

# Editorial

## Games as transformative works

Rebecca Carlson

*University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States*

[0.1] *Abstract*—This special Games issue brings together diverse questions from broadly defined notions of gaming. On some level, all the articles collected here work to reestablish how gaming, in all its variations, is embedded in the social knowledge, meanings, activities, and productions of users and makers.

[0.2] *Keywords*—Fandom; Games; Social practice; Video game

Carlson, Rebecca. 2009. Games as transformative works [editorial]. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 2. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0116>.

---

### 1. A deceptively simple question

[1.1] With the U.S. release of the Nintendo Wii in 2007, a series of commercials were launched that depicted two Japanese salarymen—clad in suits and driving a tiny car—knocking on the doors of Americans. "Wii would like to play," they said offering up the Wii Remote as they bowed. In one version, the two men ring the door of a white suburban family and proceed to play virtual tennis with them, pausing only to sample the family's lemonade.

[1.2] The light-hearted tone of these commercials—and the seeming techno virginity of the people approached by the salarymen (most don't conform to the prevalent image of a gamer; instead, they are grandparents, mothers, families)—reflects Nintendo's intentions to target a new gaming audience with the Wii. Shigeru Miyamoto explains:

[1.3] While other game makers had felt that there was a future in taking the current style of games and making them more complex and more advanced...We felt that video games should instead include a variety of different elements and a variety of different styles of entertainment that can appeal to a much broader audience. (quoted in Kalning 2008)

[1.4] Nintendo's efforts to attract a wider, more casual gaming audience—focusing on innovation in game play over hardware or technological development (one programmer notoriously called the Wii two GameCubes duct-taped together [[note 1](#)])—has sparked a deceptively simple question: What is a (video) game? With the release of next-generation consoles like the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3, Nintendo's focus on attracting a broad mainstream audience (with their handheld DS as well as the Wii), and the increase in

production of a variety of games targeting a more casual (or untapped) gamer, the question "what is a game?" is increasingly circulating throughout the industry. (See Bisz's exploration of this question as related to card games in this issue.) Journalists debate the question in reviews and insider podcasts; gamers talk, blog, and post about it on message boards; developers discuss it at conferences and meetings. Andrew Pfister (2007) confronts this question in his review of the game *fIOW*:

[1.5] The massive success of the Nintendo DS (and so-far seemingly similar success of the Wii) has given rise to a new debate: What constitutes a "videogame?" *Electroplankton*, *Nintendogs*, *Brain Age*...all of these definitely have gamelike elements, but because they deviate so far from what's always been considered the norm, everyone is wringing their hands over how to properly classify them.

[1.6] What is considered the norm for a video game is partially molded from early arcade games. For example, *Breakout* (Atari, 1976) pioneered a style of game play that involved clearing or "beating" one level and then moving on to the next, usually harder level, a game play mechanic that has since become a fundamental structural component of many video games (Kohler 2004:20). Now when games lack any sense of linear movement or progression through stages, clearly defined goals, achievable tasks, a competitive high score to beat, or a clear ending when credits can easily roll, electronic play challenges the established definition. For example, with the Nintendo DS game *Nintendogs*, users spend their time raising and caring for a dog, similar to a Chia Pet. With *Wii Fit*, the user goes through a series of exercise routines, keeping track of weight loss and progression ([note 2](#)). With *fIOW*, the user navigates a fishlike avatar through a sea, eating and evading other creatures on a quest to evolve ([note 3](#)). (See Soderman's discussion of *fIOW* in this issue.) Pfister (2007) notes that *fIOW* "can be fairly and simultaneously described as a 'glorified Pac-Man,' an 'interactive screensaver,' or 'playable last track on a Sigur Rós album,'...fIOW is more of an entertaining diversion than what we're used to calling a 'game.'" Video games that involve a kind of play that may be more a form of experimentation, with few set goals or even clear boundaries, perplex the categories that consumers and producers use to develop, market, play, and experience games. Amid debates of whether the game is even a game, journalists have begun to refer to these types of video games as nongames or metagames.

## 2. What is a game?

[2.1] Games have matured from the high-tech do-it-yourself hobby of technophiles to a dominant and pervasive sector of the worldwide entertainment industry. In the process, games have begun their inevitable contribution to social science research. The self-reflexiveness of the question "what is a game?"—which has been circulating among developers, journalists, fans, and researchers—provides an opportunity for exploring more than just definitions or categorizations. This question demonstrates, even insists, that gaming and play are intensely social activities, overlapping and interconnected experiences

shaped by cultural and historical contexts. Video games, as interactive entertainment or education, are enmeshed in our everyday lives. As a mass media commodity situated at the nexus of inquiries about technology, virtuality, mobility, and flux, video games affect the formation of subjectivities, participate in creating and supporting new forms of labor, and work to mediate and structure daily experiences. The growing popularity of games—they are now merging with mainstream practices and broad audiences, as the Wii demonstrates—makes them a particularly valuable site from which to engage questions pertinent to the contemporary moment, simultaneously opening up rich and varied approaches and questions for researchers and fans. If within the industry debates continue over what the video game medium is defined by and capable of, then social scientists will be forced to consider the broad social nexus that surrounds forms of gaming and will no longer be able to pigeonhole game studies into comfortable questions about online communities—for example, those surrounding games such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*—where sociality seems assured and easy to assess.

[2.2] This special Games issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* brings together diverse questions from broadly defined notions of gaming. On some level, all the articles collected here work to reestablish how gaming, in all its variations, is embedded in the social knowledge, meanings, activities, and productions of users and makers. Three articles in the Praxis section (Allen, Carlson, O'Donnell) deal directly with questions of the production of value and meaning in games. Allen argues that the meanings produced by users of *America's Army* and the Virtual Army Experience (VAE, the Army's touring experiential cinematic recruitment tool) often diverge from those intended by the Army. Allen reveals that even employees of the VAE produce their own diverse understandings and meanings that may be contradictory negotiations of those presented to them through their work at the VAE. Allen demonstrates that these textures, with their divergent, even conflicting, meanings, may be revealed through an ethnographic methodology that insists on attention to local, on-the-ground experiences. He thus valuably demonstrates the importance of a research perspective that moves beyond the text of a game to the everyday realities of game makers and users. Carlson similarly argues that meaning and value are negotiated at various points along the life of a game, and in particular, she explores the ways that game journalists mediate and add value to games through the production of news reports, reviews and previews, game critiques, and evaluations. O'Donnell, like Allen, is committed to an ethnographic methodology and uses his 3 years of participant observation at game companies in the United States and India to explore notions of work and play as experienced by game developers. O'Donnell is ultimately concerned with examining creative collaborative practice among game makers, in particular developers' drive to understand the structures that underlie the games they play and the games they produce.

[2.3] Chen and Underwood both shift attention to the ways users create gaming communities and the methods and means that gamers use to maintain the boundaries of these communities, often through the production of expertise and social capital. Whereas Chen is interested in the ways *World of Warcraft* gamers perform and enact social capital during specific instances of ritualized game play (such as endgame boss battles),

Underwood explores similar issues among a group of tabletop role-playing game (RPG) players. Although Chen's participants meet virtually and Underwood's sit face to face, the practices these groups use to police community membership, perform identity, and enact expertise during play are similar. Slater, on the other hand, is more interested in the ways members of a community are brought together through shared nostalgia for adventure games to produce, often collaboratively, their own mods or remakes. Slater also examines the way these modding activities, similar to the remaking and repurposing of material seen in fan fiction, may challenge or question our contemporary understandings of authorship. Driscoll and Diaz's article turns toward a historical perspective of gaming activities and experiences to explore the production and impact of chiptunes (music produced by fans with the microchip technology found in early video game consoles and home computers). For Driscoll and Diaz, the production of chiptunes, like the adventure game mods and fan fiction discussed by Slater, reflects a creative appropriation of game technology and materials that is typical of gaming and computer users and communities.

[2.4] While extending attention to fan production, the Symposium articles in this issue continue these themes by tackling a diverse range of gaming practices, modes, and methods, from console gaming to playing tabletop RPG card games to live-action role playing (LARPing). Bisz, in his examination of collectible card games, questions the nature of play and the notion of a game when winning is not the object of fans' interests. Bryant uses a comparison between tabletop RPGs and other genres, like video games, to argue that tabletop RPG games may share more in common with fan fiction. Bryant also echoes Bisz's and Slater's interest in the way fan productions may work to challenge or complicate corporate control of game narratives, assets, and experiences. Soderman similarly discusses the value added to games through free fan labor and mods—touching also on some of the themes addressed earlier by Carlson and O'Donnell—and the complicated relationships that may develop between producers and consumers when gamers' leisure "work" is co-opted by corporations. Odom continues Bryant's comparison between genres by discussing the ways LARPing is different from tabletop or computer RPGs, particularly through means of materiality, such as touch, personal interactions, costumes, gestures, facial expressions, and environments. Odom argues that this materiality, despite the interactive nature of digital games, continues to offer gamers a more textured, realistic narrative engagement and play experience. In contrast, Brooker explores, from a personal examination of his history with early 8- and 16-bit games, the impact that contemporary graphics (which often tend to photorealism) may have on gamers' personal connections to story worlds and creative lived imaginations of game spaces. Brooker argues that gamers are more fully able to engage their imaginations with game materials when graphics and environments remain abstract and open to interpretation. Beck and Herrling's exploration of the self-inserted Mary Sue figure is also interested in the ways fans add materials and imagination into games, thus shaping new readings and responses. In particular, they discuss the way Mary Sue, a fan-produced figure who acts to mold the narrative world to her own interests, operates or functions differently within console and tabletop RPGs. Phi continues this attention by discussing his own personal responses to caricatures of Asians in video games. However, his

focus on the politics of representation in games simultaneously addresses culturally shared stereotypes and the way these representations are communicated at large to gamers as they play.

[2.5] Each article in this issue reveals the way gaming practices, despite their diversity, are all, in various ways, shared activities: whether a gamer keeps in touch with her brother in St. Louis over Xbox Live, forms a bond with anonymous clan members while playing *Resistance 2: Fall of Man*, posts a question to Gamefaqs.com, or trades gaming cards on eBay to complete a set. In contrast to the stereotypical image of the antisocial lone gamer, these articles all position gaming as social processes that involve building communities, creating and maintaining social networks, collaborating (and perhaps exploiting) users and makers, and producing the shared and negotiated understandings, meanings, and practices that develop among communities of gamers and fans. Participatory culture isn't new; consumers and audiences have never been passive. Yet this term invokes a renewed awareness that media and commodity consumption is an active process, an understanding that helps move researchers away from theories of the past that cast viewers, users, and audiences as passive receptors. Instead, as these essays show, we are learning to acknowledge how social participation and active production—of meanings and experiences as much as of concrete fan-made work—are embedded in all acts of gaming.

### 3. A question of fans

[3.1] It could be argued that it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about video games without talking about fans, particularly if researchers acknowledge that games, while they exist as objects, commodities, and things, are embedded in everyday realities. Games are imagined, produced, purchased, unwrapped, played, experienced, and reimagined. Whether this happens alone or in groups, over wires, or in person, games are much more than code on a disc that, when inserted into a reader, produces images, sound, and text; their interactive nature implicates users in the game's story world, play mechanics, and structure. Because games come into existence only through user interaction, researchers must acknowledge that games are social experiences and not simply still-life texts.

[3.2] Much of the academic literature on fandom has tended to focus primarily on concrete creative production, such as mods, walk-throughs, fan Web sites, fiction, newsletters, and narratives, as well as fantasy making that are theorized as important aspects of being a fan and participating with fan culture. Yet because video games are used in diverse ways and by diverse groups of people—from a hardcore *Gradius ReBirth* gamer to a retirement-home *Wii Sports* enthusiast—researchers must expand their notions of what constitutes a fan. Fans may be consumers as equally as they are actual producers, be they journalists, programmers, or art designers, but a firm distinction between consumer and maker increasingly evades us. Although gamers are often transformed into fan creators who produce fan fiction, mods, and artwork, sometimes the only thing that a fan creatively or actively produces with or through games is enjoyable leisure time, an activity no less worthy of exploration. Fans, broadly conceived, are insiders. They move in and out of communities

and related social activities, and they maneuver through complex game and social worlds whether they are producing machinima of jumping *Halo* avatars or arguing with a store clerk over the new *Madden* upgrades. Researchers must be able to follow fans if they are to present a thorough and useful analysis of their experiences, social activities, and meaning-making processes.

[3.3] The articles in this issue confront fandom in its many forms. Whether or not the contributors use the word *fan*, each explores games and gaming as situated social experiences and activities that happen only with and through users. *Transformative Works and Cultures'* focus on merging academic research with fan work is the optimal space to present a dialogue between researchers and fans, and to facilitate the breakdown that is always occurring between those who research and those who are researched. The various articles in the Praxis and Symposium sections, along with the Interviews, should be read as a richly juxtaposed conversation among formal academic work and more personal or editorial writing. They also comprise a productive meeting point for the variety of voices, experiences, and perspectives that make up gaming and fandom experiences.

[3.4] Video games, as well as gaming and play more broadly conceived and experienced, demand that as both researchers and fans, we explore questions that continue to challenge our preconceptions—and fears—about the ways people use, negotiate, and appropriate technology and media. This issue supports gaming as a valuable arena for exploration and research that can contribute to an understanding of the relationships we make to, and find mediated by, global flows of technologies, commodities, images, and texts. It valuably illustrates the range of local processes of negotiating meaning, practices, and patterns that we utilize in our everyday lives to make sense of the world, our selves, and others around us.

---

## 4. Acknowledgments

[4.1] Many thanks to Jonathan Corliss for all his helpful comments and suggestions on this editorial; he has contributed greatly to my knowledge and thinking on video games.

[4.2] The following people worked on TWC No. 2 in an editorial capacity: Rebecca Carlson (guest editor); Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (editors); Rebecca Busker, Alexis Lothian, and Julie Levin Russo (Symposium); and Veruska Sabucco, Mafalda Stasi, and Cynthia W. Walker (Review). Levin Russo and Stasi also worked on the interviews.

[4.3] The following people worked on TWC No. 2 in a production capacity: Karen Hellekson (production editor); Margie Gillis, Mara Greengrass, and Vickie West (copyeditors); Rrain Prior (layout); and Sarah Hazelton, Vickie West, and Liza Q. Wirtz (proofreaders).

[4.4] TWC thanks the journal project's OTW board liaison, Francesca Coppa. OTW provides financial support and server space to TWC but is not involved in any way in the content of the journal, which is editorially independent.

[4.5] TWC thanks all its board members as well as the additional peer reviewers who provided service for TWC No. 2: Robertson Allen, Jeffrey Bardzell, Przemyslaw Budziszewski, Irene Chien, Astrid Ensslin, Pawel Frelik, Christopher Goetz, Christopher Hanson, Miki Kaneda, Jane McGonigal, Tom O'Donnell, Hector Postigo, Brian Ruh, Anastasia Salter, Braxton Soderman, Hanna Wirman, and Bryan-Mitchell Young.

---

## 5. Notes

1. During the Game Designer's Rant at the 2007 Game Developer's Conference (GDC), *Maxis* programmer Chris Hecker made this now-famous statement; he later issued an apology (see Boyes 2008).
2. Nintendo has forbidden Miyamoto from discussing any of his personal hobbies with the media because many recent Nintendo DS and Wii games, such as *Nintendogs* and *Wii Fit*, grew out of Shigeru Miyamoto's own interests: raising a family dog, getting his wife and parents to play games (Lewis 2008).
3. The game play of *fIOW* does utilize a style of advancement or progression through levels, typical of many other games. As the gamer's avatar consumes objects in the sea around it, its appearance evolves, and by eating the right watery element, the user can dive deeper to harder levels of play. These deeper levels are differentiated by a changing color scheme and the presence of different kinds of creatures. Eventually, a boss battle is reached that, when won, ends the cycle, and a new creature is born. The uniqueness of *fIOW* might be users' ability to return to easier levels whenever they find the game too challenging. The debate continues about whether *fIOW* is a game, even though it possesses many established video game elements.

## 6. Works cited

Boyes, Emma. 2008. GDC '08: Game designers sound off. *GameSpot*, February 22.  
<http://www.gamespot.com/news/6186631.html> (accessed March 7, 2009).

Kalning, Kristin. 2008. Meet the man behind the Wii: Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto talks about the console's success. MSNBC.com, July 17.  
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25710005/> (accessed March 7, 2009).

Kohler, Chris. 2004. *Power-up: How Japanese video games gave the world an extra life*. Indianapolis: Brady Games.

Lewis, Leo. 2008. The Nintendo gaming world awaits another Mario. *Times Online*, August 9.  
[http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry\\_sectors/technology/article4488157.ece](http://business.timesonline.co.uk/tol/business/industry_sectors/technology/article4488157.ece) (accessed March 7, 2009).

Pfister, Andrew. 2007. Eclectic light orchestra [review of *fIOW*]. 1up.com, February 22.  
<http://www.1up.com/do/reviewPage?cId=3157439&p=37> (accessed March 7, 2009).

