, only a reduced group of scholars and a smaller number of practitioners and critics are familiar with it these days. At present, mainstream videogame journalism and industry dominate the creation of analytical models in relation to popular culture—it is more likely that videogame fans will watch a videogame review on YouTube, or read a development blog than any of the papers given at the DiGRA conference. This is why these pages introduce readers to exemplary texts from a variety of sources, focusing on academic analyses of games.

The influence of marketing on the discourse, particularly in the area of digital games, is not negligible. Game reviews are one of the first (and often only) types of game writing that mainstream audiences are exposed to. This type of writing can be subject to a series of economic pressures that may condition its content. An online visit to some of the major websites specializing in videogames will probably reveal a site plastered with huge advertisements for the latest videogame releases. Publishers may also provide journalists and videogame reviewers early access to the games provided they do not publish anything before a specific deadline.[5] If a site posts any news that breaks the embargo, its staff may not get advance copies of games and publishers will withdraw their advertisements from the site, preventing the site both from having advance content and taking away revenue from advertising. Subjectivity is inevitable (and even necessary) in reviews; the issue is that, in some specialized sources, the revenue model can influence the content to the point that some reviews are overtly biased toward the positive.

There is a space for videogame reviews as consumer reports; the problem is that those reviews can be skewed by economic interests.[6] Plus, there are other types of journalistic writing, written in a way that is accessible to the general public, which reflects on the cultural role of games and players. The state of videogame reviews is steadily changing thanks to new journalistic models and approaches, and it is not a problem that will be tackled directly here. My concern is that there is no reason for writers outside certain specialized sites to replicate that kind of discourse, particularly in academia. Scholars should be able to talk about what we like and what we do not with a certain level of nuance, understanding our role as players and how our experience may differ from other people's, being able to explain what it means to have a user interface that does not follow conventional configurations, or discuss the differences between the male and female player characters in terms of mechanics. There is so much more that game analysis can talk about beyond the quality of the graphics or the difficulty curve.

A more sophisticated way to talk about games is useful to both scholars and players. The aim of this book is to make the tools of academic analysis more accessible to everyone. Many schools have incorporated the study of games in their curricula, particularly in departments of social sciences and the humanities, and it may be difficult to know where to start or how the new subject fits with the rest of the materials covered. Game analysis is also relevant to practice-driven schools or computer science departments, because they need to be familiar with pre-existing works and what they have done in order to understand them as well as create innovative games.

My aim is also to encourage everyone with an interest in games to learn more about them and produce thoughtful reflections. If you consider yourself a gamer who breathes and lives in game worlds, my aim is to take advantage of your expertise and apply it to examining games systematically, within a specific academic domain and approach. Having an extensive knowledge of games is obviously helpful to analyze games; in my classes, I try to take advantage of the personal investment my students already have as a motivation. My teaching focuses on the aspects of games that can provide material for analysis, their interrelationships, and how those aspects can be tackled from different perspectives. Analysis is also a tool for budding game designers, who can learn about diverse design aesthetics and develop a vocabulary to understand games better, as well as to communicate their designs to the people they work with. Being aware of the different processes that generate

meaning in games is essential to understanding their role as a cultural and artistic expression.

The guidelines in this book should also be helpful to those who do not consider themselves game experts. The strategies here are not strict guidelines; they provide some considerations to be made when tackling games, a map of the different building blocks of the analysis, and a series of comparative examples. The idea is to help writers find their own way into games and how to talk about them, making use of what they already know, even if it is not games but other media. We must also remember we do not have to limit ourselves to videogames, and that there are many types of games—playground games, card games, board games, arcade games, casual games, shooter games, escape the room activities, to name but a few—which can all be dissected and discussed.

By providing tools to analyze games in a cultivated way and promoting the generalization of academic discourse, my hope is that the readers of this book realize that there are many ways to talk about games. Improving the discourse will allow players to engage with games in novel ways and become more critical of what they play. In filmic terms, it is similar to the difference between a *moviegoer*, who is someone who goes to the movies regularly to be entertained, and a *cinephile*, who is a more demanding audience member, has an extensive knowledge of film history, and can articulate the relevance of a movie and relate it to other works. In a similar way, we need more diversity of ways to engage with games, ranging from the casual player to the *ludophile* who knows about the history and form of the medium in depth.

The foundation to a more sophisticated discourse on games is to understand them as *texts*. The methods I propose here are strategies for textual analysis applied to games, both digital and non-digital, derived from a humanistic background. This raises a set of questions, which I will address in the following sections: How are games texts? What is textual analysis? What can we learn through the analysis of games?

▶ HOW ARE GAMES TEXTS?

The term *text* is usually associated with the written word, which is also part of the dictionary definition. Because the practice of textual analysis has a strong tradition in the humanities, particularly in literature, the phrase

has persisted in relation to reading and writing. As someone with a strong background in literature, I studied poems and novels, for example. When studying theater, however, it became evident that the text alone was not enough, because the meaning of the text would also depend on the way the actor would deliver a certain line, and the context of the performance. In this case, the term *text* also applies to the performance of the play or an excerpt from it. "To be or not to be" means something different depending on the actor playing it and the overall concept of the production, even if the words do not change. I realized that what *text* means extends to other artifacts that can also be objects of study: from literal text, such as a novel, philosophical essays, or historical documents, to non-written or even non-verbal text, such as movies or paintings, to sports events or broadcasts. This is not my discovery—French theorist Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies*, provides a classic example of how the concept of text can be applied to activities and artifacts that may also be a form of human expression.[7] The articles included in the book examine the cultural status of items such as red wine and detergents, to activities such as professional wrestling or striptease.

Textual commentary can also take many shapes and forms, from a very systematic analysis that helps develop specific theoretical concepts. For example, Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* is a book-long analysis take on Proust's multi-volume novel *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* [*Remembrance of Things Past*], which at the same time is developing a conceptual framework to understand general structures of narrative discourse.[8] A very different form of textual analysis can take advantage of the properties of digital media, creating a free-form multimedia essay, such as Peter Donaldson's article on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which invites the reader to explore the essay to convey the multi-layered, complex nature of the play and one of its film adaptations, *Prospero's Books* (1991).[9]

This broad understanding of the term allows us to approach games as texts, whether they use cardboard, computers, or spoken words. We can study games as a cultural production that can be interpreted because they have meaning. Their cultural significance can derive from the context of play: who plays games, why and how, how the practice of playing relates to other socio-cultural activities and practices. Meaningful play also results from the player interacting with the systems and representations of the game. Thus, when we analyze games, we study meaning within the game (meaningful play) and around it (cultural significance). The text is not limited to the work itself, but also to where the text is interpreted and by whom.

If we consider games texts, we can also understand them better by analyzing what Gérard Genette calls *paratexts*—texts that surround the main text being analyzed, which transform and condition how the audience interprets that main text.[10] Texts such as the author's name or the title, reviews, or discussions about the work can predispose the audience to read the text a certain way. For example, some readers may be more willing to engage with a novel if the writer is a renowned author; if the work comes from a new novelist, readers may be more critical. Again, these texts do not necessarily have to be written, since we are using the term in a broad sense. In videogame terms, paratexts would include the box of the game, the instruction manual, the game's commercial website, reviews, and interviews with the developers, as well as other media, from other games to commercials or films that may have been inspired by the game or spawned by it. The way that a game is branded also becomes part of the paratexts of the game and how we understand it—branding creates expectations because it may belong to a pre-existing game series, or feature the name of a famous developer on the box. Extending Genette's concept to videogames allows us to understand how they become complex media artifacts in the light of these paratexts, since they provide further layers of interpretation. The building blocks described in the context area of Chapter 3 deal with the variety of paratexts that we can use to analyze the game.

One of the challenging issues when writing about games, particularly when bringing methods and approaches from literature, film, or communication studies, is whether games can actually be understood as a new way of communication. Mark P. Wolf entitled one of the earliest books in the game studies field, *The Medium of the Video Game*;[11] the word *medium* seems to imply that there is a message in them. Games as an expressive medium, however, are hardly a one-way method of communication where the designer "tells" a message to the player. The player is a necessary part of the text; it is difficult to find games where there is no player input,[12] as the game is not really a complete text without a player who interprets its rules and interacts with it. When we study games, we investigate how players engage with the text at different levels: how players understand the rules, and follow or break them, how players create goals for themselves, how they communicate with each other, to name but a few. The materials can be very rich—Mia Consalvo's book, *Cheating*, deals with the different ways in which players define cheating in games, how they cheat, and how it changes the game.[13]

Players can also communicate and relate to each other through the game—after all, most games without computers are social activities. Therefore,

some of the processes that can be studied if we consider games a medium are how players connect to each other through the game. Some games do incorporate responses to the designer, such as a table-top role-playing game where the players talk directly to the game master, or playground games where players are constantly inventing, negotiating, and arguing about the rules. In others, the cycle of feedback may take longer, with players posting on online forums what they like or dislike about a game, or streamers providing moment-to-moment commentary as they play. Even though games are not usually a two-way medium where the player can respond to the designer of the game, the necessary participation of the player and their interpretation constitute a cycle that can be understood as a medium. It may be the case that there is no designer to talk back to, because it is a folk game (like Poker or Go Fish), which may prove that the communication is not between the player and the designer, but rather between the player and the game. If players do not like Old Maid, they will not complain to the designer, even if there was one. If they do not like the rules, they will simply change them and adapt them to how they want to play.[14] Some games have made talking to the player about the game directly into an expressive device, such as *The Beginner's Guide* (2015) where the designer analyzes a series of incomplete game levels by a fictional game designer, or *Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy* (2017), a game of heightened difficulty where Foddy himself encourages the player to persevere and reflects on the nature of failure as the player struggles to advance in the game.

So games are a strange medium, where the communication takes place as a constant cycle of players making sense of the game, figuring out what they want to do, and seeing what happens. It is a medium that, by necessity, establishes a dialogue between the game and the players, and among players.

Some aspects of games can be analyzed from the standpoint of other media, such as examining cinematics from a film studies point of view, or from visual design. The purpose of this book, however, is to call attention to how games are different from other media. Rather than limiting ourselves to thinking about games as a medium to convey messages, we can think of them as artifacts that encode certain values and ideas, which players decode and engage with as they play. Mary Flanagan argues that game developers should be more aware of the values that their games incorporate, and use them as an expressive device.[15] An example of the type of issue Flanagan talks about is the arcade game, *Death Race* (1976), whose creators thought

it would be funny to have a game where the goal is to run pedestrians over, then marking a tombstone on the spot where the person was killed. Even with blocky graphics in black and white, the game caused one of the earliest controversies about videogame violence in the US.[16] *Death Race* was interpreted as a message inciting players to violence by people who did not play it; however, the creators and many players thought it was a fun game and did not think about the implications of their design decisions. Similar controversies repeat periodically, only the games get better graphics and sound and more complex design. What we can learn from this story is that games can be read differently depending on the audience, and that the system of the game embodies certain values which can also be the subject of interpretation. Once we accept that games are a type of texts, we can analyze them as such.

▶ WHAT IS TEXTUAL ANALYSIS?

There are multiple methods to help us understand our reality, which change depending on the field we come from and what we want to learn. The practice of textual analysis cuts across different disciplines, both in the humanities and the social sciences: literature, philosophy, history, anthropology, communication and media studies.

Textual analysis is the in-depth study of a text in the sense discussed above, using the text as a sample or case study to understand a specific issue or topic. By using inductive reasoning and analyzing specific texts, we can develop general theories that can be applied to other works. The strategies of textual analysis go beyond interpreting the piece or event itself: part of it is trying to make sense of the text, while it may also address the varied ways in which different people can interpret it, as was the case in the *Death Race* controversy.

We have a general disposition to make sense of texts, often without formal training, in practices that can be observed in everyday life—conversations between friends after going to the cinema, reviews in consumer websites, book clubs, and discussions of last night's sporting match. We constantly try to unravel the texts that we engage with on a daily basis; it is natural curiosity. The game fans whose conversation I overhead at PAX East were precisely doing informal text analysis, as a way to share and enjoy their media experiences and making sense of them together. It was precisely that

impulse which probably took them to the convention in the first place, in order to find like-minded people with whom to talk about their favorite games and to partake of the culture surrounding games. Thus, analysis is not only a form of deeper engagement, but also of creating communities that play them critically and create a discourse based on those texts. Those communities may be academics, journalists, or fans; they may also be the practitioners who produce those texts and need a discourse to communicate with each other.

▶ GAME ANALYSIS FOR ALL

So if we practice textual analysis naturally and we do it so often, what is the point of getting formal training? What are the benefits of learning academic methods for text analysis? Isn't that a bit of cultural snobbism? In everyday life, people may associate the academic approach to media analysis with high-brow film critics haunting art-house cinemas, for example, who seem to speak another language and with whom general audiences find it difficult to relate to. Academic critics may pan a film that may later become a cultural reference, encouraging the divide between everyday audiences and the academic realm. It has happened before—Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) was received with mixed reviews when it was released,[17] and yet today it remains a point of reference for filmmakers and critics alike.

Is this book encouraging an elitist approach to analyzing and discussing games? Well, yes and no. First of all, nothing will prevent the informal analysis of games, which is second nature to so many people. What is at stake here is fostering structured, systematic, and methodical ways to discuss games, similar to the ones that already exist for literature, film, theater, non-fiction, documentaries, and philosophy, for example. We need to construct an academic discourse that allows us to relate games to other media as well as other academic fields, to help expand and improve our knowledge. There is a need to include games in the map of academic study, because the study of games is eminently interdisciplinary, as we will see. In the end, more sophistication is a means to broaden the types of discourse in relation to games, expanding the spectrum of ways of understanding them depending on one's background, the context of play, and so on. It is not that the pre-existing discourse should disappear; rather, what we need is a wider variety of ways to talk about games.

Encouraging more sophisticated ways of discussing games is a way to include game knowledge as a form of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu defines *cultural capital* as the kinds of knowledge that allow one to acquire power and status, such as formal education and specific skills.[18] At the moment, the contribution of games and game studies to cultural capital is limited, mostly because the general knowledge of games is usually derived from the marketing of games and the generation of hype about certain titles, which trickles down to journalistic articles and blog posts. This type of knowledge is usually not as useful to acquire "power and status"; rather, it is often considered a waste of time. This is slowly changing in specific instances where expertise translates into specific status. For example, top e-sports players enjoy a reputation within their field and among their fans, and are able to make a living out of their gameplay—but they do not yet make as much money as what elite sports players may earn.[19] By improving the discourse on games, we can make it so that being well-versed in games can be admirable and knowing about games an intellectual currency.

Being able to discuss games in a cultured manner is not the exclusive realm of hard-core players—the key is not playing a lot, but playing well. What "playing well" means depends on the context. According to Drew Davidson, "playing well" in this context means enjoying the experience, understanding the game, and, more importantly, being able to explain what one likes or not and why, without using terms that marketing dictates.[20] One plays well by being able to understand the social set-up of a game, by interpreting games as a performative activity, by breaking down how participation in a fictional world is structured, by being able to appreciate the beauty of a system, by spotting the references to other games or other media, and tracing the variations or innovations with respect to other games. Understanding the complexity of games as activities, as well as their expressive means and features as aesthetic objects, implies expanding the ways in which we can enjoy games, digital or not.

The aim of textual analysis in general, and this approach to game analysis in particular, focuses less on making value judgments on the game and more on appreciating how we make sense of them. Creating a game canon, which includes games that are "good" or "the best" and which serve as a referent to all in the field, is not necessarily a way to improve games knowledge as cultural capital. A game canon lays a common ground, a series of compass points for those who enter the discourse, allowing us to chart the

corpus of the texts that we study. A canon, however, can also limit the field of study, again by using elitism as a criterion. Moreover, often the prime candidates that would be popularly included in a game canon are bestsellers; if we think of digital games, the list could include works such as *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), *Halo* (2001), or *FIFA 17* (2016), once more displaying the power and influence of marketing. Determining which are the best games to label them as the games worth playing or analyzing is reducing our field of study. What we want is to expand the field—the method here provided is all-inclusive, where all games are worth studying, thus opening up the possibility of discovering smaller, forgotten games, encouraging the practice of game archeology in order to highlight works that may have been overlooked, and finding new meanings in games that at first may have seemed trite. If our goal is to learn, there is so much that we can gather from playing flawed games, as well as the top of the crop.

THE PROBLEMS WITH CANONS

One of the clearest markers of how a writer is thinking about their audience is how examples help illustrate the discussion. Many fields assume that the reader will be familiar with the texts referred to, because they may be considered canonical and covered in foundational courses of the field. For example, scholars of English Studies are expected to know Shakespeare's key tragedies (*Romeo and Juliet* (1595), *Hamlet* (1602), *Macbeth* (1606), *King Lear* (1607), *Othello* (1604)), whereas film scholars should know *Citizen Kane* (1941) or *Goodfellas* (1990). In a similar way, in game studies, the assumption is that scholars will be familiar with *Pac-Man* (1980) or *Super Mario Bros.* (1985). On the one hand, canonical works provide us with a list of texts that serve as common referent to the participants in a discipline, so we do not have to explain every example from scratch. If you read an analysis from a field that is not yours, you will realize how difficult it can be to follow the argument if you are not familiar with the texts they are discussing. On the other, canonical lists across fields perpetuate works that are supposed to be "good," usually sidelining works that may be worth revisiting, apart from often marginalizing the work of diverse creators, especially women and people of color. In the case of game studies, the tendency is to focus on mainstream commercial games, because they are more accessible and more people may be familiar with them. This is one of the reasons why I encourage my students to find games that may have been overlooked, or may be unusual—lesser-known examples may be an undiscovered trove of knowledge, and may help highlight different creators whose work had not been noted before.

Games as texts can be tackled from two angles: as works connected to other works, or as works that can be read in different ways. In the first instance, we can look for what different games have in common, finding recurring patterns in their design, topics, aesthetics, and so on. Alan McKee calls this a structuralist approach,[21] which points to the work of theorists like Barthes, mentioned above, or Claude Lévi-Strauss, an anthropologist who discussed the commonalities between different cultures and societies. On the other hand, we can focus on the processes of sense-making while playing a game, the context in which it is played, and how it may be understood by different audiences. McKee calls these post-structuralist strategies, relating this approach to the work of scholars like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, or Julia Kristeva. Going back to the *Death Race* example, a structuralist analysis would focus on how it continued the tradition of two-player arcade games, such as *Computer Space* (1971) or *Pong* (1972), or how driving in the game maps the two steering-wheel controllers to a top-down view of a field, or what the game may have to do with the movie that supposedly inspired it. Reading the game from a post-structuralist view, we could explore the question of why people who had not even played the game were so upset, and their understanding of what an interactive medium is, and compare it to the approach of the designers, documented in various interviews. Discussing how the game may seem very tame (or not) by today's standards and why may be another productive avenue of discussion.

This book provides an overview of a series of building blocks that can help writers following either approach, structuralist or post-structuralist. We can follow one or the other depending on what we want to learn from the game. My goal with this book is to provide a rich framework that allows us to understand the complexity of our subject matter and the multiplicity of ways in which audiences can engage with the texts.[22]

Game analysis is also a necessary tool to develop the concepts and vocabulary of game studies, which is still a relatively young field of study. Using an inductive method (that is, extracting general principles from specific examples), we can find overarching concepts that allow us to understand a wider range of games. These concepts allow us to relate games and their development, as part of the structuralist approach just described. Doug Church complains about the limited vocabulary to talk about games, particularly within the practice of game design, and calls for the development of what he calls *formal abstract design tools*, derived from the analysis of

specific games.[23] By examining closely the design of exemplary games, he comes up with concepts that allow not only explaining how the game works, but also identifying elements that can be used to understand other games and make design connections between them. One such example is "Perceivable Consequence: A clear reaction from the game world to the action of the player," which is identified both as a good element that helps the player know that their actions are meaningful in the game world, and as a design strategy to help the player understand the consequences of their actions in the game. There has been a growing number of academic works to develop those formal abstract design tools, in the form of reference libraries or dictionaries, such as the Game Design Patterns project, the Game Ontology, or the Operational Logics approach.[24] The conceptual framework to understand how games tick and how we relate to games is still a work in progress; Church's proposal to derive tools from the close reading of actual games and comparisons between them helps in developing those concepts in context. The strategy is not new—in the fourth century BCE, Aristotle generated the terms for his *Poetics* from the close reading of theater plays and epic poetry, creating a series of concepts that helped describe and compare the texts.[25] Following Aristotle's steps, we can generate terms that allow us to describe them with nuance and depth.

▶ THE BUILDING BLOCKS AND AREAS OF STUDY OF GAME ANALYSIS

Starting an analysis can be daunting, because there are so many things one can talk about. In order to ease our way into analysis, its building blocks can be divided into three interrelated areas: the *context*, the *game overview*, and the *formal aspects*. Each area comprises a series of building blocks, which writers can select to analyze a game. Think of these building blocks as plastic bricks that one assembles to construct the analysis—depending on what the analysis is for, the writer will use some pieces instead of others. These building blocks can be interrelated, so that in the same way that a door piece may need a hinge piece to build a doorway, there are analysis building blocks that usually go together. For example, when Camper discusses the graphic style of *La-Mulana* (2005), he uses two different building blocks: technology and the representation.[26] With respect to the technology, the game runs in current computers but it is developed to evoke the looks of games developed for an older computer standard, the MSX2, whose processing capabilities were much more limited. Alongside the discussion of

technology, Camper also discusses the aesthetics of the visual representation of the game, and how the careful choices to evoke a specific technology become an artistic statement.

There are many building blocks that we can use to construct the analysis of a game. This book presents three general areas in order to make them more accessible. Each different area may provide a different focus to our analysis: the social sciences may focus on the context of the game or its reception, specifically in relation to players and communities, whereas game designers may want to discuss the formal aspects.

Interrelated building blocks can be the connection between the different areas, meaning that while we analyze a game, we are not limited to one specific set. In the example of *La-Mulana* above, the two building blocks fall into two different areas: while the technology used for the game and the technology it pays homage to are part of the context, the representation that recreates that technology is discussed as part of its formal qualities.

The following is a brief overview of the different areas of analysis of games. The introductions in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will provide a more extensive description of these areas, as well as the building blocks that they comprise.

Context The context of the game comprises the circumstances in which the game is produced and played, as well as other texts and communities that may relate to it. Although some literary scholars defend that textual commentary should be limited to the text itself, as we will see later in the book, ignoring the context in which it is produced overlooks aspects that may be essential to understanding the text. The importance of context may be obvious in historical analyses, which must by necessity refer to the socio-political circumstances that produced texts like a newspaper article or a political discourse. There are other cases where the context is essential to disambiguate specific components of the text. For example, the Bible uses *thou* as the second person singular pronoun because that was the linguistic norm of the time; if a contemporary text uses it, it can be a sign of wanting to evoke a specific time period, or a reference to the Bible. In many fantasy videogames, such as *Ultima VII: The Black Gate* (1992), characters speak using *thou* as part of the language of the fantasy world in which they take place, marking that the action takes place far from everyday life. The same word can thus have different connotations depending on the context and who is reading it; what applies to a word can also be extended

to a larger text. Thus, when we are analyzing a game, we have to take into account these other circumstances that may affect the way we understand it as a text.

An illustration of how context can affect the way we understand a game is *Resistance: Fall of Man* (2006). Its release met the disapproval of the Church of England, because one of the levels takes place within Manchester Cathedral. The Church of England considered that having a battle within a digital version of the cathedral was a desecration, as well as copyright infringement.[27] The legal claims here were dismissed, although Sony, the publisher of the game, released a public apology about the level. This controversy is part of the context, and helps us understand the game, which seems to pride itself upon the realism of the locations to the point of copying real places.[28] The game takes place in an alternate history, so the similarities with the real world are an important part.

Game Overview This area focuses on the content, the basic features that distinguish the game from others, and how it has been read, appropriated, and modified by different audiences. These building blocks provide us with a summary that gives us an idea of what the game is about and who plays it, as a way to identify it.

The game overview covers the information that players need in order to get started. Players do not play games for their digital properties and structures, but because they mean something to them. Even as a pastime, games provide a means to relax and meditate, to become someone one is not, to explore, to learn about fantasy worlds as well as the real world, to make friends, to blow off steam. Games can also be provocative texts that prompt players to create their own interpretations and parallel texts, such as creating their own levels, drawing their favorite characters, or writing stories based on the games they play. Although the analysis of fan-made texts is beyond the scope of this book, these paratexts (remember: texts outside of the work being analyzed but directly related to it)[29] can also help gain a deeper and complex understanding of a game.

When analyzing a videogame, one has to take into account the player's position in the game. As a performance activity, the game is not complete until the player participates in it, and therefore the player is also part of the content of the game.[30] It is certainly an ambiguous position, since the player is also part of the context of the game. It is very difficult to account for the role

of the player in the game, because different players will participate differently, and will therefore transform the text being analyzed. This also means that the person analyzing the game is part of it too, and their approach to the game as players will also color how they understand it.

The design of a game usually encourages certain types of interactions, which is one of the aspects that we can explore. Games provide *affordances*, which define what the player can do, and curtail other actions, thus defining the space of possibility of the game. For example, in *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), the player controls Mario, who can run, jump, and pick up objects, get rid of enemies by avoiding them or jumping on them, and grow larger by picking up a magic mushroom. This limited repertoire of actions allows Mario not only to traverse the world, but also to increase the final score. The game, however, does not let Mario talk to the enemies and ask them politely to pass by, or use the coins to buy a vehicle that would make him run faster. The intersection between what the player can do in the game and what is not afforded is the possibility space of the game.[31]

Formal Aspects The area dealing with the formal aspects studies how the text is constructed, the pieces that make it up. Verbal texts are made up of interrelated components: words, sentences, paragraphs at their most basic level. Word choices, patterns, and figures of speech are other components that literary analyses are concerned with. In cinema studies, being familiar with the vocabulary to refer to different types of shots, camera movements, and editing conventions is basic to writing a textual analysis of a film. In games, the formal aspects refer to the system of the game and its components (the rules, the control schemes), as well as how the system is presented to the player (interface design, visual style).

There are two humanistic approaches that base their methods on the formal analysis of their object of study: formalism and structuralism.[32] While formalism seeks to find the inherent components of a literary text at an abstract level, structuralism is the result of applying grammar-like structures to works beyond the verbal level, in order to understand where the meaning lies and how we make sense of that text. For instance, Vladimir Propp came up with what seems like a mathematical formula to describe a wide collection of Russian fairy tales, which is a typical example of the formalist approach to study literature.[33] He lists the typical lists of characters (the villain, the dispatcher, the helper, the princess, the donor, the hero, the false hero). Each of these characters has a specific function;

for example, the donor provides an item that helps the hero during the adventure. Later on, Joseph Campbell's work on the Hero's Journey, also called the monomyth, can be conceived as a structuralist approach, since he parsed thematic commonalities in how the adventures of a hero cross cultures and ages.[34] This (often misunderstood) journey follows a very specific pattern: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from his mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."[35] Both formalist and structuralist methods have often been accused of overlooking the context by focusing exclusively on formal components over the content—the post-structuralist methods mentioned above are a response to the limitations of structuralism.[36] Although these reservations are not unfounded, it is also true that we can gain relevant insights by studying the structures of the text, how they relate to the content, and how these structures connect it to other works.

The method here proposed to study the formal aspects of games has a structuralist foundation as a conceptual tool to discuss games. Games are often structured systems, in the form of rule sets of computer programs, which are models that lend themselves to study of their form. According to Caillois, this type of organized play is termed *ludus*, as it has specific regulations that constrain the activity.[37] Structuralism, however, can also be applied to study informal and unstable systems, such as make-believe play, which does not have hard rules and is made up as the players advance; Caillois calls this type of play *paidia*, improvisational play, spontaneous, an opportunity for players to express themselves.[38]

The area of formal analysis may be familiar to writers coming from literature and film, where these approaches have long been applied. It may also be the most relevant to those interested in game design, as a way to understand how games work, as well as being able to communicate ideas to their development teams.

The building blocks of game analysis will be categorized under one of these three areas (context, game overview, formal aspects), giving us a glimpse of the richness and complexity of games, and the range of materials that we can comment on. The three areas are so interwoven it is difficult to talk about certain aspects of games without making references to others; we spread them in three areas to facilitate mapping them.

The richness of games as a subject of study is such that not only can we write our class homework on games, but also theses and dissertations. There have been whole books written on games or game series, such as Dan Pinchbeck's *Doom: Scarydarkfast*, a monograph on *Doom* (1993), its process of creation and design, as well as its cultural influence, or *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*.[39] There is so much we can explore and write about!

▶ DEFINING THE AREA OF STUDY AND OUR AUDIENCE

In my classes, I often see students who want to say everything about their favorite game, because the texts can be very rich indeed. They know the game backwards and forwards, and they talk about it with their friends all the time. This often results in students freezing when it comes to writing, because they are overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information. Another common occurrence is that they try to cram everything they know in a single 1800-word paper, going from idea to idea but without really having a core argument. My method to assist students is usually asking them to stop and think about what they want to say, and focus on what makes the game noteworthy. The goal is to learn something new about the game, hopefully something that might have been overlooked or not noticed before. Part of my job also includes reminding students that they are not writing a blog post that their fellow gamers will read, but an academic paper where the teacher has certain expectations and standards, and which should be readable by people outside the class.

My trick to avoid being overwhelmed by the amount of material to discuss, or to fall into trite and not very productive discourse, is to be specific about what I am studying and who I am talking to, even before starting to write. By knowing who my audience is and what methods to use, I can be more effective in reaching my audience, as well as reduce the scope of what to say.

The approach of this book caters to scholars coming from a variety of disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences. This is still a broad audience, and different scholars may feel more at home with one approach instead of the other. Although game analysis is inherently interdisciplinary, we cannot use every method and discuss every single aspect of a game. In order to remain practical, we must identify the areas that we want to study

and which discipline we are addressing. Some of the questions we can ask ourselves to define the scope of our paper can be:

- What do I want to learn from the game?
- What is the field of study that I'm approaching it from?
- Who am I talking to? What do they know about games?
- What are the aspects of the game that are going to be relevant to the analysis?

The previous section briefly examined how different fields of study may tackle the games; we are not done with the multiplicity of fields yet. The discussion of the different building blocks in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will include a connection to the specific discipline and methods they relate to.

Being aware of where we come from as authors, what we know best, and who we are writing for is a necessary exercise of introspection. It may be the case that the author is a teacher of literature who has decided to include videogames in their syllabus, as a way to appeal to their students. The methods and approach of literary analysis are relevant and useful to understand videogames. The literary scholar, however, should be careful not lose sight of what makes games different from other media, forgetting about their participatory nature or the social aspects of playing. In another case, the author may be a hard-core gamer who may have a lot of confidence in their knowledge of games. This is a great asset to have, but it may also get in the way of communicating one's findings to a readership who may not be as familiar with the games being discussed, and may get lost within the myriad specific names, jargon, and even in-jokes. The opposite can also be true—I am a scholar who is trying to reach out to game developers who are not familiar with academic discourse. My strategy to talk about my work to commercial game developers is to focus on basic theoretical concepts and ground them on examples. I cannot count on my audience knowing about literary theory or semiotics, but I can count on them knowing their games well.

▶ ARE WE READY?

There is so much to be done in the field of game analysis! Rather than being afraid of it, we should be very excited about the possibilities. We can be

pioneers in highlighting and arguing for the intellectual value of works that already have a cultural impact. Better still, we can become digital archeologists and discover an obscure game that turns out to be a wonderful work of art, and put it in the spotlight.

Not everybody who writes game analyses may be an avid gamer, but through analysis one can learn to appreciate games as a cultural artifact. The following pages do not intend to transform readers into videogame fans. After reading this book and applying it to your own work, some will still remain critical and skeptical about the status of games as art. That is okay, because the goal of this book is not to evangelize, but to expand the variety of discourse as well as its quality. By enriching the discourse of games, we can also reach out to audiences in order to make it more widespread. The study of games must not be exclusive to a set of self-appointed experts. Everybody plays games—in playgrounds, on tables, with friends, with computers, with mobiles. Now let us start thinking about what games can mean and how.

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