

REINVENTING ANALOG GAME STUDIES: INTRODUCTORY MANIFESTO

BY EVAN TORNER, AARON TRAMMELL, EMMA LEIGH
WALDRON (ALPHABETICALLY)

Game studies—once considered a marginal field—is now over a decade old, and its share of the academic and cultural spotlight grows daily. But all spotlights cast shadows. In 2001, computer games hovered at the margins of what were then emerging studies in digital media. Lev Manovich’s *The Language of New Media* published that year, for example, focused on the privileged spaces of installation art, hypertext literature, and cinema over any discussion of games as a medium.¹ As digital media studies blossomed, however, computer games suddenly became that which—above all else—exemplified radical new directions in scholarship. In his introduction to the first issue of *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth noted that the field should be prepared to encounter both the “Nintendo-Hollywood” industrial complex, as well as open-source revolutions in design and distribution cropping up everywhere on the Internet.² Computer games would become essential to understanding the intersection of

1. Lev Manovich. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001.
2. Espen Aarseth. "Computer Game Studies, Year One." *Game Studies* 1.1 (2001).
<http://gamestudies.org/0101/editorial.html>.

digital media with popular culture; similarly, nothing could have been more in-vogue than *Game Studies*, an open-access online publication, dedicated to these games' analysis and critique.

Now, thirteen years later, it has become increasingly clear that the field of game studies needs a hack: not so much a 2.0, but rather a 0.5. None will contest the fact that computer games are becoming increasingly pervasive in our society. As game studies has come into its own as a field of scholarship, now lying at the margins are the *analog games*: those very games at the center of foundational texts such as Roger Caillois' *Man, Play and Games*³ or Richard D. Duke's *Gaming: The Future's Language*⁴. Analog games have had their own terminology and prominence for centuries. They are those products that are not always mediated through computer technologies, but which nevertheless exemplify contemporary cultural forms. As Jonathan Sterne points out, the term "analog" only exists by way of negative comparison to the digital, such that our present-day digital forms of expression produce their analog heritage as a by-product.⁵ Today, so-called analog games often take a hybrid form, composed of those elements of the digital they might exploit and use: high-quality image editing, social media distribution, and tablet interfaces, for example. In other words, game studies can no longer afford to primarily focus on computer games in an era where the world has become so digitally mediated that the nomenclature ceases to carry the same weight that it once did. Furthermore, analog games are notably detached from many cultural attitudes prevalent in the computer game industry, and can offer an insight into the ways that games work to produce social change. They make clear the rules that govern behavior

3. Roger Caillois. *Man, Play and Games*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

4. Richard Duke. *Gaming: The Future's Language*. New York: SAGE Publications Inc., 1974.

5. Jonathan Sterne. "Analog/Analogue: A Speculative History of the Not-Digital [DRAFT]." *Culture Digitally*. May 15, 2014. <http://culturedigitally.org/2014/05/analog-draftdigitalkeywords/>.

within games and, in doing so, reveal the biological and cultural rules which have forever governed our society.

In business, gamification is the new trend: badges, points, achievements, and leaderboards are increasingly tied to all social media product rollouts. And, like Katniss Everdeen from the immensely popular *Hunger Games*, consumers must learn the affordances of these systems to ensure what is understood to be emotionally healthy, fulfilling and cost-efficient living in the 21st Century. Applications like *Foursquare* transform everyday activities like barhopping, dining, and shopping into games, and dating websites like OkCupid offer incentives and points to users who fill in more profile data. Jane McGonigal has spoken from the pulpits of TED on the strategies she has taken to gamify her life in the pursuit of excellent productivity, physique, and balance.

The positive attitude toward gamification in meatspace should be somewhat baffled, however, by the homophobic, racist, and misogynist horrors that continue to ravage the culture of digital gaming. As testified by the *Penny Arcade Expo's* "Diversity Hub and Lounge", an effort at inclusion that was effectively a geek apartheid for women, queer folk, and gamers of color, not all is right in the world of computer game culture. Video games have met with critiques mounted by, for example, Anita Sarkeesian's web series "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games." The series was met with death threats and a stream of mindless argumentation relentlessly advocating the merits of a rape-culture that relies on the construction of women as sex objects. What remains is a sad truth: while games are now a clear part of our social infrastructure, they often act as a counter-progressive apparatus in the world today.

On the point of social justice, it is interesting to note that some of the most innovative and progressive movements in gaming recently have been analog. Independent role-playing games have

evolved into a niche publishing industry, and games like Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* (2009) or Emily Care Boss' *Under My Skin* (2008) have greatly expanded what narrative possibilities role-playing games have to offer. Meanwhile, people around the world are taking notice of a vibrant Nordic tradition of discourse and documentation about larp (through conferences such as Knutpunkt and Fastaval and publications such as the *International Journal of Role-Playing*), while similar practices are becoming more and more common in other play cultures as well (in the States we have the Wyrd Con Companion Books and the recently inaugurated Living Games Conference). Finally, thanks to the popularity of eurogames – epitomized by *Settlers of Catan* (1995), *Carcassone* (2000), and *Ticket to Ride* (2004) – fan interest in board games rivals that of computer games at this time, and Internet crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter have helped usher in a renaissance of board game development. The Spielmesse in Essen, the world's largest board game convention, regularly hosts over 150,000 devoted board game enthusiasts each October, more than double the attendees of PAX Prime, the premier video game festival. This is not to say that analog games are more *important* than computer games, but it does imply that published research in game studies has been disproportionately focused on computer games. *Analog Game Studies* aims to close this gap.

The argument for game studies began with the point that computer games are important due to their already-extant centrality in today's media industries. And while this is—if anything—more true now in 2014 than it was in 2001, perhaps the opposite point could be advanced for analog games. Because the barriers of entry to design do not require the technical expertise demanded by the lines of codes which bring computer games to life, analog games hold the potential to allow a new and different set of voices into design processes, voices which might resist the pathological displays of racism, sexism, homophobia,

and violence native to the video game industry. In addition, analog games are – except for a rare few blockbusters such as *Monopoly* (1935) or *Cards Against Humanity* (2011)– marginal, and estranged from demands made by the conventional publishing industry (although the indie publishing industry indeed makes its own demands). Many larpscripts are circulated by PDF, and other games still are passed down through oral tradition alone. Because the impetus is on *invention* as opposed to *industry*, analog games epitomize the potentials of a design ethic that does not pander to over-generalized market demographics.

The marginality of analog games, however, is not without its own problems. Because these games are often trafficked in underground circles, there has been far less documentation about the practices, and cultures of analog game players. Although certainly work of many of the authors contributing to this blog has gone a long way to better document these practices, *Analog Game Studies* is committed to providing a periodically published platform for the critical analysis, discussion of design, and documentation of analog games. By offering sharp narratives that highlight the most interesting features of individual games, we hope to increase the visibility of analog games within the sphere of game studies.

So, that's it! That's why we're here. Not to eclipse game studies scholarship, but rather to show how the field's marginalia have been important and central to the dialogue of games in the 21st century all along. We hope you enjoy the articles we offer each week, and help contribute to a communal conversation by joining us in the comments with your own ideas and perceptions.