Introduction

Ken S. McAllister and Ryan Moeller

> Criticism is not a decision-support tool. Criticism does discuss the basic competence of an art work, but it seldom goes into the question of whether it's good value for the money. The purpose of criticism is to increase understanding, to interpret a work of art in light not only of other, similar works, but also of the larger cultural and historical context in which it appears. . . . Critics must bring to their work a wide reading and an understanding of aesthetics, culture, and the human condition.
>
> —Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams
> *On Game Design*

> As game scholars, we are (or should be) dedicated to understanding all games, not just the ones that sell. To us, games are not products but communicative practice. The games people play are (or should be) more important to us than the games people buy.
>
> —Espen Aarseth
> "The Dungeon and the Ivory Tower"

At the end of their book *On Game Design*, Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams insist that computer games[1] need to be critiqued rather than merely reviewed. *Reviewing*, they suggest, is a term best reserved for the act of facilitating sales: directing consumers to games they might like to buy. What's really needed in game design, they argue, are critics: those who are prepared to discuss games from a broad range of interpretive schemas and who are able to critique the effects games have on those who make, market, purchase, and play them. This is what Aarseth calls for as well, for a deep critique not only of the economics of computer games as consumer products but also of the cultural impact of games as meaning-making artifacts, each of which represents a variety of ideologies through its gameplay, narrative structure, interface, and componentry.

WORKS AND DAYS 43/44, Vol. 22, Nos. 1&2, 2004

It is for reasons such as these—as well as our own sense that even within academic circles, computer games are too often reviewed, rather than critiqued—that we have assembled the collection of essays that follows. Together, they represent a wide range of computer game critiques from many perspectives: aesthetic, environmental, political, industrial, and others. These authors approach computer games as works of art, acts of labor, and artifacts situated within (and simultaneously impinging upon) culture. The notion that computer games are worthy of careful and sustained examination and critical discussion, therefore, is self-evident to the authors in this volume.

One consequence of this shared assumption is that it encourages critiques that consider the artistic, technical, commercial, and semiotic qualities of computer games simultaneously, a process that insists upon games' social complexity. As Darin Payne argues in this issue, the primary purpose of computer games may be entertainment "not unlike television shows, movies, magazines, and countless other artifacts of popular culture. But like those artifacts, computer games are unavoidably rhetorical; they are situated within, responsive to, and (re)productive of specific discourses marked by time and place." It is this "both—and" perspective that we believe most clearly recognizes the spectrum of potential that computer games—and all the industries and consumer practices that enable them—have to transform the world in particular ways. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse calls for a deep critique of cultural artifacts for the same reasons that Espen Aarseth does years later: "The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual" (7). The concept of critique, then, is not to decide which computer games will sell better, but which are being played, why they are being played, and what implications this play may have on culture at large.

Our Mission

> The objectification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make people's sense human, as well as to create the human sense corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance.
>
> —Karl Marx
> *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts*

This volume argues that computer games are one way in which human beliefs and ideologies—the theoretical stuff of culture—intersect with practical action at a basic level: when a player reacts to prompts in a computer game, she or he takes action by pressing a button, moving a joystick or a mouse, or making a keystroke. Whatever the interface, gameplay, or narrative, a computer game represents a powerful cultural phenomenon and a point at which

culture can be analyzed. Moreover, computer games represent an intersection of production and leisure of unprecedented proportions: computer games require many people to devote thousands of work hours in order to develop environments, characters, actions, and narratives that players will consume (primarily) during leisure hours.

There are many compelling new theories that can help computer game scholars think about the social impacts this form of entertainment is having around the world. From discussions of the social effects of gameplay, to theories of emerging multi-literacies, to the pedagogical potential of games in the classroom, computer games are receiving a great deal of attention. Yet two basic questions still remain largely unanswered: (1) what makes computer games a unique medium, and (2) how do computer games alter human beings' understandings of culture? This volume explores these two questions in detail by placing them in the context of politicized cultural critique and by drawing on a variety of theories and disciplinary approaches. Other critical questions along these lines include:

What ideologies and cultural practices guide innovation in computer games?

How do designers' assumptions about their audience's relationship to capital become encoded into their games?

How do the guiding ideologies of particular production companies and facilities shape the multitude of decisions made prior to a game's release?

Because learning is a fundamental part of all computer games, what educational paradigms seem to rule the computer game industry in the United States? How are these similar or different from the educational paradigms in other cultures and nations?

What may be learned about particular cultures (or even particular societies) from investigating the marketing materials and distribution processes developed by the computer game industry? What marketing tropes from other commodities interpenetrate those of computer games?

What systemic logics do computer gamers participate in when buying or playing computer games? Is there a difference between choosing a game to buy and choosing one to play?

How are games being played and used in specific communities (e.g., religious institutions, schools, community centers) in ways that resist and transform market demographics?

This issue of *Works & Days* demonstrates the impossibility of understanding computer games as anything but highly complex and socially imbricated technologies that resist simple analyses. It attempts to account for and critique the development of computer games as a unique art, business, and social phenomenon. Our

hope is that this issue will serve as a critical prognostication for an anticipated future culture in which computer games will likely be more influential than television is today. This project hopes, too, to be true to the injunctions of critical cultural studies old and new: the authors of the essays selected for this volume aim not just to critique the world that is now so saturated with game culture, but also to transform it.

The Issue by Section

Works & Days 43/44 is divided into three sections: Games & Media Convergence, Games and Politics, and Games and Social Engineering. These sections roughly represent an overall argument that games are a unique and multivalent medium, that they are rhetorical and political in nature, and that they have an ideological impact—both reifying and generative—on those who play them.

Interspersed within each section are shorter pieces by game developer Chris Crawford, a longtime champion of the potential of games as an expressive medium, and a longtime critic of the game industry's increasingly common practice of prioritizing profit and expediency over creativity and attention to narrative and experiential detail. The selections of Crawford's work that we've included here—with his kind permission—are not new, which is part of what makes them so remarkable. Crawford wrote most of these short essays as a kind of frontline reporter during the 1980s and 1990s, a time when the game industry was being transformed from a niche entertainment market into the latest mass medium.

We chose to reprint Crawford's essays in this volume for several reasons. First, we wanted to include a critical voice from the production side of game studies, and Crawford's work is among the very best of such voices. Second, we wanted to provide some historical context for the much more recent and academically-oriented critiques that our other authors were presenting. This context, we hope, will help readers understand that the game industry was not ideologically consolidated overnight, but rather that the industry's trajectory toward the mass consumption of games is a specific trend determined by a range of motivated and unmotivated exigencies: from the constraints of technology and the idiosyncrasies of consumer behavior to misguided management and corporate greed. Third, we wanted to illustrate for readers who are new to game studies that game critique originated not in the academy but from within the game industry itself. Unfortunately, as the industry has shifted its emphasis from participating in popular culture to propagating mass culture, critical—even prophetic—work like Crawford's was shut down and locked out. Chris Crawford's essays, then, which are drawn from a number of journals, magazines, and online publications he edited, stand in this volume always in an important relation to the other essays that surround them: his commentaries shed historical and insider light on the more contemporary critiques that in turn serve as witnesses of the future bearing out Crawford's earlier critiques.

Games & Media Convergence

The essays in this section position computer games as a unique medium and seek to understand its unique characteristics among other media types. In "Competing Strategies for Adapting Film Narrative to Video Games: *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*," Harry J. Brown discusses the differences in the narrative structures of computer games and their potential for opening up new, interactive storylines apart from films, even in computer games that emerge as a part of an empire like *Star Wars*. Jennifer deWinter discusses the complex nature of computer games and interactive narratives as an emergent "mega-literacy" that requires players to negotiate multiple literacies, not only those of particularly game worlds (e.g., audio, video, and tactility), but also of other converging media such as film, novels, and comics.

Daphne Desser's piece, "'Why not Leeloh?' and Other Disasters: Children's Computer Games as a Site of Cultural Contestation, Corporate Corruption, and, Despite all That, Cognitive Development," argues that while games often teach cognitive skills like hand-eye coordination and problem-solving abilities, this learning is executed through dependence on sexist, racist, and consumerist ideologies. Similarly, in "Simulation or Simulacrum? The Promise of Sports Games," Ron Scott and Judd Ethan Ruggill argue that the complexity of sports-oriented computer games still leaves out much of what "real" sports have to offer both players and fans, while including numerous elements that problematically equate "realism" with "commercialism." Amid all these essays are several by Crawford that discuss Disney's approach to intellectual property, the questionable practices of computer game marketers, and the homogenizing force of the mass market.

In short, the essays in this section suggest that for a relatively nascent technology (compared to its older media cousins), computer games have demonstrated a unique tendency to teach through interaction. What is taught through this interaction, however, is more than simply problem-solving skills, coordination, or even violence. What is taught are narratives, literacies, and ideologies that require constant evaluation by players, developers, and cultural critics alike.

Games & Politics

Computer games, like all other forms of media and popular culture, are political. The authors in the "Games & Politics" section demonstrate this by showing both how computer games are themselves products of social relationships and power struggles, as well as how developers address these relationships and struggles through the content and design of their games. In "Digital Nature: *Uru* and the Representation of Wilderness in Computer Games," Amy Clary provides an eco-political critique of computer game hardware. She argues that the present state of computing hardware development that is being driven by games with cutting-edge

graphics and rendering technologies is largely responsible for the drastic increase in the dumping of outdated—and toxic—hardware in landfills around the world.

Shifting from U.S. environmental policy to the imperialist motives that seem to underlie it, Darin Payne offers a stark comparison of contemporary U.S. foreign policy to the ideology of gameplay in the computer game *Black and White*. In "Making Nation-Building Fun: The Game-Plays of the God-Wannabes in Global Capitalism and *Black and White*," Payne critiques the game's rhetoric of nation-building and economic revitalization as a covert strategy for disseminating the more problematic ideologies of U.S. capitalism. Similarly, Laurie N. Taylor's critique of game economies in "Playing the System: Economic Models for Video Game Narrative and Play," analyzes "power-ups," "token systems," and other game-based systems of commodity valuation that draw upon real models of capitalism and reinforce the consumer nature of games.

This section also offers work by two game developers, both of whom have distinguished themselves as inveterately political. The first of these talents is Rafael Fajardo who, along with his development team (known by the telling acronym SWEAT), specializes in designing relatively simple games that raise decidedly political issues: U.S. immigration policies, the relationship between class and the illegal drug trade, and the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border. In their latest game, *Juan & the Beanstalk*—presented in this section through a series of screenshots and explanatory captions—Fajardo and SWEAT put players in the life-threatening shoes of a Columbian farmer whose son has recently disappeared and who must also decide whether to plant coffee or poppies. Unfortunately (but realistically) for Juan, either choice carries with it dangers that frequently outweigh the rewards.

Chris Crawford is the other developer in this section, and this time his short and prophetic essays offer up critiques of the game industry's lethal obsession with graphics, as well as the "death and rebirth" of game development in accordance with business models that privilege the economic advantages of consoles and the massification of game software. A third Crawford essay in this section, "Goodbye," works as a kind of requiem for the soul of game development, which Crawford recognizes as desiccated by the forces of capitalism: "There is no artistic potential left in a marketplace that has grown crasser than television."

All these essays suggest that computer games are primarily products of the socio-political and economic systems that design, market, and distribute them. This will be hardly surprising to the seasoned academic gamer, but to scholars new to game studies, these essays show that video games carry far more political freight and ideological complexity than the mass media's predictable and one-dimensional treatment of them as perverters of family values.

Games & Social Engineering

The computer game research collective whose members are represented in this volume and that goes by the moniker "Learning

Games Initiative," frequently uses the stock sententiae "Games always teach multiple things in multiple ways to multiple audiences." They use this saying as a protective and illuminating mantra against more prevalent dogma that teaches "games teach a few things [that are usually undesirable] in one way [through intense visual action] to an audience of kids [and maybe a few adults with too much time on their hands]." This latter kind of reductive thinking about computer games has plagued game commentary for almost as long as there have been computer games, even though most of the earliest developers—like Chris Crawford, who again responds from the past to the contemporary essays in this section—were playful adults designing games for other playful adults. Early adventure-type games, for example, were loaded with witty references to literary classics, popular primetime TV shows like *Dallas* and *Miami Vice*, and innumerable bawdy sub-texts. Many early games also depended on understandings of battlefield strategy and complex political themes like international diplomacy and national resource management—mental exercises that most people don't associate with elementary school kids. This is not to suggest that school kids didn't play these games—they did, and in droves; hence, the multiplicity of the LGI mantra. When teenagers played *Zork*, they learned different things than when their parents played it, and when gamers played the game in small groups after school they learned different things than when one of them played it alone at home.

The essays in this section offer an excellent array of how games teach multiple things in multiple ways to multiple audiences, and in the process demonstrate that the other end of learning is teaching. The authors here are frequently at pains to show that the teaching games always do is rarely the agenda of a single person or monolithic corporate entity. Instead, games teach through the meaning-making networks of which they are a part, from the hegemonic impact of capitalism to the idiosyncratic hermeneutical frameworks of individual gamers. This kind of complex certainly incorporates a variety of very intentional social engineering strategies and tactics, but—like all other forms of engineering—there are always unintended consequences to even the most deliberate plans.

To demonstrate this fact, we begin the section with Crawford's 1991 essay "Portrait of the Gamer as Enemy," in which he offers the provocative thesis that in building games for extant gamers, developers have lost sight of the great variety of people who are subsequently marginalized. These marginalized people are, Crawford reminds his colleagues, the regular people, that is, people who are not game geeks, but rather are beginners looking for a way to *enjoy* their computers, not just work at them.

Drew Kopp addresses this process of transforming consciousness from a different angle, one deeply informed by the work of Arthur Schopenhauer. Kopp explores the means by which players connect with games, both assimilating and being assimilated by the realities

they project and reflect. Likewise, Kevin Moberly examines the types of consent players must offer up in order to be players, and discusses the implications of such seemingly necessary submissiveness for the purportedly open gameplay environs of that most venerable form of online gaming, the Multi-User Dungeon. Steffen P. Walz' essay on the rhetoric of digital games bridges the work of Kopp and Moberly, arguing that the main goal of any game is to convince players to create their own game experience, a project that involves both externally and internally motivated suasory acts.

Inverting the approach to games that asks why and how they are so compelling, Nicholas White looks for the holes in the history of game content and asks why developers haven't yet filled them. In particular, White investigates why there are so few Civil and Vietnam War games, despite the fact that war games set in other eras and contexts—from ancient Rome to apocryphal Middle East countries full of terrorists—are relatively popular. Such analyses inevitably come to interrogate the ideological processes that shape the collective consciousness of a community, an approach that Gareth Schott and Andrew Burn similarly take in their examination of the game-art subculture that flourishes around the game franchise *Oddworld*. In their essay, Schott and Burn ingeniously explicate the problematic of fan art, which simultaneously reproduces the ideologies of its central subject matter while subverting that reproduction through social practices that suggest that the imitative artists are more like guild members than brand-intoxicated corporate drones.

Finally, the volume ends with Zach Whalen's essay on the perils of "genre" for computer game analysis. Arguing that genre designations drawn from other media like novels and television tend to efface the inherently dynamic and contradictory meaning-making processes of games, Whalen calls game scholars to abandon those static categories in favor of what he calls "meta-generic" terms that are as appropriately flexible as the unique medium of the computer game itself. As in the other sections, Chris Crawford's voice from the past haunts our contributors' analyses, seeming at turns to say "I told you so" and "Things don't have to be that way—let's change them!"

* * *

A fundamental premise of this volume on the politics of games is that without the ruthless critique of game production, marketing, distribution, and consumption, the medium that so many people love and respect—including all the contributors to this issue of *Works & Days*—will never become more than an instrument of bottom-line brokers who couldn't care less about games as an artistic form or as integral components of creative, critical, and varied play. The essays that follow unabashedly report on some of the dire material consequences that digital games are having on the world, from environmental polluting and labor exploitation to ideological conditioning that numbs players' sensitivities to the quotidian

injustices that pervade our lives. These critiques ought not to be misunderstood as blanket condemnations of the medium, however, but rather as efforts to effect a radical transformation in how games mean in society. These critiques, in other words, are meant to be integral to the spiral of praxis, a process that in the context of this volume is meant to break down the boundaries of how computer and video games work in the world and allow them to fulfill the radically libratory potential that the best forms of play can enable.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the editorial board of *Works and Days* for the opportunity to present this issue devoted to computer game critique. In particular, we would like to thank the managing editor, David Downing, and his editorial assistant, Matt Wegener, for believing in this project and working with us so patiently and thoughtfully. We would also like to thank each of our contributors for their work and their engagement with this important area of cultural studies, not the least of whom are our cover artist Greg Sosnowski and our urgent ghost, Chris Crawford (who, by the way, is still very much alive). Finally, we're grateful for all the ongoing intellectual energy and creativity of the members of the Learning Games Initiative. Without them, this volume would not have been possible.

Note

[1]In this Introduction, we use the more general term "computer game"—as opposed to the more specific "video game"—to designate any game that requires a computer to work. Computer games, then, include titles that run on desktop machines, console and coin-op systems, and handheld devices. It is important to note, however, that not all of the authors in this volume follow this convention.

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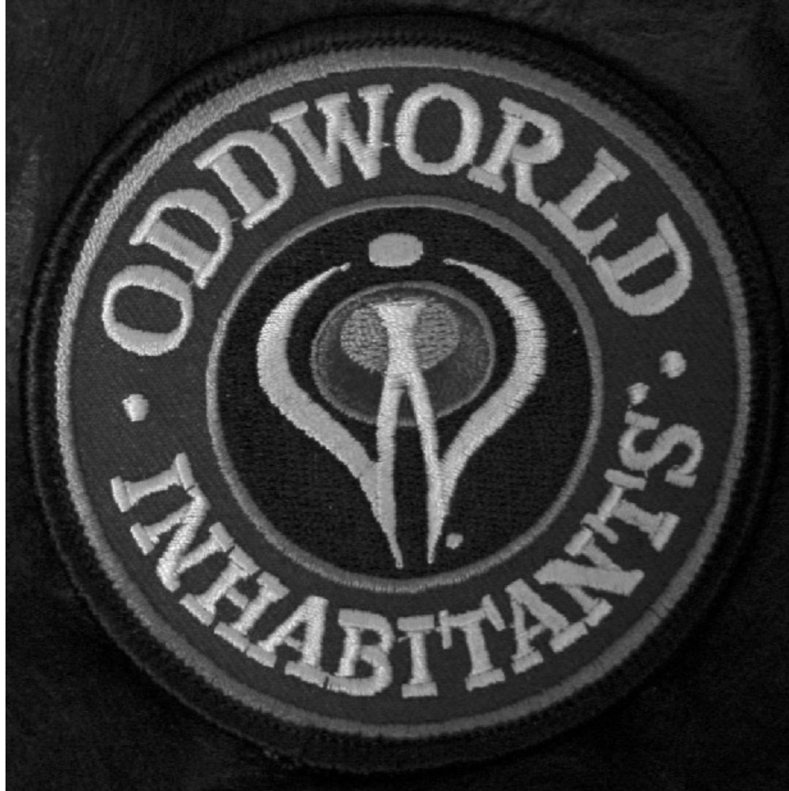
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Part I:

Games and Media Convergence