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# What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies

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## Abstract

What is video game culture, however? What does it mean to have a culture defined by the consumption of a particular medium? Moreover, what are the implications of defining this culture in a particular way? While there has been a great deal of ink split on video game culture, the actual definition of the term is often treated as common sense. Unpacking the discourses surrounding “video game culture” allows us to see the power dynamics involved in attributing certain characteristics to it, as well as naming it “video game culture” as such. This has implications for how video games are studied and is connected with how culture is studied more broadly. By critically examining how video game culture has been defined in both press and academic articles, this paper illuminates how this definition has limited the study of video games and where it can move.

## Keywords

video games, video game culture, cultural studies, discourse, gamer stereotypes

From books that look at *Gaming as Culture* (Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006) to journals such as *Games and Culture* (SAGE), there is a great deal of academic buzz about video game culture.<sup>1</sup> There has been a great deal of “cultural” work done around video games, particularly in the past 10 years. Authors look at video games in relation to thinking (S. Johnson, 2005a), learning (Gee, 2003), gender (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000), children (Kinder, 1991), war (Halter, 2006), and so on. The great

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majority of recent work on video game culture centers on massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) like *Everquest*, *World of Warcraft*, or *SecondLife* (Castronova, 2005; Chee, Vieta, & Smith, 2006; Ondrejka, 2006; Taylor, 2006; D. Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Yee, 2001). In these areas, authors look at video games with regard to knowledge acquisition, identity and performance, representation, and the relationship between media and audiences. Throughout this research, there is a pervasive sense of video game culture as separate from a constructed mainstream culture, as something new, different, and more importantly definable.

What is video game culture, however? What does it mean to have a culture defined by the consumption of a particular medium? Moreover, what are the implications of defining this culture in a particular way? Although there has been a great deal of ink spilt on the subject of video game culture, writers usually treat the actual definition of the term as common sense. As King and Krzywinska point out, however, “[t]he most potent ideologies achieve precisely this status, being taken for granted as part of the ‘commonsense’ understanding of particular regimes, rather than recognized *as* ideology” (2006, p. 188). This article unpacks this common sense and interrogates how video game culture is defined in the mainstream U.S. press as well as the academe. I do this not to argue that all video game studies must approach games as culture, but that those scholars that do approach video games through the lens of culture should adopt the same critical and reflexive approaches to culture that cultural studies has. Herein I argue for a critical cultural study of games, rather than a study of game culture as such.

“Game culture” is often defined via descriptions of gamers. The point of this article is not to outline the gamer stereotype yet again. Instead, it begins with the categories from which the stereotype stems. These categories include (a) who plays video games, (b) how they play, and (c) what they play. Starting with these categories and not looking for a prototypical definition of a gamer identity allows us to see that popular discourses actually offer a much more diverse view of what gaming is than they are generally given credit for. They still define “video game culture” as something very distinct and very different from mainstream U.S. culture. This othering of games, whether done in a positive or negative manner, shapes how video games are studied. Unpacking the discourses surrounding “video game culture” allows us to see the power dynamics involved in attributing certain characteristics to it, as well as naming it “video game culture” as such. Definitions of gaming culture have implications for how video games are studied and are connected with how culture is studied more broadly. By critically examining how video game culture has been defined in both press and academic articles, this article illuminates how this definition has limited the study of video games and where culturally based game studies can move.

## Conceptualizing Video Game Culture

I begin with the assertion that although much has been written about video game culture, little work in this area has actually looked at games from the perspective

of cultural studies. Without delving too deeply into the long and complicated history of cultural studies, “we can picture cultural studies as a distinctive approach to culture that results when we stop thinking about culture as particular valued texts and think about it as a broader process in which each person has an equal right to be heard, and each person’s voice and reflections about culture are valuable” (Couldry, 2000, p. 2). That is to say, “culture, from the cultural studies view, is a process” (Carey, 1997 [1992], p. 272). Moreover, cultural studies is in a state of constant debate and flux, as it is “a tendency across disciplines, rather than a discipline itself” (Miller, 2006, p. 1). As outlined in various texts, cultural studies is a field of approaches which is under constant tension and conflict over definitions, methods, theories, and even the fundamental goals and existence of cultural studies (a few texts in this debate include Bennett, 1998; Grossberg, 1994; R. Johnson, 1986–1987). I am not arguing that game studies must look at games as culture or that it has yet to look at games as culture. Rather, I assert that if video game studies are going to look at games as culture, it must adopt the conflicts and struggles of cultural studies, not just the terms and foci.

Much like cultural studies, the study of video games has relied on borrowing techniques from other disciplines, including anthropology, economics, philosophy, psychology, film studies, and so on (Boellstorff, 2006; Loftus & Loftus, 1983; Mortensen, 2007; Myers, 2003). Although they are both interdisciplinary fields, however, game studies has not drawn deeply as it might from cultural studies, particularly its critical and reflexive tendencies though notable exceptions do exist (see Kline, Dyer-Witford, & De Peuter, 2003; Mayra, 2008). This is problematic as cultural studies could help video game studies approach the field in very productive ways.

How one defines culture, for example, has been a persistent debate in cultural studies as it should be in the analysis of video game culture. Raymond Williams (1998) outlines three ways in which culture has been defined. The first follows from Matthew Arnold’s famous quote that culture is “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold, 1998, p. 7). The second is culture defined as a form of criticism, “the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded” (R. Williams, 1998, p. 48). The third, defines culture as a way of life: “[i]n contemporary parlance, culture consists of four sorts of elements: norms, values, beliefs, and expressive symbols” (Peterson, 1979, p. 137). Geertz (1973) conceptualizes culture as a web of meanings. Hall (1998) asserts that culture is studied both as ideas and as social practices. As culture can be defined in so many different ways, it is of little surprise that the definition of video game culture is so difficult to pin down.

The study of video games as cultural texts or the culture of video games relies on many of the differing understandings of culture outlined above. Video game culture has been defined as a subculture marked by certain tastes (Winkler, 2006, p. 147) and as an art form (Jenkins, 2005). Some look at games as social practice. T. L.

Taylor's (2006) ethnography on the MMOG *Everquest*, for example, describes an "online gaming culture," which she defines in terms of its social practices and a shared identity/community created in the gamespace. Analyses of the video game industry are also used to define game culture (Kerr, 2006; Kline, Dyer-Witthof, & De Peuter, 2003). Dovey and Kennedy (2006), for instance, define video game culture by way of the major discourses used by members of the video game development industry. "Games culture is . . . a critical site where discourses around technology, technological innovation, and technological competence converge with dominant conceptions of gender and race" (p. 131). They describe how these discourses shape who is allowed into the industry (as acculturation is a requirement for entry into the field) and the effect this has on the products.

These examples demonstrate how video game culture has been defined in the academe. Video game scholars, however, tend to write about the culture from the inside, as many of them identify as gamers. Journalists, however, tend to write about video gaming from this outside. Game studies academics often try to describe video game culture against the mainstream discourse. Likewise, journalists often quote, or misquote, game scholars. To get a sense of what is meant by games culture, we must take account of how it has been described in the popular press as well as the academe.

As Steven Johnson describes there is "an experiential gap between people who have immersed themselves in games, and people who have only heard secondhand reports, because the gap makes it difficult to discuss the meaning of games in a coherent way" (2005a, p. 25). Often in academic accounts this gap is addressed by adding the "gamer's side" to the story. Yet rarely do scholars look closely at precisely what these "secondhand reports" are saying about gaming culture. One exception to this is Dimitri Williams' (2003) frame-based analysis of news magazine coverage of video games from 1970 to 2000. Although a very useful analysis, and in fact many of the frames found in the study are still seen in current news coverage, the task in this essay is a different one. The question is not how are video games discussed in print media but rather how video game play is framed as a culture in the popular press as well as the academe.

## Looking for Gaming Culture

In this discourse analysis, I used a ground theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2006 [1967]) approach to popular and academic descriptions of video game culture. It would be a worthwhile project to talk with people who do play and make video games and ask how they define video game culture. The aim of this project, however, is to understand how more widely available discourses discuss video game culture, which does not preclude the perspective of those who play video games. Moreover, in my interviews with gamers and observations of message boards, those that play video games often draw on news and academic sources in discussing aspects of video game culture.

I used LexisNexis to compile articles for this analysis. A search on the terms: “video game culture,” “gamer culture,” “gaming culture,” and “games culture” was run on major U.S. and world publications for all available dates.<sup>2</sup> Articles with these terms specifically, and not more general discussions of video games, were selected because the focus of this analysis is not how video games are discussed in the press, but how video game play/texts/practices are described as a culture. To limit the sample, only U.S.-based publications were chosen and of those only papers in the top six on the available list of newspapers by circulation (as listed in Wikipedia, 2007). Only four of the top six papers had results in the LexisNexis search: *USA Today* ( $N = 4$ ), *The New York Times* ( $N = 16$ ), *Los Angeles Times* ( $N = 4$ ), and *The Washington Post* ( $N = 8$ ).<sup>3</sup> As described earlier, academic studies of video games are often in dialogue with the popular discourse about video games. Thus, this analysis is contextualized with a review of literature on video game culture. Although not a particularly large discourse is available to be analyzed here, it provides a good grounding for a critique of how “video game culture” has been described and what a cultural studies approach to game culture might look like.

## Who Plays

The issue of who “counts” as a member of video game culture is central to studying games within a cultural studies framework. “[C]ultural studies thinks of culture in relation to issues of power; the power relations . . . which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as ‘culture’ and what does not” (Couldry, 2000, p. 2). This is a question we must ask of all new media, as Carolyn Marvin discusses.

[T]he early history of electronic media is less the evolution of technical efficiencies in communication than a series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed. (1988, p. 4)

These questions are important ones in the study of gamers.

There is a tendency for the newspaper articles to point out that video gamers are not necessarily who we think they are. As one article asserts, “the stereotype of the gamer as a glazed, incoherent teenage boy is wrong” (Copeland, 2000). One article even emphasizes that gamers are more charitable than is often presumed (Freire, 2006). Articles acknowledge that video games, particularly thanks to Nintendo’s Wii, have become mainstream entertainment (Schiesel, 2007a). This may prove Williams’ (2003) prediction that media coverage of a diverse gaming audience would result in a more diverse gaming audience has come true. Even as the game audience is described as more diverse than typically presumed, however, there is

still the underlying assertion that there is a truth-based stereotype of gamer identity that is being changed, not challenged.

[F]or most of the last two decades gaming has been considered an odd, insular subculture, the territory of teenage boys and those who never outgrew their teens. But now, as the first generation of gamers flirts with middle age, and as family friendly game systems like Nintendo's Wii infiltrate living rooms around the country, video games are beginning to venture beyond geekdom into a region approaching the mainstream. (Schiesel, 2007b)

New definitions of game culture are never used to question the constructed past of video game culture's insularity, maleness, and youthfulness.

When articles point out that not all gamers are young U.S. males, it is generally done in a way that reasserts the expectation. So yes, women play video games, but video game culture is not necessarily a welcoming space for them (Pham, 2007). Sure not everyone is a hardcore gamer but South Korea where competitive video game stars are heroes is the model of video game culture to emulate (Schiesel, 2006a). Perhaps, gamers, as geeks, are not expected to throw good parties, but violent media, scantily clad women, and lewd behavior are to be expected at the parties they do throw (Verini, 2006). Although video games may be played by soccer moms and retirees, the hardcore, quick-fingered gamer market is still something very different and the site of traditional gaming culture (Schiesel, 2007a). Furthermore, the expansion of "gamer culture" involves some negotiation of that culture. As one article points out, when (Columbia Broadcasting System) televises gaming matches they plan on excluding certain games because of violence and "tweaking games' rules to make them more viewer-friendly" (Schiesel, 2007b). Even as game play expands, knowledge of the subcultural capital of video game play is still required to understand more "advanced" types of play.

Acknowledging broader types of gaming seems to be mainly the province of marketers, for whom having a wider range of gamers is more profitable (Elliott, 2005). Similarly, *World of Warcraft's* popularity is tied to its appeal to both hardcore and casual players (Schiesel, 2006b). This is interesting in relation to Ang's (1991) analysis that often academics look at audiences as defined by the industry. In the case of video games, however, the industry seems more interested in a broader range of gamers than academics, which focus almost exclusively on dedicated video game fans, though counter examples, like the article by Williams et al. (2008), which debunks "the stereotypical gamer profile," offer impetus to question this focus.

The implication of narrowly defining video game culture, even while simultaneously acknowledging the expansion of this category, is that game studies scholars who study the "others" to this dominant definition are forced to talk about their subject in relation to the perceived center. This is often the case with studies of women gamers (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Schott & Horrell, 2000). Most studies of gender and video games take it for granted that "girls" and "boys" play differently and that

finding ways of dealing with that can help make video game culture more accessible to female players (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). Gender is certainly a factor in media consumption, as Bird (1992) describes in her study of tabloid newspaper readers. Butsch too describes the gendered nature of media consumption as, “some thought passive radio listening was de-masculinizing” (2000, p. 180). Essentializing gendered media practices, however, is problematic. “The essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic” (Hall, 1993, p. 111). More productive work looks at how cyberculture in general has been gendered as male, largely through the exclusion of women’s voices from texts, which serve as the cultural substance and points of reference within that subculture (Flanagan & Booth, 2002). As Dovey and Kennedy (2007) describe, “star” biographies on the “founding fathers” of gaming help promote a culture where technical proficiency, “geek” cultural capital, maleness, and Whiteness have defined gamer identity.

The answer to this, however, is not to shift a focus to female gaming groups, as many academics, journalists, and marketers have done. What is necessary is a critical reexamination of the place of women and girls in those spaces of gaming culture that have been traditionally defined as male as McRobbie (1980) argues for subcultures more generally. In my own research, a review of the literature on Arab video games demonstrated this tendency to make “other” anyone who did not fit the dominant U.S. gamer identity. In interviews, however, Arab gamers did not position themselves outside the “traditional” gamer culture. Neither did lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender gamers in another project. That is not to say that the ways in which their identities differed from the main gamer stereotype had no impact on their consumption of video games. If they do not place themselves outside what is often called video game culture, however, why should researchers? To do so privileges the dominant gamer identity while marginalizing all others.

## What They Play

Beyond studying games culture, Steinkuehler (2006) argues that games can also be studied as cultural artifacts. It is logical then, that the second category used to define video game culture in the press is the textual products the culture produces. The news articles emphasize a predilection for violent fare (Snider, 1999), elaborately created fantasy worlds (Memmott, 2005), fast-paced high action games (Robbins, 2002), and MMOGs (Schiesel, 2006a, 2006b). Sports games are mentioned but largely in the context of games changing “real sport” culture, rather than being part of video game culture (Velin, 2003; Walker, 2004). This is important, as the texts we use to define video game culture affects what we deem worthy of study (Dovey & Kennedy, 2007). The edited volume *Gaming as Culture*, for example, focuses exclusively on tabletop and electronic role-playing games. Similarly, the more journalistic book *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to*



*Chic* relies on a very specific history and definition of this culture (B. King & Borland, 2003). Press discourses about video games further affect the study of games as video game academics tend to study the games that are most controversial, like a recent edited volume on *Grand Theft Auto* (Garrelts, 2006), or that get the most news coverage, like *World of Warcraft* and *SecondLife*.

The work of journalists and scholars has also helped construct a history of video games in which particular game texts, like *Pong*, *Space Invaders*, and so on, have been canonized (Gaudiosi, 2007; Kent, 2001; Schiesel, 2006b). What is important here is not that particular game texts and images have become exemplars for what gets defined as video game culture. The problem is the lack of reflection on which objects earn that status. Early games like *Space Invaders* and *Pong* did not just emerge out of the ether, nor did *SecondLife* or *World of Warcraft*. The complex interweaving of social networks, mainstream and video game press coverage, marketing, economics, and so on, all go into what makes a game popular. Moreover, “[a] considerable part of how games mean as cultural artifacts depends on how agent/reviewers apply a variety of influential forces in the work they do of evaluating titles for agent/consumers” (McAllister, 2004, p. 139). Pinckard (2003), for example, demonstrates how the marketing for the game *Tomb Raider* limited the potential feminist readings of Lara Croft and anchored her image as a pinup rather than a hero.

Beyond the games, a certain geek style has also been correlated with video game culture. Articles mention the pervasiveness of symbols of video game culture in the “rest” of culture, like pixelated characters from early video games or digital music (Has Anybody Here Seen My Old Friend Martin, 2005; Wilson, 2005). Such assertions ignore the intertextuality of most media and the interrelationship between different media industries, like film, television, video games, toys, and so on. Winkler (2006) offers a very specific definition of gamer culture as “marked by modes of dress, specific linguistic jargon, and a sense of solidarity. Gamers often wear clothing that references specific games, comics, television shows, or movies that are not widely known outside of a small following” (p. 147). Describing video games as a subculture on the basis of style and taste markers is not wrong per se. However, it only tells part of the story. It also often results in not looking at this subculture as part of a larger culture.

Cultural studies offer a rich history on which game studies could build in this regard. In his book *Subculture, the Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige (1979) moves beyond just the fashions and musical tastes that mark youth punk subculture by tracing these expressions of culture to class identities and tensions. Placing video games within larger cultural discourses is important, as video games themselves are the product of larger cultural contexts. King and Krzywinska (2006) assert, for instance, that although game play in some ways is a subculture of subcultures, it is also a part of mainstream culture. “If game playing has an array of niche cultures, and the broader subculture of self-identified ‘gamers,’ it has also established a place in the much wider landscape of popular culture and entertainment in recent decades” (p. 222).



Assumptions about what gamers play influence how researchers approach the field. Similarly, what researchers play affects their investigations as they often study the types of games they enjoy. Dovey and Kennedy caution game studies academics against this, however. “As reflexive critical thinkers, it is essential that we also pay attention to our own internalized technicities and tastes and to the way in which they inflect and determine the choices we make about which games to study and how to study them” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2007, p. 151). Too much attention to defining what gamers play without reflecting on why certain types of texts and styles are codified is problematic. Taking a cultural studies approach, with “its openness and theoretical versatility, its reflexive even self-conscious mood, and, especially, the importance of critique” (R. Johnson, 1986-1987, p. 38), would be more productive. Cultural studies have been subject to much internal debate and critique, and although game studies have come to draw on the concepts and subjects of cultural studies, it has not taken on the conflicts.

## How They Play

Much as we can study culture in terms of social practices, gaming can be, and has been, studied in terms of play practices. Generally speaking, however, play practices are very narrowly understood in dominant discourses about video games. Video game play is unquestionably assumed to encourage flow, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost for the sheer sake of doing it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). The implications of claiming that our object of study becomes such an all encompassing aspect of players’ lives, however, are rarely considered. This type of description also discredits a great many other types of interactions with video games as cultural objects. Turning to the press, the relationship between the definition of gamer culture and how people play encompasses many issues, which fall into two main categories, negative connotations and positive connotations.

The negative connotations include correlating video game playing with childhood obesity (Perez-Pena, 2003) and obsessive play (Faiola, 2006). Video game culture is also defined in terms of the amount of time people spend doing it, obsessively or not, of which South Korea is used as an exemplar (Schiesel, 2006a, 2007b). Video game culture is often defined in terms of the social interaction it engenders or negates. It is either a culture of people in isolation (bad) or a culture of obsessed people playing across the Internet into the dawn (better, but still bad). The positive connotations include the claim that video games enhance learning (S. Johnson, 2005b). A great deal of research on digital games has focused on this issue. Some researchers have suggested that games can encourage problem solving skills and logical thinking (Higgins, 2000; Inkpen, Booth, Gribble, & Klawe, 1995; Whitebread, 1997). Along similar lines, a review of literature by Sandford and Williamson states that “computer games are designed ‘to be learned’ and therefore

provide models of goods learning principles” (2005, p. 2). Similar definitions are present in discourses about game culture. Academic studies of video games often attempt to disprove these negative assessments but rarely question the positive ones (Fromme, 2003; Jenkins).

Many of the articles, as well as academics, define game culture in terms of interaction and immersion. “We are about to enter an intensification of the mediation of our everyday lives. An intensification in which we learn how to flow seamlessly between the virtual and the actual, with our experiences in one being just as affecting as those in the other” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 2). There is a heavy emphasis on the interactivity between audience and text, as one press article states, “there’s something more going on here than passive, mindless escapism: it’s active, complex, multilayered escapism” (Walker, 2004). It involves using complex, high action, face-paced media, “Now we have an industry that makes its money by doing . . . rather than watching, listening, reading” (Copeland, 2000). It is also about thinking, learning on the go (S. Johnson, 2005b). Video game culture is about interacting with media, participating, and convergence (Jenkins, 2006). A great deal of attention is paid to “home brew,” or modification, applications programming savvy players make on existing games (Musgrove, 2006). In this regard, a great deal of game scholarship emphasizes that video game consumption is definitively different from all other mediums. “[T]hrough we may refer to film spectatorship as ‘active,’ due to the viewer’s ongoing attempt to make sense of the film, the video game player is even more active, making sense of the game as well as causing and reacting to the events depicted” (Wolf, 2001, p. 3). Jenkins (2002) too describes interactive audiences as a largely modern phenomenon. This might not actually be the case, however.

Butsch (2000) demonstrates that the notion of the interactive or productive audiences is not necessarily new. In the 1840s, “b’hoys” existed as a very masculine, rowdy, and knowledgeable theater audience. Critiques of their interactive behavior had strong class overtones, as the wealthier patrons who also used the theater as part of their cultural capital did not appreciate the intrusion of working class manners (p. 56). Similarly, early radio, like early video game design, was dominated by amateurs. As radio’s popularity rose however, amateurs had to share their field with the masses. While audience interaction and production were discouraged in Butsch’s examples, in the current discourse, both are highly valued. This is not properly analyzed in studies that focus too closely on valorizing gamer agency. In fact what “counts” as a location of production may tell us more about power dynamics of a particular time/place than it does about audience practices per se. Some early critiques of mass culture for instance put greater value on “folk art”, user-generated content (like player-made gaming modifications), than on mass culture (MacDonald, 1957). Curiously, the situations in which user-generated content and agency is celebrated are the very instances in which it is exploitable by media corporations. *SecondLife*, for example, exists almost entirely as user-generated content.

Beyond being historically myopic, there are both methodological and political ramifications to emphasizing the interactive nature of video games. “The activity

of the players is essential to the realization of much of what unfolds in the playing of games, even where the parameters are clearly established in advance. As a consequence, the player can seem more directly implicated than traditional media consumers in the meanings that result” (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 169). Violent games can teach children to kill because they are interactive (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). Likewise, the educational benefits of games, whether or not the games are designed for that purpose, are correlated to the audience activity they require (Gee, 2003; Greenfield, 1984; S. Johnson, 2005a). The very appeal of video games is posited to be their interactivity (Klimmt, 2003). The focus on games as highly interactive and audience-dependent texts can lead us to ignore that they are in fact encoded with ideological positions just as any other medium (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006; Leonard, 2006). That is not to say we should ignore the activity of the audience but that we should also look at the dominant meanings encoded in the texts they are playing. As Toby Miller (2005) asserts, media must be studied both in terms of active audiences and dominant ideology, rather than one or the other. There is movement in the game studies in this direction, with an emphasis on platform studies and investigating the interactions between culture, technological design, and user interfaces (Bogost & Montford, 2007). More work, however, should be done.

Both journalists and academics also assert that gaming is highly social. This is often set against the stereotype of the solitary gamer (Schiesel, 2006a), assumed on both sides to be a negative caricature. Dmitri Williams (2006), for example, argues that studying gamers is important as “gamers don’t bowl alone;” here, Williams is playing on the title of Robert Putnam’s book *Bowling Alone* (2000), which asserts that U.S. society is becoming increasingly isolating. Who has led us to think video game play is a solitary act, when both academics and journalists are constantly telling us it is a myth, is unclear. Some players’ experiences are solitary, others’ purely social, and most likely many fit somewhere in-between. One might argue that, perhaps, the only way academics can create a “culture” around games is by making games social, but the site and context of consumption has never wholly defined cultural analyses of other media.

Furthermore, there is reason to think that video game play is not as simple as a solitary/social dichotomy.

[A]s suggested more generally in Huizinga’s definition of play, which includes the tendency for play to generate particular play-communities on the basis of ‘the feeling of being ‘apart together’ in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, or mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world’ – a quality similar to that invoked in more recent studies of subcultural forms. (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 219)

The simultaneously isolating and social aspects of video game play need more investigation. Games, for example, can be played alone or with others. They can also be played alone with others, that is, playing an MMOG while sitting alone in your

apartment. Similarly, they can be played together alone if two partners sit in the same room playing on their respective computers, handheld devices, or on separate televisions (and obviously mixtures of all three types of devices). The types of sociality in gaming, and I would argue all media consumption, are extremely complicated and worthy of more research.

The negative connotation to playing alone, moreover, is rarely critiqued. As seen in the example of interactive and productive audiences, however, game studies academics miss an important opportunity by not interrogating why solitary play is so disparaged. Butsch (2000), for example, describes how early radio moved from being communal to familial. Even later it became an individual activity. This shift to private listening “provided grounds for critics to decry ‘hypnotic,’ ‘narcotic,’ effects of broadcasting on individuals” (p. 207). There is a social and political function to valuing certain types of consumption and play over others, something cultural analyses of video games should interrogate.

Finally, there is an increasing emphasis in digital studies on the importance of the body in video game play, which ties together both the interactive and social aspects of video game play. This is a rhetoric, which has historical roots. “The enormous range of discussion about electricity, nature, and the body attempted to locate electricity, a force of unknown dimensions, by means of the most familiar of all human landmarks, the human body” (Marvin, 1988, p. 151). Similarly, discourses about video games and even new game technologies, which are necessarily not that new, seek to make it more acceptable by more firmly locating it with the body (motion sensitive controllers, vibrating controllers, Dance Dance Revolution mats, etc.). As it has a long history of analyzing bodies, cultural studies is a valuable resource for game studies in this regard. Indeed, cultural studies theorists have already sounded off on the matter: “[T]he most powerful effects of video games may be determined less by ideological dimensions than by certain forms of embodiment, by the way in which the player controls/produces the sounds and lights that engulf, produce, and define a ‘rhythmic body’” (Grossberg, 1988, p. 383)

## Video Game Culture as Other

Video game culture, in both press and academic discourses, is framed by descriptions of who plays, what they play, and how they play. Starting with these three categories and not looking for a prototypical definition of a gamer identity allows us to see that popular discourses actually offer a much more diverse view of what gaming is than they are generally given credit. Video games are played by the young and old, males and females, and across the world. People play violent games, sports games, puzzle games, and action games. Games help players think, force audiences to be active, are social, and engage the body. These articles still, however, define “video game culture” as something very distinct, as separate from the rest of some constructed mainstream culture. This is done primarily by discussing the “effect” video games have had on culture, including national culture, media culture, sports culture,

and so on. "Gaming is changing us: our technology, our art, how we learn, and what we expect from the world" (Copeland, 2000). Video game culture is thus often seen as something on the fringes of, but which nevertheless influences, popular culture. This has ideological and political ramifications as it allows for video games to be dismissed both as a form of entertainment or the culture of an "other."

When looking at "the world's most advanced video game culture," South Korea, emphasis is placed on the ways in which this country is different from the United States (Schiesel, 2006a). It is stressed, for example, that Koreans are very different from Americans because they treat pro-gamers as heroes, unlike U.S. sports culture that values athletes, though both, arguably, treat individuals as idols for their ability to play games. This is done in an ambiguous way, however, as the article attempts to demonstrate that this is not disastrous for Korean society, yet it is still spoken of as markedly "other" from U.S. culture.

The "othering" of video games is not only done by journalists. Much of the introduction of *The Medium of the Video Game* is spent explaining why games are so different from other media (Wolf, 2001). The function of defining video game culture as separate could be a required step in defining this area of study by academics. It may be, as Hall (1993) asserts, "that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility" (p. 107). That is to say, in an effort to make video games visible and have them taken seriously as cultural products, video game culture has to be defined as something specific. Looking at previous models of studying media as culture, however, can demonstrate where game studies could move instead.

The books *Comic Book Culture* (Pustz, 1999) and *Television Culture* (Fiske, 1989) provide two different versions of discussing media culture. The first, like video game studies, relies on a conception of fan culture as a singular entity defined by its own language, rituals, and tastes. The essence of the book is an effort to make respectable an often undervalued medium and readers. This is a valuable goal but perhaps, like video game studies, a bit too reactionary. Putz's focus is on what others have said about the author's in-group, rather than critically reflecting on the ways in which the comic book culture has been structured. This is particularly reflected in the erasure of women and queer comics' histories from his historical overview. Fiske's book, however, situates the codes and representations of television within larger social and cultural ideological structures. Fiske discusses the specific qualities of television in relation to broader issues like gender and class. He also offers a much broader analysis of different types of television programming, something game studies does only cursorily.

Huizinga (1955) argues that play is an intrinsic part of culture, not something separate from it. Indeed, Henry Jenkins' (2006) work attempts to situate video games in a larger convergence culture. Only one press article, however, describes video games in relation to a broader national culture (Schiesel, 2006b). In doing so, it affirms an East/West distinction between games that are produced and popular in North America and those in Asia. Thankfully some academic articles look at video games as either national or transnational products (Consalvo, 2006; Kerr & Flynn, 2003;

Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Sisler, 2006). One particularly useful article looks at the technological, cultural, and social relationship between the video game industry and other creative and technological industries in Japan (Aoyama & Izushi, 2003). There is, however, much more work to be done in this respect.

Defining video game culture serves to separate it from “the regular” culture, much as mass culture was separated from high culture in earlier critiques (MacDonald, 1957). One dichotomy set up in both academic and press discourses, as seen in cultural critiques more generally, is a distinction between video games as popular and video games as art. Much of the effort to get video games “taken seriously” has relied on arguing for their aesthetic or moral value (i.e., serious games). This is done by showing the video games are worthy of academic study (Schiesel, 2005) or can encourage social justice (Gorman, 2007). To be relevant then, video games must mean something outside of their entertainment medium niche. If game studies are to learn anything from cultural studies, however, it should not take for granted the ways in which certain types of games, modes of play, and types of players are used to validate this field of study.

## Conclusion

Culture is not the only way to study games of course. Like any text, medium, or phenomenon there are a diversity of approaches and perspectives one might take. If we *are* going to study games within a framework of culture, however, we as scholars must draw on the concepts as well as the conflicts of cultural studies. We must be reflexive and critical of both our object of study and our methodologies. Defining gaming culture as something distinct and separate from a constructed mainstream culture encourages us to only study those who identify as gamers, rather than more dispersed gaming. That is, we should look at video games in culture rather than games as culture. Video games permeate education, mobile technologies, museum displays, social functions, family interactions, and workplaces. They are played by many if not all ages, genders, sexualities, races, religions, and nationalities. Not all of these types of play and players can be encompassed in a study of an isolated gamer community. Moreover, the reification of certain types of game texts over others limits the field of study. Finally, the concerted effort of game academics to disprove the negative connotations of video game play and not the positive ones is problematic.

Interestingly, the term “video game culture,” at least based on the search conducted for this analysis, is a relatively new expression. The earliest occurrence retrieved was from 1996 (Amdur, 1996), and most are from the past 4 years. While there are certainly articles on video games predating this, and there are limits to the LexisNexis database, that the term game culture arose around the same time as video game studies began to coalesce is interesting. It may indicate that, regardless of “ivory tower” rhetoric, game academics are defining their field of study as much

as they are studying it. This is precisely why game studies should adopt the reflexivity of cultural studies in its analyses.

Academics and journalists generally express a tension between the stereotype and the “reality” of gaming, but only with the negatively charged values assigned to each category. The violence, the “boys only,” the isolated, and the obsessed are all stereotypes that are willingly challenged. The complexity of thought, however, is rarely rethought. Moreover, the claim that video game play demonstrates a departure from previous forms of media studies is problematic. The assertion of a medium’s revolutionary quality is neither a new nor an inconsequential tendency of new media.

A useful strategy for stripping social phenomena of the power to endanger the status quo is to anchor them to safely established notions while presenting them for public consumption as revolutionary . . . . The introduction of electricity was seen to have *no* political consequences, no winners or losers of power, or winners called to account for abuses of power, since politics would exist no more. (Marvin, 1988, p. 206)

By allowing us to be anyone, by making audiences active and productive, by making us smarter and better thinkers, video games are supposed to fix a lot of “problems” with media. As many game studies authors point out, however, video games have their own ideological baggage (Consalvo, 2003; G. King & Krzywinska, 2006; Leonard, 2006). Although game studies have drawn on cultural studies’ history of analyzing ideology, active audiences, encoding and decoding, not enough effort has been made to question how video game culture itself has been defined, with perhaps the exception of analyses of gendered game spaces (Fullerton, Ford Morie, & Pearce, 2007; Kline, Dyer-Witthford, & De Peuter, 2003).

Many of the themes seen in press and academic discourses about play map onto the “Seven Rhetorics” of play Sutton-Smith (1997) outlines. “In general, each rhetoric has a historical source, a particular function, a distinctive ludic form, and specialized players and advocates, and is the context for particular academic disciplines” (p. 214). The rhetoric used to describe play shapes the study of play, it narrows what we think is valuable for study. Along these lines, one lesson video game studies should learn from cultural studies is that beyond just labeling culture, it is important to unpack why culture has been labeled in certain ways. Hall’s recommendations for the study of Black culture can be extended to video game culture studies in this regard, “[t]here is, of course, a very profound set of distinctive, historically defined Black experiences that contribute to those alternative repertoires, I spoke about earlier. But it is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of the Black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention” (1993, pp. 111-112). As cultural studies “works with an inclusive definition of culture” (Storey, 1996, p. 2), it is best for video game studies to look at video game culture as inclusively and diversely as possible.

One example of this critical cultural approach to video games is the study of older gamers by Quandt, Grueninger, and Wimmer (2009). In this article, the authors take



some popular assumptions about who games and why and critically reassess the popular descriptions of these players by looking at the experience of actual players. Another option is to look at games as a media practice, “[c]onsidering video games as a media practice . . . would imply not only attending to video game consumption (or the practice of playing games), but also to how the gaming practice is related to other media practices and how it is socially organized” (Roig, San Cornelio, Ardevol, Alsina, & Pages, 2009, p. 91). This type of perspective looks at video games culturally rather than video games as culture. Game studies have largely focused on validating video game consumption, video game texts, and video game players. Video game studies, however, should be reflexive, not reactive. The legacy of cultural studies on which video game studies should draw is not to study culture in games, though that is useful as well, but to investigate how video game culture is constructed. This is a critical, not descriptive practice.

### Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, the broadest possible understanding of video games, including all forms of digital games, is being considered.
2. The original search was run on October 15, 2007, and rerun on November 17, 2007, to retrieve additional articles.
3. Other articles from these papers that came up in the results were eliminated because they referred to a sports game culture not video game culture.

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**Bio**

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