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Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games

Analyzing Words, Design, and Play

Christopher A. Paul

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To Erin

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Using Wordplay

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Introduction
The New Rhetoric of Video Games

Video games have played a prominent role in the recreational choices throughout my life. Regarding video games as mere entertainment short-changes the force they had on how I grew up and how I choose to live my life now. There are three elements of my relationship with games that frame this book: my patch jacket, early mornings, and 'boss fights.'

One of the coolest features of the Atari Video Computer System was the ability to beat Activision games and send in a picture of the end of the game or a high score benchmark in exchange for a patch symbolizing the achievement. A brilliant promotional tool that might not work in a Photoshop age, patches signified my merits and achievements as a gamer in the pre-Gamertag, pre–PlayStation Network era. All of my patches were gathered on a single jacket, which I may have worn way too often and rarely washed for fear of the damaging any of my beloved patches.

For a period my favorite games to play were those in the *Final Fantasy* series. The games were immersive, compelling, and I enjoyed the progression in leveling up and advancing through the world presented within the game. However, there was one central problem with *Final Fantasy* games—they were long. In a house with only one television, I had to share access with the rest of my family and getting a good session of *Final Fantasy* going meant waking up early. Releases of each new *Final Fantasy* game were met with a series of pre-dawn alarms that gave me a few short hours to play before the rest of my family woke up only to request that anything other than *Final Fantasy* be put on the television.

The third element of my gaming history is slightly different, as it is about my relationship with my father. Dad and I went through a substantial chunk of my life without much to talk about and lacked a close relationship. However, video games brought us together. The same personality differences that occasionally drove us apart made us a dynamic gaming team. From Commodore 64 games to the *Legend of Zelda* to *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), Dad and I developed a pattern of play. He would grind through the 'boring' leveling content and I would be brought in to kill the bosses. He spent hours on *Zelda*, only to get stuck and yell "boss fight," at which point I would come in, slay the boss, and hand the controller back to Dad until I

was needed again. In *WoW*, Dad ground through level after level, as one of a select few who preferred to level by killing monsters, rather than completing quests or dungeons. However, when he felt he needed better equipment, he let me know, and I pulled a group together to lead him to get the gear he needed for his personal quest to eradicate the bad guys.

These three stories demonstrate various aspects of the discourse of video games and part of what make video games special to me. Analyzing the full context of video games requires taking a broad look at how they are constructed as cultural objects. I argue that to do this we should use *wordplay* to analyze video games. Wordplay uses the tools of rhetorical criticism to examine various elements of games, from the words found within and around them to the design, play, and coding of them. By looking at these elements, wordplay facilitates analysis of how games persuade, create identifications, and circulate meanings. Wordplay focuses on examining elements of video games with an eye to why specific aspects of the discourse of video games matter. In the course of this book, wordplay is used to address three broad areas of how video games are made to mean: the *words* within and surrounding video games, the *design* of games and society, and the practices of *play* in games. Elements of these three core areas make video games what they are as cultural objects. Wordplay is a critical approach designed to better understand how video games work, what they mean, and what factors frame how we think about video games.

An easy starting point for demonstrating how wordplay guides the analysis of video games begins with looking at the three things that help make games special: a patch jacket, early mornings, and boss fights. Functioning initially as promotional material, the patches on my jacket advertised individual games and marked me as a gamer. Beyond that, they also established a discursive environment predicated on playing games in a particular way. To obtain, or earn, the desired patch, I was required to achieve the benchmarks presented by the developers of the game. This encouraged me to play in a certain manner, one that can now be seen woven throughout the achievements integrated into contemporary games. Waking up early functioned differently. To play a game in long, uninterrupted stretches like I wanted, I needed to rearrange my life and sleep schedule to best utilize the resources available to me. The way the game was designed shaped my desire for longer play sessions, because I think *Final Fantasy* is best in extended doses where I could develop the storyline and level my characters. However, my ability to play was also formed by the larger cultural and technological context in which my play was situated because I was living at home with people far less interested in *Final Fantasy* than I, and we only had one television. Finally, my relationship with my father is mediated through the games we play. After many years of gaming together, it is the games we play that give us a bond with which to address topics beyond gaming. Gaming provides us with a platform on which to build identifications. We are far closer now than we were in the days between *Zelda* and *WoW* when we

were not playing games together. For the two of us, games function as a cultural object, something that is talk-about-able, and prompts us to discuss things beyond video games.

Wordplay is based on analyzing the ways in which games are made to mean, create identifications and circulate meanings, but this process is not limited to the games themselves. Wordplay can be applied to things like promotional patches and the impact of a single television on the availability to play *Final Fantasy*. The games are crucially important though, as the design of *Final Fantasy* was a key factor in my desire to wake up far earlier than was otherwise rational. The texts and structures surrounding games also have a crucial impact on how the discourse of gaming is constituted, which is alluded to in my relationship with my father. In our case, games are merely a starting point that provides a channel for other kinds of discussion and bonding. Wordplay articulates how games are composed of many factors, which can roughly be organized into categories of words, design, and play.

Wordplay is about how games and their surrounding texts participate in a process by which meanings are created, identifications are built, ideas are circulated, and persuasion is attempted. Wordplay uses the tools of rhetorical analysis to better understand the discourse of games and the impact they have on the structure of the game industry. A better understanding of what is at stake in the sociocultural systems at work in video games offers benefits to scholars, developers, and players. Wordplay facilitates better mapping of the discourse of games and how words, design, and play help explain the ways in which games are designed, played, and viewed culturally. This chapter focuses on developing the background in rhetorical analysis and game studies necessary to show how the concept of wordplay aids analysis and understanding of video games.

RHETORIC

Rhetoric is a complicated, oft misunderstood subject that, when put in the title of a course, is almost guaranteed to scare students away. For the purposes of this book, a brief historical overview sets the table to focus on contemporary rhetorical theory and how it is foundational in developing the concept of wordplay. Rhetoric is an ancient term, dating back to Plato's *Gorgias*, when it was roughly connected to the art of persuasion. The study of rhetoric was particularly important in ancient Greece, owing to the role of public speech in the governance of society. Rhetoric was a contested term, with Plato positioning himself against the *sophists*, paid teachers of speech, and the field of rhetoric developed standards and expectations for oratory. Aristotle added several categories to rhetoric, sorting oratory by approach and desired ends, uniting much of the work of Plato and the sophists.[1] However, in contemporary times, rhetoric has taken on a

negative connotation, often used to describe phenomena like talk without substance, 'empty rhetoric,' or as part of a cover up of 'real' facts, like when something is described as rhetorical posturing. In the popular vernacular, rhetoric is often symptomatic of false, partisan words, like the 'mere rhetoric' of a politician's campaign promises. It is within this backdrop, a history that stretches to classical times and contemporary misunderstanding of its subject matter, that the academic discipline of rhetoric is set.

As could be expected of a discipline with this amount of history, there is difference of opinion about how to define the field. In the interests of an easily defensible starting point, Karlyn Korhs Campbell and Susan Schultz Huxman state that "rhetoric is the study of what is persuasive."[2] They argue that "the discipline of rhetoric examines the symbolic dimensions of human behavior in order to offer the most complete explanations of human influence . . . rhetoric is the study of the art of using symbols."[3] Rhetoric was initially used to understand and advance the study of oratory and sought to explain what made particular appeals more or less effective. In contemporary times, many rhetorical scholars have moved beyond the study of speech, as speeches are less integral to contemporary culture than they were in ancient Greece and mediated communication plays an increasingly important role in how people are persuaded today. As such, rhetoricians have begun to analyze elements of communication like images, online discussion, and video games.

Twentieth-century rhetoric offers a number of modifications to classical rhetorical studies that are worthy of note in the journey to reaching Campbell and Huxman's definition. Defined primarily in terms of "persuasive uses of language"[4] throughout its history, contemporary rhetorical studies is marked by a meta-discourse focused on redefining the role of the field to better address how symbol use fits within our lives. Much of this introspection was driven by the work of Kenneth Burke, who argued that language has a symbolic dimension and, given his belief that humans are defined as symbol using animals, "the whole overall 'picture' [of reality] is but a construct of our symbol system."[5] For Burke, rhetoric is connected to language use and language is "*a symbolic means for inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*."[6] Burke adjusted the focus of rhetoric, often preferring to study its role in creating structures of identification and division, rather than just the persuasive force of symbol use. In so doing, he offers up a means of analysis that is quite useful to the analysis of video games because we can study the 'picture of reality' furthered by particular symbolic elements of games and how they facilitate identification with or division from certain pieces of the discourse of games.

The study of language use is also addressed in the subfield of argumentation theory. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca contend that "there is no neutral choice [in language]—but there is a choice that appears neutral . . . What term is neutral clearly depends on the environment."[7] This was a shift in looking at language, as it was the beginning of an approach where

rhetorical critics saw persuasive force in all things. Symbol and language use is deployed strategically to emphasize specific concepts and minimize others. Those following in the wake of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca could study both the clearly persuasive messages embedded in discourse and the subtly persuasive ones. They argued that actual neutrality, language or symbols without rhetorical force, simply does not exist. Further, languages that appear neutral, like mathematics or science, may be even more interesting as objects of study, because we do not always clearly perceive the power behind symbols used in those endeavors.

This broader notion of rhetoric is often connected to the work of R. L. Scott. For Scott, "rhetoric may be viewed not as a matter of giving effectiveness to truth but of creating truth."[8] Given this frame, rhetoric "is a way of knowing; it is epistemic."[9] This idea has been expanded by other scholars, to the end that "one of the assumptions implicit in much of contemporary rhetorical theory is that there is no way to ground representations of reality (rhetoric) in a reality independent of discourse."[10] Functionally, this means that rhetorical analysis shifted from identifying how to persuade to examining the strategic function of symbol use in certain contexts. In the wake of Scott's work, "rhetoric is a unique cultural practice" predicated on "locating the substance of rhetorical knowledge in the creation of a situational truth."[11] Scholarly focus shifted from "how one resides in a framework of meaning and interests" to "how one articulates and uses these."[12] The general perspective behind this way of looking at rhetoric is that "everything, or virtually everything, can be described as 'rhetorical.'"[13] In the end, rhetoric changed. No longer relegated to advising speech students about how to craft the best speeches or necessarily placing the focus on persuasion, rhetorical analysis can be seen as a way of thinking about how knowledge is produced and deployed strategically. Rhetorical analysis is a tool that can be used to investigate how situational truths are constructed and what, in turn, those newly established truths function to do. Rhetorical analysis seeks out how messages create meaning, lead to identification or division, persuade, or circulate ideas.

For those who have embraced a turn toward 'big rhetoric,'[14] rhetoric is more like a perspective than a subject with the distinctive objective of studying speech. David Zarefsky writes that, as the number of 'texts' rhetoricians have sought to analyze has expanded, the dynamic "in effect identifies rhetorical criticism with a mode or perspective of analysis, rather than with a distinctive critical object. Rhetorical critics bring to any object the focus of making arguments about how symbols influence people."[15] For Zarefsky, the two key questions to ask while engaging in rhetorical criticism are "what's going on here" and "so what."[16] Anything can be analyzed rhetorically through a critical examination of the dynamics of the message, but it is the 'so what' that separates quality insights from basic observations. In the end, "rhetoric offers another perspective, one that accounts for the production, circulation, reception, and interpretation of messages."[17]

A broad understanding of rhetoric is well suited for analysis of video games and forms the base of wordplay. In the wake of 'big rhetoric,' the tools of rhetorical analysis offer a perspective for scholars interested in studying how knowledge and situated truths are established in and surrounding games. Rhetoric can address the entire discursive environment of gaming as virtually everything can be described as rhetorical. This does not mean that all insights granted by rhetorical analysis of games will result in noteworthy contributions, but it does mean that the many dynamics of video games can be commented upon by better understanding how particular symbols have the power to persuade, shape meanings, and aid in the construction of our perspectives and beliefs. Rhetoric can look at both the play in games and how the dynamics of design or culture more generally shape the ways in which a game is constructed and played. The words contained in surrounding texts are particularly appropriate for rhetorical analysis, from the blog posts that discuss a game to the impacts the branding of *Madden NFL Football* has on its public image. Finally, the primary texts of a game, from the protagonist to the images, script, and coding, are all dynamics that help shape a particular way of viewing a game that rhetorical analysis is well suited to critically analyze. Rhetorical analysis is at the heart of wordplay, forming the base to see how words, design, and play in video games matter, while pointing out how all those elements impact our perceptions about video games as cultural objects.

GAME STUDIES

Looking to game studies for examples of theoretical and critical analysis offers an opportunity to refine the application of the tools of rhetoric to video games and illustrates why developing wordplay is necessary. There are four key pieces to reviewing this research. First, an overview of methodological approaches in game studies illustrates the lack of established methods in the field and elements of video games that are necessary to consider in the development of wordplay. Second, a discussion of games as process develops the background needed to address the special status of games as objects comprised of both meaning and doing. Third, a handful of studies that use elements of rhetoric to analyze games demonstrate where the combination of fields currently stands and how much wordplay can add to rhetoric and game studies. Finally, examples of projects that could be enhanced by the addition of a rhetorical perspective, yet do not necessarily claim it, show how wordplay can enrich existing studies of games.

As an emergent area of study, the analysis of games does not yet have established methods upon which to rely in the criticism of texts. Further complicating things is that game studies is like a collection of pieces rather than a clear, stand-alone discipline. Because of this, research generally borrows existing methodologies from other places, which are then applied to

games. This dynamic may change as more is published in the field, but some scholars have addressed ways in which games should be analyzed systematically. Jesper Juul analyzes the dynamics of computer games, arguing that the formal rule systems of games and programs make them different than traditional narratives.[18] In discussing analysis of games, Espen Aarseth outlines three keys: study of game design, rules, and mechanics; observation of others; and playing the game as part of research.[19] These criteria are quite broad, which makes them flexible enough for many different projects. Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton refine these approaches, advocating four categories for qualitative analysis of games: Object Inventory, Interface Study, Interaction Map, and Gameplay Log.[20] Each of the three articles is useful, but they are aimed at identifying aspects of a game one should investigate rather than providing a clear way to engage in analysis.

One of the ways many game scholars have worked around the lack of established methodology is by importing approaches from other disciplines. Mia Consalvo[21] uses Gérard Genette's idea of paratexts,[22] the texts surrounding a primary text, to analyze cheating in games. Consalvo found that players have different conceptions of what constitutes cheating and that a player's personal definition shapes how they engage in play. She contends that increasing amounts of information about games have moved from "a trickle to a torrent" and that those texts all play "a role in shaping our experiences of gameplay—regardless of the actual game itself."[23] Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter find their inspiration elsewhere, using ideas from *Empire*[24] as a theoretical frame for the analysis of the sociocultural factors surrounding the production of games, leading them to examine issues like the real world labor of gold farmers in online games.[25] Both of these projects borrow from existing modes of analysis, which shapes the kinds of questions asked and the results likely to be found. Rhetorical analysis offers both the flexibility and critical force to attend to many of the ways in which texts function. In so doing, wordplay adds a complementary, necessary resource for those seeking to analyze games and provides another surface for rhetoricians to analyze. Rhetorical analysis fuels the development of different questions and, when expressed in wordplay, helps us understand video games and why they matter, especially when considering questions about words, design, and play.

While Consalvo, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter focus on the processes and texts surrounding games, Alex Galloway and Ian Bogost argue that we must not lose sight of the special status of games as actions or procedures. Galloway argues that games are special because they only come into being when they are played. He contends that gaming is a process of both "meaning and doing."[26] For Galloway, games are actions that depend on the execution of software that exists "when enacted."[27] Galloway posits that games are distinct from other forms of media, as the activity of gaming "only ever comes into being when the game is actually played."[28] In line with Galloway's position, Ian Bogost advances a conception of procedural rhetoric,

which is the most established method of game studies analysis predicated on a rhetorical approach. Bogost defines procedural rhetoric as "a practice of using processes persuasively."[29] He argues that, in video games, "the main representational mode is procedural, rather than verbal,"[30] which necessitates developing a mode of procedural rhetoric to address texts that are not spoken or written in a conventional sense. Inspired by his descriptions of rhetoric, he contends, "Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively."[31] To this end, a key take away from his argument is that "video games make claims about the world. But when they do so, they do it not with oral speech, nor in writing, nor even with images. Rather, video games make argument with *processes*."[32] Procedural rhetoric seeks to analyze how games use processes to "dictate how actions can and cannot be carried out"[33] and how those processes persuade players. Both Galloway and Bogost are invested in the ways in which the structure and processes of games are different than other forms of media, which requires revising analytical methods designed for other media formats.

Although attention to structures and the notion of procedural rhetoric is quite useful in analyzing video games, there are two key limitations of this approach. First, isolating procedures from other elements of discourse is problematic. Just as Galloway and Bogost contend that video games cannot be fully understood without analyzing their processes, one must also analyze the context and forces shaping those procedures. Although something like the specific chat channels or means of communication enabled or disabled by a video game could be considered an aspect of its procedural rhetoric, the discourse in those channels may be quite similar to traditional reading and writing. There are also dynamics inside and outside of the game that can shape how it is played, from Dragon Kill Points (DKP)[34] to the clothes players choose to wear in games[35] or the presentation of race in *Grand Theft Auto*.[36] Procedures in games are not conceived in a vacuum, which means that it is important to look both at and beyond them. Wordplay fills this gap by focusing on both the procedures within games and the elements surrounding them.

Separately, one could read Bogost's approach to procedural rhetoric as a secondary text that reshapes how games are designed. Bogost presents a rearticulation of what games do, altering the structure of future processes. In effect, if his analysis is successful in changing how games are designed, his work is a demonstration of the rhetorical force of both texts beyond a game and processes of a game.

Second, Bogost contends that "[v]ideo games have the power to make arguments, to persuade, to express ideas. But they do not do so inevitably"[37] and gives "the name *persuasive games* to videogames that mount procedural rhetorics effectively."[38] This pair of statements is incompatible

with the big rhetoric approach embedded in wordplay, which holds that all games are persuasive and they are inevitably so. Structure and design are special parts of games that require attention, but they are not the only part of games to analyze, just as they are a part that must not be neglected in analysis. Whether or not games are successfully persuasive or to what ends they persuade is secondary, but all games are persuasive in some way. Whether the persuasion is to buy the game, play the game in a manner that is rewarded with a patch, follow a given narrative, use the game as a surface to bond and identify with one's father, absorb the capitalist lessons of *Animal Crossing*[39] or the political messages in *Tax Invaders*,[40] all games are persuasive.

A handful of other scholars have also sought to employ the tools of rhetoric to analyze elements of games. Gerald Voorhees argues that "the form of the player-game interaction has to be taken seriously if critics are to come to terms with the rhetorical force of *Civilization*,"[41] as it is the player–game interaction that connects the game to the mind and actively ignores the constraints imposed by the body, internalizing the role of agent in the game. Voorhees also analyzes the changing character representations over the course of the *Final Fantasy* series, contending, "When every representation is in some way ideological it is not possible to speak about representation without also considering it rhetorical."[42] Looking at online discussion boards, Moeller, Esplin, and Conway contend it is on discussion boards where players "push the boundaries of what is considered *ethical* or *sportsmanlike* in a medium where testing the boundaries of an environment and the limits of the rules is encouraged and expected."[43] The common thread through these projects is the interest in how certain elements of games structure the way those texts are understood and encountered. These pieces articulate ways in which games persuade to a variety of different ends, offering examples of how rhetorical analysis can engage both a game and the text surrounding it.

A number of other research projects studying large-scale elements of gaming offer potential links to the rhetorical perspective found in wordplay, as they critically analyze discourse in a manner congruent with a rhetorical approach. The context for rhetorical analysis is largely set by understanding the vast number of interrelated forces that shape interactions in virtual worlds. In critiquing the concept of a magic circle,[44] Mia Consalvo articulates what can be seen as a call for rhetorical analysis in the massively multiplayer online (MMO) game genre, stressing the importance of "the need to understand how players understand, contextualize, and challenge MMO games."[45] Consalvo goes on to explore how structures, real-life influences, and game play experiences interact, stressing the importance of examining the interrelation of the various factors that shape play interactions in games and virtual worlds. Similarly, T. L. Taylor offers a list of interrelated factors that shape games and their play, including

> technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activities as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes.[46]

These dynamics offer surfaces on which rhetorical analysis helps explain why or how key forces interact and the ways in which they remake or influence video games. In doing this sort of analysis, wordplay can help explicate the persuasive forces that dictate how knowledge is created and how the terms are set for 'what counts' in video games and virtual worlds.

Several more targeted projects in game studies address specific instances of discourse in which wordplay would be useful. Mark Silverman and Bart Simon argue that DKP systems have a tangible impact on the way players interact in online games, arguing, "Players do not work together because the prospect of a reward gives them an incentive to do so. Rather, by playing a certain way (i.e., as a power gamer), they begin to perform a rational subjectivity that views the game in terms of incentives and rewards."[47] One could argue that DKP functions symbolically as a player-generated rhetorical message that reshapes the way those participating in DKP systems see the game world, redefining the relative 'truths' in the game. Certain games put players into situations in which they must allocate scarce resources and the systems players derive function rhetorically to encourage them to alter the ways in which they play. In the case of DKP, players develop their own systems for addressing a design element of the game they play. The rules they choose can be read rhetorically to better understand what drives different groups of players and how game design intersects with player action. Lisa Nakamura argues, "Player-produced machinima accessed from Warcraftmovies.com make arguments about race, labor, and the racialization of space."[48] In this case Nakamura argues that machinima, which is discourse from outside the game, shapes the ways in which players conceive of representation and behavior within the game. Nakamura's work expands the kinds of texts that may be of interest to scholars analyzing video games, demonstrating how a paratext can function to influence interaction. These two projects look at different aspects of gaming, yet the thread between them is that the texts they study constitute elements of the discourse of gaming and could be complemented by the rhetorical perspective embedded within wordplay.

There are a variety of ways for rhetorical analysis to aid in the analysis of video games. With all the surfaces, interactions, and topics contained within and surrounding games, there is plenty of room for analysis of persuasion and knowledge claims. With a background of both rhetoric and game studies

in hand, it is appropriate to look at where they come together to form a base for this project and how this book pushes beyond them to advocate for wordplay as a key means with which to understand video games.

RHETORIC AND GAMES

Unifying rhetorical analysis and games is a natural pairing, but the execution of the match has been problematic on both sides. Game studies is largely lacking in terms of the connection and use of rhetorical tools, as there are only a few projects where game studies explicitly invokes the tools of rhetoric, even though the subject area and research questions in many projects overlap with core skills and strengths of rhetorical analysis. Further, much of the existing work is limited, with holdings pertinent to a specific game or instance surrounding a game, rather than developing a system or framework by which to apply the tools of rhetoric across many different kinds of games. This is part of what wordplay can do. One project that seeks to do both is found in the work of Ian Bogost, who does an excellent job of analyzing a specific element of gaming and how it connects to rhetorical analysis in the form of procedures, but limits the role of rhetoric, relying on a limited interpretation of its tools and only focusing on one way in which persuasion, identification, and meaning are made in games. Procedural rhetoric is a key part of the discourse of games, but it is only one part, and games studies can benefit from wordplay's broader context for rhetorical analysis.

On the other hand, rhetoric has a checkered history of integrating analyses of contemporary media into a mode of analysis that was originally designed to analyze speeches. The turn toward big rhetoric offers room for rhetoricians to examine an expanded notion of texts, but much of the rhetorical analysis of contemporary media features substantive problems, ranging from an inadequate adaptation to a new channel for communication to a lack of understanding of the actual workings and production of the forms of communication. Unlike speech, which most people have a background in producing before engaging in criticism, elements of media like games and computer code can be foreign to critics, often resulting in an incomplete analysis. This can lead to an increased emphasis on analyzing elements of written or spoken text, which more closely resembles traditional surfaces for rhetorical analysis, than the technologies or structures shaping discourse.[49] As Bogost rightly summarizes, "[D]igital rhetoric tends to focus on the presentation of traditional materials—especially text and images—without accounting for the computational underpinnings of that presentation."[50]

Extant positions of both game studies and rhetoric limited and partial when it comes to analyzing video games. Game studies can benefit from a more thorough and complete integration of rhetorical analysis, as games

are riddled with words, design, and play that are designed to persuade, create identification, shape meanings, and circulate ideas. These messages within games are not limited to the procedures of games, but video games also cannot be reduced to their text or images, as much of the rhetorical analysis that seeks to engage new media tends to do. Combining the strengths of both leads to the development of wordplay, a ground upon which to better understand the ways in which the discourse of games is constituted and how that discourse functions. Wordplay gives scholars in games studies a robust set of tools for the analysis of games and the structures surrounding them. This is particularly useful given the number of projects that are connected to elements of rhetorical analysis—even when a rhetorical perspective has not been explicitly claimed. For rhetoricians, wordplay provides a grounded method of analyzing games and a more thorough way to approach other new media objects. Wordplay moves rhetorical analysis forward by focusing both on the elements of a text that are a comfortable fit for rhetoric, like words and images, and on the crucially important structures and technologies underlying media forms, like design and play. For game developers, wordplay offers a deeper understanding of why certain elements in games work and why others do not. Further, by recognizing how various factors function to create a discursive environment, developers can seek to make all the rhetorical texts of their games work together in a concordant message that creates the desired gaming environment for players. For those of us who play or are interested in video games, wordplay grants a complex, sophisticated understanding of how games do work on us by stimulating critical thinking about video games and the messages they send. Although video games can be entertaining, educational, or something else all together, thinking critically about the messages sent puts game consumers in a position to reflect on the ways in which the discourse of video games creates and structures experience.

WHAT'S TO COME

There are two primary parts to this book that demonstrate different aspects of wordplay and how specific elements of video games are particularly interesting items to analyze. Each section takes on a different aspect of gaming to show how both broad social forces and seemingly small elements of games work to construct a specific kind of gaming environment.

Part I: The Context

The chapters in this section address how the contexts of gaming shape how games are played. Starting with the larger forces surrounding games enables a discussion of the rhetorical scene in which games are played,

setting the backdrop for analysis of specific games and genres. In addition to the contextual elements that fall outside of games, like a large-scale social predisposition that video games are for children, this section focuses on how games can foster their own context and how technological developments mediate the environment in which games are played. The rhetorical force of gaming is shaped in part by the games we play, but the words, design, and play of video games are not created in a vacuum. The discourse of video games is subject to larger sociotechnical forces, like the growth of the internet and the role blogs and forums play in creating space for interaction between gamers and developers. Games help shape contextual forces through the integration of elements to socialize players into particular games and gaming as a whole, but all games are subject to a context beyond their control. This section cannot address all of the forces shaping the context within which games are played. However, these cases show the different kinds of factors that contribute to the scene in which games are played and produced. The cases were selected to provide sufficient depth to demonstrate how they help set the terms for understanding wordplay and demonstrate key ways in which to apply the tools of rhetorical analysis to the study of the discourse of video games.

Chapter 1: Socializing Gamers

One of the key jobs for any game is to introduce gamers into the flow and game play of how the game works. Typically this is done through an introductory section rife with hints, tips, or strategies. Lessons can also be spread throughout a game, from including a hint on the screen about which button to press at a key moment or changing the color of a stone on a wall to denote that it should be seen as particularly interesting. On a grander scale, game developers and genres work to introduce gamers into a particular way to play games, whether that is through encouraging them to look at an online forum, pursue a certain strategy to defeat an enemy, or request they register a product to gather more information about who is buying a given game. All of these factors work to interpolate players into a game and gaming, socializing them in how to play properly and potentially encouraging them to play more often. Applying wordplay to the early moments of games addresses how design devices and technology function rhetorically to encourage a certain kind of play with examples of how design elements bring gamers into a game and keep them invested. This marks a connection between the work of rhetoricians who often focus on the images and text in digital media and critics who seek to analyze the function of games from a procedural or structural standpoint. Focusing on the early game experience offers a clear development of how game designers leverage words and play to shape the context of gaming and how wordplay can offer insight on decisions that are key components of video games.

Chapter 2: Video Games as 'Kid's' Toys

One of the key discursive constructs that still frames public discourse about games is that video games are perceived by many as kid's toys. Although Atari marketed its game console at young adults and much of their initial arcade game testing was done in bars, Nintendo's marketing toward children still holds a portion of the public's imagination with regard to gaming. What is particularly interesting about this construction is that most gamers knowingly dismiss this presumption as a clear, irrelevant falsehood, especially if they self-identify as a gamer, yet are no longer a 'kid.' As such, concerns about violence and other adult themes in games are largely contextualized in the public discourse by questions about what will happen if children play these games, even if developers intend the game to be played by adults. The belief by some that games are the exclusive domain of children is part of the force behind events like the Provenzo report and Electronic Software Ratings Board ratings, but extends to contemporary debates about content in games, like the Hot Coffee mod in *Grand Theft Auto* or the ability to unlock sex scenes in games like *Mass Effect*. A key consideration for rhetorical critics is analyzing relationships between constructions of scene (context) and agent (perception of gamers). As such, the perception of gamers is almost more important than who is actually playing games when considering the larger social environment for games. Looking to the history of gaming demonstrates how we live in discursive environment within which perceptions about contemporary games are limited and shaped by a discussion almost completely external to games and gamers, but still looms as an important factor in how video games are designed and played.

Chapter 3: Talking Game Design

The advent of the web and rise of blogging created a situation in which there are dozens of forums and blogs about most major video games. Perhaps more interesting than the volume of the communication is that developers actively read and participate in many online forums and frequently respond to the expressed thoughts and concerns of gamers. In so doing, a loop is created that allows gamers to actively contribute to game design and development. Good ideas are incorporated into games and particularly productive members of the community are often brought into the gaming industry. Designers of mods[51] may be added to development teams and particularly active and vocal players can be hired as game designers. The level of communication about most contemporary games has changed the ways in which discourse about games is shaped, as the framework of the internet has facilitated a way for gamers to talk back to developers. An ability to address the changing terrain of game design and how the discourse of games is subject to the communication of gamers and developers is a key advantage of wordplay. By looking at the way channels for communication alter the discourse of games, the surfaces upon which to apply wordplay

expand, as larger technological developments are considered within the context of video games.

Chapter 4: Consoles Read Rhetorically

A final contextual element is an understanding of how rhetorical analysis can explain some of the reasons why certain consoles have been more successful than others. The platforms on which games are played are important and the successes or struggles of certain console form the rhetorical terrain for console gaming. Focusing on four defining elements of the console gaming experience, like where we play and what we are able to do with game consoles, a historical retelling of video game console history is a key part of the context of video games. There are several key developments in console gaming, especially at the points when the industry transitioned from one generation of consoles to the next. Understanding the rhetorical force of certain appeals helps articulate what touch points in gaming history indicate about the broader discursive environment for video games. Using wordplay to analyze the design and marketing of the various consoles at specific moments in time demonstrates how the messages developed in these materials constitute rhetorical appeals that shape proper notions of 'games' and 'gamers,' often in stark contrast to existing predispositions or competing consoles.

Part II: The Texts

This section of the book shifts wordplay away from larger contextual factors and toward specific games. Although all games are developed within the larger context of gaming, specific texts have elements that illustrate unique dynamics of wordplay, from the planned obsolescence that can be seen in EA Sports games to the designed meritocracies resident in online games. All games have rhetorical features worth noting, but the titles selected in this section present particularly interesting opportunities to apply wordplay. Elements ranging from warranting play as a violent gangster in *Grand Theft Auto* to creating a cottage industry of statistical analysis outside the bounds of *World of Warcraft* dramatically impact the design and play of the games examined. Many of these games are well suited to be analyzed rhetorically, as they encourage the production of substantial amount of text on forums, blogs, and in developer's comments about them. This section offers a platform on which to see the multiple ways in which the production of rhetoric in games is infused through the interactions between games, gamers, developers, and the structures in which they communicate.

Chapter 5: GTA, Humor, and Protagonists

Grand Theft Auto (*GTA*) has received a substantial amount of attention in popular press for the violence in the game and scholarly attention to elements

like the racial constructions of *GTA: San Andreas*. Less discussed are the ways in which the words and design of the games in the series undercut the starkness of the violence perpetrated by the protagonist. A careful construction of the protagonist and prominent use of humor function rhetorically to make the game 'foreign' enough from the life of the average gamer to be playable and amusing enough that wanton killing is not necessarily a focal element of game play. By taking a deep look at a particular game series to demonstrate the presentation and key elements of a game, wordplay illustrates how the rhetorical forces embedded within a game impact how it is played and received. In the case of *GTA*, increasingly refined steps have been taken to shape how players discuss the game and which elements they find notable. In the midst of frequent public outcry, gamers are far less likely to talk about the violence in *GTA* and far more likely to talk about elements of humor or game design. By looking at the game's design and play, as well as reviews and gamers' comments about the various games in the series, analyzing *GTA* demonstrates just how much game design interacts with the texts surrounding games and how combinations of words and images function rhetorically.

Chapter 6: EA Sports and Planned Obsolescence

EA Sports is effectively built on annual editions of games that are obsolete shortly after they are purchased. Relying on the annual variation in sporting rosters in an era of free agency, each edition of the game also promises a game engine update or two to tempt consumers into a new purchase. Even if a new design element ends up on the video game equivalent of the cutting room floor in future editions, these games are explicitly designed for annual sale, promising just enough to be worth buying the new version of the game. Rhetorically, the minor changes in game design create an environment where consumers are encouraged to buy new games in an ongoing cycle, leading to massive annual launches for EA's *Madden NFL Football* and *FIFA Soccer*. The increasing integration of online play stands to concentrate power in the hands of developers, as game companies can restrict a player's ability to play online. Studying EA Sports solidifies an aspect of wordplay by looking at how game developers can leverage the design of a particular set of games to create marketing fervor for the franchise, rather than just a single edition of a game. By engaging in massive marketing efforts, including the annual Madden Day promotion, EA uses words to change the context for the reception of their games and craft a particular discursive environment for sports gaming. Sports games demonstrate how the critical tools of wordplay can go beyond games to analyze culture and marketing efforts.

Chapter 7: Rearticulating Rewards in WoW

After the Lead Content Designer of *WoW*, Tigole, deemed a new set of rewards "welfare epics," the *WoW* player community responded in a multitude of

fascinating ways. Combining wordplay with a critical analysis of welfare discourse, several strategies can be seen in the responses produced by the playing community, all of which demonstrate how players perceive their relationship with the game and their play. From directly confronting Tigole's statements to lamenting a loss of avatar capital and analyzing the effects the changes have on the multiplayer aspects of the game, the rhetoric of welfare epics offers unique insights into the importance of scarcity in the normative structures of *WoW*. Applying wordplay to the concept of welfare epics also helps show how players accept and perpetuate beliefs about the design of reward systems in online games. Studying welfare epics with wordplay demonstrates that games change over time and how subtle adjustments in design can prompt substantial alterations in the way a game is played. The discussion about welfare epics also demonstrates the interconnected relationship between players and developers, as the debate about welfare epics shows how both groups can influence the ongoing design and execution of a game.

Chapter 8: Theorycraft and Optimization

As an emergent practice of *WoW* players, theorycrafting is the search for the optimal set of strategies with which to play *WoW*. By using statistical analysis and mathematical modeling, theorycrafters seek out the underlying formulae that govern *WoW*, largely in an attempt to optimize their play. Theorycrafting is a practice that emerged from a small segment of players and changed how *WoW* is played, while reshaping the relationship between players and designers. Analyzing theorycraft enables a discussion about how the discourse of gaming connects to other cultural trends, like the growth of statistical analysis in sports and society. In this case, the development of a player originated discourse limits functional choice in *WoW* because all answers that are not best simply are not good enough and need to be fixed. Though the understanding and modeling of theorycraft may be incomplete, theorycraft puts players on a level where they can engage in discussions with designers about the best ways in which to design their game of choice. Theorycraft demonstrates how player behavior is a key factor to track, especially in massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), as players can reshape how a game is played in practice and that the 'game' of *WoW* extends well beyond the bounds of the imagined world in which it is set.

Chapter 9: Balance and Meritocracies

One of the themes permeating the discourse of video games is the supposition that MMOGs are a meritocracy, where the best or most active are able to excel through their efforts within the game. Rewards and achievements are often interpreted as indicators of great skill and superiority, separating those who have ascended from those who should admire them. Tied to a key aspect

of MMOG design, that all players begin the game at roughly the same status, is the belief that the cream should be able to rise to the top. This frames discourse about design and play in online games, creating a self-reinforcing cycle where players are encouraged to earn rewards to prove their worth to others and 'properly' succeed in the game. Critiquing the perception that virtual worlds are somehow more fair, balanced, and equitable than the offline world, wordplay examines the dynamics that make these games popular and how the design of games connects to their rhetorical presentation. Within the context of the section, analyzing the role of balance connects a variety of elements of the discourse of video games, including the role of designers, players, and in-game and out-of-game text.

Part III: Using Wordplay

Chapter 10: Words, Design, and Play

To conclude the development of wordplay as a critical tool, it is necessary to bring the threads of gaming, words, design, and play together. Paying attention to how wordplay helps leverage the resources of rhetorical analysis, examining words, design, and play facilitates a discussion of how video games work, what video games mean, and how video games both construct and are constructed culturally. By understanding wordplay and the discourse of video games, scholars gain a useful set of tools for their analytical work, developers gain an understanding of the myriad forces impacting their games, and gamers gain the critical, reflective skills to analyze the games they play.

Wordplay takes advantage of a rhetorical perspective, while freeing itself from the negative connotations of the word 'rhetoric.' Wordplay takes note of procedural rhetoric's focus on what makes video games distinct, but does so in a way that can also account for the words in and around games. Wordplay blends rhetorical analysis with game studies to analyze the whole of the discourse of video games by examining how video games are constructed as cultural objects through their words, design, and play.

In sum, the upcoming chapters in this book navigate the terrain of discourse inside of and surrounding games to map why things ranging from patch jackets to the early morning alarms to boss fights matter. Each case study has been selected to help articulate the larger context of the discourse of video games and why wordplay is a key part of understanding how games leverage words, design, and play to create meaning, facilitate identification and division, persuade, and circulate ideas.

Part I

The Context

1 Socializing Gamers

Finding myself alone in a nearly destroyed train car, I notice the blood oozing out of my gut. The train shakes and I am left desperately hanging onto a railing—the only thing keeping me from plummeting into the chasm lurking below.

These two sentences could describe many things, but in this case they depict some of the earliest moments of a player's experience with *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*. However, players could have also first encountered the game in a number of other ways. They may have carefully tracked information and news about the highly anticipated sequel to *Uncharted* through a variety of different gaming publications. They may have heard about the game from friends, perhaps even watching someone else play the game before they picked up a controller. Perhaps they saw the commercial Sony ran to promote the game where a twentysomething male 'asks' Sony's "VP of Big Action Moments" what to do when his girlfriend wants to watch the *Uncharted 2* 'movie' every night.[1] These moments are elements of the words, design, and play of video games that socialize players into a certain mode of thinking about what *Uncharted 2* is and how it should be experienced. By introducing an audience to what the game 'is' these efforts form the context for the application of wordplay, constructing how games are played and how they are embodied as cultural products.

Starting with the specific elements of games themselves and moving outward into media like commercials, game reviews, and game walkthroughs, game design and external media construct preferred means by which people think about video games. Players are routinely educated about how to properly play a game, sometimes with an introductory tutorial or an instruction booklet and occasionally with relatively little instruction at all. All of these elements interpolate people into gaming, potentially on very specific terms, as in the case of the *Uncharted* commercial where the fairly well-off white, male, twentysomething is the one playing, and his attractive, popcorn-making girlfriend still believes the game is a movie.

In addition to the limited introduction into particular games, these efforts to socialize also take on a larger meaning because what it means to play games changes. Certain design elements are normalized over time, like the health system in *Uncharted*[2] or the questing system in *World of Warcraft*.[3] These normalizations socialize gamers into games by leading them to have

expectations about how video games work. Gamers learn from the games they play and lessons carry on to the next game, as certain elements of the discourse of video games teach them what it means to play games. In practice, this means that if the tutorials that teach players how to play the game are increasingly built into the game, the relevance of something like an instruction manual is marginalized. The limited importance of the instruction book is further degraded by larger industry trends, like the growth in the sale of used games and the emergence of a rental market, where games are unlikely to come with their instructions. As designers are faced with the reality that players may not have the original materials, the cycle begins again, because designers cannot assume players have the instructions and must develop the game so players do not need what they may not have.

The process of socialization into games means that, as the elements of the discourse of video games change, the context of gaming, including what it is to play games, who is playing games, and what is considered enjoyable, is altered. As an example, the approachability of certain games, like *Ultima IV*, has shifted over time as contemporary gamers are used to a different experience than the massive amount of reading and exploration necessary to succeed in *Ultima IV*. Instead of reading the two manuals provided with the game, a contemporary player may want to jump right in, only to find that the game "isn't too much fun for them" and "they want a radar in the corner of the screen. They want mission logs. They want fun combat. They want an in-game tutorial. They want a game that doesn't feel so much like work."[4] In addition to the potential for older players to reminisce nostalgically about the lack of appreciation for the classic games of yore, socialization also means that concepts like 'video game' and 'gamer' are malleable over time, changing in response to the overarching dynamics of design and economic trends in the industry. In so doing, the scene of what constitutes games and the players/agents who are perceived of as playing games are altered, potentially taking on new meanings, while prompting feedback on other elements of the discourse of video games that reconstruct the whole. In order to better understand what it means to socialize players into games and develop the elements of socialization more generally, it is instructive to look to a variety of games to examine how they use words, design, and play to socialize players.

UNCHARTED 2: AMONG THIEVES

Some of the introductory moments of *Uncharted 2* have been sketched out already, but there is far more to understand how this game socializes players. A PlayStation 3 exclusive and the sequel to the award-winning *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, *Uncharted 2* was highly anticipated and critically acclaimed, winning numerous 2009 Game of the Year awards. Players are positioned in the role of Nathan Drake, a treasure hunter and

descendent of Sir Francis Drake, who is approached by two former accomplices in an effort to track various parts of the voyage of Marco Polo and discover lost treasure. There are a variety of elements to how *Uncharted 2* brings players into the game, but the most notable are the integration of the game play and story narrative, the out-of-game promotional blitz, and the tutorials within the game and the paratexts surrounding it that 'teach' players just how the game should be played.

Uncharted 2 starts like many other games on either the PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360. If this is the first time you have played the game or if you have taken a lengthy break in between play sessions, the game will likely instruct players that updates are required to play. This forces players to download new content, and possibly consent to new terms of service, before they actually start up the game itself. Upon boot up, the publisher (Sony Computer Entertainment) and developer (Naughty Dog) are announced before a ceremonial dagger begins spinning in the bottom of the screen, marking the loading screen for the game itself. Although these may seem like innocuous, regular parts of games, they are still key, constructive elements of the discourse of *Uncharted 2*. In requiring regular updates and downloads, console games shift from what were once seemingly complete cartridge games into the kind of impermanence and change that used to be exclusive to their compatriots designed for personal computers. This changes how games are constructed, making them updateable, like the roster updates frequent to sports games, and also facilitates the sale of downloadable content, expanding what constitutes a game and potentially extending its lifecycle by adding playable material over time. The ability to include additional content shifts the development and marketing for high-end console games because the package you buy at the store is not necessarily the end of what the game is. The typical inclusion of the developer and publisher works as a small ad, predominantly functioning as a matter of branding. High-profile, notable games that are played over several sessions offer both companies the opportunity to present themselves in front of a primed, receptive audience who can then track down other games made by those companies. The spinning icon for the loading screen has a dual function. In the case of the *Uncharted* series, the objects depicted on the load screen are central to the plot of the game.[5] Simultaneously, the objects are sleeker than the screen on many games that simply states "Loading," as they push players toward the larger narrative of the game. This eases the break between the mechanical, processing needs of the game system and the diegetic, story-driven interests of players.

When *Uncharted 2* begins, players are presented with a menu that requires them to select from a list of options. Upon starting a new game, players are greeted with the introductory cinematic, which prominently features a Marco Polo quote, "I did not tell half of what I saw, for I knew I would not be believed," that cleverly announces to players that they are about to embark upon a wild adventure, while offering the game designers

great liberty to integrate what could seem to be ridiculous narrative elements into the game.[6] The game then reveals Nathan Drake bleeding profusely on a damaged train, with little context for why he is there or what he is doing. The train suddenly slides down the edge of a cliff, sending Drake hurtling out of the back toward his doom, except for the piece of railing to which he manages to cling. The player then takes over the controls, aiding Drake in his effort to scale the train and make it safely onto solid ground.

As Drake makes it up and safely off the train, a second notable piece of *Uncharted 2* quickly becomes evident. Throughout the game, focus shifts from play where the player is in control of meeting some sort of objective, like scaling the train, to cinematics that are used to provide back story and advance the overarching narrative in the game. Once the player safely ascends they are treated to a flashback introducing Harry Flynn and Chloe Frazer, two former accomplices who are planning a new caper. These segments enable character development, as we learn that Drake can read and translate the thirteenth-century Latin found in Marco Polo's journal in addition his proclivity to narrowly escape death. The segment closes with Drake quipping "What could possibly go wrong?" before being teleported to the snowy cliff where the player resumes control of the game. It is the whole of the game,

> all of these different elements, along with the lighthearted story, [that] are mixed together perfectly, providing an intoxicating pace that continually builds upon the previous section. The incredible rate at which *Uncharted* moves is staggering, seamlessly urging players from one incredible experience to the next, without ever staying on one mechanic too long.[7]

By blending game playing content with narrative detail and offering a variety of different experiences, *Uncharted 2* socializes players into a blended game where the pre-rendered cinematics add to the play in a manner that provides a sophisticated, complex gaming experience. These moments, where buildings collapse and a player needs to jump through a window to narrowly escape death are what "make *Uncharted 2* so exciting and more importantly, make it feel just like a movie."[8] During the whole of this experience a variety of different, familiar narrative tropes are employed. Complementary game design elements socialize those witnessing the game into viewing it in a different way, likening the experience to participating in a film, rather than just playing a game.

A second component of being socialized into *Uncharted 2* is the paratexts surrounding the game. Inextricably linked to its predecessor, *Uncharted 2* is a AAA game[9] with substantial development resources and the huge marketing push that typically surround a high-end release. Game publications were laden with previews to build anticipation for the game, which were followed by game reviews upon *Uncharted 2*'s release. All of these elements combine to create hype surrounding the game where gamers are able to

revel in mere rumors about the game or a subsequent sequel.[10] The buzz about the game socializes those fans to anticipate, want, and consume. Game publications need content to attract readers, which means that the information surrounding a high-profile game is widely reported and, potentially, widely read, forming paratexts that set the terms on which gamers will engage the title. In the case of *Uncharted 2*, the promotion of the game reached beyond the limited audience of gaming publications with Sony's television commercial that ran prominently after the game's launch. Depicting the game as an action-adventure movie that 'your girlfriend' would be happy to watch night after night moved awareness about *Uncharted 2* from a core gaming audience who reads previews and reviews to a larger television audience interested in action movies. The ad targets men by presenting the aspirational opportunities offered by *Uncharted 2*. The ad implies that games like this are played by those who live in plush apartments and have popcorn-making girlfriends who look forward to seeing more of the 'movie.' By recontextualizing the game, the potential audience becomes broader, leading to three million copies of *Uncharted 2* selling in a matter of months,[11] while raising anticipation for the game as a whole. All of these promotional elements frame what players expect and shape the image of who is 'supposed' to be playing the game by setting the terms for the discourse about how to perceive *Uncharted 2*.

In addition to the paratexts encouraging consumption of the game, a second group of paratexts surrounds the game and shape how players engage in play. This piece, the walkthroughs readily found online, form a particular way of playing *Uncharted 2*, one that some might call cheating, while others find it essential to their mode of play.[12] Walkthroughs for *Uncharted 2* come with two primary aims: guides for navigating the story in the game[13] and guides to acquiring the more than one hundred treasures spread throughout the game.[14] The walkthroughs offer direction about what to do in the game, either in words, pictures, video, or some combination of the three. In so doing, they proffer a preferred, scripted means by which to circumnavigate the challenges faced by players. Guides construct an idealized means by which to play the game, socializing players into a different form of gaming, one based on following instructions, rather than exploring the context of the game world. There is a wealth of similar examples spread throughout the internet, which offers easy access instructions for the players of almost any game. By transforming how games are played, these paratexts shift socialization, creating a connection between text and paratext while crafting a potential dependence upon these guides in the minds of gamers. Put simply, for many gamers, game play is dependent on the paratextual guides and walkthroughs available online. These elements push words into questions of play and design, as guides become a key component of how many people are now socialized into gaming as a whole.

The final piece of socialization in *Uncharted 2* is the means by which the game trains players within the game's design itself. Although players

can seek instruction from online guides or receive minimal guidance from the instruction book included with retail version of the game, *Uncharted 2* trains players as they play. Early in the game, when left hanging on the railing, players must make initial decisions with the control sticks to move back and forth. When reaching a predetermined moment, they are instructed to "press X to jump." Later they are met with other instructions about how to pick things up, how to open doors, and how to aim and shoot a gun. All of these moments are key to how gamers in *Uncharted 2* are taught to play, a training regimen that prepares gamers for games where they can simply pick the game up and start playing without reading an instruction manual in advance. As players proceed through the game, they are also likely to notice less explicit forms of persuasion. Objects fall behind you in initial stages that function to block off your path and prevent you from backtracking or getting lost. Conveniently colored objects, like yellow pipes or white bricks, stick out from the background to indicate there is something interesting or interactive at that spot. These elements, both explicit and more subtle, interpolate gamers, encouraging them to pick up and play while offering them the ability to move smoothly without needing too much help. Stripping those instructions from the game would alter how it is played, forcing players to research how to play or requiring them to search harder for clues as they play, instead of simply pressing buttons on a controller and enjoying the 'movie.'

Uncharted 2 is a strong example of how leading console games socialize players into games, from the blending of story and gaming to the promotional hype and means by which players are taught to play the game. These elements shape how players engage games and what they are likely to expect from future releases. In so doing, these practices of socialization are a key component of how games work. However, understanding the contextual force of the means by which people are brought into games requires looking beyond AAA console titles.

WII SPORTS

In stark contrast to the high production value and slick visuals found in *Uncharted 2*, *Wii Sports* is defined by its game play and restructuring of the playing experience. *Wii Sports* shipped with Nintendo Wii consoles sold outside of Japan and offered players the ability to use the Wii's motion-based controller to play several popular sports, including tennis, baseball, and bowling. The Wii was marketed to a broad audience that included young and old, male and female. A primary appeal of the console was a mimetic interface that promotes a "very usable" gaming experience that was well suited for *Wii Sports* because "most people have seen these sports performed before."[15] Nintendo's own marketing pitch for the game proclaims, "This is what video games should be: fun for everyone. *Wii Sports*

offers five distinct sports experiences, each using the Wii Remote controller to provide a natural, intuitive and realistic feel . . . If you've played any of these sports before, you're ready for fun!"[16] This design intent is the first key element of what makes *Wii Sports*, and many of the games on the Wii console, different from games like *Uncharted 2*. Instead of building on the key aspects of socialization from previous games and the player's understanding of other pieces of video game culture, *Wii Sports* actively shifts the terrain for gaming, seeking a broader audience that is socialized into how sports work, rather than how video games work. The impact of shifting contexts for socialization plays out in three key ways: changing who is brought into games as players, altering the ways in which games are played, and changing the focus of games from graphics and visual design toward play control and motion.

Nintendo's effort to reshape their target audience for games begins with their marketing. Instead of seeking out the white, male twentysomething in the *Uncharted* commercial, *Wii Sports* seeks to provide "fun for everyone." The larger television ad campaign for the console promulgated this idea by displaying a wide variety of people playing *Wii Sports*. In the advertisements, two Japanese businessmen arrived at someone's residence and then viewers were shown the people living in the house playing games on the Wii.[17] This approach gave Nintendo the opportunity to show young and old, men and women, urban and rural, as well as a variety of different ethnicities, playing and enjoying the Wii. Although the commercials did not show every demographic, they made a clear effort to demonstrate how these games were designed to be played by a much larger audience than just those who already self-identified as gamers. Nintendo also benefited from how the news coverage that accompanied the Wii's release reshaped the context for the console. Many stories featured an unlikely group of players picking up the Wii and integrating elements of *Wii Sports* into new rituals of gaming. Coverage of seniors picking up *Wii Sports* to start Wii bowling leagues spread throughout major media outlets,[18] supporting the overarching idea of a broad group of game players enjoying the excitement of *Wii Sports*. The ad campaign for the Wii and *Wii Sports* in particular are "the result of a company-wide effort to win over the elusive non-gamer—your mom, your dad, and maybe even your grandfather, too."[19] This move sought to resituate notions about who played video games by establishing the Wii as the kind of console that anyone could play by demonstrating the range of people who could enjoy these games. In doing this, Nintendo sought to socialize a broader segment of the population into video games, encouraging those who did not play video games regularly to pick up a Wiimote and be brought into the fold of Nintendo. Seniors were one of the strongest targets of this kind of appeal, as many of them grew up in a bowling boom, but found bowling to be too physically demanding as they aged. By marketing to this audience with a new way to bowl, Nintendo opened the door to a different kind of gamer.

A key to Nintendo's campaign to broaden the base of 'gamers' was their effort to redefine how games could be played. In a trend that was introduced by Nintendo and later appropriated by Microsoft with Kinect and Sony with the PlayStation Move, Nintendo resocialized players into how to play video games. Rooted in the larger context of mimetic gaming, *Wii Sports* sought to match the actions the player took with what happened in the game. Suddenly, instead of pressing a button to swing a tennis racket (and needing to memorize a variety of different buttons to press to perform a number of different shots) one used bodily performance to dictate what would happen on the screen. Jettisoning a focus on graphics, *Wii Sports* is an effort to express a different mode of socialization into games, "one focused on simple gameplay controls and uncomplicated, primitive graphics."[20] The games work because of "their ease of use. Each of the games shaves its respective sport down to a few essential elements and then has you pantomiming these basic activities with the Wii Remote."[21] By shifting the mode of play Nintendo appealed to a larger population of players, but it also introduced a different context in which to play games, broadening the focus to physical interaction with the game, rather than a finger based interaction with button pressing.

These larger core elements of *Wii Sports* are key to how the game socializes players into playing video games and stand in opposition to a game like *Uncharted 2*, with its singular gamer behind the controls of a button pressing game. The efforts to redesign gaming also stretch in more subtle ways into the play of the title itself. One of the first things the game encourages players to do is to secure the wrist strap, a command almost as vital as learning how to jump in *Uncharted 2*, as the Wii's release was accompanied by players documenting the damage done as controllers flew out of their hands. Although this subtle, oft-ignored warning may seem like an innocuous part of *Wii Sports*, it is a notable, as it shapes the context for play. Just as tutorials are frequently built into contemporary games, this warning needed to be built into *Wii Sports* to anticipate the eventuality that many players would simply jump into the game, rather than read the instructions. The game also features a number of other alerts throughout, including the encouragement to "make sure there are no people or objects around you that you might bump into while playing" that appears before each game begins. This warning extends the logic of the initial notice to fasten the wrist strap, as when the context for play changes, the consequences of play also change. Just like a television can be broken by a flying Wii Remote, people can be damaged by that beautiful crosscourt topspin forehand winner. The final notable screen that pops up in *Wii Sports* is the encouragement to take a break. After playing *Wii Sports* for about fifteen minutes and when deciding to change sports, the game encourages players to take a break and informs them about how to pause the game. *Wii Sports* shatters the traditional image of a gaming session, one where long stretches of time are spent playing a game, and seeks to establish the notion of a shorter,

more interactive session. All three of these notices to the player must be dismissed with the press of the A button, which means that at least a basic acknowledgement of what is on the screen must be made. Accompanying the effort to redefine who plays and how they play, *Wii Sports* expresses a form of socialization based on redefining how games are played, predicated on making players aware of their surroundings and taking breaks to get away from the game.[22]

Unlike *Uncharted 2*, *Wii Sports* offers a multi-generational, multi-ethnic group of men and women playing games predicated on motion, rather than a graphical fidelity rivaling an action movie. *Wii Sports* expresses an aspect of how play can function to redefine who plays video games and how. *Wii Sports* shifts focus from appearance to the players themselves, casting a broad net that seeks to include everyone as a potential player. However, this effort is not without cost, as developing a strategy to attract the "elusive non-gamer" with *Wii Sports* cost the Wii a core gaming audience who experienced a short bit of fun with *Wii Sports*, but then moved on to games that better suited the more traditional experiences in games like *Uncharted*.[23] Although non-gamers are still courted as a key piece of expanding the market for video games, it is notable that elements of the commercials for other motion-based, mimetic products featured a broad invoked audience of players similar to those in Nintendo's ads. Given the oppositional dynamics of this pair of console games, it is also relevant to examine how a pair of computer games expresses some of these aspects of socialization, while they introduce other elements of words, design, and play.

FRONTIERVILLE AND *CITY OF WONDER*

As a rapidly growing platform for gaming, Facebook offers a radically different approach to designing and playing video games. Unlike *Uncharted 2* or *Wii Sports*, Facebook games are often developed and published independent from the platform on which they appear. As a result, they pursue substantively different methods of reaching their audience. Players need not buy a game console to play these games; they simply need to be a member of Facebook. These games generally do not have substantial marketing campaigns outside of Facebook, unlike the television ads that announce the arrival of the most prominent console titles. However, the most notable difference is that these games are grafted onto a massively popular site that was initially designed as a social network, a piece of technology intended to foster some sense of connection among people. In addition to the difference in the platform for gaming, a brief analysis of the economics of Facebook games enables us to focus on the key aspects of socialization and the context of gaming in *Frontierville* and *City of Wonder*. Applying wordplay to *Frontierville* and *City of Wonder* shows how the construction of the games is shaped by the location where the

games are played, as the design and play of both games are predicated on fostering an almost compulsive need to check in with them while developing a relatively peculiar notion of 'social.'

The economic structure of Facebook games stands in stark contrast to other video game markets. The primary revenue for *Uncharted 2* is likely to come from sales of the game at retail, with additional money generated through downloadable content that is later sold to those playing the game. *Uncharted 2* also experienced brisk used sales, but that money will not go to the publisher or the developer of the game; resale money is limited to those buying and selling the used copies. Games like *Uncharted* 2 can have additional value for the console maker, as titles exclusive to any single console, like the *Halo* series, can drive sales of that console as gamers purchase the system in order to play the game. As a result, the developer, Naughty Dog, typically sees an influx of money or support in exchange for releasing the title exclusively on the PlayStation 3. *Wii Sports* works somewhat differently, as the game is packaged outside of Japan with the Wii console and does not require an additional charge. As a result, the game is not intended to be sold individually, but to showcase the console and what it can do. Facebook games, however, are designed to work on a completely different economic model.

Facebook games capitalize on the large user base of Facebook in order to try and acquire as many players as possible. Instead of charging a premium for the purchase or installation of the game itself, games like *Frontierville* and *City of Wonder* are distributed to players for free, but then offer the ability to purchase items with the context of the games themselves. Value is generated in two primary ways, by selling items in-game and by attracting more players to the game to purchase more items. Facebook games work on the principle that the initial play is free, but the cost comes in the form of near constant offers to spend money and solicit your friends to play the game. Often called 'social games,'[24] owing to the interaction required with other players, these games generally feature high churn rates as many players quickly move from playing the game to not playing the game, often finding other games to take the place of those they left.[25] Part of the reason for the churn is likely the relatively low level of investment, as there is no upfront financial cost to play the game and, for the overwhelming majority of players, the cost will never approach that of a console title. The advantage for game developers is that the games are relatively low in cost to produce, generally ranging from about $100,000 to $300,000,[26] rather than the multiple millions that a console title can cost to create. Console games like *Grand Theft Auto IV* can reach the $100 million mark in production costs,[27] which means that when it costs a fraction of that amount to make a game like *Frontierville* the economic model can be quite different. Making money on a Facebook game comes down to the straightforward proposition of attracting as many users as possible, counting on a small percentage of them to pay money for advantages in the game and then offering other

games for them to move to as they churn out of one game and on to the next. Facebook games can also sell paid advertising within the game, either delivering players to products or hyping other games by the developer in order to keep players within the same company's reach. For Zynga, the company behind the development of *Frontierville*, the recipe is so successful that they attained a private valuation for their company that exceeded the worth of prominent video game publisher Electronic Arts in late 2010.[28]

Zynga's *Frontierville* and Playdom's *City of Wonder* share much in common, but there are enough differences between the games to make both worthy of analysis. The only set up required is to have an updated version of Flash and an active Facebook account, through which people can search for the game or click on the link on a friend's game to begin playing. The games are then installed to the Facebook account and players can start the game in short order. Signing up requires giving the program access to certain elements of one's Facebook account, like the ability to access basic information, send emails, or post on a player's wall. Players are encouraged to turn over information in exchange for things like daily emails that contain advantages to be redeemed in the game. After signing up, players are faced with their first opportunity for play. In the case of *Frontierville*, players design an in-game avatar, choosing from a relatively wide number of options to personalize their appearance while roaming the frontier. Once situated in the game, both games offer tutorials to show players how to play, explicitly pointing out various features of the game with large, moving arrows and careful shading of the background and key objects to draw player's attention to the desired components. Tutorials are relatively short, taking less than ten minutes, and then players are let out into the more open game world. The focus of the tutorial is to quickly acquaint players with the elements and objects of the game, whether it is to build a civilization by adding people and growing goods (*City of Wonder*) or developing a settlement on the wild frontier (*Frontierville*).

In congruence with the economic incentives for these games, both feature ways for players to advance by buying their way ahead via dual currency systems. *City of Wonder* features coins as a dominant currency, which is used to buy most things in the game. Gold bars supplement the coins and can be used to speed research into technologies that progress a civilization or to purchase special, more powerful buildings to improve certain aspects of their city. Each player starts out with a fair number of gold bars, and more trickle in as a player rises through the levels in the game, but the greatest and quickest influx of these bars requires investing cold, hard cash to buy them. *Frontierville* works with the same general principle, although their gold bars come in the form of horseshoes, which can be used as a short cut to completing most objectives. Both also cross-promote other games produced by the same developer. In the case of Playdom's *City of Wonder*, the promotions take the form of framing devices around the game screen encouraging players to play other Playdom games. Cross promotion

by Zynga in *Frontierville* is more prominent, as players are encouraged to play other Zynga games to gain an advantage in *Frontierville*. Zynga's wide variety of games and large Facebook player base allow them to leverage each existing game to try and gain players for their latest offering or tempt players into trying an older game.

The primary difference in the early part of the two games is the number of missions or objectives available to players. *City of Wonder* offers several missions early in the game to drive player choice, encouraging them to do certain things in the game and teaching them how to play beyond the introductory tutorials. However, after the first day or two of play, players will have completed all the missions available in *City of Wonder* and are left on their own to employ the lessons learned to advance their soon to be wondrous city. *Frontierville*, on the other hand, uses a substantial number of objectives to guide play throughout the game. In addition to teaching players the rules of the game and how to play, players are paced by the new missions that give them a focus and encourage them to keep playing the game. New objectives are added as previous ones are completed, with many requiring multiple steps to complete. Certain holiday and timed missions are introduced to keep pace with the various seasons, much like those found in large, massively multiplayer online games. Given a basic overview of the games, it is appropriate to turn attention to how words and design socialize gamers into particular forms of play.

There are two keys to both of these games and how they operate. The first fundamental concept is socializing players into a compulsive need to check into the games and keep checking into the games. As time passes in both games, any advantage the player gained can quickly be lost as their city falls into disrepair or when the debris they cleared comes back to clutter their frontier. *City of Wonder*'s reward scheme is particularly slanted to compulsion, as the maximum return on investment for goods in the game requires checking in every five minutes. Players can choose to use goods that only require checking in every two days, but the net rewards of that choice pale in comparison to checking in more regularly. Although the rewards for crops are distributed differently in *Frontierville*, the game features chickens that can be fed every thirty minutes, building materials that can be requested every few hours, and, should one leave their frontier untended for too long, much of their work at clearing their homestead can be lost, which is a scary proposition for anyone playing the game. Compulsion is made even more complex as individual play sessions in the game are limited to a relatively short period of time. In *Frontierville*, players are explicitly limited by their amount of energy, which regenerates over time, but limits any individual play session to a few minutes. Food can be purchased to obtain additional energy and there are other means by which to play for longer, but *Frontierville* is designed to have players play for frequent short chunks of time. This is in stark contrast to the occasional long session of play that can typify other forms of gaming. Both games are

designed to keep people coming back for multiple play sessions a day, rather than sitting at the keyboard for hours at a stretch.

The second key to socialization in these two games is how they are 'social.' Commonly cast into a category of social games, both are designed in such a way that players are compelled to bring other players into the game so they can benefit from each other. Throughout play, *Frontierville* players will be met with the message that "life on the frontier is even more fun if you team up with some neighbors!" The bottom of the screen is filled with encouragement to add more neighbors and players are reminded to send their friends gifts or check in on their friend's frontiers. Although this persuasion to add friends to their game is overt, other efforts are more subtle and, perhaps, more powerful. Completing buildings in the game either require getting materials from friends or purchasing them by buying horseshoes. Some objectives in the game require visiting a friend's frontier, which becomes easier by adding more friends. Premium crops in the game and many of the later missions also require either having a certain number of friends or paying for enough horseshoes to unlock objectives. *City of Wonder* takes a similar tack, with players being greeted by a pulsing purple exclamation point encouraging them to add friends, called allies, and a reminder to send their friends in-game presents. Certain objectives in the game either require the assistance of allies or can be purchased with the premium gold bars. Allied cities can be saved from random events, like invasions of pirates or menacing chickens, which rewards the visiting player with coins and experience. Either of these games could be played alone, but the constant reminders to add people and the in-game rewards from adding more people makes a persuasive case to conscript others to play the game with you. Although these games could be construed as social activities, the level of interaction is thin, as most of it falls under the heading of clicking on someone's message or doing something that gains you an advantage by visiting another frontier or city. In effect, the games require interaction with others, but on certain terms and in self-interest. Message boards and blog posts about the game are filled with requests for new 'friends' and promises to click on anything someone posts. Although these offers may lead to meeting new people, the terms on which those people are met and interacted with are framed by the game, as it socializes players into the need to add people who will give *you* what *you* need.

The economic incentives of *Frontierville* and *City of Wonder* drive a different mode of socialization for players of the games. Instead of encouraging players to see the game like a film or getting them off of their couch and into the game, these two games reward players for compulsive interaction and enlisting their friends. This form of socialization is grounded in the context of an economic model predicated on a large mass of players and the acknowledgement of churn. Players who burn out on one game can quickly replace it with another. By drawing more people in, companies have a greater chance to attract the small percentage of players who will invest

their out of game money to catch up to or surpass their friends by buying their way forward. This straightforward design, built on attracting a mass audience of compulsive players is shaped by the dynamics of the environment within which the games are played, both of which are key parts of their rhetorical construction.

EVE ONLINE

In the wake of discussing four games that actively encourage more people to play, it is important to analyze a different part of the spectrum with a game that takes an alternate approach to socializing play. *EVE Online* certainly encourages people to try the game. Developer CCP offers a fourteen-day free trial to give people a chance to do just that, but the design of the game functions in a way to push most people away. By carefully deploying specific design choices, CCP hones the audience of the game and shapes the context of their player base.

EVE Online is a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) that is different from almost any other game on the market. Attracting around 330,000 players, the game is played by the fewest people of any examined in this chapter, but there are a number of reasons why it is especially worthy of study. *EVE* features a single shard world, where everyone plays together, rather than the more common approach in MMOGs of splitting players onto servers that only hold a small fraction of the total population playing the game. This means that if you know anyone playing *EVE*, you are going to be playing with them, eliminating the need to choose between servers and, possibly, friends. The game is set in space, with a particularly dark motif to many of the graphics, giving the universe a dystopian feel, in opposition to the bright colors and fantasy settings of many competitors. Game play is relatively slow and key activities, like mining, are tremendous time sinks. If a player has ever expressed concern about the length of time on some of the old Kalimdor flight paths in *World of Warcraft*,[29] they would be aghast at the space flights between systems that can seemingly take hours. Character creation and execution is also different. Any character can pursue any and all skills for which they are qualified. Instead of picking a class, players in *EVE* can pick what they want to do and, if they change their mind, they can change their training to add their newly desired skills. *EVE*'s training is particularly friendly to casual players, as it happens around the clock, regardless of whether or not the player is logged in. There are no experience points to advance levels, only time to train skills, and players new to the game can possess skills to perform limited, but crucial roles at a level to match the most experienced pilots within a matter of a month or two.

Although these differences, and more, separate *EVE* from its competitors in its genre, the most notable difference is the brutal, harsh, cold, and

unfriendly learning curve that distinguishes the game. The game is routinely summarized in similar ways, with acknowledgement that it is "mind-numbingly harsh for those who want a pick-up game, or a game that cares if you make it beyond your first 30 days—or even 30 hours"[30] and that it has "the deserved reputation for being the hardest MMO to get a grasp of."[31] *EVE* has a virtually vertical learning curve, with a deep and complex world that is so different from other games that there is a veritable ton of information to learn. Even the game developers, CCP, note the difficulty of learning the game when beginning to play, stating that "you don't have to learn everything at once and that some things you won't ever need to learn" and "despite all our efforts to help players learn, most still gain the majority of their knowledge from other players which is the natural way of things in an MMORPG [massively multiplayer online role-playing game]."[32] This last note is perhaps the most interesting, as it presents part of the reason why the developers do not have a problem with their reputation as the most difficult MMOG to learn. The difficulty encourages player interaction, as new players must interact with older players in order to ascertain how to play the game. This has led to the development of groups like EVE University,[33] a player-run entity dedicated to educating new players about the game. The difficulty of *EVE* is notable and important, precisely because it has a tremendous impact on how players are socialized.

Two other key design components distinguish play in *EVE*. First, is the constant refrain, reinforced in both word and deed, that you should trust no one.[34] The developer's F.A.Q. about the game concludes with the warning that "this is general advice" and "we cannot guarantee any standard of behavior towards you."[35] Although vague, the intent behind this warning is reinforced by the numerous in-game actions that have thrown *EVE*'s world, individual corporations (the *EVE* versions of guilds or clans), or player accounts into chaos. In *EVE* it is legal to steal from others or engage in a creative use of game mechanics to garner an advantage, which could range from a suicide attack to destroy another player's ship and obtain the loot rights to the cargo and materials,[36] to stealing the equivalent of $45,000 in game currency in a massive investment scam,[37] to defrauding your corporation of billions in game currency,[38] or engaging in corporate espionage to dissolve a competitor.[39] In the course of *EVE* very few activities are frowned upon by the developers, and there is no protection from scams or other activities that would be deemed illicit by game managers in many other MMOGs. Account hacking and botting[40] are the two crimes punished by game administrators. The paucity of fixed rules means that *EVE Online* has a massive amount of emergent, unexpected game play, as players are given free rein to do just about whatever they like in the game world in order to find the play experiences they seek.

The companion game concept to this is that you will die in *EVE Online*; it is simply a matter of when and how often. The first commandment of *EVE* is that "the only place where you're safe in *EVE* is either docked or

offline, otherwise you're mostly fair game."[41] For many, the idea of death or risk in a game may not seem like a particularly big deal, as players die in games all of the time. However, the penalty for dying in *EVE* hearkens back to the penalties invoked in older games, like *EverQuest*. A player who is not properly prepared for the risk of death may lose almost all of their net worth and months worth of training in one fell swoop. In a world where a single ship can cost about as much as a small, used car would in the real world[42] the central role of player versus player (PvP) and death is quite meaningful. In *EVE* "you do not have any safety, like you do in a PvE [player versus environment] Warcraft realm. You do not flag on PvP. It's always on."[43] Any *EVE* player can attack any other *EVE* player in any zone in the game. There are non-player character (NPC) police that will attack those with malevolent intentions in certain areas of the game world, but the CONCORD police[44] are there to merely react to what has happened, rather than to prevent the attack in the first place. As a result, other players can destroy your ship, knowing they will be destroyed by CONCORD in order for their friends to loot the materials your ship contained. When your ship is destroyed, and "you will lose a lot of ships while you learn the ropes,"[45] you are jettisoned into space in your 'pod.' NPCs will not attack the pod, but players can, resulting in getting 'podded.' Although being podded is "nothing personal"[46] for *EVE* players, it can result in a loss of "*a month's full-time* training or more."[47] *EVE* does have game mechanisms to mitigate losses from death, including ship insurance and clones that can store your skill points in case of podding, but the existence of both programs speaks to the regularity of death in *EVE* and its potentially dire consequences. An up-to-date clone can offset much of the damage from podding, but insurance does not cover all components of the ship, making death in *EVE* a significant, harsh experience.

Logging in to *EVE* means being greeted with a message about the number of other players sharing the server with you, a number that is frequently in the mid-five figures. An introductory cinematic introduces players to the world of New Eden, which was discovered when explorers left Earth and used the EVE gate to pass through a wormhole in space. The gate later collapsed, leaving "thousands of small colonies" in a state of "complete isolation to fend for themselves, cut off from the old world" and "clinging to the brink of extinction."[48] Players are encouraged to forge their own fate in an emergent world where the bold are rewarded and the meek are punished. After choosing a race, bloodline, ancestry, and biological sex[49] players design their avatar and select a name. Players then move into the world of *EVE* where they are treated to a "crash course tutorial" about the basic mechanisms of the game. This includes early lessons in piloting a ship and ends up in a space station where a variety of different tutorial missions are vaguely matched to potential careers within the game. Although the introductory process has been adapted throughout the development of *EVE* to make learning the game less frustrating and smooth out portions of

the learning curve, the game can still be mind-numbing. The user interface probably resembles little the player has ever seen in a game. Players are flying space ships, so there is no flat ground from which to orient one's self. The choices to make and the menus to wade through are both deep and complex, throwing players into information overload almost before getting started. Complicating matters even further are the frequently incomplete instructions that infuse the early game experience with a level of frustration that borders on keyboard throwing. Players are told to do things, like add something to their overview, but they are not told *how* to do those things. One mission warns players that it may lead them through dangerous space, unless they adjust their autopilot settings, but there is no guidance on how to make those adjustments. These events typify the early game experience in *EVE* and are crucial to how the game socializes players, which is a huge part of what makes *EVE* what it is. Players are presented with windows that pop up over the top of other windows, muddling their view and creating what one MMO gamer refers to as "one of the most poorly laid out tutorials that I have ever seen."[50]

The effective function of all of these elements, from the vertical learning curve to the harsh penalties of the ever-present risk of death, hone the community of *EVE* players, much like a secretive club seeks to stay hip and trendy by staying under the radar of most people. To get through certain sections of *EVE* is a test, one that many do not pass, but just like many forms of hazing, those who do pass the unannounced exams share something in common that can prompt them to adhere to the greater group, even if you cannot trust them enough to loan them a beloved ship or in-game currency. The tutorials that lack key pieces of information work as a lateral thinking exam. Players must turn to each other or find information on their own in order to complete the tasks they are given. *EVE* has built-in support personnel, from game masters who frequently greet new players with a welcome message, to an Interstellar Services Department, a group of volunteer players who spend part of their playtime answering questions for those new to the game. Although players should not fully trust anyone, *EVE* "has quite a mature community, and a very friendly group of people who loiter in the New Citizens forum watching for a new post to answer" and the *EVE* "community is helpful and positive,"[51] even if they might blow your ship up later. There are a wealth of informational guides available to new players, often specifically designed to supplement the information the in-game tutorial omits,[52] one only has to know that they must look outside the game for them.

The game is harsh and many players will set out to shoot you down in a heartbeat, but if players are actually interested in *EVE* and do their own due diligence, a substantial portion of the *EVE* community will bend over backward to provide new players with the information needed to survive their early days in New Eden. By placing the role of primary positive socializing force on the players in the game, developer CCP quickly weeds out

those that do not care to reach out to others, as one has to ask questions and find answers to survive in *EVE*. The real focus of socialization is not necessarily about learning how to play the game, but learning how to reach out to the greater community of players in order to assimilate a new player in what it means to play *EVE*, shaping the context for play. By designing a series of tutorials that cannot be completed without filling in the gaps, *EVE* socializes players into either quitting the game in frustration or reaching out to others. In so doing, CCP has created a game that features the emergent behaviors of players as the crux of the play and continues to retain people interested in a game where the players substantively shape game play and design.

SOCIALIZING WORDPLAY

Although the games discussed in this chapter are all quite different, each begins with the use of words and design to bring players into the world of the game and set up the context for play. By socializing players into the game developers give players direction and the ability to survive and achieve their (or the game's) goals. Looking at how games socialize players into their games is one of the fundamental framing components identified by using wordplay, because it marks the point at which players enter the game world and shapes how players engage the game. Each game deploys a deliberate approach suited to the population playing the game, from the heavily scripted, highlighted mode of introduction in *Frontierville*, to the brutality of the *EVE* introduction, the motion and physical awareness of *Wii Sports*, and the movie-like, blended presentation of *Uncharted 2*. The different socializing elements of each of these games target a specific population of players and frames the context of play—a dynamic that is often shaped by larger socio-economic forces. Wordplay facilitates a focus on the ways in which games invite players to play and how the elements of socialization work to encourage particular kinds of play. Blending elements from within games to the paratexts surrounding them enables a more complete analysis of this type of discourse, a kind of assessment that is encouraged by employing wordplay as a critical tool.

Socialization into games is a foundational point for understanding how wordplay works and what it does. The pilots of *EVE* make it through a veritable boot camp that forces them to rely on their fellow citizens of *EVE*, increasing their commitment to the game and the community of players, while *Wii Sports* casts a broad net to bring in people and get them moving around their play spaces. Wordplay is about who we are and how we play games, which is tied to how words and design socialize us into play. However, wordplay also depends on who we 'see' playing games, which is framed by the discourse about how we have seen video games as 'kid's toys.'

2 Video Games as 'Kid's' Toys

Understanding wordplay requires analyzing both the content of video games and the larger context in which those games are discussed, designed, and played. The framing discourse surrounding games has a tremendous impact on both what gets played and the kinds of games that are developed. One of the key elements of the rhetorical environment surrounding games is a belief that video games are kid's toys. Although demographic data firmly refutes the idea that video games are the exclusive province of children, dominant themes most typically advanced by non-gamers focus on how video games are corrupting the young. The establishment of the perception that children are the target audience for games is a persistent one, more clearly developed in certain regions of the world than others. This belief grounds elements of how society at large processes discussions about games, making it a key element of the discourse of video games and a topic in dire need of deconstruction to better understand how words about video games impact the design and play of them.

The establishment of children as a key target market for video games is a relatively recent phenomenon, even in the truncated history of video games as a whole. Initially designed at places like research laboratories[1] or by a group of students at one of the world's leading universities[2] and requiring sophisticated equipment to play, video games were more available to adults and college students than children. Early arcade games continued the trend, with Atari user testing taking place in a local bar. Arcades then became a place that parents warned their kids to avoid because of perceptions about their clientele and sometimes seedy locations. The introduction of home gaming systems, like the Atari VCS/2600 and Intellivision, changed the dynamics of users somewhat as games were introduced into private space, but the audience for video games cut across many major demographics, not just children. In the United States, the roots of contemporary discussions surrounding video games were formed in the wake of the video game crash of 1984, as the video game industry in North America shrank, subsequently opening space for the introduction of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES).

A substantial part of Nintendo's advertising campaign for the NES was aimed at children as potential consumers of video games. Children had certainly been a target market prior to the NES, as video games were generally

sold in toy departments and Chuck E. Cheese blended video games with food only a child could enjoy, but Nintendo's marketing campaign effectively equated video game players with young children, predominantly boys. The late 1980s rise of Nintendo "infiltrated every conceivable market until the question was not whether Nintendo's invasion would succeed but what the invaders would leave in their wake."[3] In his history of Nintendo, David Sheff notes that "many people see the company as an evil force because it deals in video games, hypnotizers of the youth."[4] Moral panics surrounding new technologies are not exclusive to video games; the introduction of everything from books to rock and roll was met with great concern as the powers that be were shocked at how the new media form shifted society. In the case of Nintendo, concerns included the amount of time children spent focused on playing and discussing games, the rise of injuries induced by playing too much Nintendo, and that addiction to games was creating a tribe of Nintendo zombies. The importance of children and video games was recognized by culture at large, but also established through Nintendo's advertising, which was targeted "almost exclusively to children and teens."[5] Children were seen as prominent players within the ads and ads ran during children's programming; Nintendo's target audience was the young.

The original Nintendo generation has grown up, but the company's focus on children lingers and wordplay can help explicate how the policies of the past still impact video games. Those who were candidates for "Nintendo zombie" status are now much older and may be working in the game industry or playing games that are quite different than the ones they played as children, but social perceptions about video games have not grown up so easily.[6] Changes in audience, as well as in society more broadly, have created a different environment for game design and play, but the previously established discursive structures linger. Understanding implications of the previous discussion about children and games requires looking first to the demographics of game players and then moving to contemporary discourse about children and video games.

WHO PLAYS GAMES NOW?

Contemporary demographic data on video game players illustrates how video games are not an exclusive realm for children. For most people that actively play games, these data and anecdotal evidence to support it are almost second nature, as 'we' know that it is not just children who play video games. Even more so, for many gamers, the games that are trotted out in public as potential threats to children are games older gamers also believe should not be played by kids. However, any discussion about the intersection of video games and children requires looking at the various target markets for video games because plenty has changed from the early days of Nintendo's focus on the young.

Although the types of people playing video games have diversified, the young are one of the largest audiences of game players. Recent research in the United States indicates that 99% of boys and 94% of girls, 97% of children overall, play video games, with most playing frequently.[7] As girls age they are less likely to play video games, but more than half still play some form of video game. The marked change in who is playing video games over the past few decades is best seen when looking at older segments of the population. Currently, over half of adults in the United States and four in five young adults are playing video games.[8] Over 20% of those adults play at least almost every day and the more educated one is, up to having some college education, the more likely one is to play video games.[9] Those adults who do play are more likely to be avid game players and more likely to play on a computer, while younger demographics tend to prefer other gaming platforms, like consoles and handheld devices.

As the earliest generations to play video games have gotten older, the average age of video game players has increased; the average gamer is now a thirty-four-year-old with twelve years of gaming experience.[10] The debut of additional gaming platforms, from the Wii to the iPad, and a general aging of the population in key countries have led to a situation where the stereotypical young boy, the potential Nintendo zombie, is no longer the primary target market for most video games. Those in or around the industry know this; they feel it in their bones and see it on the faces of those they know who play games. However, elements of the larger public discourse about games has not changed, as those who are increasingly in the minority, those who do not play video games, participate in recycling an antiquated image of video game players to support certain political stances ostensibly in an effort to protect the young. Understanding why the construction of audience is important to wordplay requires three steps. First, it is important to look to the primary concerns about kid's video game play habits. By focusing on issues of violence in games and addiction to playing games video games are often portrayed as a new moral panic where children could be brainwashed, desensitized, or zombified. Beyond an initial look at the broad issues surrounding children and games, two case studies offer a deeper perspective on issues of mature content and violence in video games and their effect on the young. Finally, it is crucial to look at contemporary industry efforts to refigure the audience of gamers and appeal to a broader, heterogeneous group of players in the advertising for motion-based game systems and how those campaigns can shift the terrain of words about video games.

VIDEO GAMES AND KIDS

Public discourse about video games and children or adolescents generally revolves around a series of recurrent points. Initially it is noted that video games are increasingly played by young people and that video games can

have a powerful impact on their lives. Often the benefits of gaming will be noted, with particular attention placed on the increase in manual dexterity that can be obtained by playing games. This is usually followed by a set of warnings about the negative impacts on children, which typically revolve around the addictive qualities of games and the violent, mature content within them. Both of these factors are at least partially attributed to the interactivity qualities of video games, as opposed to the passive consumption encouraged by most other forms of media, like television. Tracking these debates, with a particular focus on which elements of video games and culture they emphasize aids in charting the connections between target audience and wordplay.

Often concerns about children's use of video games are grounded in the holdings of the Provenzo report, which was prepared for U.S. Congress in the wake of Nintendo's expansion into North America. Frequently, critics focus on Eugene Provenzo's contention that the primary target audience of video games was children and that games have been developed with substantial amounts of violent, sexist, and racist content.[11] Provenzo's ideas are rooted in the notion that video games shift audiences from being passive spectators into being active participants through their engagement with the mediated text. As a result, the potential harm for players comes from actually performing the activities on the screen, which has led to the accusation by some that video games are violence simulators. In his take on violent video games, pop psychologist Dr. Phil contends that "violent games activate their [young players] anger center while dampening the brain's 'conscience.' And think of the more subtle impact. What do you think the effect is when your kids spend time with violence simulators that glorify gang culture, celebrate brutality, lionize crudeness, and trivialize violence toward women?"[12] Making a subtle shift in the decades since Provenzo's report, Dr. Phil moves the discourse away from strong, declarative statements about the impacts of video games and toward a series of potentially unanswerable questions. Without clear evidence to support his point, Dr. Phil centers his interpretation of violent games upon a particular psychological philosophy about the way the brains of young children work then follows this with a question, rather than a statement. In so doing, Dr. Phil's audience is led to a conclusion of their own making, rendering it impossible to prove him wrong and capitalizing on any potential biases among audience members. One cannot simply cite studies or research in response; one must answer the meticulously framed question Dr. Phil asks. When 54% of U.S. adults believe that violent games lead to a more violent society,[13] his argument is made implicitly.[14] Further, by reframing video games as violence simulators the tone of the discourse shifts. Any contention that games can be played for fun or for other ends is shelved, as the content of certain games is to be rejected without question because they most certainly train players to perform illicit, socially destructive acts.

In response to early fears about the content of games and the Provenzo report, the U.S. video game industry developed the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) in 1994 to review and rate games and their suitability for different audiences. The ratings system combines six-age based classifications, from Early Childhood to Adults Only, and included a group of content descriptors, like language, nudity, and violent references to add context to the ratings.[15] Although the program is voluntary, almost every game is rated, as many retailers will not stock unrated games. The fundamental issue in developing a rating system for video games is the massive amount of content contained within an average video game. Many games have thirty-plus hours worth of activity, more than ten times as much as a typical movie. The end result of a rating system is that the decision for what games should be played is left in the hands of parents, who are given information to make choices about what games their children should play. This idea, that game choice for children is "a personal decision for each family to make" and one that "can vary from child to child and one circumstance to another,"[16] outsources the decision from regulatory control to parental oversight. This enables the games industry to skirt governmental restrictions, but does not eliminate judgments about which games are proper for children to play. Establishment of the ESRB allowed the creation of a broader selection of titles, as the industry could clearly label them as not for children. However, the continued belief by some that children are the target audience for games perpetuates criticism of the content in video games.

In addition to concerns about the impact of mature content on the young, games are to be feared because of their 'addictive' qualities. The notion of addiction to games is frequently tied to young people who fall far too deep into the world of video games, displacing many of the other activities in their life, most notably school, family, and friends. Treatment programs have sprung up to address this issue, with one program greeting visitors to its website with the message that "anyone who has experienced it knows all too well—video game addiction is real."[17] Although the site acknowledges that the American Medical Association has "not yet officially" recognized video game addiction as a diagnosable disorder, the site portrays video game addiction as certitude, one suffered by ten to fifteen percent of the teens who play games. A guide for parents notes that "according to some studies it would appear that the excitement of video games causes the brain to release a chemical that is, in essence, addictive. For any parent who has seen the fervor by which some kids play video games, this news is no surprise."[18] Concerns like these work from the presumption that video game addiction is real then confirm that position by meticulously selecting extreme cases that demonstrate clear problems with the role of video games in certain people's lives. Although adults are mentioned in a fraction of addiction discourse, those portrayed as suffering are disproportionately children or teens. This approach borrows from early social discussions in

the U.S. surrounding video games, within which video games were targeted to prey on children by sucking them into compelling worlds they could not escape. By starting from the assumption that addiction to video games is a fact and selecting compelling stories of problematic use, a particular narrative is reified, one that depends on children as the target audience of video games to make the argument more powerful. Further, as these arguments are often addressed to non-gamers, there is a gap in the level of understanding about how games work. This can be exploited, making the issue more urgent, especially when danger is lurking for the young people parents are supposed to raise and nurture.

The consequences of these trends and the importance of children within them can be best seen by looking at a gamer's perspective on the discussion about problematic play. Although gamers may use the word addiction to talk about their play habits and refer to games as *Evercrack* or *World of Warcrack*, when talking about game addiction as a whole they generally resituate the debate by focusing on the problematic use of games by some individuals.[19] Gamers look at presentations like the 2010 BBC *Panorama* documentary on video game addiction and note,

> Chris Dando kicked in his sister's bedroom door in when his parents turned off his connection to *World of Warcraft*, Joe Staley dropped out of university when he became addicted to his Xbox. But focusing on these extreme cases just showed me how abnormal games addiction is, and how these sad stories are so unlike anything I've encountered in the 30 years I've been playing games.[20]

A separate response prefaces much of the analysis with the contention that "I do not possess the evidence that gaming does not cause addiction. What I do know, from an enormous amount of time spent researching the subject, and interviewing those researching the subject at an academic level on both sides of the argument, is that there is no evidence that games *do* cause addiction."[21] In making these arguments, those who play video games actively note the gap between the aberrant, destructive play of a handful of admittedly devastating examples and the norms of play for those they know. Gamers typically place responsibility on the parents to regulate all sorts of media use, just as they believe the parents should monitor other forms of behavior, like using drugs or skipping school.

The key theme of problematic use or addictiveness in games is that the argument for addictiveness is predicated on the belief that children are at risk and parents need to oversee their behavior. If demographic data, like the thirty-four-year-old average video game player, was fully acknowledged, a more holistic recognition of the impact of video games on the populous could be made. However, outside observers are primarily concerned with the alleged impacts on the young. Video games are equated

with the potentially devastating impacts of drugs and alcohol, with the added kicker of a presumption that they are designed to entrap children in the first place. Concerns about problematic play would likely persist even without the focus on children and video games, but the historical legacy of the discourse fuels the ongoing discussion about the inherent risks of video games for children.

The overarching threads of the discussion about violence and addictiveness offer an overview of the implications of children and video games, but a deep look at two specific controversies shows how wordplay helps explain the stakes of assumptions about the intended audience for video games.

MASS EFFECT

The original *Mass Effect* game was released in 2007 by BioWare and was rated Mature by the ESRB, which means that it "may be suitable for ages 17 and older."[22] After about thirty hours of play, players may be presented with the option to engage in a romantic relationship with one of their crewmates. Players are able to choose to play as either a female or male Shepard[23] and can develop a heterosexual[24] relationship with a human crewmate or romance a blue-skinned alien crewmate who possesses a female appearance.[25] In order to develop a relationship with any of the other characters in the game, players must choose a certain set of dialogue options and elect to complete a specific set of missions within the game. If they do not select these conversation choices or decide not to do certain optional missions they may complete the game without ever engaging in a romantic relationship. If they do successfully romance one of their crewmates a brief sex scene plays that is "no more risqué in its plot or graphic in its depiction than evening network television"[26] and players are granted the Paramour achievement.

The reason why *Mass Effect* is interesting in the course of children and gaming is because of two controversial incidents spurred by a handful of conservative reports about the nature of the sex scene in the game. One salvo was launched by Kevin McCullough in an article titled "The 'Sex-Box' Race for President." In the editorial, McCullough asks campaigning presidential candidates to take a stand

> on the new video game that one company is marketing to fifteen year old boys. It's called "*Mass Effect*" and it allows its players—universally male no doubt—to engage in the most realistic sex acts ever conceived. One can custom design the shape, form, bodies, race, hair style, breast size of the images they wish to "engage" and then watch in crystal clear, LCD, 54 inch screen, HD clarity as the video game "persons" hump in every form, format, multiple gender-oriented possibility they can think of.[27]

This statement drew the most criticism from Electronic Arts, which had recently acquired *Mass Effect*'s developer BioWare, and gamers, but McCullough continued,

> Yet here's a question that deserves to be asked, and in all likelihood will not be: "How much moral judgment should the President push into legislative issues that are likely to severely damage our children's innocence, function, and capability?" I hear the nay-sayers claiming I'm being the wild and crazed Bible thumper I've always been—but its [sic] a worthwhile question isn't it?[28]

Later likening the game to pornography that can inspire serial killing, the key objection advanced was the concern that the adult content in a video game would corrupt the young. There was a clear objection to the perceived nature of the content in the game, but his outrage was reserved for what it would do to the children who may end up playing the game. Shelving the inaccuracies about his portrayal of the game, McCullough's rage is funneled toward game makers who are designing games that offer high fidelity virtual sex to children. Along similar lines, a different article was built around commentary from Cathy Ruse, a lawyer at the Family Research Council, who contended that *Mass Effect* is "clearly marketed to minors" and argued that "there are cultural implications for feeding porn to kids in this way . . . it is profoundly naïve to suggest that feeding children graphic sexual material is going to have no effect on their psyche. That's just stupid to think that."[29] Complementing the two online articles was a Fox News report titled "'SE'XBOX?" with the banner headline "New Video Game Shows Full Digital Nudity and Sex." The anchor introducing the story stated that she "was looking at it a little bit this afternoon" and continued to discuss how players could see "full digital nudity" and the player gets to decide "exactly what's going to happen between the two people if you know what I mean."[30] The primary concern in the piece was not necessarily that there is sex present in a video game, but that the game was being marketed to children. In the coverage, the game was subsequently described as "Luke Skywalker meets *Debbie Does Dallas*." The psychologist in the report, Cooper Lawrence, introduced her comments by stating, "[W]ho's playing video games? Adolescent males, not their dads."[31] The Fox panelists also expressed concerns that, because mothers were not in the home as much as they were in the "days of the *Playboy* magazine," we really need to watch out for video games and expressed regret that we were no longer in the days of "Atari[32] and pinball and *Pac-Man*." Throughout these pieces there may be disdain for adults who play these games, but a special level of criticism for the video game industry is lodged based on the fear that these games are designed to be played by the hands of children.

In response to the news coverage, gamers spoke out, as "the internet hath no fury like a gamer scorned."[33] Gamers generally stressed that the scenes were taken out of context or were not as significant as they were

made out to be.[34] They also argued that the Mature rating of the game means that *Mass Effect* was most definitely not targeted at children. Electronic Arts, the parent company of the game's developer, outlined a variety of factual errors in the reports, concluding that the arguments presented in these pieces were "insulting to the men and women who spent years" creating *Mass Effect* when plenty of programs on the Fox network were more graphically explicit and seen by more children than *Mass Effect*.[35] Some were less decorous, offering to "pay $100 for the version of *Mass Effect* he [McCullough] played. $200. Come on BioWare, cough it up. Of course the version of the game McCullough played doesn't exist, mainly because he obviously didn't touch the game."[36] Gamers argued that the critics assume "the game is marketed towards children, because why the hell would full-grown adults play video games?"[37] Gamers also directed their outrage at those who critiqued *Mass Effect*, sending emails to the authors and review-bombing psychologist Cooper Lawrence's new book.[38]

Both McCullough and Lawrence responded to the criticism, with Lawrence retracting her earlier comments after watching more of *Mass Effect* as she regrets "saying that, and now I've seen the game and seen the sex scenes it's kind of a joke. Before the show I had asked somebody about what they had heard and they had said it's like pornography . . . But it's not like pornography. I've seen episodes of 'Lost' that are more sexually explicit."[39] On the other hand, McCullough refused to back down, issuing a response titled "Life Lessons: Gamers 'Rights' to Lesbo-Alien Sex!," complete with insulting and vulgar emails he received from gamers.[40] Later, after opening up his radio talk show to gamers,[41] he apologized for two points: that the Federal Trade Commission had documented a reduction in the number of underage buyers able to purchase Mature rated games and that the amount of play time required to reach the scenes in question means that the percentage of objectionable content in *Mass Effect* is minimal.[42] However, he maintained his "original position that the objectionable content in *Mass Effect* is still offensive, and should be kept out of the hands of those under age."[43]

The debate surrounding *Mass Effect* demonstrates how important the role of children as the idealized potential audience of video games is to those that do not actively play video games. *Mass Effect* was controversial not necessarily because of the scenes in question, but because those scenes were placed in a video game and could subsequently be seen and processed out of context. As Lawrence notes in her apology, *Lost* could be more objectionable, but the same critics do not necessarily think of *Lost* as a show aimed at children, likely because they watch the show or better understand the dynamics of marketing television shows. Should similar content appear in *Dora The Explorer* the same forces are likely to fly off of their hinges, perhaps for very good measure. However, even with a Mature audiences rating, the perception was that the target audience for *Mass Effect* was children and adolescents, rather than the thirty-four-year-old,

demographically average gamer. Gamers quickly parsed the discourse, noting that the game was not intended for children, but the lingering memories of better days of yore, when *Pac-Man* was a hit, shapes the discursive environment surrounding games, placing game companies and game players in a position where they are forced to defend their habits against those who simply do not understand the context of the video games they discuss.

VIOLENCE AND GAMES: SCHWARZENEGGER V. ENTERTAINMENT MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION

In addition to potentially objectionable sexual content in games, violent content in video games also fuels public outrage, which led to the passage of a California law prohibiting the sale of violent video games to children. The law would treat violent video games like pornography,[44] establishing a system in which there "can be a type of video game that would be legal to sell to adults but illegal to sell to kids."[45] The assemblyperson introducing the law developed it because he believes that "ultra-violent games can harm kids in ways other forms of entertainment can't."[46] This feeling led him to construct a bill that would require the labeling of "violent video games" and "provide that a person who violates the act [by selling a prohibited game to a minor] shall be liable in an amount of up to $1,000 for each violation."[47] The bill lays out several criteria to determine what would make a game obscene, including a reasonable person standard to assess that the game as a whole possesses "appeals to a deviant or morbid interest of minors" and that the violence in the game "causes the game, as a whole, to lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for minors."[48] The law was ruled unconstitutional by the courts, largely because if it were to be enforced it would mean that video games were held to a different standard than most other forms of media, effectively "saying there is something different—and more potentially damaging—about video games compared to books, movies, [and] music."[49]

Oral arguments in front of the U.S. Supreme Court revolved around a number of issues including: violent content in Grimm's fairy tales, whether laws like this could be applied to music,[50] and "how the gaming industry could say that prohibitions against the sale of some sexual content to kids was ok but the same against violence are not."[51] One analysis suggested that

> the industry's lawyer ducked justices' repeated requests to help identify ways of regulating violent games that would pass muster. He contended that America has long presented violence to children in books, movies, comic books, and other forms, so violent video games fit a tradition.[52]

In response, Chief Justice John G. Roberts responded that some acts, in particularly violent video games, were something that "we protect children

from."[53] In short, oral arguments were "full of feisty exchanges about free speech and protecting kids."[54]

This case and the issues surrounding it are somewhat different than the risks perceived in the rising threat of Nintendo and the harm from playing a video game for hours to see a brief, network television acceptable sex scene in *Mass Effect*. Those in favor of the law pose the argument that video games present a unique, powerful threat to contemporary society and our children. Their presumption was that video games must be regulated differently than other forms of media because the content of these games are particularly dangerous and the mode of interaction is especially seductive. Chief Justice Roberts outlined this position in oral arguments, contending that "in these video games the child is not sitting there passively watching something; the child is doing the killing. The child is doing the maiming. And I suppose that might be understood to have a different impact on the child's moral development."[55]

In the development of this law and the consideration of this case, there is an acknowledgement that there may be an adult audience for video games, but the underlying principles behind the line of argument supporting the legislation was that video games risk such a harm to children that they must be considered distinct in the realm of entertainment. The presumption behind this position was that industry and parental efforts were not enough to protect children and the government had a vested interest in adding an additional layer of protection to stand between children and a particular type of video game. Video games are portrayed as a danger similar to pornography, cigarettes, and guns; a clear and present threat to the health and development of the young.

This position hinges on a particular understanding of the way video games work and what they do—one rooted in the belief that video games can turn children into Nintendo zombies. This line of argument is updated and adapted to account for adults as a potential market for video games, but retains the presumption that images on a screen connected to player-controlled button pressing can be particularly damaging to the young. Different than the discussion about addiction, but rooted in the psychological work on violence, video games are dangerous because of the connection to children. This belief is frequently held by those with a lack of extended first-hand experience with video games. Regardless of who is right with regard to the impact of these games on children, the notable issue with regard to wordplay is how the debate is shaped and how video games are constructed as a unique media form.

In the midst of oral arguments, when California's attorney admitted limited experience with video games and most Justices shared the vague understanding of how the games worked beyond the images they were shown in a series of recorded, non-interactive videos, video games were defined by their interrelationship with children. Although the Supreme Court held that the law was unconstitutional, arguments from both sides demonstrated a

lack of understanding about how video games work and who plays video games. Books, music, and movies were constructed as less threatening because of their lack of interactivity and because examples of that kind of content with adult themes are not perceived as being targeted at children. Perhaps most importantly, other media forms were not as scary precisely because they are well understood by all those involved in the case. Without assigning a particular value judgment on either side of the argument, this law centered concerns about video games on children, reifying the status of video games as kid's toys, even when these games are explicitly designed to only be played by 'mature audiences.'

ADAPTING WORDS: CHANGING THE TERMS OF THE DISCUSSION

The primary way to shift the discourse about kids and video games is to witness a long-term, ongoing alteration of the observed target audience of video games. Debates about children and video games are likely to shift at the point when the general public reaches a level of understanding about video games similar to the current knowledge about other media forms, like books and television. Quite simply, the lingering implications of children's prominence as a target audience for games persists because of a lack of first-hand information, the residual power of anecdotal evidence, and sophisticated marketing campaigns. Currently, the best example of a potential for seismic shifts can be seen in the advertising for Microsoft's Kinect and Nintendo's Wii.

Similar to the ads for the Nintendo Wii and *Wii Sports* discussed in Chapter 1, advertisements for Microsoft's Kinect feature a wide range of people interacting with the game. Instead of focusing on showing game action, the ads focus on who plays these games and how they are played. Snippets of the different games that can be played are shown, but the bulk of the ad is filmed from the perspective of the television that looks out on to the players. This makes sense, given that both the Kinect and Wii are based on changing the mode of gaming toward motion and away from button pressing, but the most fascinating part of the ads are *who* is shown playing. These ads typically feature pairs of players, often demographically mismatched dyads, interacting with the games together. In altering who is shown playing the games, both the Wii and the Kinect seek to shift the demographics of gamers away from the traditional construction of who plays games toward something new, something different, something that is demographically diverse. In so doing, they also offer the potential to redefine public conceptions about what video games are and what constitutes an appropriate standard bearer of 'video game player.' A deeper look at the promotion for Kinect offers a chance to see how newer developments in words, design, and play offer the opportunity to leave the rhetoric of 'kid's play' behind.

Television advertisements for Kinect follow a relatively standard pattern. Ads begin from the perspective of the television, looking out on to a scene with players preparing to play Kinect by putting a coat on their couch or preparing some drinks.[56] After seemingly sizing up the game, players launch into play, often in pairs and frequently surrounded by onlookers who seem to relish the opportunity to watch their friends connect with the Kinect. The groups are diverse in terms of age, race, and gender, although all the play spaces are large and all of the rooms in which the Kinect is played are quite well decorated, indicating a lack of diversity in economic class.[57] The ads frequently close with the slogan "you are the controller," emphasizing the fundamental shift Microsoft seeks to make in how video games are played. This motif is continued on the Kinect website, which promises that Kinect offers "something for everyone" as "whether you're a gamer or not, anyone can play and have a blast . . . Kinect promises a gaming experience that's safe, secure, and fun for everyone."[58] Although much of the focus in discussion about the Kinect and Wii is about how they change how games are played, the focus on who is targeted to play the games is just as important.

The Kinect certainly seeks to change how games are played, offering a mimetic interface with the promise that "you already know how to play. All you have to do now is get off the couch,"[59] but that promise is grounded in the premise that the potential audience for these games is broader than the one that prefers learning how to play a game while sitting on their couch. In seeking to change the 'how' in playing games, Kinect also seeks to shift the 'who' and, as more people are included in playing games, the notion of the target audience for video games will change. Messages for the Kinect and the Wii reach far beyond the traditional base of gaming and, although some gamers may decry that these products are not for them, the broader appeal stands to benefit them greatly as the larger cultural discourse surrounding games changes. The relevance of this kind of appeal is particularly notable in contrast to advertising for Sony's PlayStation Move. Instead of seeking to broaden the audience of potential players, Sony appealed to their base of core gamers, frequently ridiculing the shortcomings of the Microsoft and Nintendo projects.[60] Rather than showing a broad swath of people playing, advertisements for the Move tend to be shot from behind the player, to illustrate both graphics and motion. Further, the players are more likely to fit the average demographic data about the typical gamer, featuring a homogenous group of adult men using the Move. Although there are many factors in making a potential new platform a success, this limited type of appeal translated into an "understated launch of Sony's new Move controller [that] has not significantly moved the needle on hardware or software sales."[61] The Kinect and Wii mark the potential redefinition of the discourse of video games, both as more people gain firsthand experience playing games and as a broader cross-section of people are seen playing games. These shifts mark an opportunity to redefine how video games are seen and

discussed across the political spectrum, likely altering the context for the design and play of video games.

Interesting side effects of this kind of shift can already be seen in public discourse, as games are increasingly seen as being integrated into daily life[62] and into our education system.[63] Additional gaming platforms, specifically smartphones, feature games like *Angry Birds* that "are reaching a wide audience of players who might never consider buying an Xbox or PlayStation,"[64] promise to alter not only who is playing, but on what devices video games are being played. Further changes are occurring politically, one of which is Australia's new government backed initiative to include an 18+ rating into their game rating system.[65] Previously topping out at a 15+ rating, Australia was in a situation where some games were not sold in the country and others that were rated 18+ in other countries carried a 15+ rating in Australia. The push for recognition of older audiences is an overt acknowledgement that video games are not just for children. The Minister for Home Affairs and Justice argued that "a decision for change will mean that Australian adults can have easier access to the games they want and parents will be equipped to make sensible decisions about the games their kids play."[66] This added distinction marked a cultural shift, one that is likely to continue, where the invoked audience of games changes and the discourse of games is adjusted to suit the multiple potential target markets of players.

Audience is a key concern for rhetoricians, as it is a primary means by which to assess questions of meaning and persuasion. As messages are always targeted at some sort of group, understanding the audience is crucial for rhetorical analysis. Audience plays a similar role for wordplay, as the target market for games shapes what kinds of games are made and how they are perceived. Wordplay helps assess audience beyond that limited role, as concerns about youth gaming demonstrate that video games hold a cultural position that transcends the insular boundaries of just those who make and play games. Promotion to a space where cultural critics pay attention to video games changes what they are and how they connect to culture at large. Wordplay aids analysis of both the internal and external audiences of games with the understanding that video games are made for people, but that audiences beyond those who play games also construct the words surrounding video games.

Using wordplay to study those who play games helps demonstrate the external forces that help shape the context for video games. Although game design alters how games are played, lingering public perceptions about video games are influential, regardless of their relative accuracy. Beyond public discourse and socialization in games, context is also shaped by technological changes, as contemporary modes of communication offer an opportunity for game design to become a circular process when gamers and designers interact.

3 Talking Game Design

Some of the most significant forces in the discourse of video games originate from the players who play them. Developers have a clear role in the rhetorical force of games, as they are a key part of the authorial voice designing games in the first place. Society at large sets the framework for the contextual boundaries about what games are made and who is seen as an appropriate player. Coding languages and procedures, as well as the consoles and technologies used to play video games are also crucial components in setting up the structures surrounding video games. In light of all these considerations, the role of the player in shaping the discourse of games is easy to ignore, however they help make video games what they are and what they will be.

The importance of players is most apparent when one starts to think about the relationship between the game industry and the people who play games. Developers, designers, and publishers take the role of authors. They make games and produce texts that many find enjoyable, but others find to be a despicable waste of time. The code, processes, and technology of video games can be tied to the channel of or scene for communication, as they set the terms for interaction. However, the audience response to a game is a crucial part of the words, design, and play that can easily be overlooked. From a rhetorical standpoint, all messages are made for an audience and it is the audience that determines the success of the text. Examples of the importance of the audience are riddled throughout society. From student papers written for specific professors to political speeches given to particular constituencies, the people for whom the message is intended are crucial to the development of a message. One of the first objectives for strong students facing a new professor is trying to figure out what makes them tick, so they can better develop papers and exam answers to suit the person who will be assessing their work. Politicians may have an overarching theme to their campaign, but the presentation of that message shifts when moving from meeting with one interest group to the next. Video games are also subject to the various interests of their audiences as it is the players who buy, talk about, and modify games.[1] In the case of games that contain robust online and offline components game design can get even trickier,

as those who buy the game to play offline may not care about the online offerings, potentially requiring designers to effectively create two different, balanced[2] games worthy of a consumer's purchase.

Beyond the players themselves, the channels present for communication between players and designers shape wordplay as a critical tool. Prior to the massive spread of blogs, forums, and various news sources about games, game producers were relatively isolated from their audiences. Certainly, there were ways in which the people making games got feedback from those who played them. One of the most sophisticated outreach efforts was made by Nintendo of America, who used game registration cards,[3] their in-house publication *Nintendo Power*,[4] and their phone-in help line[5] to gather information from gamers. Nintendo then used the data gathered from these tools to sell players whatever new product was set to be released. Another way for the audience of players to interact with game developers is to develop user modifications for popular games or be hired into the industry.[6] However, the spread and mass adoption of the internet, combined with the increase in market value of the game industry, presents myriad ways for the audience of games to interact with the authors of games. The development of additional channels for communication makes the context for wordplay all the more profound, as the interactions between audience and author are richer, deeper, and more complex than in the past.

The paths for interchange between those who make games and those who play them alter the context for what games are made and how they are played. Additional outlets for players to talk about games, especially forums and blogs, give players the chance to actively reshape the terrain of gaming particularly because many are read by developers. Similar channels of communication also give developers a chance to directly address players. This leads to situations where prominent players are in a position to directly interact with developers or where developers reach out to their audiences in an effort to clarify their intent and rally support for a game. The means by which developers interact with their audiences continues to change, as demonstrated by a major game developer that opted for a blog format to "foster developer communication to the players without some of the inherent problems of posting in forums."[7] As the amount of public discussion about games increases, wordplay must adapt. The developer–player (or author–audience) relationship becomes more complex, as players are increasingly participating in the construction of the games they play.

Tracing the ramifications of more outlets for communication on the dynamics of wordplay requires a deeper look at how these new channels work and how they alter the relationship between author and audience. Starting with some of the ways developers have sought to directly communicate with players outside of the game and moving to case studies of specific ways players have reshaped how their games of choice are played it is possible to trace how words from and to players are key components of the discourse of video games.

DEVELOPERS: REACHING OUT TO PLAYERS

The clearest link to wordplay begins by examining how developers reach out to players in an effort to (re)define how their game is seen. Developers often address players directly to communicate the rationale behind a key decision, seek to build anticipation about an upcoming development, or attempt to make players feel more invested in the games they are playing. In these situations players are not directly impacting the design of a game, but they still dictate the terms on which the discourse of video games is built.

Another reason developers may choose to engage players is as part of a larger community management strategy. In the case of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, the addition of a new Senior Community Coordinator led to increased participation from developers in "fan podcasts, websites, and the official forums," as for gamers "it is always refreshing to fans when developers sit down with them to answer their questions."[8] Adopting this strategy is an acknowledgement that the players of the game matter and, by reaching out to them and answering questions, the players participating in the game are likely to be more committed to it. In the case of a *Star Wars* game, it is particularly notable that this addition to staff was made well before the game launched. The vibrant, pre-existing community of fans could be counted on to stoke anticipation for the game, but only if they were properly managed. Large game titles, predominantly in the MMOG genre, depend mightily on the ongoing subscription payments of their players, which make the level of investment of those players crucially important. The addition of positions like "Senior Community Coordinator" is further acknowledgement that video games are not solely constituted by what is on the disc or in the lines of code, but also by the discussion surrounding the game, as publishers are increasingly recognizing the importance of how they and their games are perceived by their audience.

Similar examples of reaching out to a community of players can be found in a variety of different games, from large budget titles to small ones. Shortly after *APB: All Points Bulletin* was shut down, the game was purchased by a different developer, GamersFirst,[9] to be relaunched as a free-to-play game. In an effort to guide discussion and recapture gamers who had been playing *APB*, one of the executives of GamersFirst began a blog to update players on the plans for the new version of the game at key points of time. The beginning of closed and open betas was announced, so that gamers could participate in the reconstruction of *APB-Reloaded*.[10] Another example of developers reaching out to the player community occurred when the development team behind the independent hit *Super Meat Boy* used a blog post to announce their response to a PETA protest of their game and the integration of a playable Tofu Boy, complete with "Inflated Ego" and who is "[n]ot actually as effective as he thinks he is"[11] as a downloadable update to the game. The response let the developers, Team Meat, capitalize on the publicity surrounding criticism from a prominent animal-rights organization,

while providing the "typically wisecracking" response expected by players of the game.[12] A blog can focus players on the strengths of a game, like explaining "the design decisions that make you, the player, the center of the action,"[13] while also framing the "hardest and most controversial decision" as "where to stop,"[14] portraying the limitations of the game as a strength, rather than a weakness. *EVE Online* used developer communication with their player base to similar effect because players had concerns that "highlighted problems with CCP's [*EVE*'s developer] approach to communicating with players and the way feedback was collected." This led the company to begin "making an absolutely colossal effort to communicate more with players through focused technical devblogs[15] and a series of video blogs."[16] The trend toward communicating with players is so pronounced that even behemoth game company Sony Computer Entertainment America launched a blog for the PlayStation[17] because the company had "learned, perhaps the hard way . . . that a blog like this is really about you and the things you want to hear, share and discuss with us. With that in mind, you'll notice that comments are enabled—and encouraged—so tell us what you want to see here and we'll do our best to make it happen."[18]

The result of all this communication is at least a partial acknowledgement on the part of game development companies that games are designed for audiences and that the audience needs to be addressed. Contemporary modes of communication make it easy for companies to reach out to consumers and players are helping to decide the direction for game design. Video game players, through their interactions with developers, have an impact on the games that are made and how those games are executed. A player's role in discussion about video game design and play is not limited to passive consumption of communication from game designers; they can also be active participants in constructing the discourse of video games.

PLAYERS: SHAPING THE GAMES THEY PLAY

Beyond extra-game discussion on blogs and forums, players are key producers of words, design, and play in three clear ways: the overlap between players and developers, the reviews certain players issue about games, and the design elements within certain games predicated on the participation of players. Developers know they need to address the audience for their games, but applying wordplay shows how the participation of players is intertwined throughout video games.

The cleanest link between the audience for and the author of video games is in the overlap between the two groups. Although there may be a game developer or two who does not actively play games, generally the game development population is overrun by active, engaged gamers who play a wide variety of different games and possess strong opinions about all of them. Although the identification of game developers as game players

is far from revolutionary, the tangible impact of the overlap is that because developers play games as audience members they are exposed to ideas and concepts that may wriggle their way into or out of the games on which they are working. This is further muddled by the long history of hiring active players onto development and design teams. From the *Doom* modders hired by Ion Storm[19] to hiring particularly active, vocal players onto development teams[20] or seeking to hire game modders who have developed particularly interesting modifications of existing games,[21] the design community regularly turns players into developers. The overlap between the two groups is notable because traditional analysis of video games frequently focuses on the elements within games or the development of games, rather than on how, as game players, the active play of games impacts the construction of and discourse surrounding video games.

Beyond the class of gamers who also make games, another highly influential audience for video games is the critics who review video games. In the early years of video games, one often needed to rely on information from friends or potentially uninformed store clerks for recommendations on which games to play. Now, the presence of a wealth of different resources on the internet devoted to reviewing games makes it ridiculously easy for gamers to find out the relative merits of a game without having to personally play, buy, or rent the title. This makes game reviewers a crucial audience for designers, as particularly good or bad reviews can have a substantial impact on the success of any given title. To this end, review aggregators, like Metacritic, have a central role as producers of discourse about video games. This system highly rewards games that are critics' darlings, differentiating the video game industry from other forms of entertainment, like television or movies, where there is often an inverse relationship between the quality of reviews and popularity. Some game companies, like Take-Two, which produces highly acclaimed series like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Bioshock*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *NBA 2K*, depend on quality reviews. Their chairman and CEO contends that "unlike many other entertainment business [sic]—there are just a few—evaluations by Metacritic and others' reviews really can influence the success of a newly-released title," as "if your ratings go below a certain level, it can really hurt your ability to sell the title, and above a certain level can make a real difference in your success."[22] To this end, the "ability to have high scores over and over and over again is a huge competitive advantage, and that advantage drives sales, it reduces risk and creates profit."[23] Reviewers have a tremendous impact on what games are successful and, thus, what games are made. Whether or not reviews actually drive sales is less important than the perception that they do, which means that developers, like Take-Two, have a vested interest in doing everything they can to get the highest scores possible for each of their titles. Although only a small cadre of gamers actually impacts a Metacritic[24] score, the importance of the reviews in the reception of a game means that certain gamers have a substantive impact on what games are made and how they are designed, executed, and released.

The final way in which gamers impact the games they play is by taking advantage of the increasing number of opportunities for players to create elements within the games they play. The MMOG genre has been a leader in enabling players to develop content within games, largely with an eye toward increasing player investment in games. By facilitating player development, game developers can free up relatively scarce, paid game developer time to access the participation of active player-developers. The technical skills needed to engage in player-based game development run the gamut, from in-game events that can be planned by any active player to the programming and development of modifications in *World of Warcraft*, which requires player-developers to write computer code in authoring their additions to the game. In this vein, *City of Heroes* took an in-house mission development tool and turned it over to players, allowing them to make custom designed missions. Within twenty-four hours of the initial launch of the tool, players more than doubled the content available in the game, exceeding all of the paid development work to that date.[25] Although the players then found a way to exploit the system, which warranted additional modifications to the program and a limitation on rewards,[26] the ability for players to create content within the game radically shifted the author–audience relationship and produced content that "was arguably better than some of the game designer's attempts."[27] *EVE Online* took a similarly interesting approach by turning the construction of space stations over to players. In a game where the only place you are safe is inside a space station, the presence and placement of stations is incredibly important. By putting players in charge of creating their own stations, developer CCP created a system where players could build things almost wherever they wanted to, while adding a new talk-about-able part of the game with "a rich history behind" each station's "construction and the battles fought over it."[28]

A growing number of other kinds of games are also dependent on player-developed content, most notably *LittleBigPlanet*, *Spore*, and *Minecraft*. These games are dramatically expanded by the efforts of players, which are integrated into the overall landscape of what makes these games what they are. The game disc for *LittleBigPlanet* comes with a complete game and many platform based levels to play, but where the game shines is in the ability for players to use the Create Mode to develop their own levels and publish them online so other players can download and play them. The second edition of the game is backward compatible with the first, and millions of levels have been created by players of the game.[29] The internet abounds with top 10 lists of the best user-generated levels,[30] and user-generated content became so popular over the run of the game that the game developer, Media Molecule, helped gather "12 of the most talented creators from the community"[31] to develop a "community-made level pack."[32] By producing a game that not only enables but also depends on user-generated content, and by gathering a large, invested community of players behind the game Media Molecule blurs the line between audience and author. In this case,

the game developers at Media Molecule made tools that they then handed over to players to rewrite the game they are playing. As players write their own levels, Media Molecule moves away from their original role as author, becoming an audience for the levels developed by those who were the original audience for *LittleBigPlanet*. In a more limited, yet larger effort to generate user-generated content, *Spore* is designed in such a way that "the vast majority of the creatures and structures that will inhabit the *Spore* universe will come from the brains of its user base."[33] *Spore* allows people to upload their creations to a centralized server where they can then be downloaded by other players and integrated into the play experience. Leveraging the creativity of players, *Minecraft* became a hit largely because of the open-ended design of a world that allows players to build almost anything they want. This spawned a community of YouTube videos where players show off their creations, as "the best part of the game is definitely the building."[34] These games are popular in large part because they redefine how play happens by blurring the lines between player/audience and developer/author.

Given a general depiction of how players are talking back and constructing the discourse of video games, understanding the full implication of their role requires taking a deeper look at two case studies, each of which shows a different aspect of the role of players in the discourse of video games. First, two incidents surrounding *Call of Duty* demonstrate how players can insert themselves into the design process, responding to and restricting the choices developers make and dramatically impacting the design of games. Second, a variety of player driven contributions to *World of Warcraft* illustrate how players can guide feedback and force changes in their games of choice. These two case studies, along with the examples noted above, demonstrate exactly why examining the context of game design is a crucial part of using wordplay as a critical tool.

CALL OF DUTY: LIMITED CHOICE

One of the key pieces of contemporary first-person shooter (FPS) games, like *Call of Duty*, is that they can be played online with friends and strangers from around the globe. Often shipped with slim offline offerings, this kind of game gets most of its play value through online battles with others. Although there are many different games in this genre, the *Call of Duty* series of games is particularly interesting for several reasons. Perhaps the most notable feature of the series is its massive sales figures. The back to back launches in 2009 of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and 2010's *Call of Duty: Black Ops* were both hailed as the "biggest entertainment launch in history" at the time of their release. The two games combined to rake in $670 million and sell 10.3 million copies of the games within just the 24-hours after their respective debuts.[35] The size of these launches is made even more interesting by the fact that the parent company for the developer

of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, Activision Blizzard, fired the heads of the studio responsible for developing the game claiming "breaches of contract and insubordination" shortly after one of the gigantic launches.[36] The subsequent lawsuits and fallout surrounding the firings read "like a dramatic Hollywood script," with both sides contending that the other actively sought to undermine their positions.[37] The amount of money surrounding the franchise sets the stage for dispute among those producing the games, but the size and scale of the series also frames the ways in which they are received by gamers.

The size of the *Call of Duty* player base alters expectations about how games in the series should work because it draws increased attention to the series while ratcheting up expectations for the games. It also means that any dispute has the potential to quickly turn into an issue the game developer must address. Changes to the game that do not meet with gamers' expectations are likely to be met with a substantial, vocal outcry. With the release of *Modern Warfare 2* for the PC, the game developer announced "that the PC version will not include code for dedicated multiplayer servers, instead relying on a yet to be revealed, peer-to-peer matchmaking service called IWNET."[38] Effectively, this meant that PC players seeking to play against others would need to run through the proprietary servers, which would allow "matchmaking and smoother gameplay," "playlists and private matches," "party system and friendslist," and "cheat/hack free games."[39] Gamers contended that "dedicated servers have been known to make or break a multiplayer game," as the community better provides the online access to enable playing with other people, while allowing them to set the rules for the games they want to play.[40] With dedicated servers, gamers are also less dependent on the ongoing support of the developer, as they can host the game on their own, instead of being reliant on the continued goodwill of a company to provide bandwidth and support for a game from which they may no longer be generating a large amount of revenue. Within days of mentioning the new system on a gaming podcast, an online petition sprang up and was signed by over 100,000 gamers who sought to maintain the ability to use dedicated servers for online PC play of *Modern Warfare 2*. The company responded with the statement that the petition "definitely made a big wave and the response will not be ignored."[41] Less than a week after the game's launch, a player hacked a developer console to "enable the ability to set up dedicated servers."[42] In this case, players wanted a system similar to what was available before and actively sought to ensure that dedicated servers could be used.[43] Initially moving through a petition to the game developer and subsequently taking action into their own hands, gamers redefined what *Modern Warfare 2* was and how it would be played. In so doing, they demonstrated the potentially sizable power gamers have in defining what video games are and how they work. However, the controversy surrounding the next game in the series, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, made the role of gamers in the construction of game design and play even clearer.

The role of audience for *Call of Duty: Black Ops* centers on the game's performance for the PlayStation 3 and PC platforms and the actions taken by a UK gamer advocacy group, Gamers' Voice. In response to receiving complaints from gamers about a variety of different technical issues with the game, Gamers' Voice began their campaign with an open letter to Activision UK. The letter contended that the "valuable customer base is bearing the brunt of this short sighted act of crass profiteering on your part," as they felt Activision "pushed out a game that is broken to the point of not fulfilling its function as a piece of entertainment" and sought an explanation for the situation and recompense for afflicted customers.[44] Failing to receive a proper response from the game company, Gamers' Voice chose to take the matter to the UK Office of Fair Trading, arguing that the broken online elements of game play

> is its major selling-point and can be the sole reason why people would purchase it. With it not functioning as intended, we can only conclude that as a product it is faulty and should not have been released in this state. To make a comparison to a more familiar product, it is akin to buying a fridge-freezer only to find that the freezer component doesn't work.[45]

The complaint is made under the Sale of Goods Act 1979, "which states that when a consumer buys goods they must be: as described; of a satisfactory quality; and fit for any purpose made known at the time of sale to the seller,"[46] as the Office of Fair Trading "has the power to impose a severe financial penalties [sic] if the claim is upheld."[47]

In response to this complaint[48] and in anticipation of the launch of additional downloadable content, a community manager for the development team, Josh Olin, gave an interview with two fascinating statements. In response to a question about the feedback received by players and the need to monitor and react to fans, Olin stated,

> If there's one thing the COD [*Call of Duty*] community is familiar with, it's voicing their opinions. It's the biggest, most vocal gaming community out there. This relationship with the fans is critically important, and something we value a great deal. It's important not to have a knee-jerk reaction to feedback, though.
>
> We must always bear in mind the tens of millions of other players who don't register on Twitter, Facebook, or our Forums to voice their opinion. The ability to gauge universal trends against isolated-but-organized movements is key to iteration on the game post-launch.[49]

The perspective presented in the statement starts with praise for the activity and engagement of the large body of *Call of Duty* fans that drive the game's success. At the same time, the attitude alluded to a group akin to Richard

Nixon's 'silent majority,'[50] implying that heeding the desires of a large body of gamers independent from "isolated-but-organized movements" is a key way for those in the industry to continue developing their games. This statement both grants that the players of games play a key role in development, one that is valued "a great deal," while articulating that there are multiple audiences to large, popular game. Finally, it retains the role of ultimate adjudication in the hands of paid developers, who must stand strong in the face of a vocal minority to preserve the interests of the many.

The conclusion to the interview returned to the theme of audience and its role in shaping the games they play. In response to a question about the "biggest problem facing the games industry today," Olin states,

> Personally, as a community manager who lives in the media or social media world every day, I think the social culture of video games is moving in a more negative direction as technology and social media continues to grow. Rather than growing with it, the trend seems to be devolving. More and more gamers seem to forget what this industry is all about.
>
> It's a creative industry—the most creative form of entertainment in existence. Too many developers who try new things are getting burned by the "pundits" and angry entitled fans who look to be contrarian, sometimes simply for the sake of being contrarian. The only thing this attitude aims to achieve is stunt that creativity and innovation even further, which is something that no rational gamer looking to be entertained would want to do.[51]

This statement became the headline that reverberated across the internet, as the interview was boiled down to a contention that "the unpleasant tone of internet contrarians is the biggest problem facing the game industry today."[52] Although the sentiment expressed toward a certain segment of the fan base is quite negative, it simultaneously acknowledges the power of gamers to shape the products being made. The concern about a segment of the population likely would not exist if those "angry entitled fans" did not have an impact on the product being produced. At the same time, the forms of media available to gamers are also part of the issue, as the first piece of the statement notes the growing number of platforms for communication among gamers and between gamers and developers. In this case, gamers, like those at Gamers' Voice, have the ability to change the way that game development works, allegedly decreasing a company's willingness to take risks for fear of angering the vocal minority.

The reaction to the *Call of Duty* series illustrates two different ways the audience of games is talking back and impacting the design and play of games. *Modern Warfare 2* demonstrates how the limited choices made available to gamers can be circumvented by the deliberate actions of players, if even only for a limited amount of time. The discussion surrounding

Black Ops is different, as it is more about how the audience for games is composed of different segments, all of whom can impact what games are developed and what risks in design companies are willing to tolerate. The status as the largest entertainment launch in history is both a blessing and a curse for *Call of Duty* because the spotlight placed on perceived failures or changes to the game can be harsh. Popularity and scale are also at the heart of the role of audience in setting the terms of play for the largest MMOG, *World of Warcraft*.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: FEEDBACK AND CHANGE

The size, scope, and design of *WoW* makes it another game where an invested community of players use words to redefine design and play. Players develop strategies for the game, occasionally deliver withering commentary on a variety of design decisions, and interact with both community managers and developers on a variety of forums. The amount of online player-driven discussion about *WoW* is massive, as the discussion and analysis of the game has become a legitimate industry with a number of companies capitalizing on the economic possibilities available by catering to engaged communities of *WoW* players.[53] The player driven reshaping of the game comes in a variety of different forms, but two of the clearest are the near constant feedback about the game's development and the ways in which the game is altered by the modification community.

The size of the audience engaged in *WoW* creates an overwhelming amount of discussion about any change in the game's design. When one considers that an MMOG is in a constant state of becoming, it means that players are regularly discussing the ways in which the game has been altered and whether or not those developments were in the best interests of the game as a whole. Often, players will either identify problems or solutions they feel need to be addressed and many of the suggestions end up being integrated into *WoW*. Although this relationship is correlative, rather than causal, it is certainly a case where players talk back and shape the discourse of *WoW*.

Two clear lines of discussion that cropped up in the wake of the *Cataclysm* expansion to *WoW* illustrate the benefit of wordplay's acknowledgement of players as active agents. The first is the way in which the *Cataclysm* quests are designed. For years both players and the game developer discussed an interest in designing the game so it felt like players were making a difference in the game world. This is something that can be easily integrated into single player games, but is much more difficult to do in a game with millions of players. *Cataclysm* sought to address this issue by introducing world zones in sections and 'phasing' the world so that when one had completed quests in an area it changed how the environment appeared to the player. However, a side effect of this was that the "overuse of linear

phasing has killed the one thing they were trying to give us: more immersion and the feeling that our characters can make a difference."[54] With the new design players complained about feeling like they were 'on rails,' as the game led them from place to place, rather than encouraging them to explore an open and inviting game world. Although Blizzard, the game developer, stated they do not fully agree with the whole of the critique, they also said that "we're taking all these criticisms in stride and will be using them to improve the questing experience for future expansions and, to an extent, future patches . . . Your feedback keeps us from swaying too far in any one direction though, so we greatly appreciate threads like this one."[55] Although this could certainly be lip service to the player base, if the Blizzard response is indicative of overall policy, it is a case of player feedback impacting the way in which games are designed. However, as this is a general statement largely aimed at a broad design goal, it is hard to trace whether or not the feedback will actually be employed in future efforts. Tol Barad is a different story.

Tol Barad was designed as a key feature of the *Cataclysm* expansion. Building on the success of a surprise hit in the previous expansion, the battle for Lake Wintergrasp, Tol Barad was designed as "an open world PvP zone" that also contained "a hub on Tol Barad Peninsula for both factions to complete daily quests."[56] Battles were set to take place every two and a half hours and sides would be evenly matched in their effort to win control of the island. There are three keeps and three towers, and the attacking side needs to gain control of all three keeps before time runs out to win. Control of the keeps depends on measuring "the number of players from each side in the immediate area" with a secondary calculation where

> each time a member of your faction [side or team] is killed in the immediate vicinity of a keep, a slider bar will move slightly in favor of the opposing faction. So not only does the size of each force in the area determine who controls each keep, but losing allies during the contesting process determines control as well.[57]

Destroying towers is done only by the attacking side, who add five minutes to the contest for each tower destroyed. The winning side gets access to additional daily quests, a small raid zone, and a direct reward of honor points and commendations if they were participating when the battle ended. The losing side gets honor points for participating in the battle and the chance to play again in 150 minutes.

Shortly after players leveled to eighty-five, which must be done to participate in Tol Barad, it became apparent that the design of the zone was poor. The idea may have been good, but the execution led to a situation where "Tol Barad would be fun if it weren't so horribly broken in its goal and mechanics."[58] There were a wide variety of problems identified with the zone, most of which combined to create a situation where "any defending

force with half the coordination of the attacking force will win . . . If you're going to attack, you'll need to coordinate with your team and fight a little (or a lot) smarter than your opponents. Until Blizzard delivers a fix, you'll need to grit your teeth and fight harder on offense."[59] As players quickly learned that they had an uphill battle to win when on the attack, participation in the battle lagged. Because the participation in the fight was fixed at a one-to-one relationship, if one side did not show up, no one got to play. Blizzard attempted to fix the problem by radically increasing the rewards for winning the battle, increasing the honor points rewarded for winning by tenfold.[60] This provided incentives for attackers to participate, but players immediately realized that the most likely result of the change would be that "the controlling side will be encouraged to just let the other team capture the zone, in order to retake the zone themselves the next cycle. This back-and-forth swapping will give the greedy person . . . the most reward."[61] Players quickly exploited the system, taking advantage of a design that "clearly encouraged players to win-trade Tol Barad back and forth, negating the whole reason for a PvP objective."[62] Within weeks it was clear that this was not the answer to fix Tol Barad and the decision was made to offer a premium for succeeding as an attacker, but one that was small enough to curtail win trading. Additional changes were made, with the general guiding principle that developers are "reading your [player's] feedback, watching trends across our global realms, and fighting plenty of battles in Tol Barad ourselves to get a feel for what's working and what isn't, and we're committed to making Tol Barad a fun and engaging zone."[63]

Regardless of whether or not Tol Barad is ever 'fixed,' the player response to the zone shows their power in crafting and adapting video games to suit their needs and interests. As soon as it became clear to players that the battle was unbalanced, they stopped playing and articulated why. Rewards were increased to get them playing again, but they were so extreme that players responded in the optimal manner for them, by trading wins. Developers felt that was not appropriate, so the change was reverted and the cycle between developer intentions and player actions restarted. Both players and developers have the power to shape the games they play or design through a collaborative process that is ensured by modern channels of communication where players talk back to designers.

Beyond the direct feedback guiding developer action in a game like *WoW*, players can also force changes through the modifications or add-ons they write for the game. Players in *WoW* are able to write add-ons or mods that alter game play in *WoW* in a number of different ways. By so doing, players are able to reshape aspects of what it is to play the game and, as a result, what the game is. This allows players to redesign the game in such a way that developers are compelled to react, deliberately breaking certain add-ons or shaping the terms of engagement for others. One of the first limitations for add-on developers was the stipulation that they could not charge a fee for their programs, under the threat of a lawsuit from Blizzard.

Though the legal system can certainly set the terms for play, other add-ons have pushed both designers and other players to rethink what *WoW* is and how it should work. In the process of announcing the first expansion to the game, Blizzard made it clear that the rules for add-ons were about to change and they were going to break[64] "almost every UI [user interface] addon that's required by most guilds for endgame raiding" while other mods would be "built into the expansion."[65] The mods in question had altered what it was to play *WoW* and automated certain tasks that the developers wanted players to perform. In developing, installing, and using the add-ons, players had pushed the boundaries of what *WoW* was, leading to a developer response to clarify their intentions. Although this example is buried in the annals of *WoW* history, the back and forth between designers and the player community continues. In *The Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, positioning was at a premium for many key battles, which led to the development of the Augmented Virtual Reality mod, which let players draw in the game world and share information with other players who had installed the add-on in an effort to "aid in raid strategy and position."[66] The mod made it much easier to circumvent spacing issues on crucial fights by altering the appearance of the game world. As soon as the mod became a staple in the raiding community, Blizzard acted quickly by breaking the add-on's ability to function and warning that any effort to make a similar modification would warrant "further, more drastic steps."[67]

WoW is a complicated, constantly emerging game that is constructed in a dance between designers and players. Players talk back through guiding feedback about everything from quest design to specific zones and how they function. These discussions take place in both public spaces and through their actions (or lack of actions) in the game itself, often changing the terrain of what the game intended. Mods add another surface for player participation where players can design and install them to alter the game, redefining what *WoW* is and potentially warranting a strong response from developers.

THE CONTEXT OF PLAYERS

The audience's relationship with the author of a text can be a tricky one, and video games make that relationship even more complicated since games are frequently updatable, modifiable, and without a fixed end point. As a result, the power of the audience to use word and deed to shape, reshape, and redefine game design and play is quite profound. Wordplay helps identify a feedback loop of developers putting forth a game; players engaging it and their actions and feedback dictating how the game is dynamically rearticulated. Poor reviews can mean that a game never really catches on, while good reviews can send the number of players through the roof, ensuring sequels will be released. Players can file complaints with government bodies that cause game companies to react in a conservative fashion or

players can develop alternate means by which to play a game. Either situation can lead a game company to clamp down, attempting to dictate the terms on which a game should be played. All of these are examples of how players are crucial to how the discourse of video games unfold. Wordplay illuminates how the context for the discourse of video games is shaped by many different elements and players are a crucial component of how the discourse surrounding games is built.

Recognizing the role of players as the audience for games and applying a rhetorical framework to the understanding of games, one where the audience routinely determines the success of a text, puts gamers in a powerful position. When gamers rally together they can redefine what parts of a game, as in Tol Barad, or even the game as a whole, like *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, mean. In talking back and setting the terms of discussion, gamers encourage designers to develop games with an audience in mind.

The last piece of the backdrop for the contextual forces that shape the discourse of video games is the technology that drives games and how video game consoles impact constructions of words, design, and play. Using wordplay to examine consoles as devices and the discourse surrounding them offers another chance to see how wordplay combines analysis of gaming technologies and the environment surrounding them to better understand how video games are constructed as cultural objects.

4 Consoles Read Rhetorically

A key aspect of any media form is the means by which it is engaged. Reading a book on a Kindle is different than reading a printed book. The transition from scrolls to books and books to e-readers transformed the process of reading and writing. The final contextual element of wordplay is a consideration of the platforms on which games can be played. Parallel to research being conducted in the emerging field of platform studies,[1] development of wordplay would be incomplete without an analysis of the ways in which we play games.

Video games can be designed and played in many different ways on a wide variety of technologies. However, a substantial amount of time and energy has been spent on developing, marketing, and playing video game consoles. Video games are still played in arcades and can certainly be played on personal computers, but a platform unique to gaming is the home video game consoles that emerged in the wake of the Magnavox Odyssey and Atari's Home Pong.[2] Analyzing certain moments in the history of video game consoles offers a way to evaluate how technologies are a key contextual element of wordplay because they shape what games are available and how they are played.

The rhetorical dimensions related to the words, design, and play of consoles revolve around a series of four issues. First, it is important to trace where we play video games. Adoption of home consoles marked a period of transition from playing in public space to playing in private space. The space for play is a huge part of game design and play, as the environment for video games sets the stage for who is likely to play, how often, and what will be played. The second key rhetorical element of console gaming is analyzing how we play. Much like the development of the mouse and graphic user interface changed the audience for and use of computers, various home video game controllers reshape what games are made and how play is engaged. Third, console wars offer an interesting angle with which to analyze the preferred representations of play by certain companies at specific points in time. The appeals made by platform developers to attract consumer attention and the technological elements built into their consoles to differentiate them from competitors offers a means by which to analyze what is valued at a given point in time. It is also relevant to analyze the potential of the console and what consumers are supposed to do with it.

From Home Pong to consoles that come bundled with DVD or Blu-ray players, the purpose of video game consoles has dramatically shifted over time. Analyzing the devices used for play helps define what a video game console was, is, and will be, while illustrating how technology and discourse contribute in the application of wordplay.

These four topics, developed through a retelling of certain elements of the history of video games, detail how the platforms on which we play games are of special importance. This work is a beginning, rather than an end, because the areas of focus can be applied to other video game technologies to facilitate further expansion of how the devices on which we play games can be better understood with wordplay.

WHERE WE PLAY

In the early days of development, video games were almost exclusively played in public spaces. From William Higinbotham's *Tennis for Two*, which was developed for visitor's day at the Brookhaven National Laboratory to the MIT Tech Model Railroad Club's *Spacewar!*, video games were developed for computers that were unlikely to be found anywhere other than places where people gathered. Both games were largely designed to show off what could be done with technology, one to invite people to see government research in a different way and the other to highlight what a savvy group of students could do with a computer. The arcade games popularized largely in the 1970s and 1980s continued the placement of video games in public space, although the purpose of video games shifted away from highlighting technological and creative advancements toward generating revenue for both the game companies that developed arcade cabinets and those that bought and installed them. Efficiently mass-producing games was important for arcade game manufacturers,[3] and arcade owners sought games that led to consistent quarter drops and heightened public attention. Individually owned console systems are quite different in design, motive and execution. Tracing those differences and highlighting the importance of certain elements of video game consoles illustrates just how important the transition from public to private is to the contextual elements of gaming recognized with wordplay.

The history of home games originated in an idea that was well before its time. In the late 1960s Ralph Baer began work on what would become the Magnavox Odyssey while at Sanders Associates. The console used removable circuit boards to enable players to change games and was packaged with colored plastic sheets that could enable players to simulate color graphics. To make the product more familiar to consumers, Magnavox chose to package the Odyssey with dice, poker chips, and stacks of fake money that made it feel more like a traditional board game. The Odyssey was only sold at Magnavox dealers and turned out to be a massive commercial failure for

at least two key reasons. A primary issue with the console was cost. Baer had originally intended for the console to be sold for $19.95, but it ended up selling for just under $200. Baer's reason for wanting the low price was that people had not yet seen a product like this one and a more affordable price point would make people more willing to make a risky purchase. Magnavox bristled at the price and, combined with the decision to include all of the trinkets as part of the game console, sought to increase the price to offset their higher cost of production. Further compounding the problems for the sales of the Odyssey was that the console was only sold in Magnavox stores. Relying on Magnavox employees to sell the product led to a recurrent theme of salespeople instructing potential customers that the Odyssey would only work with a Magnavox television. The combination of a price hike and limited, exclusive distribution meant that a console intended to appeal to a broad audience failed miserably. At this point there was no successful business model for video games and without an established industry to drive sales, the Odyssey's failure in attempting to change the site of play was ensured by its overwhelming cost and limited distribution.

Around the same time that the Odyssey was failing in Magnavox dealerships, Atari's *Pong* was taking off in bars, bowling alleys, and other locations where the arcade game was installed. Although there were several other efforts to make commercially viable video games prior to *Pong*, it was the first widely successful arcade game, spawning a number of imitators that modeled the concept of taking a well-known activity, like tennis, and making it into a video game.[4] In establishing what would become the video game industry, the arcade version of *Pong* led to the development of a new line of consumer products, which Atari capitalized on with the debut of the first widely successful home console, Home Pong. Although Atari's first attempt to get video games into the home was in a similar price bracket to the Odyssey, it benefited from two dynamics that enabled it to overcome the lackluster reception of Magnavox's attempt to establish a home market for video games. First, Atari benefited greatly from a change in the discursive environment for gaming. The Odyssey sought to create a market, while Home Pong was able to build what was the first home 'arcade port.'[5] By capitalizing on a successful, sought-after arcade game, Atari was able to leverage the popular interest in *Pong* to fuel sales of their home console. Instead of needing to invent a market, Atari could capitalize on the discursive space that was obtained with the popular success of the established versions of the game. As the arcade game only cost a quarter to play, consumers could learn to appreciate *Pong* for a far lower cost that the $199.95 needed to try out the Odyssey. In addition to having an established market base for whom the console could be developed, Atari also sold Home Pong through a much wiser channel.

Based on the failure of the Odyssey, toy and electronic retailers refused to enter into a contract with Atari to sell the console. Home Pong was expensive, and the only other product like it had failed miserably. After

striking out repeatedly in trying to place the system with retailers, Atari ended up in discussions with the Sears sporting goods department. Placing a home electronic game with a sporting goods retailer may seem odd, but the deal had substantial benefits for both sides. Atari did not have access to the same kinds of large-scale specialty retailers that currently exist, so they needed to find another outlet. Sears offered a much wider means of distribution than partnering with a particular television manufacturer. For the sporting goods department of Sears, Atari offered a known, desirable intellectual property that people would be able to consume in a new way. Further, the sporting goods department often struggled with winter sales, as so many of the sports for which they sell products are best played in the spring, summer, and fall. Yet the winter, with its accompanying Christmas catalog, offered huge opportunities for Sears and the sporting goods department wanted to take advantage of the catalog's wide distribution. Home Pong, in conjunction with the growing size of U.S. households and the inclusion of designated rooms for entertainment, offered a product that would fill the gap and give the department the opportunity to dramatically increase their winter sales. Originally released under a Sears Tele-Games brand, Home Pong was tremendously successful, becoming one of the biggest sellers in the history of the famed Sears catalog. Home Pong addressed the issues the Odyssey faced, changing the context for video games and shifting the space in which video games were played. No longer exclusive to public places, Home Pong brought games into the home, a dynamic which was continued with Atari's follow up product, the Atari Video Computer System or VCS.

The Atari VCS was a leap forward from Home Pong. Offering interchangeable cartridges, the system enabled players to play a wide variety of games and enabled Atari to sell the console with thin margins, as they sought to make money from the games they sold. This business model, based on King Gillette's approach of making money from razor blades instead of razors, seemed to be a sustainable business model. The company would only need to keep making successful games to have a constant money-spinner. Though the system reached great heights, Atari was charting new ground and unforeseen obstacles arose. Three key dynamics highlighted the rhetorical implications of the VCS on where people sought to play video games: competition, licensing, and age.

Two of the three biggest problems with the VCS were tied to a 'quality problem' that proved to be a massive issue for Atari. First, the economic potential demonstrated by both Home Pong and a rapidly growing arcade market meant that many companies sought to establish themselves in the home console market. As a result of the success of Home Pong, the VCS, and video games in general, many companies developed their own consoles. Over the life of the VCS it competed with a console made by a semiconductor company, the Fairchild Channel F, a company that began its existence making shoe leather, the ColecoVision, and a host of other competitors

attempting to cut into the substantial market of video games. From the perspective of wordplay, this marks two interesting elements. First, the home market for video games grew from nonexistent to prized in a matter of a few years. Within roughly a decade of the Odyssey's grand failure, almost a dozen companies were making home consoles. Video games had begun to establish themselves within the homes of the middle and upper classes. Separately, all the attention to the new marketplace had a deleterious effect on each individual console. With more than ten different consoles and potentially dozens of games for each on the market, retailers had a hard time retaining enough shelf space to stock and promote the growing number of products. The massive number of options was also confusing for consumers, as keeping track of all of the different products posed difficult buying decisions for anyone uninformed about the marketplace for video games. The rapid growth fueled options, but the options cluttered the market, confounding the efforts of companies to distinguish themselves and their messages.

As the console market began to shake out, and companies whose products did not sell well dropped out of the competition for market share, the rhetorical environment of consoles became less clouded, which benefited Atari greatly. As the most popular console option of its time, it survived the winnowing process, pushing out many of its contemporaries. As it did so, it was struck with a different problem. Compensation structures and norms surrounding employment had not been established within the growing video game industry and a variety of factors led several of Atari's top programmers to leave and found a game development company called Activision. Knowing that they had produced several of the most popular games for the VCS, Activision's programmers continued making games for the system, while obtaining independence from a management structure they found stifling and unrewarding at Atari. Prior to Activision, almost all of the games for the VCS were first party titles, those made by Atari. The entire business model for the VCS was founded on the notion that making successful games would be what turned a profit. Activision shattered Atari's illusion of safety, developing games for the VCS console and benefitting from the large installed base of consoles Atari established. This development set off a massive new competition for Atari, one that turned out to be quite damaging to their prospects of establishing the home as a lasting place for video game play.

The rapid success of Activision demonstrated that there was good money to be made in developing games for the VCS. At the time, Atari had not programmed security measures into the console to prevent others from developing games and had little authority over what titles could be made for the system or on what terms third party developers could produce games. The lack of control, combined with the perceived opportunity for massive profits meant Atari was once again competing against scads of companies. The flood of cartridges for the VCS also meant that the number of games

crowded the marketplace and made it hard for consumers to identify which games were worth buying. Although several of these new companies made high quality games, many did not, quickly driving lesser developers out of business. When the companies went bust, they liquidated their games, putting downward price pressure on video games that created a death spiral, as even more developers were sent out of business. Retailers put cartridges made by defunct companies into bargain bins, slashing prices, which lowered consumer's expectations about what video games should cost. Plunging price expectations made developing quality games a marginal economic proposition. The flood of poor games and the difficulty identifying quality offerings pushed consumers away from the VCS, eventually leading to a video game collapse in North America in the early 1980s.

In attempting to establish the home as a site for play Atari benefited greatly from the fact that they were able to set many of the terms of engagement in the industry. Without an established industry, Atari quickly became the dominant force, growing faster in its first ten years than any company had prior to Atari.[6] Beyond the lack of control over third-party developers,[7] Atari's management also did not foresee another key dynamic, the notion of a console generation. Now it is well established that a video game console will have a certain lifespan and, years before a transition is expected, a company begins work on the next version of the console. That knowledge had not yet been established as a key part of the design of video game production as the VCS aged. Certain forces in the company wanted to push ahead and develop a new console, but the management of Warner Brothers, who had acquired Atari to enable the wide release of the VCS,[8] put their foot down. To Warner Brothers, there was no reason to develop a new console when the existing one was selling well. Even when more powerful video game consoles were released on the market, like the Intellivision and the ColecoVision, those in charge of Atari thought they should continue to capitalize on the advantage they had in the massive installed user base of the VCS. Eventually Atari came out with a new, more powerful offering, but it was too little, too late, and the flood of subpar games was already dragging the home video game market into the abyss.

Because of the rapid growth of technology, as embodied in Moore's law,[9] video game consoles age like computers, which means companies must periodically release a new platform to hold the public's imagination and stave off competition. The terms of console generations are shaped in part by their move into the home. As a result of the inexorable growth in computing power, console-producing companies can leverage the development of more sophisticated technology to produce more powerful machines. To ensure the ability to continue to make money on the games they release or license, companies must maintain a powerful position in the market. If game console makers do not have enough of their products installed in homes to qualify as a tempting target for game development then consumers will likely pass up the system because of the lack of games. As the VCS

aged and Atari was not developing a new console they ceded their position as an innovator, enabling rivals to produce options that offered game developers and home users a more compelling gaming experience.

Economic and cultural forces along with the lack of centralized control over game approval, and technological growth, ended up devastating Atari's prospects. Atari was wildly successful in establishing the home as a desirable place for video game play, but their success was executed in a way that was not sustainable. The context of video games changed, establishing a new location for play and radically popularizing the activity, but Atari suffered from the lack of established business norms in the new industry. Things that are a taken for granted part of the contemporary video game industry, like the royalties and licensing agreements that are part of console publishing deals or the periodic need to release a new console, did not exist. Without norms that were later established, Atari was left with a tremendous amount of revenue and control outside of their reach. As a result of Atari's shortcomings, console makers changed their approach, but the overwhelming success of Atari with Home Pong and the VCS redefined notions about where video games could be played. The move into homes transformed the video game industry, changing the kinds of games that were designed, as the economic point of games shifted from attracting quarters to warranting the purchase of a cartridge. The new space for games led to new rules that can continue to be seen as games reach into other new markets, from the web to Facebook to mobile gaming. Each of these new spaces requires the development of new norms, which can also lead to new modes of play.

MODES OF PLAY

Atari's establishment of the home as a suitable location in which to play video games caused certain practices in the game industry became more standardized. While North American video game companies suffered a crash in home systems and a retrenchment from overexpansion of arcades, Nintendo was able to thrive in Japan and remain relatively isolated from the turmoil an ocean away. Based on the success of imported versions of consoles resembling the Odyssey, Nintendo developed and released the Family Computer or FamiCom that was eventually introduced into the United States as the Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES. Although U.S. retailers, burned by the collapse of the video game industry, were hesitant to stock the system, Nintendo's persistence and unwillingness to bow to poor focus group results and marketing advice led to the debut of a system that swept the country in Nintendo fever. Nintendo reestablished the home as a site of play and altered how players engaged video games.

One of the key moves that Nintendo made was to learn from the failures of Atari. Nintendo insisted on extraordinarily restrictive agreements on licensees to control the flow of games. When the console was eventually threatened by the release of a competing console from Sega, known as the

Mega Drive or the Genesis, Nintendo was able to respond with a successful new console launch in the Super Nintendo. In responding to Atari's shortcomings, Nintendo also began to establish what would become standardized modes of play, even as they would later radically redefine how we interact with games with the introduction of the Nintendo Wii.

One of the key pieces of play is the mode of interaction, the way in which one engages the game. In sports, one of the most interesting things about the rules of both soccer and baseball is that they are subject to nonstandard field dimensions, which means that teams can attempt to tailor their players to best fit their home stadium. The home console era marked by the VCS and its competitors, game consoles were designed in a similar way, precluding the easy movement of players and porting of games from console to console. The iconic Atari joystick was marked by a single orange button on a black base. Other controllers, like those for Home Pong and the ColecoVision, featured dials players spun to determine movement in games. The Fairchild Channel F controller was oriented vertically, rather than horizontally, and sought to work as both a joystick and a dial based controller. The NES popularized its means by which to engage games, with a now iconic design that paired a control pad with four buttons: A, B, Start, and Select. In many ways, the design allowed players to do more and, as a similar design with extra buttons appeared on the competing Sega console, movement from console to console was less striking. This alteration to controller design changed how gamers experienced the design and play of video games at a fundamental level. By normalizing the means by which players interacted with the console, Nintendo reshaped the mode of play. Their work was later expanded and redefined, with the Sony PlayStation integrating molded handgrips to make the controller easier to hold. Over time, companies added additional buttons and thumb sticks, but the roots of contemporary controller design and layout, with control pad on the left and buttons on the right, can be seen in the NES controller.

Nintendo sought to do more to shape interaction than simply develop an innovative control pad. The NES also offered R.O.B., the Robotic Operating Buddy, which enabled the player to play a couple of games designed specifically for the robot. More importantly, Nintendo used R.O.B. as a means by which to differentiate themselves from previous game consoles. The robot offered them the rhetorical space in which to contend that the NES was more than a mere game system. Nintendo offered cutting edge entertainment, complete with an advanced robot that could show families many of the wonders of technology, giving consumers a different mode of play, one that game Nintendo the room to argue they were not just another game system.

Nintendo's desire to innovate was also expanded by the highly promoted Power Glove. The accessory was hyped in a variety of different media forms, including the Nintendo produced feature film *The Wizard* starring Fred Savage. Shortly after seeing the film I knew I needed one, but rarely have I been so disappointed. The Power Glove was a breakthrough in offering

players a new mode of play, but it had a host of problems. A primary issue was that there were only two games released that were designed for it. Other games were promised and the glove could be used with games for which it was not designed, but those games generally worked much better with a standard control pad. Further plaguing the device was the fact that it was stripped down from a more sophisticated initial design to function on the NES. To work with the relatively limited computing power of a home game console many design features had to be removed, which meant that the Power Glove suffered from far less than perfect play control. However, years later, motion control helped define Nintendo.

With a variety of tweaks for ergonomics, the addition of buttons and the inclusion of analog sticks, controllers changed in the two decades following the NES, but the next big leap in the mode of play was made with the Nintendo Wii. Nintendo's Wii was striking for a number of reasons. First, the default controller featured a paucity of buttons in comparison to its contemporaries. When held horizontally it resembles the stripped down, retro-chic controller that accompanied the original NES. Second, the controller looked more like a remote control than a contemporary video game controller. Instead of being molded to be held in two hands, like almost every controller in the wake of the PlayStation, the Wii controller is shaped like a baton, with buttons and a control pad on the top for the thumb and a trigger underneath. Finally, and most importantly, the Wii introduced a mode of motion control that far outstripped the poor execution of the Power Glove. Adding to the innovation marked by motion control, Nintendo subsequently released *Wii Fit*, which combined a device that looks like a piece of step aerobics equipment with a game that promises to help players get in shape. Although originally derided by competing companies, game industry commentators, and the types of players who comment on internet stories, the Wii became the early breakout hit of its console generation. It outpaced the initial sales of Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3, largely by drawing a broader group of consumers into buying a game console that rewrote the mode of play for video games.

The Wii's motion control was so popular that, after ridiculing Nintendo for trying something different than what was expected, both Sony and Microsoft developed their own versions. Sony ended up releasing the PlayStation Move that was promoted with the tagline "This Changes Everything," while Microsoft offered the Kinect, promising that "You Are the Controller." Sony's accessory featured a baton not unlike that of the Wii, but included the trademark PlayStation button combination and a glowing orb lit by LED diodes that were tracked through the PlayStation Eye camera. The Kinect ditched the external controller altogether, instead using a system of sophisticated cameras to allow players to control the console and gaming experience through the use of gestures and vocal commands.

This major leap in the mode of interaction, away from button pressing and toward motion, is fascinating, as it enables a different sort of play.

Fitness games become possible when activity can be tracked, shifting the potential target audience for games. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Wii's launch prompted popular discussion about the new groups drawn to play the Wii because of its integration of motion control. The Kinect was also met with interesting reviews, particularly as people started to hack the device to offer additional functionality and take advantage of the technology embedded in the device. From the standpoint of wordplay, these shifts in the mode of play are interesting because they change the types of games that can be played and the people who are likely to play them. The different approaches of competing companies is also interesting, as both Japanese game makers opted to make a device that is somewhat analogous to a standard controller, while the U.S. company got rid of that interface altogether. Further defining the difference between the efforts is the need for space. All three devices need substantially more space than a traditional controller, as the game companies make sure to note that you will be getting off your couch and need to watch out for things you could crash into, but there are clear differences among the three. By retaining the controller interface, both the Wii and the Move can be used in relatively smaller spaces, while the Kinect needs at least six feet of uninterrupted space from the sensor to function properly and works best with about ten feet of space. Certainly video games, given their expense and the time investment involved are generally the hobby of wealthier people, but the Kinect requires almost one hundred square feet of open space to play optimally. For those in urban areas with smaller living spaces, a hundred square feet of space is a precious commodity, far more likely to be found in suburban or rural areas where space is generally less costly.

Motion control redefines the mode of play for video games, shaping the terms for what kinds of games are likely to be made and the terrain of video games more broadly. The homogenization of control schemes across consoles facilitates porting games across different platforms, but breakthroughs in the mode of play make wholly new genres of games possible. In setting the terms for engagement, modes of play are a key piece of wordplay. Standardization and new developments in the means by which we interact with games is an area where hardware design plays a major role in the discursive construction of consoles, with an assist from the words embedded in marketing campaigns waged by game companies. That equation is reversed when considering the representation of play, where the marketing campaign often takes a much larger role in the discourse of video games.

REPRESENTATION OF PLAY

A key piece of the marketing approach for video game consoles is the promotion of the fidelity of the experience on that console. The newly introduced console option is better because the graphics are superior, the experience is

more responsive, and the games feel 'more real.' Much of the refinement in the mode of play is enabled by the advance of computing power, but examining how console producing companies represent their play experience is instructive in understanding how console design can be analyzed with wordplay. In striking out reasons why one console is better than another, graphics typically become a key line of argument that enables a company with a newer console to contend that gamers need to upgrade, establishing the perception that more accurate representations are better as a key part of the discourse of video games.

One of the first times this kind of strategy was deployed in a large-scale advertising campaign was when the Mattel Intellivision took on the Atari VCS. Released about two years after the VCS, Intellivision sought to establish itself as the superior game console through a series of advertisements using sports journalist George Plimpton, who the company branded as Mr. Intellivision, to offer side-by-side comparisons of games on each console. With banner taglines like "Two pictures are worth a thousand words" and comparisons of action, control, and challenge on the consoles, Mattel attempted to establish that a more realistic representation was something to be prized. Using Plimpton's fame as a sports writer, the advertisements frequently featured sports games, one of which had Plimpton standing behind televisions with images of each console's baseball titles.[10] The VCS title had three fielders that move together, while the Intellivision version featured the licensed name *Major League Baseball* and had nine fielders and a much more realistic playing field that was a far more accurate representation of the sport on which the video game was based. Plimpton was quoted as saying "Atari vs. Intellivision? Nothing I could say would be more persuasive than what your own two eyes will tell you. But I can't resist telling you more." The ad then moved into a text heavy page that extolled the virtues of the Intellivision and why it was argued to be a superior console to the VCS. By appealing to the graphics and the overall sophistication of the experience possible on the Intellivision, Mattel articulated a campaign about what home game consoles should be. Home consoles should strive to be more accurate, better representations of what we see in other aspects of our daily lives. In making this appeal, Mattel set the stage for an ongoing argument as to why players need to upgrade to a newer, more powerful, thus, better console.

In the effort to introduce the NES to the United States, Nintendo employed a similar appeal. Instead of relying on a side-by-side comparison with another console, as the NES did not have a significant competitor in its early days, Nintendo sought to make it seem that players were brought into their games, that the verisimilitude of the games on the NES was so fantastic that players were integrated into the experiences of playing a NES game.[11] In developing an advertising campaign for the NES, Nintendo placed the focus on their software, hyping particular games with the clear message that, to play them, one would need a NES. Nintendo also took

advantage of the fact that they only needed to produce a few commercials each year, investing their money into making a handful of highly produced, relatively expensive ads. As a result, their higher production values stood out from the clutter of other advertising, aiding in their attempt to draw attention to the NES.

The authenticity of their games was shown less through the graphics and in-game presentation than in the development of the ads themselves. The ad for *Ice Hockey* promoted the game by blending shots of people playing actual ice hockey with in-game images of the NES version. The game is "as slick as ice, as fast as fury" because with Nintendo "now you're playing with power." The end of the commercial shows a shot going into the net in the NES version that is continued with a puck coming out of a television and flying by the player who ostensibly scored the goal in the game. The advertising for *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!* was built on a similar theme by intercutting game images with depictions of Tyson hitting a heavy bag. The ad reached a crescendo by promising players the opportunity to fight Tyson should they make it through the gauntlet of other fighters, while the images switched from game action to a mocking Tyson laughing at the viewer foolish enough to believe they could take on Iron Mike. The Nintendo ads were based on eradicating the perceived boundary between life and game. Advertising was used to depict the NES as the device that gave players power, a power anchored in the realm of the real. Nintendo was where players could take on the heavyweight boxing champion and dig their skates into the ice. Nintendo enabled players to do more than they could do outside the game, as suddenly they could become a top-notch boxer or hockey player. Attempts to define representation in play did not stop here though, as Sony reached beyond sports to give gamers another ideal to seek.

In making the PlayStation, Sony turned away from the cartridge based game systems that had become the norm in the wake of the VCS. Taking advantage of their status as a major electronics company, Sony opted to use a CD-ROM drive that was capable of 3D graphics and was easier and cheaper to develop games for than the proprietary cartridges used by other consoles at the time. The use of CDs also offered game companies the ability to break their games into parts by using multiple CDs for a single game, therefore including far more data to distinguish their representation of play.

One of the banner games for the system was *Final Fantasy VII*. By the time the PlayStation was released, the *Final Fantasy* series was already well established and had been exclusively released on the Nintendo family of consoles. However, for *Final Fantasy VII* the developer of the game, Square, sought to use a large amount of motion data for the battle sequences and a significant number of cut scenes to facilitate the storytelling. As such, Square wanted to release the game on CD-ROMs, rather than a cartridge, leading to a decision to make the game for the PlayStation. As part of a massive marketing campaign, the game was promoted in a number of

television commercials that focused on showing image sequences from the game matched with breathless voiceovers laden with effusive praise like "they said it couldn't be done in a major motion picture, they were right" and that "the most anticipated epic adventure of the year will never come to a theater near you." These television ads were matched with a print effort featuring the image of a massive cannon from the game spread over two pages and the text "Someone please get the guys who make cartridge games a cigarette and a blindfold" splashed across the top with "Possibly the greatest game ever made is available only on PlayStation. Good thing. If it were available on cartridge, it'd retail for around $1,200."[12] Video games were no longer just competitive with sports and reality; their representations surpassed the best in entertainment. *Final Fantasy VII* promised a tale more fantastic than those that could be found in motion pictures, a fidelity made possible through the new CD-ROM technology that could only be experienced on a PlayStation. Gamers should get a PlayStation because the design and play it offered were more dynamic than a cartridge system could ever match. Taking an argument made by Intellivision and amplifying it, Sony refined the appeal that accuracy and representation are a key part of video games. Sony's contention was that their system was better precisely because it could create more interesting design, a better story, and a better game than could be found on cartridge systems, like the NES.

Although this kind of rhetorical positioning still infuses the words, design, and play surrounding consoles, video games have become established enough that fractures are appearing in the argument that a realistic portrayal is the best way in which to represent video games. From the brief period where cell-shaded graphics were all the rage to the caricatures common in the graphics on the Nintendo Wii, alternate lines of argument are being presented as to what should drive acquisition of a game console. At the same time, consoles like the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 used a traditional line of appeal based on better graphics and more processing power to promote their offerings. Although the Wii won the early phase of the console war between the three companies, sales of that console dropped substantially as Microsoft and Sony cut prices and the Wii reached a point of greater market saturation. In spite of diffusion in appeals about why to buy a console, the battle over representation in the context of the discourse of video games is unlikely to go anywhere; especially as consoles continue to incorporate new technologies and manufacturers seek to beat out their rivals.

WHAT WE DO

One of the emerging pieces of the discourse of consoles is the changing dynamic of how we view what consoles should do. Considering that the introduction of the home console was as a seasonal toy, the context of these

products and the discourse they help construct has dramatically changed. Developing how wordplay helps us understand consoles requires looking at what we can do with game consoles and what they claim to do for us.

Starting out as a winter toy, Home Pong set the initial terms for what was to be done with a home video game console. It was a product largely for the recreation room and was well suited for sports fans looking to engage in competitive activity in the winter. Arcades came to further define video games, as they were associated with less than savory elements of society. Because of the stigma associated with arcade games, console manufacturers sought to distance themselves from the label of 'video games.' The Video Computer System emphasized its link with computers in its name, appropriating the title of a growing, scientific industry that had positive associations. Many of the VCS's contemporaries integrated the idea of 'vision' into their name, like in the Intellivision and the ColecoVision, which connected them to the well-established televisions on which they worked. Both approaches anchored the consoles into popular discourses of their time, seeking to twist words about video games to include more positive connotations and fewer negative ones. The issue of naming came up again for Nintendo, as it sought to enter a market that had recently been burned by the collapse of Atari. Instead of stressing links to video, computing, games, or vision, Nintendo opted to stress entertainment in the title of the NES. In so doing, Nintendo sought to anchor their console in the terminology of the growing home entertainment industry, allowing the company to take a position as something that was family friendly and targeted toward middle and upper middle-class families. Although video games had negative connotations, the notion of an entertainment system, particularly one with a robot that allowed the family to play together, was wholesome and could be welcomed into homes. Discursive framing is a key part of the development and marketing of game consoles and the branding of the PlayStation helps give insight into how Sony sought to frame what could be done with their console.

The PlayStation originally set out to be a joint Nintendo–Sony product, with Nintendo continuing their work with cartridges and Sony providing CD-ROM support. Sony was hesitant to get into a market dominated by a dedicated gaming company like Nintendo, especially because they would have also faced competition from Sega. Through a series of decisions rich with boardroom intrigue, Nintendo decided to back out of negotiations with Sony, choosing to work with Philips. This stunned Sony. Sony eventually opted to introduce the PlayStation on their own, as they suffered a massive loss of face when Nintendo's shocking announcement cut them out of the video game industry. The ongoing development of the Sony platform, however, showed the company's desire to shift how people used video game consoles, redefining discussion about video games to make the PlayStation a literal station for all kinds of play and entertainment, rather than simply a device on which to play video games.

Although the PlayStation was largely a straightforward video game console, when it came time to develop its successors, Sony did far more to leverage their position as a giant in the consumer electronics industry. For the PlayStation 2 (PS2), Sony opted to move from a CD-ROM to a DVD-ROM drive and for the PlayStation 3 (PS3) they went with a Blu-ray drive. The success of both efforts were substantial and indicate how the discourse of games has shifted. In the case of the PS2, Sony was able to release a console that contained a functional DVD player for about the same price as the DVD players of the time period. As a result, consumers were left with a decision about whether to buy a device that only played DVDs or purchase a PS2, which would play both DVDs and a massive catalog of video games. So many people opted to go with PS2s that it fueled the widespread adoption of the DVD format in Japan. Similarly, when Sony included Blu-ray, a Sony backed high-definition video format, in its PS3, the console offered one of the best options on the market at a price initially competitive with dedicated Blu-ray players. The inclusion of the drive added to the overall cost of the console, making it the most expensive of its generation, but the PS3 benefited most from dropping its price as the console aged, gaining market share on its competitors. Sony also moved quickly to support 3D gaming, which is notable as they are also one of the leading producers of 3D televisions.

The video game console initially faced a discursive environment in which it needed to develop what it was and why people should acquire it. Facing a rhetorical situation where video games came with nasty, negative connotations, Atari and others struck out in other directions, reshaping the rhetorical environment to make home consoles attractive to a broader audience. Nintendo extended this logic, while splitting themselves from the damaging memories of the video game collapse. Sony, however, took the approach to a whole new level, rethinking what a console was and transforming it from something that simply played video games into a black box that provided myriad entertainment options and extended Sony's reach into the home as a blended electronics and media company.

WORDPLAY AND CONSOLES

Consoles are a particularly interesting part of the discourse of video games, especially as they have become a primary means of play. Wordplay helps analyze shifts in where we play, how we play, how we judge representations of play, and the role of a console. Analyzing the history of consoles offers insight into how each specific platform impacts the development and design of video games. A substantial portion of the context for discourse about video games is shaped by the devices we use and how they are conceived of as technical, cultural, and social objects. Wordplay demonstrates how something like a video game console is not a stable, consistent thing over

time. What a console is and how consoles are marketed changes. Tracking key points of the historical discourse surrounding video game consoles helps indicate the values of console producers, game developers, and gamers, particularly when there are changes in the culture of which video games are a part.

Given the backdrop in the context for video games and how wordplay can be used to analyze surrounding elements of the discourse of video games, it is appropriate to turn to the games themselves to develop how wordplay can change conceptions about games and gaming.

Part II

The Texts

5 *GTA*, Humor, and Protagonists

Grand Theft Auto (*GTA*) is an excellent base upon which to demonstrate how wordplay can move from analyzing the context of gaming in general to the texts found in a specific series of games. Originally developed by Scottish game company and typically set in a reimagined United States, the game simultaneously is "all about the American Dream"[1] and "highlights the real threat to the American Way of Life" as it is symbolic of "the war on middle class values."[2] A polarized reaction to *GTA* is manifested in almost any discussion about the game. Those who have played it are likely to regale others with their favorite memories of places like Liberty City or San Andreas, while those who have not played are appalled by tales of picking up prostitutes to restore one's health and then killing them to get your money back. I witness this division each time I talk about *GTA* in class, as those who have played the game rapidly split from those who have not. Wordplay helps assess both sides of the reaction to identify how games in the series can be so many things to so many people, enabling a complex understanding of how discourse functions when multiple audiences construct perceptions about video games.

Elements of *GTA* have been addressed in scholarly literature, but most existing research analyzes various game play dynamics[3] or racial constructions within the series. Much of the latter category of work focuses on *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, where the protagonist is a young black male and the game's early setting mirrors South Central Los Angeles.[4] Public controversy about the series is noted in much of the scholarship about it and is typically paired with dismissive attempts to compartmentalize external discussion about the game such that we are not "guided by reactionary and emotional propaganda."[5] Instead of dismissing the controversy surrounding the game, investigating the whole of the response to *GTA* offers an opportunity to better understand games as texts and how those who play *GTA* see the violence within the game as a warranted game mechanic, rather than as a threat to society. Reveling in the controversy, it is easy to see hostility on both sides and how the divide is instructive in developing wordplay and understanding the composition of *GTA* as a cultural product.

In an effort to cease perpetuating myths "when we should be interrogating them"[6] and illustrate how "uses of this technology require greater responsibility and renewed social concern"[7] the division of opinions about

Grand Theft Auto is a key part of the rhetorical construction of the series. Wordplay can articulate why these varied responses matter. The words surrounding the games can be seen from a gamers' perspective through both game play and the wealth of game reviews published by large-scale game news outlets, while non-gamer discourse abounds in various social commentaries about the state of society. In game reviews it is clear that, instead of placing their focus on the violence, reviewers stress two key elements of *GTA* games: the details, especially the humor, that make the games feel like a living world and the evolution of the depiction of the protagonist. For critics of *GTA*, the violence takes center stage. The open world concept that enables players to do most anything becomes a platform upon which *GTA* is portrayed as a "murder simulator." These rhetorical moves define the discourse of the series and are instructive about how games are discussed as a whole, as they illustrate how *GTA*'s violence can recede to the level of a mere game mechanic. By marginalizing what is the central portion of the game for non-players, wordplay critiques how all the elements of *GTA* work together to shape how it is read as a cultural product.

Three primary principles are required to understand why *GTA* is so interesting. First, it is necessary to understand the role of humor in discourse to see how it can shape and define *GTA*. Second, public discussion of *GTA* will be charted to show the controversy surrounding the series. Finally, game reviews show how gamers elide discussions of violence in *GTA* by focusing on other elements of the game. *GTA*'s reviews place focus on the rhetorical force of certain elements of the design and play of games, leading to a better understanding of wordplay, while articulating many of the reasons for the controversy surrounding *GTA*.

HUMOR MATTERS

A specific body of literature about communication is necessary to fully investigate how wordplay applies to *GTA*. Humor is a key piece of the series, as noted in both game reviews and academic analyses,[8] and a better understanding of the dark humor helps explain why those who do not laugh at the game criticize it so harshly. *GTA* contains heavy touches of irony and satire. Humor changes the dynamics of a text, potentially leading to multiple kinds of readings about what the text 'means' by creating "distance and differentiation—division rather than identification."[9] Put differently, "humor can have both uniting and divisive effects within and between communicating parties."[10] Within the context of *GTA*, some may appreciate the humor, while others will not. This polarizes the audience; you either laugh with the game or find it even stranger that anyone could like it. For those who laugh, the humor bonds them to the game and becomes memorable, pushing them away from those who just do not get the joke. This is especially true for irony, "as an ironic message can only

really be understood when there are shared beliefs between two individuals."[11] Ironic messages can address contexts or topics that literal messages cannot, but without the shared beliefs upon which to establish irony, the messages fall short and the humor is not appreciated. The dark and ironic humor integrated into *GTA* increases the gap between those who like the game and those who do not. One group will laugh at the radio ads and jokes while playing, identifying with the series, while others will not hear the jokes in context or appreciate the humor, making it even harder for them to find any value in the game.

Humor also impacts message recall, as it increases the presence of a message by increasing positive emotions surrounding it.[12] In the case of *GTA*, humor makes the game more memorable as a whole, but its presence changes how players remember the game. Because of the humor, a player is more likely to remember laughing and less likely to remember a killing spree. In this vein, it also disrupts the perceived coherence of a message, as satire "may provoke laughter on many sides," but the cost of those laughs is a lack of "sustained rhetorical coherence."[13] In the case of a political message this may be a problem, as rallying support with an incoherent message is quite difficult. On the other hand, within the context of *GTA*, the same lack of coherence can disturb the focus on violence, prompting laughter and distracting from other parts of the game. Humor may seem like a nonessential component of *GTA*, an ornamental flourish, but its impact on what we remember and how we perceive things has a tremendous impact on the rhetorical force of the series. The extensive use of humor in the game makes the experience of playing the game quite different than simply hearing about isolated pieces of it, much like an inside joke that can only be appreciated by those present.

CALL AND RESPONSE: A DEBATE ABOUT *GTA*

Although the first few games in the series escaped widespread public notice, *Grand Theft Auto III* brought controversy to the public. Public discourse about *GTA* is composed of two primary parts: outcry about sex and violence in the game and a response by gamers to that criticism.

Critics of *GTA* games generally focus on the violence or sexual content included as part of the game and the risk of the game getting into the hands of children. One example of this can be found in the Parents Television Council (PTC) review of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*:

> What's a recipe for success for a video game? Keep in the most controversial parts and give players more of everything. More violence, more weapons, more cars to steal. that [sic] seems to be the plan for Rockstar Games' follow up to the best selling video game, *Grand Theft Auto III*, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. Like its predecessor, *Vice City* has

> copious amounts of violence and offensive sexual content. Also like its predecessor, *Vice City* has the potential to lure young gamers into its seedy underworld of crime, violence and vice.[14]

Particularly interesting in this case are the ways in which fears about sex, violence, and the threat to children are set off with powerful trigger words, like copious violence, offensive content, and the risk of luring in the young. Similar criticism from the PTC was prompted by the release of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, which was described as being "littered with sex scenes and wanton violence."[15] The president of the organization contended that "this brutally violent video game must be kept out of the hands of children, and we are calling on all major retailers to reconsider any decisions to sell this game."[16] In seeking a retailer boycott of the game *GTA IV* is likened to pornographic magazines and handguns because, for the PTC, the threat of children simply seeing the game in stores poses a moral hazard. A like-minded critique describes the series as "one of the original sandbox games, a game that allows you to go anywhere and do anything, in any way you would like. And I mean anything—kill, rob, highjack cars, and more seedier [sic] ventures not fit for print."[17] The openness of the game is clearly disturbing for critics who are both afraid that *GTA* games will be played by children and that players possess relatively free choice within the game's design, even if there are consequences for actions built into the game.[18] A particular flashpoint for criticism is Jack Thompson, a lawyer who filed multiple lawsuits predicated on the belief that the games are "murder simulators" that train players to engage in real-life behavior in a manner that mirrors in-game activity.[19] The issue with *GTA* for critics is closely related to the design of the game world that, in its openness, offers the option for players to choose to engage in reprehensible actions.

Gamers and scholars often respond to these critiques in similar ways, with an exasperation that depicts those criticizing the game as unreasonable. The original *GTA* review on IGN anticipates many of these criticisms, beginning with,

> OK. Push aside all of the Senator Lieberman nonsense. Pretend this is just a videogame for a moment. Get yourself in the mood for a strange kind of innocence. When you're through to the other side, and can play *Grand Theft Auto* with a clear mind, you're going to have to admit to yourself, sooner or later, that there's nothing quite like *Grand Theft Auto*. Here, it's fun to be bad.[20]

The author recontextualizes how *GTA* is described, presenting himself as in opposition to critics who are prone to nonsense claims. He contends that *GTA* is best played by the innocent, who can revel in the opportunity to be bad in a video game, where the consequences are not what they are in real life. The same author's review of *GTA III* continues in a similar vein, with

a section header that proclaims "Questionable Content? Maybe For Your Grandma . . ." and states, "Let's get one thing straight. This game is not for the weak. It's not for the people who like a little poofy dragon chase or a double butt-bump for shiny coins. Nah. *Grand Theft Auto III* is about knocking people off, it's a game about criminals and about the things they do."[21] *GTA III* is for those who have grown up and out of the games of their youth, but are not so old as to be out of touch with what is cool. The criticism of the game fuels the interest of gamers, as they do not want to be the old women, the 'grandmas,' who worry about the content of *GTA*.

Occasionally the critiques aimed at *GTA* are resituated, which is frequently the postscript to discussions about the controversy of the series in academic literature. Irene Chien redescribes the open world that critics find disturbing by arguing that "what makes this series so gripping is not that it requires you to perform extremes of ultra-violence, but that it offers an immense, open-ended environment where such actions are possible."[22] This is a fundamental point of impasse, and perhaps the most interesting aspect of the discourse, as the same aspect of the series provokes moral questions from critics and praise from academics and gamers. Additionally, defenders of *GTA* contend that although violence is portrayed as a major problem in a series like *GTA*, games where one represents an agent of the state, like a police officer or a soldier, are far less likely to provoke calls for a retailer boycott. To this end, although "a ceaseless parade of patriotic, heart-in-hand World War II games, in which you merrily blow the skulls off Japanese and German soldiers under the explicit authority of the U.S. of A . . . anti-gaming critics didn't really explode with indignation until *Grand Theft Auto 3* came along."[23] These responses are interesting, as they rearticulate the terms of discussion about games by pointing out areas of inconsistency in public criticism. Understanding why the reasons behind these differences matter requires looking more closely at how gamers talk about *GTA*.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?: DETAILS AND NIKO

Describing the difference of opinion about how games like *GTA* impact culture or demonstrating the divide between gamers and public critics about the series is not particularly newsworthy. However, the dissonance present in discourse about the games offers a platform upon which to engage in critical analysis of reviews and to develop how wordplay can analyze games as texts. There are two keys to understanding how the violence that can be part of *GTA* is not a focal point of the series for gamers: players appreciate the attention to detail in the game's design, and characters like Niko Bellic, the protagonist in *GTA IV*, change how players identify with the game. Reviews of the series are notable because of what is absent: reviewers do not talk much about violence or sexual content, instead attending to other

dynamics. By tracing the reviews of the game over time, it is possible to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the game in the minds of gamers, as the details and carefully developed back-stories drive *GTA*'s success.

Reviews of the early games in the series were generally mediocre. The PlayStation version of *GTA* received an overall score of 6.0 out of 10,[24] and *GTA 2* only scored somewhat better with a 6.8.[25] The games were plagued by technical problems and were reminiscent of "the simplistic arcade games that ravaged the earth about 20 years ago,"[26] rather than being cutting edge. The protagonist in the first version of the game was "barely identifiable from any other pedestrian" and that, while fun, the game would leave you "saying to yourself outloud [sic], 'Hey, why didn't they fix that?'"[27] The second version of the game was marked by issues of hard-to-read text and a problematic control scheme. A reviewer noted that "just because it pisses off brain dead politicians is enough to like the game," but in spite of the opportunity to upset 'the Man,' he was left saying, "I just don't get it."[28] The primary praise for the game centered on the use of sound. In the first game, "small details—like the beeping sound a truck makes when it backs up, the various engine sounds, or the way pedestrians scream and run if you drive on the sidewalk—add to *GTA*'s cool factor."[29] In spite of an overall negative review, sound was the point "where the game excels," and the difference between the music on the radio in the various cars adds depth as "a unique tool to encourage gamers to simply search out new vehicles just to see what's playing on the radio."[30] Although the violence and an anti-hero focus on crime were parts of the series from the beginning, the games were not well received. Violence was noteworthy, but as a means by which the game received media attention and entered public consciousness, not as a way to garner a positive review.

GTA III and its direct sequels, *GTA: Vice City* and *GTA: San Andreas*, were greeted with a different critical reception. Instead of posting mediocre scores, these offerings won Game of the Year awards and were greeted with regular ratings near the top of any scoring spectrum. *GTA III* expanded the notion of what a game world could be, enabling players to choose a relatively direct route through missions in the game or wander throughout the world, as *GTA III* "offers freedom, non-linear gameplay, and variety like never before."[31] *GTA III* is different "than other games in the series" because of "the volume of characters, cut-scenes, and story imbedded in nearly every mission, large or small."[32] The game is also marked by the fact that "it's got a distinct sense of humor. Dark humor, to be sure, but humor nonetheless. The characters you meet, the random AI [artificial intelligence] on the street, even the kinds of missions you get sent on, at their core, point at the insanity, irony, and the humor at the darkest aspects of life."[33] Critics held that, rather than violence or sexual content, "what makes the game so entertaining to explore is the design and presentation of the entire package. *GTA3* is just dripping with style, from the architecture of the different sections of the city to the characters you'll meet in said city

to the dark humor that runs throughout the game."[34] A different review goes out of its way to warn readers that the content of the game is "easily the most 'mature' M-rated game on the market today" and that "the game and its dialogue have been written specifically for an adult audience, and it definitely isn't for kids."[35] However, that kind of content is not the reason to play the game, the draw is that "Rockstar and DMA Design [the game's publisher and developer] have obviously spent a lot of time adding tons of little touches to the game that, while almost completely unnecessary, make the world seem like a living, breathing place."[36] The game progressed in critical acclaim not because of the violence or mature content, but because buggy elements of the earlier versions of the games were fixed and the game was developed to a greater degree of depth. Adding detail to the world to make it feel 'real' and enhancing the humor meant that *GTA* became more than just a chance to play as a criminal, separating it from competitors by honing the design of the game world.

Acknowledgement of what makes *GTA* interesting for gamers is made even clearer in reviews of the other games from the *GTA III* generation of the series. One critic notes that "while *Grand Theft Auto* has always been a violent, mature-themed series, it has always balanced the violent crime with an equal amount of tongue-in-cheek humor and style," and in *Vice City* "the humor comes mostly from the radio, which really drives home the sort of form-over-function mentality that most people associate with the '80s."[37] The version of the series developed for the PlayStation Portable marked an interesting juncture for *GTA*, as the game was able to leverage the highly praised design elements, but the debut on a new platform led to substantial technical issues, hearkening back to the days of *GTA* and *GTA 2*. However, this time reviews were far more favorable, with one critic noting,

> By now, you may be wondering why a game that we've basically talked about negatively for half the review deserves a rating of 9.0. Regardless of how bad the story is or how little innovation is in the game, it's still a *Grand Theft Auto* title through and through. Rockstar has consistently imbibed a sense of humor into an expansive and fun world, and it keeps you coming back for more. This is 100% true of *Vice City Stories*. Navigating the world, be it on foot, in vehicle or in the air is fun as hell. Even though the story sucks, the characters are unique and intriguing enough that you likely won't skip the cutscenes. And most of all, it's simply and purely *fun*.[38]

By 2006 *GTA* had reached the point where the formula for the game, based on 'unnecessary' details in a darkly humorous world, was refined enough to earn a very strong critical review in spite of technical issues and a thin overarching storyline.

The importance of humor and depth in game design can be seen throughout the run of the *GTA* series, but the high watermark games, at least in

terms of critical reviews, show what gamers focus on in *GTA*. *GTA*: *San Andreas* was hailed as the best game ever made for the PlayStation 2 and was matched by a slate of 10.0 reviews for *Grand Theft Auto IV*. Reviews of both demonstrate just how hard it is to understand what makes these games interesting, unless you play them. *San Andreas* was the largest world in *GTA*, and when fully unlocked offered a thirty-minute drive from one end of the game space to another. The added depth is

> why *San Andreas* is so awesome: it's a world that can offer different people different things. If a solid storyline and some incredibly tough missions are all that you're looking for, then you can have them. If you'd rather spend your time doing nothing but exploring the city and finding new ways to make money, destroy property, and dress like a pimp, then you can do that too. Live the life you want to live, do the things you want to do; it's entirely up to you. But however you choose to do it, do it now. Drop everything and do it right now. This is the best PlayStation 2 game ever made. Period.[39]

San Andreas was more than a game—Rockstar created a world in which players were able to choose from a tremendous range of options; no single design element would be enough to make the game 'work,' but the combination of all of the parts, especially the little pieces of design that gave the game depth are what makes playing *GTA: SA* fun. A different reviewer summarized the game, claiming,

> the strength of all these different gameplay elements—too many to count—makes for a powerful package that does not disappoint, despite the extremely high standards that *Grand Theft Auto* established and that *San Andreas* needed to live up to. With its strong story, well-written dialogue, terrific voice cast, impressive graphics, great in-game sound, and extremely entertaining and varied gameplay, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is a stupendous thrill ride that shouldn't be missed.[40]

GTA: *San Andreas* continued the development of the series, enriching the world as a whole and doing everything it could to make the game world seem real and alive. In so doing, the elements of the game that are most disturbing to many external critics recede into the background when playing *GTA* and are replaced by things like roaming the virtual San Andreas where players can lift weights and eat fast food.

GTA IV applied the lessons learned from previous games, while taking advantage of the processing power of a new gaming platform. It expanded on the wealth of activities in which players could partake, including integrating mock internet access, comedy shows by Ricky Gervais and Katt Williams, and a variety of other activities that allow players to "unwind in Liberty City." Players can "watch television, listen to numerous different

radio stations, check out some genuinely funny shows (including some big-name acts) at cabaret and comedy clubs, and use a computer to surf the in-game internet."[41] The in-game version of the internet included a variety of different spoof emails and websites that mock out of game scams, from ads for male enhancement to princes requesting money. The depth of play in the game led one reviewer to contend,

> Though these unsavory activities [killing, the ability to drive drunk] are somewhat commonplace in the game, it is an unfair simplification of the overall package. It's like calling a nuanced and well-scripted Scorsese film "a movie about guns." Sure, there's violence and depravity abound but there's also movie-quality cutscenes, the best voice acting in the industry, intrigue, betrayal, mysteries, dark secrets from the past, character interaction and development. This is not just a game about murder. This is an experience.[42]

As best seen in *GTA IV*, gamers find something in play that is beyond the common critiques of the game. *GTA* games develop a funny, fully designed world in which players are actors in a gripping drama. Certainly, the games should not be played by children, but the ability to do almost anything is part of what makes these games entertaining. Wordplay shows how the small, yet powerful contributions found in play are what make the game resound.

In addition to increasing the depth of a player's immersion into the game through the details and humor, *GTA IV* distinguishes itself from previous versions of the series by developing a compelling protagonist in the design of Niko Bellic. *GTA* games are increasingly focused on character development, which complements the appeal of the game. The earliest version of *GTA* games featured a bland, nameless protagonist. The main character does not speak until *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. In *GTA IV*, the additional character development leads to the recognition that "criminals are an ugly, cowardly lot more worthy of pity and disdain than admiration. This is what you'll learn playing through the single-player campaign in Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto IV*. The series cheered (and criticized) for glorifying violence has taken an unprecedented turn: it's gone legit."[43] The rich character development allows *GTA IV* to complicate notions of good and evil through a number of interesting characters. Niko Bellic is a recent Serbian immigrant seeking retribution against someone who betrayed his company of soldiers, causing the death of all but three members of the group. Although Niko routinely commits crimes, he also saves women from abusive relationships, denies offers to partake in drugs and alcohol, and confronts his own homophobia when he learns that one of his two fellow survivors is in a homosexual relationship with the mayor of Liberty City.[44] After playing as Niko for hours, it is hard not to like him, similar to the way one can develop an affinity for characters like Omar in *The Wire* or a member of the Corleone family in *The Godfather* movies.

One key that makes the design of Niko work within the game is that he is clearly constructed as 'other.' Throughout the game, particularly in the opening moments, both Niko and other surrounding characters stress that he is "just off the boat," a brand new immigrant to Liberty City. Similar patterns are continued in other entries into the series, most notably in *GTA: Chinatown Wars*, where Huang Lee is also referenced as "just off the boat" to seek redemption for his family. This narrative technique allows the game and player to make anything of the protagonists, effectively constructing a blank slate upon which to signify. The problem, however, is that assigning all of these activities to an 'other' frees players to place anything they do onto a character that is fundamentally not them. Gamers note some of the benefits of a character like Niko in evaluating an expansion to *GTA IV*, *GTA: The Lost and Damned*. The game "is not one of Rockstar's stronger offering. Johnny's [the protagonist] is not a likeable guy . . . He's just an ass as is everyone else in The Lost [Johnny's biker gang]."[45] In specific comparison to Niko, *GTA IV*'s main character "is a lot more than just a guy with a funny accent. Niko's journey is one of a lonely immigrant looking for companionship in a strange city. Though he does bad things, he never comes off as a bad guy. The same can't be said for Johnny."[46] Johnny grew up Liberty City, which leaves less room to imagine him as a character foreign to his environment or for players to identify with him from a distance; he is more of a fixed product who started his development close to home. As a result, Johnny "seems to lack the depth or conflicting feelings that other central characters of the *GTA* IV franchise"[47] possess. This may be a more disturbing legacy of the series than the sex or violence. To enable the cognitive distance to develop the narrative of *GTA* in an intriguing manner, it seems that *GTA* needs to make the protagonist either a featureless blob or a conflicted other. This aspect of design prevents the game from asking too many harsh questions about contemporary society so that the focus of gamers can be placed on humor and immersion.

The contents of reviews about *GTA* are quite different from mainstream, non-gamer discourse about the game. Wordplay shows that *GTA* offers gamers an intriguing package that draws them into a complex world, but can solidify problematic assumptions about the other.

LEARNING FROM VIOLENCE: THE CASE OF *GRAND THEFT AUTO*

The *GTA* series is particularly interesting as a case study because the games are among the biggest sellers in the video game industry and among the most frequently discussed by those who do not play games. As a result, they offer a useful opportunity to apply wordplay. Perhaps the most interesting facet of *GTA* is that the elements of the game that are particularly polarizing, the sex and violence, are often left out of the evaluation of the game

in reviews. This may be in part because the presence of sex and violence is simply understood by gamers, but the design of the games also drives this. Other expected details, like the depth of the game world or humor, frequently get extended praise within reviews. From a communicative standpoint, all of these details construct and change what is memorable about the game when it is played. As the violence is woven throughout missions, like in most first-person shooters or war games, players begin to see violence as a background issue, one to be discussed in terms of game play and game design, rather than a discussion about whether or not it is appropriate. The violence in the game is not unique. Other games involve shooting, so a gamer's recall is focused on what makes *GTA* different. The most notable aspects of *GTA* are the complete world in which players are placed and the humor that makes them laugh. At this point, *GTA* has honed the formula of what works to the point that almost any version of the game that enacts a deep world with dark humor will be well received. *GTA* has crafted a niche for itself based on the ability to create an interesting, immersive game world where players know they will be amused and able to focus on the 'fun' in the game. The flourishes in game design function rhetorically to diminish the elements of the game that ring alarms for external critics concerned about sex and violence.

The *GTA* series reached a critical pinnacle with *GTA IV*. A substantial piece of what makes this version of the game distinct is the presence of Niko, who gamers are clearly encouraged to imagine as other. In part, the characters in *GTA* can do bad things because they are not us. They are people in a world similar to ours, but different enough that players are not encouraged to think too much about the relationships between the world represented in the game and the world that exists outside of it. The satirical references within the game may encourage some reflection, but always through humor. By presenting Niko as an other, fresh off the boat and not from Liberty City, the simulated world of *GTA* takes on an additional level of cognitive distance. Niko is fun to play in part because we need not ask questions about whether or not a character like Niko could be created from 'one of us.' Niko is the product of both a traumatic war and an immigrant's displacement in a new land. Niko would play quite differently had he been constructed as a middle child from middle America who moved to Liberty City to go to college, only to fall into a life of crime. A character like that would make the world of *GTA* feel too real, too close to too many of the people playing, which would disturb the fantasy of the game. The effort to make a native of Liberty City the focal character in *GTA IV: The Lost and Damned* led to the construction of an unlikeable character that players reviled. Casting the violence into the background of the game is not solely the role of the humor within the game, as a distant protagonist helps carry part of the burden to draw players into the game. The most troubling part of *GTA* is not that one can shoot people, but that one commits wanton violence as someone who is carefully coded as different from the person

likely to be behind the controls of the game. In sports games, players are encouraged to create a self-replica, a feature I would be stunned to see in *GTA*. The design of *GTA* is predicated on division and difference between the game and the player, which are part of what enables gamers to divorce themselves from the content others find objectionable.

The schism between the public criticism of *GTA* and gaming discourse about the game indicates a number of interesting things about wordplay. First and foremost, it is clear that there are differences between gamers and critics of gaming that are not likely to be bridged in any circumstance, but a deeper understanding by both sides might lead to a more productive discourse about an important media form. Both sides exaggerate and negatively characterize the contributions of the other, resulting in an impasse where any potential point of the 'opponent' is lost in the discussion. Jesse Carey contends that in discussions about video games, one must remember that "*what you say* isn't as important as *how you say it*," especially as the tone of criticism "has made the video game industry enemies with the critics."[48] Though the two sides need not agree, a productive discussion by intelligent people with differing feeling about games would likely lead to a better understanding of the medium. Part of this is recognition that games need to be played to be understood, but beyond that the inclusion of more voices into a productive discussion about the role of games in contemporary society stands to enhance the understanding of games as a whole.

Reviews of *GTA* also offer an opportunity to better understand how video games function. Procedural rhetoric may be exclusive to games, but the processes in games are not the only symbols influencing players. They cannot be understood without being placed into context. The discourse surrounding the game and central game mechanics, along with the seemingly unnecessary touches like the script, sound, and development of the protagonist, work together to make *GTA* games a coherent package. Analyzing video games requires reaching beyond the games themselves to examine how they are discussed by those who play them and those who do not. In this case, *GTA* games offer a complex example of how games function rhetorically. Comprehending the breadth of the series requires looking well beyond the bounds of the processes contained within the games. Investigating these external texts and how they interact with the procedures inherent to games is a perfect setting for applying wordplay.

Finally, discussion about *GTA* marks another example of video games as a rapidly maturing media form with complex stories and design elements that offer inviting worlds that need to be studied and better understood. At the same time, the uproar about what is possible within games marks a veritable rite of passage, as the furor over games like *GTA* matches the attention paid to almost any emergent media form. Books, rock and roll, and movies are perceived of as far less of a threat now than they once were, in large part because we better understand them. Part of better understanding video games is charting their discourse with a particular eye to what makes

controversial games work and why they seem so hard to comprehend. In this case, *GTA* demonstrates how games function rhetorically, using small details and humor along with the careful construction of a protagonist to make a crime spree seem like the least noteworthy part of a video game.

Humor, details, and the deliberate depiction of a protagonist are seen in the words, design, and play of *GTA*. Looking more deeply at texts also requires examining the economic structure within which they are developed, an area where wordplay shows how, for EA Sports, that "it's in the game."

6 EA Sports and Planned Obsolescence

Sports games are a fascinating segment of the video game industry. Built around wildly successful franchises with annual release schedules, versions of the most popular sports games are among the top-selling games every year. The market for console sports games is largely dominated by EA Sports, a subdivision of Electronic Arts, which produces annual versions of *FIFA Soccer* and the *Madden* football series. They also make a variety of other sports titles that include *NHL* hockey, a Tiger Woods–branded golf game, and *Fight Night* boxing. Although there are competing companies in the genre, most notably 2K Sports, EA currently holds exclusive rights to making video games based on NFL and NCAA football, and *FIFA Soccer* is the best-selling soccer game in the industry, which makes EA's games of particular relevance to the discourse of video games.

Within the context of words, design, and play, sports games are especially notable because the genre is predicated on regular releases of largely similar games each year. Substantial upgrades and adjustments are often made in the transition from one console generation to the next, but the overwhelming majority of each new game is the same as what can be found in the previous year's edition. In spite of the year-to-year similarity or perhaps because of it, new versions of the games sell well and attract a vibrant audience, even though the games themselves lose their resale value more quickly than a new sports car driven off the dealer's lot. Resale value is not necessarily a primary reason why people buy video games, but it highlights the single most curious aspect of sports games: gamers know these games have a much shorter shelf life than other games, yet line up to buy them year after year.

As an active sports gamer who has more copies of *Madden* than I care to publicly admit, I find the cycle of the sports franchise fascinating. Fortunately, using wordplay to carefully examine EA Sports points to several reasons why sports franchises are successful and aids in the explanation of how these games keep bringing players back year after year. Starting with a set of popular sports licenses, building from and subtly adding to a workable code base, and launching massive marketing campaigns enables EA Sports games to thrive, even when annual upgrades may not be in the best interest of gamers. Add in the increased importance of online play and online access for player updates and game developers are even better able

to make each annual version of a game feel like a must buy. Understanding how wordplay applies to franchise sports titles starts by exploring at the dynamics of EA Sports itself, with a particular focus on their two biggest franchises, *FIFA Soccer* and *Madden* football.

EA SPORTS: GAMING JUGGERNAUT

EA Sports is a sub-label of gaming giant Electronic Arts (EA) that focuses on producing games based on real-world sports. Their titles typically attempt to provide a 'simulation-style' experience that replicates what one would find in the real-world versions of the activities,[1] although they produce a handful of arcade-style[2] titles like *NBA JAM*. EA Sports games are typically among EA's biggest sellers, with titles like *FIFA Soccer 11* selling almost twice as many copies as any other game released by the label in the 2010 fiscal year, and *Madden NFL 11* also placing within EA's five most successful games in that time period.[3] Four key elements help define what make EA Sports notable: a focus on simulation and replication of the sports on which the games are based, a transition toward online play, the target audience for the game, and the cultural impact of their leading titles.

The bias toward simulation in EA Sports games is most readily evidenced by their marketing campaigns. The original company slogan "If it's in the game, it's in the game" was later shortened to the assumptive declaration that "It's in the game." Both slogans stress how 'real' EA Sports titles seek to be. This appeal to fidelity is backed by the numerous, often exclusive, licenses EA Sports pursues with sports leagues and player's associations, which allow the company to include famous sports teams and notable players in their games. Their *FIFA Soccer* franchise was the first to be licensed by the soccer federation, and their NFL and NCAA football franchises have benefited from long-term exclusive deals. These exclusive contracts shut out any competition seeking to make a game that integrates real-world players and teams. This approach has hurt them in some cases, as competitor 2KSports obtained an exclusive license to Major League Baseball, but the attempt to provide an accurate simulation of the real is at the center of how EA Sports seeks to shape its products. The height of this focus on simulation is embodied in the romantic retelling of the discussions surrounding the original version of *Madden Football*, where famous NFL coach and the game's licensed namesake, John Madden, insisted that any game bearing his name must feature 11 versus 11 football, rather than the 3 v 3 used by competitors or the 7 v 7 pitched by the game's programmers. This approach is continued throughout the history of *Madden*, as *Madden NFL 12* integrated a new handling of player concussions in both graphics and in-game commentary to better represent contemporary debates in the football league upon which the game is based.[4] In developing a connection between reality and sports games, EA established a key dynamic of the discourse.

The focus on simulation has served EA well over the years, especially in using the company's size and resources to lock up crucial licensing rights.

Beyond promoting their games as having a higher fidelity than their competitors, EA Sports innovated and embraced a number of changes to the video game marketplace, most notably in the expansion and integration of online play into their games. Online content was originally built around the ability to play other people online, a feature where many casual gamers "quickly found out the hard way that I was no match for the [high] caliber players who have the time to play online."[5] Eventually, EA Sports added elements to match players of similar skill levels, enabled players to build their own online franchises, and integrated a variety of other features to move players from focusing on playing against the computer or local players to being able to play gamers from around the world. The relationship between EA Sports and online play was summarized when their president, Peter Moore, contended that the increased connectivity of game franchises across multiple platforms is leading to a situation where "there will be no offline games."[6] This approach of leveraging fan communities and online access can be seen in the online vote held to determine which player would hold the coveted spot on the cover of *Madden NFL 12* and on expanding EA Sports's *FIFA Soccer* property on to Facebook with *FIFA Superstars*. Additional innovations include a decision to build tutorials into EA Sports games, enabling the company to claim they are "going green" while cutting the cost of printing instruction manuals,[7] and marketing campaigns that contend the release of their primary titles is launch day holiday gamers should celebrate by taking a day off of work.

Another key question for EA Sports is determining the target audience for their games. Sports games, like many other genres, typically can cater to all kinds of players, with the most common split being between the 'casual' and the 'hardcore.' Hardcore players typically invest more time playing, practicing and honing their skills, which means that games with complex tactics or a multitude of options better reward their time investment. On the other hand, casual players are interested in the game, but devote less time to practicing their craft, which typically makes assistance systems and a streamlined approach relevant to this broader audience. Beginning with the version of their games released in 2000 EA Sports actively targeted the hardcore, adding complex game play elements and seeking to develop a game where elite players could thrive and professional competitions could be developed using their games. Things started to change in *Madden NFL 09*, which introduced "simple playbooks combined with [ex-NFL player and commentator, Chris] Collinsworth's backtrack analysis" that "are a step in the right direction when it comes to making Madden more accessible to casual players."[8] *FIFA Soccer 10* also sought to expand its target audience, as "thankfully, the new tutorials help newcomers learn the ropes, and they're in-depth enough to teach even advanced players some things they might not know."[9] The additional features in these games sought to

broaden the potential audience for the games, which makes sense if one is trying to sell as many copies of the game as possible. Further, by establishing a dedicated hardcore user base, outreach to casuals did not pit one group against the other and EA has shifted their efforts to target casual players. In the case of *Madden NFL 11*, the primary new game mechanic, GameFlow, "was tailored specifically with the casual audience in mind, as many have been intimidated by Madden in the past, and for good reason."[10] The problem is the system "isn't nearly as comprehensive as you might expect for such a highly touted addition," which means that "Madden veterans will quickly see the systems limitations and revert back to traditional play calling."[11] Casual players were able to take advantage of GameFlow to speed up play, while the hardcore could turn it off and retain an additional level of control over their play calling. Additions like GameFlow allow EA Sports games to capitalize on their established link to the hardcore, while reaching out to a broader audience. The transition toward casual players is notable, particularly because the hardcore players are likely hooked on the game anyway and striking an appropriate balance between various interest groups is crucial to further growing sales totals. With sales numbers generally trending upward since the games began targeting a broader audience, it would be reasonable to expect EA to continue reaching out to a more heterogeneous group of players.

The final key piece of EA Sports is the massive cultural impact of their games, particularly the power of their lead franchises. EA has a long history in game development, backed by hits likes *Dr. J and Larry Bird Go One on One* and the original *Madden* games, the company has had a substantial role in the evolution of sports video games. In the United States, *Madden NFL* games are talked about in reverential terms, with a display about the game included in the professional football Hall of Fame, and the game hailed as "the new Nike, sports' official arbiter of cool."[12] The cultural power of *Madden* is marked by

> grown men lining up outside Walmarts for the game's annual midnight release; rock bands, such as Good Charlotte, going mainstream via inclusion on the *Madden* soundtrack; a pokerlike underground circuit of cash tournaments;[13] the black-cat mojo of the *Madden* cover curse superseding the Sports Illustrated cover jinx; Madden himself being recognized less for his Hall of Fame coaching and broadcasting career than for a game that beat him into Canton.[14]

From the public recognition to the launch day holiday, "when it comes to sports games, *Madden* is the undisputed king of them all."[15] *FIFA Soccer*'s impact is felt primarily outside of the United States, where many of its more than 100 million copies in lifetime sales have been racked up. Benefiting from the multiple soccer competitions that can be leveraged for supplementary releases, *FIFA Soccer* is often marked by multiple versions a year, from

the lead version timed to each fall's new season to special editions for the World Cup and the European Championships. *FIFA Soccer*'s marketing campaigns include a who's who of soccer stars, frequently with dedicated editions for different regions to highlight the best and brightest star players each area has to offer. Much like *Madden NFL* has become an arbiter of cool for football in the United States, *FIFA Soccer* is seeking to do something similar for another kind of football on a global scale.

Understanding the role and scope of the EA Sports games sets the background with which to apply wordplay to delve into how these games show particularly interesting aspects of words, design, and play. EA Sports games are notable for three key reasons. First, although video games are increasingly moving toward the production of franchises because of the perceived security in producing sequels to established hit games, the planned obsolescence built into sports games is striking. The successful debut of a new piece of intellectual property is likely to lead to the development of a franchise, but the original still retains some sort of value in the scope of the franchise as a whole. EA Sports games are different in that, on the day they debut, the clock begins ticking as to when they will be obsolete, as they will be replaced by a newer, better version next year. Second, the large-scale knowledge of the impending obsolescence of sports games means that extensive marketing campaigns are built to ensure that players see a 'need' to get the newest version of the game. Development of brand loyalty is important, but what is even more crucial is articulating one or two key ways in which the new game will be the best in the history of the series. Finally, the movement to online play dramatically impacts how sports video games are played. By shifting the primary interaction off of an individual player's console and onto servers hosted or maintained by EA, EA Sports gains great power in dictating how their games are played. These three crucial elements form the core of wordplay's application to sports gamers.

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

The business model of sports games has a substantial impact on the way in which they are made and distributed and, thus, on their rhetorical construction. Several key factors shape the terrain for the economics of games in the sports genre, most notably licensing, competition, an annual release schedule, and the 'upgrades' that come along with that schedule. Examining each of these elements enables analysis of how the impending irrelevance of sports games shapes how they are designed, marketed, and played.

Perhaps the most important piece of the economics of sports games is the acquisition of the relevant licensees to produce an accurate simulation. To use the team names and graphics, payment must be made to the sports leagues governing the activity. For *Madden NFL* that means payment is made to the National Football League and for *FIFA Soccer* payment is

made to the various governing bodies of soccer. *Madden NFL* also licenses rights to individual player names and likenesses, which requires payment to the NFL Players Association. Although *Madden NFL* is a particularly dependable title for EA Sports, "it's not a game that comes cheap, though. Beyond the usual $9 per copy royalty payments to the console manufacturers Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo, EA has to give a portion of each sale to the NFL (as part of its exclusivity deal) and the NFL Players Association. And that's after retailers get their 20 percent portion of the sale."[16] *FIFA Soccer* is relatively cheaper for EA, as the total license costs are lower,[17] but the fees for these games are substantial enough that the money generated by *Madden NFL* is the largest source of license revenue for the NFL outside of apparel.[18] The perceived need for a license changes how these games are made. As part of their contract with EA Sports, the NFL gets approval of in-game content to ensure that it represents the NFL appropriately.[19] This extra step guarantees that a certain amount of control lies outside the game's programmers, which means the ambulance that used to cart injured players off the field will not be coming back any time soon. Intrusive oversight like this makes the context for constructing the game quite different than one based on original intellectual property. Adding both a direct cost and potential restrictions, licenses with sporting organizations have their limitations, but a further wrinkle in the discourse is the opportunity for a game company to negotiate an exclusive license.

The ability to negotiate exclusivity has a dramatic impact on how sports games are produced. The perceived importance of a license means that game companies need to negotiate with sports leagues, but those sporting authorities can opt to work with multiple game companies, as is the case for FIFA and the National Basketball Association, or with a single corporation, as is the case for the NFL and Major League Baseball. In so doing, game companies that lock in exclusivity have an opportunity to stifle competition before it starts. One of the reasons why *FIFA Soccer* is cheaper for EA Sports is because their license is not exclusive, but their use of exclusive licenses to protect games like *Madden NFL* and *NCAA Football* imply that the additional cost can be considered money well spent. In the first version of *Madden NFL* to be released under the exclusivity agreement, one review noted that *Madden NFL 06* was a great game, but "in the first year where *Madden* is all we get when it comes to licensed pro football, I was expecting more. But then again, maybe EA's exclusivity with the NFL will hamper their annual improvements, being that their only opponent this year is what, *Blitz*?"[20] When a juggernaut like *Madden NFL* only faces a short-lived, action-style presentation of football in the competition for consumer dollars, EA Sports is able to push out other companies and entrench their product as something that makes football not just 'in the game,' but when gamers seek to play NFL football, EA Sports provides the only game. *Madden NFL* still needs to add new things each year to warrant purchase, but it is only competing with older

versions of itself. The exclusivity of *Madden NFL*'s design extends the benefits EA reaps from licenses granted to sports games, as the necessity of holding a license to produce simulation-style gaming shapes the discourse of sports games. Everyone may know there will be another version of the game coming, but the competition for licenses means that "there are very few instances where there are multiple publishers all fighting over the same sport and all are being successful."[21] In protecting their games with licensing rights, EA Sports is able to fetishize the value of licenses and push out competitors, which means their games increasingly compete with older versions of EA games, rather than external competition. Exclusive licenses compound these benefits, as they eliminate competition for an extended period of time, making another company's resurgence in the market more difficult because they have not been making a game dedicated to that sport and would have to build their game from scratch.

One of the key pieces for any game's release is hitting the appropriate launch window for the product. Programming and producing the games is a tricky business and typical games take two or three years to code, but sports games need to ship at least every year.[22] An annual release is expected for sports games, even though industry experts believe that "rushing most franchises to get an annual release impacts series quality in the long run."[23] Further complicating matters for sports games is that they have to hit a precise launch window to be successful. Although many games seek to release in the winter holiday season, should issues arise in programming or testing the game, the launch date can be moved back. Sports games, on the other hand, are in a position where the timing of the real world season on which they are based drives a huge part of game consumption. This poses some advantages, as the occurrence of a major soccer tournament can drive sales of *FIFA Soccer* months after the game's initial launch, but if the window is missed, bad things happen.

EA Sports suffered from this with their planned NBA release in 2010 when testing showed a number of bugs in *NBA Elite 11* that made it an inferior option to the competing *NBA2K11*. With *NBA Elite 11*, EA Sports sought to reinvent their NBA title, making substantial changes to their game engine in an attempt to "fundamentally innovate," which required a "complete rewrite of the technology."[24] EA CEO Jon Riccitiello argued that EA Sports was faced with a choice: ship a second tier game that would lose in the marketplace and cement "a reputation for being one to ship secondary sports titles" or continue production and delay the launch, "but when you look at the data, typically somewhere between 85 and 90 per cent of basketball games ship between launch date and the All-Star game so we would have been competing for, what, half of the last 10 per cent?"[25] Compounding the issue is the fact that the continued debugging of *NBA Elite 11* would mean that the development cycle for the next year's game would be even shorter. As a result, EA chose to shelve the product, stopping its release and writing off the work on the

existing game as a sunk cost, simply because of the immense importance for sports games to hit their launch dates, especially in one of the few sports with open competition between publishers.

The limited window for launching sports games and the desire for annual releases changes the dynamics of design and development of these games. Most commonly, critics argue that the games fail to innovate, as innovation presents potentially unsustainable risks like those encountered in the case of *NBA Elite 11*. EA Sport's leadership fiercely disputes the notion that they are failing to innovate new approaches to game design, with their president, Peter Moore, contending that "our games have become more and more complicated and complex, and we often get dogged for one of the biggest misconceptions in the entire industry—a lack of innovation year in and year out on annually iterated titles. I bristle . . . when I hear this because nothing could be further from the truth."[26] Even though EA Sports disputes the contention that they only iterate, the tight timeframes within which to produce sports titles is a key piece of the construction of these games. External factors play a crucial role in the development of sports games, especially because "people admire game companies that take risks but in retrospect they only seem to admire game companies that take risks when the risks work."[27] The impending irrelevance of sports games because of their short sales window means that it very well may make more sense to write off a title than release it late or in an unpolished level of production. Quite simply, sports games do not age well, and many gamers have plenty to say about it.

Players of sports games are divided into categories beyond hardcore and casual, as they are also split on how often they buy their titles of choice. In addition to the subset who buys a new version of the game each year, there are a substantial number of irregular buyers who are prone to purchasing the newest version of a sports franchise every few years. However, both groups are subject to the annual releases of EA Sports titles that quickly make their older games obsolete. This dynamic occurs with their exclusively licensed titles, like *NCAA Football* for which those interested in creating large online tournaments are faced with an additional charge "like tribute, because it's not enough that they'll bilk you for $60 ($70 in Canada) for a game doomed to obsolescence in a year. It's what EA does. You will pay and you will like it, because EA also holds the sole license to the NCAA and there are no other college football games out there."[28] Similar complaints crop up in evaluations of the other kind of football as well, particularly in the assessment of specially released tournament titles, which are slimmed down versions of the full *FIFA Soccer* games that only allow play in a particular tournament. In the conclusion of a positive review, it is noted that, although "*2010 FIFA World Cup* is one of the best tournament games EA has ever put out . . . its obsolescence cuts closer than the usual annual *FIFA* games."[29] As the game was released in April and the World Cup final was in July, the game only offered a few months of play before real life events

passed it by. Perhaps more confounding is that *FIFA Soccer 11*, a new full version of the game, was released the following October, supplanting the smaller tournament version of the game and giving it fewer than six months of shelf life. Scorn for this kind of release schedule extends to the full version of the franchise as well, with the passionate plea "in short, don't buy this game. EA releases a new *FIFA* game every year with marginal improvements, and we suckers keep buying them. It's time we wise up."[30] Although players are faced with the desire to heed the warnings and avoid the new purchase, EA Sports exploits the use of licensing, an annual release cycle and the clever development of specific upgrades to overcome the knowledge that the games have an exceptionally short shelf life.

The obsolescence built into each of the sports games is a key dynamic that shapes the discursive construction of EA Sports titles. EA has to address the perception that they are only tweaking the game each year, seeking to develop the belief that each version is the best one ever—a must have. That process is the second area where wordplay applies to sports games, by focusing on the appeals EA Sports uses to convince players to purchase the new version of the game, even as it makes their older copy worthless plastic.

WHY WE UPGRADE

EA Sports has become far more than just a game company and the breadth of their activities are best shown in the massive marketing campaigns on behalf of their biggest products. Beyond simply developing a game franchise, EA Sports has to make each edition of every game matter. The key to this kind of appeal is developing a series of reasons why players need the new version of the game based on what makes it special and why it renders the older version obsolete. When done well, the appeals effectively build on each other, creating a well-established perception that sports games are only good for a year, which is solidified by EA's ongoing marketing efforts and the convenient fact that there is a new, real-world season each year to go along with the new game. There are four key pieces to EA's campaign to get players to upgrade their games: annual feature hype, an appeal to the 'real,' the development of a roster fetish, and the concluding argument from these appeals that each new version of a game is the best ever.

The cornerstone of each new game in a sports franchise is the hype that comes along with the new feature or two in the latest edition of the game. Although there are occasional wholesale changes in a game, annual changes are generally refinements of what already exists. The ordering principle of these games is that there will be one or two feature additions each year to garner press and public attention, framing discussion of the game to "seemingly make the upgrade from one year to the next worthwhile."[31] This approach enables a marketing department to have an easy hook into

the promotion of the game, as the newest additions can be explained and hyped with the implicit argument that previous versions of the game are lacking, since they do not contain the amazing new design mechanic. There are usually several smaller modifications that accompany the major changes to provide bulk to the argument about why people should upgrade, but a banner addition is at the core of the marketing campaign. A press release for *Madden NFL 2004* contends that its key new feature is the "revolutionary Playmaker Control that lets gamers adjust on the fly just as NFL players do."[32] Time in development can also be used to promote the importance of a particular version of a franchise; the press release for *FIFA Soccer 12* announced "a new physics engine that will deliver revolutionary changes to the best sports videogame on the planet. Two years in development, the new Player Impact Engine inside *FIFA Soccer 12* delivers real-world physicality in every interaction on the pitch."[33]

By developing press releases filled with platitudes like these, reviewers of the game frequently develop a parallel approach in their discussions surrounding the game. This is then integrated into a larger articulation of the ordering logic of why players should upgrade, as the features EA Sports keeps adding are driven by player feedback. The changes to *FIFA Soccer* and success of the title are attributed to the fact that

> during the past few years, however, the development team at EA Canada [the development house for *FIFA Soccer*] has been listening to the huge FIFA community more and more—involving the hardcore contingent into the development process, with the result being a soccer series that has flourished both critically and commercially.[34]

The changes are not just important because they are revolutionary; the reason to upgrade is because developers are listening to players by inviting them to participate in the construction of the franchise, binding them more closely to the game. When they are paying attention to their audience and implementing requested changes, EA Sports can contend that these particular features are especially noteworthy, encouraging purchase of the latest title. Whether or not the features are later celebrated or reviled, like the QB Vision Cone that was introduced with *Madden NFL 06* and later removed from the core of the game, is secondary because the additions are presented in a way that makes the game seem new and different, while retaining elements of the old and familiar.

Although the new mechanics are the key additions to the game that warrant upgrade, it is the underlying warrant behind the arguments surrounding the games that makes the appeals resound. By basing most EA Sports games on a notion of simulation, of reality, of the fact that 'it's in the game,' EA Sports offers an ordering logic that encourages consumption of a new game each year. Because sports leagues have a 'new version' each year the appeal to annual editions of games fits a broader perception of how sports

work. This belief system offers an anchor upon which to set the arguments about the improvements and changes in each game, allowing the game makers to promote the increased fidelity achieved through replicating any rule changes or issues that have arisen in the previous year, while setting the stage for the one constant upgrade in sports games—the rosters.

A traditional means by which to disparage annual editions of sports titles is to contend that they are merely roster updates, where the only value the new version has resides in the movement of players from uniform to uniform and in and out of the league. Although the articulation of the importance of the new game mechanics offers an opportunity to circumvent this argument, the consistent appeal to the games as a simulation of reality make updated rosters a key piece of what makes each year's game special. Beyond changing the jersey or kit in which a particular player or team performs, each year's version also enables EA Sports to update a player's rating to better represent how they will play on the field or pitch. Given that a player's rating and appearance in the game are a regular source of discussion amongst the players themselves, one that requires an EA Sports employee as a middle person to handle concerns and comments,[35] the changes to rosters are a integral part of what makes each version of the game special. In recent years, this line of appeal to players has been expanded through the availability of online roster updates. For their core titles, like *FIFA Soccer*, *Madden Football*, and *NHL* games, EA Sports offers periodic rosters updates throughout the playing season. These changes allow designers to modify the game on the fly, reproducing trades, transfers, or signings that occur in the real-world sports on which the video games are based, while also adjusting a players rating to represent a series of breakthrough performances, an injury, or a prolonged slump. By enabling in-season roster updates, EA Sports can continue to expand their contention that they are an accurate representation of what happens in the sports gamers follow, while further entrenching the perceived importance of accurate rosters and placing an even greater emphasis on the importance of online access to the game.

This combination of appeals form the crux of EA Sports' argument about why players need to upgrade annually, as they add up to the conclusion that each version of each game should be considered the best ever in the series. By typically working from a base of somewhat subtle adjustments, rather than wholesale changes, and making an effort to respond to audience concerns, the games are unlikely to backslide because they iterate on what made the games successful without taking anything particularly important off of the table. Leveraging the ability to talk directly to gamers online, EA Sports has taken up using developer posts to reach directly to their community of fans, circumventing a typical press release and enabling them to build anticipation as to why each version of the game will be the best in the series. In advance of the launch of *Madden NFL 12*, the art director for the game mused that

> in reading reviews of *Madden NFL 11*, we weren't satisfied with '*Madden* looks good as ever,' we wanted to give you those big time 'wow' moments. Everything we focused on is true to the NFL and what YOU the fans have been begging for! We believe Madden NFL 12 is our biggest leap forward ever, and I think you will agree once you've seen what we have in store.[36]

Combining a potpourri of the reasons why gamers should upgrade each year, the contention that this year is the best ever is established with an argument about pre-game presentation, better lighting and graphic art for player models, and 3D grass that moves more like it would in a real game of football. Even though the games have a relatively short time frame for development, the ability to build and work from an already established product enables a game with incremental changes to make a clear case as to why it is the best version of the franchise anyone has ever seen. The notion of building on the past and adding as they go helps make annual franchises best sellers, which enables EA Sports games to continue to build their cultural impact and franchise value and start the cycle on the next 'necessary' upgrade.

EA's annual franchises have worked to build the presumption that there is a reason to buy the new game, even though there is far less difference between each version of a sports game than there is in an action-adventure or platform title. EA Sports has to make the case each year about why gamers should buy a newer version of a game they already own, which is a key piece of the production of words surrounding sports games. Complementing the arguments about why the discs themselves warrant upgrade from one year to the next is another key aspect of the design and play established for sports games, the growing importance of online access.

ONLINE ACCESS AND CONTROL

The increasing integration of online access into sports titles is a fascinating piece of what makes contemporary sports titles popular. Combining a vast array of options for players, which dramatically expand how they are able to play their games, with a massive amount of control turned over to the game developer, online integration is a key piece of how sports games are constructed discursively. Online content expands the bounds of the game, enabling roster updates and online competition, but also requires authentication and access checks that enable game companies to impede used game sales or effectively require upgrading to the newest version of a game to be able to compete with friends. Furthermore, online interaction enables EA Sports to reach beyond the traditional bounds of their games to more completely integrate players into the process of constructing what these games are culturally.

After the initial debut of online competitive play in games like *Madden NFL 2003* and *FIFA Soccer 2004*, the amount of online interaction has been steadily increasing in EA Sports titles, marking regular records highs for online play with the debut of each new version of their major titles. Shortly after the release of *FIFA Soccer 11*, EA Sports "registered more than 18.6 million online connected EA Sports game sessions, with more than 11.3 million contributed by *FIFA 11* over the two-day period."[37] Driving the increasing number of online sessions is a growing effort to build a robust array of online options into the games themselves. Complementing existing game modes, recent versions of EA Sports games offer enough online play "that the game should have a good deal of longevity throughout the year."[38] As EA Sports allows more online play, a large subset of the player base is able to enrich their playing experience by taking advantage of the dynamic option of playing against people, rather than a relatively static computer. The richness of the added elements of online play are frequently the highlighted in EA Sports titles, with *Madden NFL 10* praised for an "Online Franchise [mode that] is fantastic"[39] and *FIFA Soccer 11* evaluated as "a great game of soccer with a fine feature set that offers plenty to do online or off."[40] EA Sports is seeking options for players to engage their games in a wide range of ways, not only by expanding online play, but spreading to additional platforms, as an EA executive contends that you can now "start *FIFA* in the living room on your TV and then engage with it on the go" as the company is adding the game to platforms like "iPad, iPhone, [and] social gaming."[41] As the game spreads, players have additional ways with which to engage it, which can be a net benefit for players who can recognize added value to their purchase. Online play generally offers depth and replayability, but it comes with a cost, as it requires the use of servers that are generally hosted or supported by EA. By providing online content on their terms, the growing importance of online play increasingly offers EA Sports the chance to take their games and go home.

Increasing the amount of online content offers EA Sports a substantial amount of control about how they are played. Instead of releasing a disc that players can use as they wish, EA Sports now sells both a disc and an online service to go along with the disc. By adding the service, EA claws back authority over the use of their games, as what they giveth, they can also taketh away. There are three primary ways in which EA Sports reasserts control of their product via online play: through the use of Online Pass, the hosting of servers, and charges for content.

The primary restrictive mechanism exerted over online play is the use of EA's Online Pass. Online Pass is predominantly a means to discourage buying used versions of EA products. In addition to the game disc, EA Sports games come with a code that enables online access. Each code works only once. Should someone purchase a used copy of the game, the Online Pass was likely used by the previous owner, particularly as the game prompts players to input the code upon first loading. Online Passes can be purchased,

but in separating the selling of the pass from the game disc, EA is able to gain revenue from the sale of the service, whereas they would be cut out of any revenue from the resale of the disc. Although EA has not disclosed revenue figures associated with the development of Online Pass, it has spread throughout their games and in one interview an executive noted "what I can say is that we've been very happy with Online Pass. Online Pass for us was all about an acknowledgement of the value of the service we want to provide online."[42] As the balance of value contained in the play experience is shifted from offline play to online play, the Online Pass program allows EA Sports to govern who is able to play by separating elements of the game and disc from the service of online access and online play.

Beyond controlling who can engage in online play, EA Sports has the option to choose when players are no longer able to play online. As part of pitching online play as a service, EA routinely shuts down the servers for their 'older' games, those with fewer than 1% of the online player base, to ensure that "our hard-working engineering and IT staff focus on keeping a positive experience for the other 99% of customers playing our more popular games."[43] Although the policy affects all EA games, not just sports titles, it is particularly interesting for sports games, as they are supplanted annually by new versions of the same game. EA certainly sells the point that relatively few people are playing these games online, but as the focus shifts from providing a complete game on the disc to providing an experience that depends on both disc and access to online content, the ability for EA to shut down online access whenever they choose gives the company a tremendous amount of power in shaping the terms on which their games are played. As online interaction hosted or supported by game companies enters the realm of play, game companies accrete a greater ability to set certain terms on which play occurs, as "with titles as recent as 14 months old [being shut down by EA], it does ask some serious questions about what you're actually paying for."[44] In many ways online access is a boon for players, as it expands the ways in which their games can be played and enables them to compete with live people and connect with friends living in far-flung places. However, the control asserted by game companies cuts into some of those advantages, a dynamic that may be best seen in the incremental charges now assessed for additional content or options.

I was slow upgrading to the HD generation of consoles, as I was playing PC games and did not see the need to get a PS3 or Xbox 360 until well after their launch. One of the genres of games I had really missed were sports games, so I quickly procured the latest version of *Madden*. As I began the franchise mode I was struck by how many elements of the game had been displaced and were replaced with new options that cost money above and beyond what I had paid for the game. This upselling is integrated throughout EA Sports titles, where one reviewer finds it objectionable that in *FIFA Soccer* "you can buy short-term upgrades for your virtual pro in the new FIFA store—160 MS [Microsoft Points, for the Xbox 360; about two USD]

points turns your footballer into a 'perfect footballing machine' for four matches, and you can buy similar short-term performance boosts for 80 MS points."[45] In *FIFA Soccer 11*, the spread of upselling material reached game content as well, with the mode of updating player statistics and ratings throughout the season costing about $5 for one league or $10 for the five prominent leagues in the game. In *Madden NFL* elements from scouting reports to short-term player and team boosts are sold, altering play and generating revenue for EA. By increasingly moving players to online, connected play, EA generates the ability to build microtransactions into their sports games, both charging for things that used to be included and adding new elements, like the Ultimate Team trading card games, for which there can be a charge. Although the increased use of online interactions generally give the game publisher additional control in defining the terrain of words, design, and play, EA Sports has also opened up a relative amount of power to their players in at least one interesting way.

Each year one of the most prized pieces of real estate in the sports world is the cover of *Madden NFL Football*. As the game has grown in cultural force, players now openly speak of their desire to be on the cover. The eventual choice of athlete routinely sparks discussion, frequently referencing a perceived Madden cover jinx, as many of those featured on the cover have been struck down by injury or poor performance in the year following their selection. Traditionally, the choice of cover athlete has been a decision made by EA Sports and a closely held secret until they choose to release the information in a massive marketing bonanza. However, for *Madden NFL 12*, EA chose to take a different path, electing thirty-two different options, one for each team, and conducting an online, bracket-style voting competition for who would be the new cover athlete. As part of the EA Sports license deal with sports broadcasting network ESPN, results of each round of voting were announced on an ESPN show, with the vote between the final two athletes, Peyton Hillis and Michael Vick, promoted across the networks. The eventual winner, Peyton Hillis, was originally seeded in the lower third of the rankings, as he plays for the relatively unsuccessful, low-profile Cleveland Browns and who, at the time of his election, had a modest NFL career. Hillis was initially selected in the last round of the NFL draft and before the 2010 season he was traded to Cleveland where he only finished eleventh in the NFL in rushing yards. By all accounts, prior to fan voting, Hillis never would have ended up on the cover of *Madden*, but he rolled through the voting, defeating more traditional *Madden NFL* cover boys, like the reigning Super Bowl MVP Aaron Rodgers. In turning this small part of *Madden* over to the players, or at least the internet voters, EA Sports gave up a modicum of control, while substantially building the hype around and cultural force of one of their flagship sports titles. Although this kind of process likely was not possible prior to the mass adoption of the internet among EA Sports primary customers, it offers an example of a collaboration between a game

company and players where the company can give up some amount of decision making power to benefit their brand overall.

EA Sports integrated online elements of their games in a manner that shapes how players engage their games, shifting the terms of play and determining many of the ways in which players play their games. In so doing, EA claims tremendous power in setting the boundaries of the discourse of their games, using elements of technology to enable some sorts of play that enrich the depth of their offerings, while using the control they gain through the transition online to restrict used game sales and more firmly curtail the lifespan of games.

WORDPLAY AND EA SPORTS

As a cornerstone of their parent company EA Sports is a key piece of the video game industry. The sports games they produce define a subset of video games, and understanding how they work is telling in depicting the full force of wordplay. Sports games are largely different than other titles, as they are released each year and are developed on relatively short time frames, while being subject to tight launch windows. In the midst of these dynamics, the effort to develop reasons why players need to upgrade to the latest version of the game, especially through the careful leveraging of online content and restrictions to define the terms on which their games are played, constitute unique rhetorical expressions.

Wordplay elucidates how sports games shift the terrain of video games to encourage regular, repeat business. This attribute may account for part of the isolation of sports gamers within the video game community more broadly; as the discourse surrounding sports games demonstrate they are developed and designed in a manner quite different than the kinds of games likely to win game of the year awards. In leveraging the strength of their brand and massive marketing campaigns, EA Sports seeks to make each version of their franchises a must buy, carefully targeting their core consumers and broadening their user base when possible. Expansion into online access and play redefines how sports games work, allowing EA Sports to reclaim control over who plays their game while pushing players to newer version of the game by cutting off online access.

Sports games are a key segment of the console market and are increasingly governed by how they leverage online play as a tool to sell games, but one of the original genres dependent on online play, massively multiplayer online games, demonstrates just how important it is to examine both paratexts and processes found in the words, design, and play of video games.

7 Rearticulating Rewards in *WoW*

At the second Blizzard Entertainment conference in 2007, the Lead Content Designer of *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), Jeff Kaplan, described recently added player versus player (PvP) rewards as "welfare epics," which set off a firestorm of controversy about the reward structure of *WoW*.[1] Kaplan, better known by his screen name Tigole, was a prominent member of one of the most notable raiding[2] guilds in *EverQuest*, Legacy of Steel, before joining Blizzard.[3] At Blizzcon, Tigole argued that, in the new PvP and arena system, players received epic loot regardless of whether or not they won or lost the competitions in which they engaged. Instead of needing other players help to defeat monsters, the introduction of the new system rewarded all players without a prerequisite of success or cooperation. Although the comment appeared to be made in jest, the label stuck and redefined the discourse surrounding *WoW*'s reward system. Because most players who play *WoW* do not raid, the changes to the PvP incentive structure were highly anticipated, magnifying the reaction to Tigole's comments. Although the response was made in jest, using wordplay indicates how Tigole may have voiced an unusually clear perspective about how Blizzard changed *WoW*'s reward structure in an effort to retain subscribers.

Tigole's background as a raider and prominence on the *WoW* design team helped shape the focus of end-game activities in the game's approach at launch. In accordance with his tastes, raiding was one of few play options available to maximum level characters prior to *The Burning Crusade* expansion.[4] Although *WoW* offered a leveling experience that was much easier than prior massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), because leveling in *WoW* could be completed solo; the game that shipped at launch offered almost exclusively group-based content to players when they reached the level cap. One commentator assessed tensions among players as "almost a blood feud" with casual players pitted against more serious players.[5] In *WoW*, casual players typically play individually for short periods of time, while more serious players play in groups for hours on end. The introduction of additional activities for end-game players started with *The Burning Crusade*, which added a number of things for players to do both individually and in groups.[6] Equating PvP rewards with welfare tapped into the simmering feud and provoked a wave of online responses about the state of the end game in *WoW*.

Applying wordplay to welfare epics prompts a question: what does the adoption and repetition of the term welfare indicate about the structures and reward system of *WoW* and other MMOGs? Originating in a single mention at a panel discussion, welfare epics quickly entered the discourse of *WoW*, from discussion boards to blogs that discuss the game and eventually reaching in-game chat, including cameo appearances in my guild's chat channel. As a *WoW* gamer who raided extensively, yet also wore a welfare epic or two to compensate for bad luck on player versus environment (PvE) drops, it was clear to me that the perpetuation and reuse of the term elucidated important elements of *WoW*'s construction, especially its core game design and the motivations and interests of players who play the game. Looking at the discourse incited by the comment, wordplay shows how the emergence and reuse of the term demonstrates key elements of the design and play of *WoW*, including the importance of scarcity within the normative reward structures of the game, how players were socialized into a never-ending cycle of earning new rewards for their characters in *WoW*, and how the debut of the new rewards marked a shift in *WoW*'s design.

Tigole, with his clear preference for raiding, represented a sentiment shared by many raiders: that rewards for raiding were being watered down. Those who preferred PvP expressed their outrage at having their efforts within *WoW* likened to receiving welfare. The online response was overwhelming and demonstrated the rhetorical force of welfare, differences between expectations of rewards in PvE and PvP content, and, ultimately, how players in *WoW* are effectively paid for their efforts in epics, all of which are key pieces of games that can be identified through the application of wordplay.

A HISTORY OF EPICS IN *WOW*

When *WoW* was originally launched, there were only three ways to get epic loot. One way was from killing monsters. Each monster has loot they drop when killed, and more difficult monsters generally drop better loot. Loot is sorted into categories, ranging from grey and white (poor and common items) to green and blue (uncommon and rare) to purple (epic) and orange (legendary). Generally, the rarer the item is, the better it is, making purples, or epics, quite desirable. Epics had a low chance of dropping off of any monster in the world, while instances or dungeons offered groups of players a greater chance of getting higher quality loot. In raids, groups of up to forty in pre-expansion *WoW*, and ten or twenty-five starting with *The Burning Crusade*, players are guaranteed epic drops from a variety of boss mobs if they have sufficient numbers and coordination to prevail in battle. This reward system meant that players had to possess either extraordinary luck or the ability to coordinate large groups of people who could defeat difficult monsters to get epics.

A second option was to gain reputation with a number of different factions. Upon obtaining an exalted reputation, players often had the option of buying epic loot. This process could take hours of killing the same monsters or doing the same quests, but promised the guaranteed payoff of a particular item. As a final option, players had access to a very small number of epic items that could be crafted by the most accomplished masters of various trade skills in the game.

Patch 1.4 introduced a new way to get epics, the original honor system.[7] Offering fourteen ranks players could climb, from Private or Peon to Grand Marshal or High Warlord, players gained ranks by killing players of the opposing faction in ongoing battles between the Alliance and the Horde. Bolstered by the release of Patch 1.5 two months later, which introduced the Alterac Valley and Warsong Gulch battlegrounds, players had new ways to gain epics, grinding high enough on the honor ladder to purchase epic items. Each rank unlocked new items for purchase and, on obtaining the eleventh rank, players could buy epic items. However, players needed to play as many as eighty hours per week for months to receive the best rewards. This system was changed eight months later with patch 2.0.1, when the rankings were scrapped and replaced by a system that allowed players to earn honor points and tokens by participating in PvP. Players could then redeem those points and tokens for gear of their choosing, with better equipment costing more points.[8] This change was made on the brink of the expansion, and was the debut of the "welfare epics" of which Tigole was so critical. Players did not need to win battles to get epics; they only needed to accumulate enough honor and tokens to buy their desired rewards.

Also released in patch 2.0.1, but not available for rewards until players reached Level 70 in the subsequent expansion, arenas gave players a way of getting honor in two-, three-, or five-player battles.[9] The arena system extended currency based honor by awarding arena points to each player who played 30% of their team's games and was on a team that played ten or more games in the week. The number of points awarded is determined by a formula that uses a team's rating and their division (two, three, or five players). Players get more points for succeeding in larger battles, but anyone who plays the required amount gets some points to spend. Promising the best epics available through PvP, the arena system enabled players to find just one friend and commit about an hour a week to complete their ten matches. Arenas did add a portion of the social coordination of raiding into the PvP system, as one cannot play in the arenas without being part of a team. However, the smaller group size required and the substantially lower time commitment make arena teams much easier to coordinate than raiding guilds. Although rewards were in part based on winning and losing battles, all players now had a way to get some of the best equipment in the game.

Patch 2.0.1 marked a change in *WoW*'s reward structures. No longer catering solely to the minority who raid,[10] the game design at Level 70 was

designed to offer a variety of paths to epics, as *WoW* Insider blogger Paul Sherrard observed, "I think that *WoW* will always be semi-focused on getting you to the big dungeons, but thankfully the *Burning Crusade* isn't *all* about the raiding."[11] Raiding was still a primary avenue to epics for many, as successful raiders have dozens of the highest quality epics in the game and the best equipment is most often acquired via raiding, but more factions with epic rewards and a revamped honor system allowed individuals to acquire epics without requiring the help of others.

Beyond reputation and PvP epics, holiday events now include epic rewards, and dozens of new patterns and recipes were introduced that enabled players to make far more epic items, a general trend that changed the relative scarcity of 'purples' in *WoW*. It reached the point where, in responding to a complaint about holidays in *WoW*, a Blizzard world designer cautioned players to be "moderate in your expectations. Don't expect epic items from every holiday, for example."[12]

With the fundamental changes to loot distribution in the expansion of *WoW*,[13] it is no wonder that someone vested in raiding and its rewards, like Tigole, might begrudge the distribution of epics to all players. No longer the domain of the minority who raid, the other 70% of gamers were effectively given access to the raider's treasure chest, which likely provoked Tigole's statement and the intensity of the online community's response. Fully tracking implications of assessing *WoW*'s reward system with wordplay requires first discussing characterizations of welfare and the role of loot in online gaming.

WELFARE AND GAMING

Welfare is a term with clear rhetorical implications that is hard to consider benign or neutral. Receiving welfare often implies that a person is not an appropriately productive member of society. Lisa Crooms argues that in the contemporary U.S. "the current bipartisan discourse about welfare reform frames the issue of poverty as one of moral failure and personal irresponsibility fueled by the financial incentives of public assistance."[14] Welfare is a loaded term, at least in part because "what person would wish to think of themselves as a 'bludger'?"[15] 'Good' members of capitalist societies are taught that welfare is something that may be necessary to support people in need, but is not generally desirable to be receiving. This underlying belief that welfare recipients reap rewards with minimal effort is represented in one *WoW* forum post after Tigole's comments, in which the poster wrote,

> This is from *WOW* [sic] Insider
>
> "At BlizzCon, Lead Designer Jeff Kaplan (Tigole) said a lot of interesting things. He called Arena gear "Welfare Epics"—that raiders earn their gear" [sic]

> If this is the case i [sic] would like to see Epic gear in my gear in my mailbox on the 1st and 15th of every month.[16]

In addition to recapping *WoW* Insider coverage in suspiciously convenient ways, the author represents a common impression of welfare: it is a handout regularly received by the undeserving, in stark contrast to proper work where rewards are earned by active, productive members of society.

In addition to the emotionally fueled reaction that often surrounds the word welfare, Yvonne Hartman argues that welfare policies also function to produce particular subjects. In studying welfare policy in Australia, she argues that additional restrictions being placed on welfare recipients "may be regarded as a manifestation of the attempt to 'help' individuals to align their individual desires with those of the government and to acquire the requisite virtues in order to become self-governing, enterprising individuals."[17] Effectively, welfare is a rhetorically powerful social policy that shapes contemporary societies. Instead of merely providing for people who are struggling, welfare reforms function to normalize recipients and persuade them to subscribe to the overarching assumptions of capitalist societies. In so doing, the mechanisms of the welfare state "support the capitalist dynamic and the process of constructing 'docile bodies' rather than active citizens."[18] From this standpoint, and fused with a rhetorical perspective, it is possible to see the ways in which Tigole's comment provoked a reaction to his clear preference for raiding over PvP and also refined a desire to normalize PvP rewards and players to already accepted norms of PvE.[19] In effect, the addition of a PvP system based on currency and incremental rewards placed PvPers on a gear progression treadmill already familiar to raiders. The new system normalized more *WoW* players into receiving rewards based on regular, ongoing play, which also required an ongoing subscription to the game. Understanding the full implications of Tigole's comment requires a more thorough discussion of the dynamics of MMOG game design.

As well documented, a primary difference between MMOGs and many other games is that they do not have a fixed end point. Writing about *EverQuest*, T. L. Taylor observes that "there is no winner. There is no obvious finish line, no point of completion, where it is clear the game has been won."[20] Edward Castronova stresses a somewhat different note of a similar argument, claiming that players in MMOGs are continually faced with new challenges after they experience the joy of defeating the last one. Drawing a comparison to Sisyphus, he writes,

> in a MMORPG [massively multi-player online role-playing game] the huge stone does not roll back down the mountain. No! The Sisyphus in a MMORPG gets the stone to the top and rolls it right over! Hurrah! But the stone does then roll down into the next valley, where it comes to rest at the base of a still taller mountain.[21]

Because the revenue structure of MMOGs is largely funded by ongoing subscriptions, they are often designed in a manner that encourages players to keep playing. If players were to beat the game and quit, subscription dollars would stop flowing. A subscription model creates a clear need to keep building new mountains for players to climb to at least give the impression that MMOGs are games without end.

However, the corollary to this element of design is that players must find rolling the stone up the mountain to be a task they can manage. Should players begin to feel they are unable to keep up, unable to compete, or that the challenge of the game does not match the reward, they are likely to move on to something else.[22] Richard Bartle's pioneering work on the motivations of online gamers details how game design elements can attract or repel certain player-types.[23] Achievers, killers, and explorers quite clearly have an understandable desire to seek rewards in their games of choice, which is expressed in a most basic way by Julian Dibbell's observation that players want "[t]o own and not be owned."[24] Nick Yee's extensive survey work on the motivations of online gamers details a number of reasons why people play online games, and elements of accomplishment, mutual success, and character progression cut across the three categories he identifies as central to why people play online games.[25] The connections between game design and player motivation is furthered in the work of Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore, who use empirical data to detail how players approaching high reward levels in *WoW* increase their play time to reach sought after level-based rewards and then decrease their play time after reaching them.[26] Castronova even coins a term for the investment players make in their gaming selves: "avatar capital."[27] Investing time in one's character can make it more powerful, opening up new opportunities within the virtual world. However, if rewards are too few, too far between, or too difficult to achieve, players may feel that there is too much mountain climbing and not enough hurrahs, eventually driving them away from the game.

Effectively, a key part of the design and play of MMOGs is that these worlds do not have an end point and present constant, yet seemingly reasonable, challenges. Players seek ways to increase their avatar capital and generally want to compete on a playing ground they feel is fair. Changes may be made to the game, but they need to be executed in a manner where the rewards received match the perceptions of effort invested. With the implications of welfare and MMOG worlds in hand, reaction to Tigole's comments can be framed to show the key implications of applying wordplay to the *WoW* community and the game's design.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT WELFARE EPICS?

Players reacting to Tigole's choice of words pursued a variety of different strategies to express their outrage at Tigole, their indifference to the issue,

or their concern that some players were getting handouts that marginalized their time and effort. These arguments can be roughly grouped into four categories, each of which demonstrates a part of the discourse of *WoW*. The highest number of responses addressed the underlying contention that PvP is a lesser activity in *WoW*, as implied by Tigole's use of the word 'welfare' to describe their rewards. A second, smaller, group of players countered that the addition of epics and ease of getting them effectively decreased the relative avatar capital of players at the top by increasing the capital of those lower in the social system. A third group theorized that the addition of these epics, which could be gained in smaller group or solo play, decreased the need to work in groups to get rewards in *WoW*. Finally, looking at how these epics were integrated into the game's design and player response, an argument can be made that player labor within *WoW* is paid in epics. This contention is borne out in two primary ways: a repetitive use of "work" and "labor" to describe the act of acquiring epics and an acceptance that epic items are an appropriate reward for a job well done.

"WELFARE EPICS"? PVPERS RESPOND

An underlying assumption of Tigole's quote is that welfare epics are somehow easier to get than 'legitimate' or appropriately earned epics. This implication is embodied in the aforementioned quote when the player contends they want to be able to pick their epics up out of their mailbox twice a month. With an implied attack on PvPers and their efforts in the game, players responded in three primary ways, by attacking raiding or PvE epics, by defending PvP epics and the effort required to attain them, or by arguing that the two categories presented a false dichotomy and loot in PvP and PvE represents such different things that they should not be compared.

Perhaps the most passionate responses to Tigole were from people who directly attacked raiding as a legitimate activity. Tigole's primary argument against PvP epics was that anyone was able to get them, they simply required time investment to attain, not success in the game. A person could lose every fight, but still be rewarded in the end. A post by Imadris on the official *WoW* forums took Tigole's comment as an opportunity to indict raiding, writing,

> Sorry but whenever I can get a free epic from 4 hours of doing nothing but keeping the green [health] bars full spamming my heals something needs fixed.
>
> Raiding needs to be harder. It needs to be even more difficult bordering on the level of impossible for raiders to get epics. Usually I show up for kara/ssc[28] and turn on a movie and when the boss dies I get my epic. It's stupid. Most pvpers spend their lives living in a battleground or doing arenas and actually have to WORK for their epics.

> Also raiding is stupid easy because you can look up the strats [strategies] on any website on how to beat a boss. Someone let me know whenever you can look up a strat[egy] on how to win and be 2000+ arena rating [a rating this high is reserved for the best teams].
>
> Blizz[ard] please make it known that raiding epics are welfare and that this issue needs fixed. Maybe move some of the raiding epics people want to the arena point system or honor point system, thanks.[29]

Invoking appeals to work, but inverting them such that PvPers are the ones who are working harder, Imadris turns Tigole's assumptions about labor in *WoW* on their head. Imadris alludes to the repetitive tendencies of raiding, that it is the same thing each week, the monsters being fought do not suddenly change their tactics, while human agents in PvP do. He also contends that strategies are widely disseminated for PvE fights, while PvP fights are dynamic and surprising. Fundamentally, the post argues that PvPers have to work harder for their rewards than PvEers and, as such, it is raiders that are the ones getting epics handed to them by Blizzard.

Beyond the direct turn of Imadris, others focused on attacking raiders personally, illustrating the simmering "blood feud." In a column on *WoW* Insider, Robin Torres references two refrains voiced by "casuals" in their critique of raiders, that raiders are the minority in the game and that they have no lives because they are consumed with success in a video game.[30] Put more bluntly, Gwaendar states,

> If the quality or ease of obtaining Arena gear bugs you, you are a loot whore. Deep down there where you don't want to admit it, but you are.
>
> And beyond that, if it annoys you that for one hour per week people have access to same-quality gear than you do after learning an instance, putting up with wipes, repairs, farming consumables and whatnot, could it be that the other secret you won't admit to yourself is that . . . you're actually not having fun raiding anymore?[31]

A blogger weighed in on the welfare epic issue to knock raiders off their pedestal, writing, "You've [raiders] done nothing special. You feel like it's a challenge but it isn't. You think you deserve your rewards beyond people who aren't 'awesome' like you and your guild but you don't."[32] Far from an appeal to all just get along, these posts reify a divide among the types of players who play *WoW*. Raiders are portrayed as a privileged minority who spend inordinate amounts of time playing *WoW*, rather than engaging in real-life activities.[33] They are imagined as only interested in rewards and keeping the best epics exclusive to those in their select cadre. The promise of spreading gear throughout the *WoW* community threatens them, as their efforts will no longer make them the only ones to "own" and expose them to the threat of "being owned." These posts demonstrate a very real split in

the *WoW* community, which is further illustrated in how raiders responded to the change in how epics are distributed.

A second category of response to Tigole's comments was to document the amount of effort required to achieve PvP epics. Instead of continuing the feud, these arguments tended to agree with Tigole's underlying assumption that epics should be earned; they just rearticulated their efforts to make it clear that they were working just as hard as raiders to earn their loot. Cytheria engaged in a lengthy analysis of so-called welfare epics, arguing that none of "the whiners and cryers [sic] seem to notice is the actual time and effort it does take to get these epics. In some cases just as long or even LONGER then it does to get the raiding epics."[34] In her post, she breaks down the amount of time played that is required to acquire enough honor points and tokens to purchase PvP epics, stating that "1 Peice [sic] of 'welfare epics' Costs 5hrs of work. Thats [sic] about one Kara run is it not?"[35] This appeal to the amount of time it takes to get rewarded is echoed in several other responses to the change in the PvP system; one player ran the math on his desired PvP gear and reached the conclusion that he will need to PvP for approximately 158 hours to get all of the epics he wants.[36]

Far from handouts that come twice a month, the amount of time put in to acquiring this loot is potentially immense. However, this also harkens to the restrictions being placed on welfare that Hartman identifies as typical of contemporary welfare systems. These epics are not just handed to players, a substantive time investment is required for a reward to be attained. Similar to contemporary welfare programs that require people to file job applications and document their attempts to join the workforce, these arguments refute the notion that PvP epics are handouts by demonstrating just how much effort is required to attain them. This appeal to the quantity of their labor is an appeal to the normative structures of *WoW* and a clear indication that the changes in rewards integrated more players into a structure where their work is paid for in epics. Just like raiders work hard to get their loot, so do PvPers. These arguments imply that PvPers are productive, properly socialized members of *WoW* society, not bludgers collecting welfare.

The last direct response from PvPers to Tigole's was to rearticulate how loot worked in PvP and PvE. Best represented by a series of three blog posts by Rohan,[37] this argument was based on the differences between the two activities in the game and how they used loot. PvP is a competition among players and Rohan argues that ensuring a wide distribution of quality gear throughout the *WoW* population will lead to more exciting PvP combat.[38] Further, Rohan argues that this is a quality/quantity debate revisited. Raiders expect to find high quality loot as a reward for difficult challenges and the rewards for a task should match the challenge. Welfare epics offend them as high quality loot is potentially available for low quality effort. PvPers, on the other hand, see rewards in terms of quantity, as the quality of reward is fixed and "higher skill or rating, which translates into overcoming harder challenges, is rewarded with *more* loot, not *better* loot."[39] This position

neither fuels the blood feud nor seeks acceptance to existing social norms, instead Rohan and others postulate that PvE and PvP are different kinds of challenges and should be treated as such by game developers.

Addressing Tigole's remarks with these three strategies, PvPers attempted to discredit raiding as an approach to the game, equate the similar amount of work put into both activities, or argue that PvP and PvE are different tasks that require different systems of reward. Avid players of one type may not see eye-to-eye with the other, but both activities are worthwhile. However, PvPers were not the only ones to comment on the newly available epics, PvEers had plenty to say about the spread of epics in *WoW*.

THE RAIDING RESPONSE

The raiding response to welfare epics seems guided by an observation Julian Dibbell made about his experience in *Ultima Online*. As he was studying the real-money trade in items, he asked whether or not players of MMOGs have taken on a taste for scarcity in virtual worlds.[40] The idea that status symbols are a primary reason why raiders play *WoW* was an extended discussion topic on the Elitist Jerks[41] forums. This guiding principle of scarcity drove much of the raider response, which voiced two primary complaints: a concern about the prevalence of welfare epics watering down their achievements and the contention that PvE is harder than PvP because of the coordination required.

A large part of the concern about watering down the achievements of raiders was centered on the graphic design of the welfare epics. Often when releasing a new season of arena gear, Blizzard chose to simply recolor the textures of the highest-level raid loot, making PvE and PvP epics look strikingly similar. One Elitist Jerk poster took exception, writing that

> unique weapon and armor graphics are going the way of the dodo. With the introduction of Season 3 gear having the same graphics as T6, it just reinforced the fact that Blizzard appears to be whitewashing any type of achievement system to allow the casual player to be 'just like your favorite hero.'[42]

Unable to look unique through their PvE accomplishments, raiders also expressed concern about the quality of epics.[43] These concerns, clearly tied to the threat to raider's avatar capital demonstrate at least part of the reason why PvP players may feel such bitterness toward PvEers. Not content in their accomplishments, some raiders seem to have fully embraced the notion of scarcity and are threatened when epics are more widely available. This is sometimes framed within the argument that PvP epics hurt raiding, as it is harder to get other people to raid with you if they can get similar rewards, with less effort, from PvPing.

The second part of the raider response was that raiding was simply harder than PvP, an argument that was generally articulated in reference to the organizational components of PvE. Flipping Imadris's notion of what made the game difficult; this argument claimed it was harder to defeat computerized opponents with the help of other people than it was to beat other people alone or in the small groups found in arenas. For one raider it is "the challenge to work with real people, not only master your skills" that makes raiding an effort worthy of the best rewards.[44] Shortly after a guild disbanded a member posted a message from their leader, Anik, who stated, "I have allways [sic] said, the content (instances) of *WoW* is not the challenge. The challenge is finding ppl [people] 'addictive' and 'dedicated' enough to endure 5 raids a week, raiding the same bullcrap over and over again . . . wasting their time on epics that will lose value as soon as the expansion hits the streets."[45] It is interesting that raiders did not fall back on an argument about spending more time working for their epics or on having higher skill, but instead on the fact that it was working and coordinating with other people that warranted the best rewards in the game. This argument skirts around the claim that PvPers spend vast amounts of time to earn their gear, instead resting on the assumption that the most challenging activity in an MMOG is learning how to work with that second M, the other players.

This part of the raider response is a key component of one of the two structural pieces of what this debate indicates about how *WoW* is designed as a game. Building from a discussion of player reaction and play style, two critiques of game design were also readily apparent in the rhetoric of welfare epics.

WELFARE EPICS: PAYING PLAYERS TO PLAY ALONE

In addition to the notable rhetorical positioning of players, Tigole's quote marks a potential tension among the game's design team and a key moment at which Blizzard's desire to keep subscribers can be seen. Research has established a relationship between game design and the social architectures that are built within *WoW*,[46] but the issue of welfare epics offers the converse, that the player base of a game can leverage words and play to alter game design. Further, given the use of the term welfare epics and the consistent use of language like work and earn to describe the effort and reward structure in *WoW*, it can be argued that *WoW* players consider themselves paid in epics. From this standpoint, the addition of PvP epics to the *WoW* environment preserves the reward system within *WoW* while keeping subscriptions flowing.

The first game design implication of welfare epics is representative of a difference between the player base of *WoW* and previous online games. Unlike experiences in *EverQuest* and *Final Fantasy XI*, in which groups

are required to accomplish almost anything, game play in *WoW* is typified by players playing the game alone, rather than in groups.

At launch and throughout most of pre-expansion *WoW*, the highest-level rewards were exclusively available to players working in groups. If players did not participate in raids, typically composed of forty players, or organized PvP groups to grind to Grand Marshal or High Warlord, they had little chance of acquiring the best loot. Welfare epics changed this, as all players had a chance to earn something, although the number of epics they could acquire is influenced by their success (or lack thereof) and time spent playing. In Cytheria's lengthy breakdown of the play time needed to acquire her desired set, she makes it clear that the primary change brought by alteration of the reward structure is that she no longer has to play with people she does not like. She notes that "the only thing I feel that Blizzard has done by re-adding purples to high level PVP is removed Guilds and other Social Graces (aka forcefriendships [sic], dealing with people you hate etc) out of the obtaining epic equation."[47] Cytheria concludes even more simply, stating, "All these pvp items do is remove the social formalities and guilds from the epic gaining aspect of the game." Free to work on their own, the terrain of character progression is once again returned to the solo-based play that *WoW* players often pursue while leveling. Effectively, these items added content for the players *WoW* ended up attracting, rather than those who frequently typified other, more intensely social, MMOGs.

Adding epics for people who do not have large guilds or organized social structures offers a wider base of players a reason to continue playing *WoW*. No longer left to leveling alternate characters or watching other players pass them by, individuals expressed excitement at the changes and the opportunity to have something to work toward. John Himes noted that the debut of Season 3 led "to a flurry of activity" on his server and wrote about how, although he's "been rather horrible at PvP" he and his partner are discussing how to "maximize our PvP potential" to seek new weapons.[48] Adding the ability for individuals to play independently and still receive rewards marked a departure from the original design of *WoW*, but moved to better serve the player base the game found.

Because it is easier to level in *WoW* than in other games, a higher number of players reach the highest level in the game and, to keep subscriptions flowing, Blizzard must provide something to keep players busy after they finish leveling their character. Players seem acutely aware of this situation; one writes,

> This is a carrot-chasing game. We keep the cart moving by trying to bit [sic] at the carrot. For some of us it takes weeks, others months. Why one donkey cares what the other donkey is doing I'll never know. But to stay in business they have to let us nibble on the carrot sometimes lest we lose sight of why we're playing and get a taste for apples.[49]

Players are invested in the game because they can seek some kind of reward. One raider observes that players largely play for recognition, which is meted out by *WoW* in three primary forms: titles, levels, and gear.[50] Because levels are relatively easy to attain, the reward system in the game must look elsewhere to keep providing carrots for players in order to keep max-level players paying for the game. As Blizzard is on record as being opposed to a proliferation of titles,[51] gear is the most sensible treat to offer to players, as it is well established as a desirable reward through the raiding PvE structure in the game. By widening the net of people able to get epics, Blizzard maintained a reward structure that players accept and almost every player is presented with an attainable carrot to keep them playing the game.

If epics remained something that the average *WoW* player, the person who generally plays alone or in a group of two or three others, cannot attain, the incentive system simply does not work—because the reward is too far away to reach. In defense of their play style PvPers engaged in lengthy discussions about how much time it would take them to get all of the epics they wanted, but none of them said this was an impossible goal or that they received nothing from the changes. Instead, excitement was sparked, even from those who had not experienced success in the PvP system before, precisely because the expectations seemed reasonable; players could see the top of the mountain and were ready to start climbing. Although the addition of epics for solo players may be anathema to Tigole, it represents a move to integrate and socialize solo players into the accepted reward system in the game. Further, a primary benefit of using gear as a carrot is that new PvP seasons can promise newer, better options, thus granting a fresh reward to chase without a fundamental change in the design of the game. Small group and casual players were more fully integrated into the reward and carrot seeking of *WoW*, chasing the newest purple epics and being paid for their work in the game with the shiny new gear they earned.

WORDPLAY AND WELFARE EPICS

When Tigole first referenced PvP and arena rewards as welfare epics at Blizzcon it demonstrated a tension in the *WoW* player base between those who earned their rewards in large group play and those who preferred smaller group or solo play. This tension manifested in the public response to the term, as both PvE and PvP players sought to demonstrate how they earned their rewards through their in-game labor. The underlying assumption that one should be sociable in MMOGs was present throughout the discourse, which is underscored by the fact that, outside of game worlds, welfare is often distributed to help more fully socialize people into capitalist systems. Applying wordplay to welfare epics indicates how more *WoW* players were normalized into a design and play structure that considers work and fiscal metaphors appropriate to describe efforts in online gaming,

reiterating the importance of scarcity as a key line of argument with regard to changes within the structure of online games, and indicating how the player base of a game can drive game design.

Many players were quick to comment about how the addition to the reward structure excited them and gave them new goals within *WoW*. The introduction of more opportunities for character advancement effectively normalized a larger portion of the *WoW* playing population into an ongoing effort to push the boulder up the mountain or chase the carrot they will never reach. More epics available to be earned applied the treadmill model of dungeon raiding to PvP rewards. Instead of a system in which players had an extraordinarily poor chance of getting to the top, then no incentive to remain there, changing to a currency based honor system allowed Blizzard to continue to release new gear and let players chase after it. Modifications to the reward structure later instituted a personal rating to restrict the most sought after items, the weapons, and the most visible item on character models, the shoulders, to the players with the most success in arena-based PvP, increasing the allure and perceived legitimacy of these epics. One summary of these changes noted that the personal ratings were an indication that Blizzard is "trying to limit the Arena gear to players that have truly earned it."[52] Whether or not this forced scarcity proves them valid, non-welfare epics, it further integrates PvP rewards into the established *WoW* hierarchy of rewards and forced scarcity.

By integrating PvP players into a system that encourages continued play, currency-based PvP rewards function much like welfare restrictions function outside of the game world, as providing rewards throughout the player base ensures continued acceptance of the social structures at large. Yvonne Hartman argues that welfare regulations

> in deliberate combination with the discourse of anti-welfarism, operate to legitimize an increased level of control over income support recipients' lives while simultaneously ensuring that expectations regarding citizen entitlements will be dampened. This configuration of discourse and practices can be regarded as producing docile subjects who discipline themselves in the name of individual initiative and responsibility.[53]

In the world outside of *WoW*, Hartman argues that welfare policies function to perpetuate the spread of neoliberalism while producing docile bodies. Within the game world Tigole may have been precisely correct when he referred to these items as welfare epics. Through the reaction of the player base it is clear that these items were viewed as desirable, attainable, and a reason to celebrate new projects to undertake in the game world. Discourse surrounding welfare epics rarely critiqued the notion that rewards should be earned or that players should work hard to acquire epics. This response is one way in which it can be seen how Blizzard is effectively disciplining players in *WoW*, offering them certain incentives to keep people playing and

paying for the game. The moment players cease finding entertaining things to do within a game they are likely to leave, but by integrating rewards for solo and small group players, Tigole's welfare epics are likely to assimilate more players onto never ending treadmills to keep subscription dollars rolling without critiquing the system that requires their constant effort to attain a status as one who owns. However, the system also built an ongoing risk into the reward structure of *WoW*, as the clearly demarcated point system for rewards stripped out some of the mystery that is associated with exciting, fortunate acquisitions of new gear. Further, by more completely integrating a gear treadmill into the game, Blizzard risked losing players as they begin to realize that anything they obtain will be of marginal value shortly after they earn it. Leveling the differences among players and centering the rewards of the game on gear increased the risk that players will burnout as they lose their taste for carrots and start wanting apples, a dynamic realized in the *Cataclysm* expansion.[54]

In addition to normalizing a greater number of *WoW* players into the system of gear progression and marginal upgrades, wordplay and welfare epics demonstrates the importance of scarcity as a line of appeal. PvE players were offended that their efforts were cheapened precisely because similar rewards were given out more broadly. Scarcity is prized and it seems that Blizzard has recognized this by introducing different models for equipment attained from PvE and PvP activities in the wake of the controversy. The widely accepted design premise is that effort invested should match rewards received and, when the ratios are out of balance, players are likely to decry the comparatively easier path that someone else is walking. The addition of arena ratings, which were raised in subsequent seasons, means that only the best will have access to most of the PvP epics, matching the skill/reward ratio of PvE epics. By increasing the scarcity of PvP epics and adjusting the reward structure in light of other aspects of the game, the changes in required ratings have been called the "death knell" of welfare epics.[55]

Finally, the introduction and spread of epics in *WoW* is an indication that game design must evolve to suit the population playing the game, rather than the population for which the game was intended. *WoW* has frequently sought to add options for max-level characters, which is well suited for a population that is more varied than any other MMOG to date. This episode in *WoW*'s design indicates how video games should occasionally modify their intentions to suit their current player base and integrate them into the preferred reward structure of the game. Also, by using lines of argument already accepted by players, rather than loaded words, other games can likely avoid the drama and tension Tigole inspired.

Developer incited drama demonstrates an aspect of wordplay where control is still retained by the people who make games. *WoW* is such an immense game, however, that there is much more that it has to offer wordplay, particularly with regard to how players have redefined the game on their own.

8 Theorycraft and Optimization

One of the striking things about games is that they can be played in many different ways. Changing a reward system by introducing welfare epics altered *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), but that was an intervention initiated by developers. Wordplay can also address how players shape the discourse of video games. In many games new tactics are tested and developed that allow players to develop strategies in an attempt to improve their odds of success. When new approaches are successful they are often copied, imitated, and integrated into other styles of play, effectively becoming new norms for the game, like the forward pass in American football or the offside trap in soccer. These elements are intimately connected to wordplay, as changes in games are formed and sustained by the elements both surrounding them and within them. Wordplay illustrates how the adoption of new means of play is advanced, as people must perceive the change as likely to be successful as a precursor to adapting the approach.

Shortly after the release of *WoW*'s first expansion *The Burning Crusade*, I became interested in the emergence of theorycrafting, as it helped me play 'better.' Theorycraft, a strategy designed around the mathematical analysis of *WoW*, is a discursive construct predicated on advising players how to optimally 'play' *WoW*, suggesting what equipment to wear, what talents to choose, and an order in which to cast spells. I was focused on raiding,[1] large-scale group player versus environment play and, as a mage, my primary job was to do as much damage as possible. One day I stumbled across the Elitist Jerks web forums. There I found a cornucopia of information about how to play *WoW*, with discussions of the optimal talents, the most valuable trade skills, and sophisticated analyses of which spells would be best in certain situations. It was my introduction to theorycrafting and I was hooked. Since then, theorycrafting has become part of the accepted canon of *WoW*, a norm for play, especially for those who raid. Applying wordplay to theorycrafting offers room to analyze how games change over time and how players can influence a game's design by reshaping how games are played.

Online games offer many ways to play and a social base upon which to test new approaches. The combination of these factors fuels the development of things like theorycrafting. Coinciding with an increase in statistical analysis in sports and society, theorycrafters developed and advanced a specific

way to play *WoW* based on the theoretical potential of the game, seeking to understand the obscured rules behind the game. A community of theorycrafters emerged on the fringes, eventually becoming a prominent force in *WoW*'s ongoing design decisions. Theorycraft demonstrates how wordplay can address a way of playing *WoW* that depends on work and analysis outside the game and a set of user mods and discussion within the game. The point at which being a 'good' *WoW* player intersects with theorycrafting is worth investigation, as it changes the terrain upon which play occurs.

There are two key reasons why theorycraft is an important object of analysis. First, theorycraft is a productive discourse that reshapes play in *WoW*. Theorycraft alters how the game works, similar to phenomena present in sports and other games; this type of development offers a glimpse of a different way to conceptualize games and wordplay. Theorycrafting is as much a practice as it is a discrete thing. Theorycrafting is a way to play *WoW* and fluency with theorycraft is regularly sought by guilds that are recruiting new members. Theorycraft also offers a platform upon which noted experts are celebrated for their insights. Theorycraft extends play and centers gamers, rather than developers, as authorities in a discussion of how *WoW* works. The rise in the profile of theorycrafting demonstrates how a new approach to a game can be designed by players and how online gamers can alter their relationship with the developers of the games they play. This shifts the ongoing procedures of the game world and notions of play within it. Second, theorycrafting illustrates how wordplay can unite analysis of processes and paratexts, the texts surrounding a primary text that Mia Consalvo argues "work to shape the gameplay experience in particular ways."[2] Theorycrafters set out to best understand the processes of the game and, in mapping the procedures of the game through the development of paratexts, have created a dynamic relationship that reshapes *WoW*'s ongoing design. Understanding the connections between process and paratext demonstrates the importance of wordplay's ability to analyze the entire breadth of texts that are part of the discourse of video games.

Understanding the dynamics of theorycraft and what its development means for online game play and world design requires several steps. First, the increasing role of statistics in games and society sets up a history of the term theorycraft and how it has grown in importance within the discourse about and design of *WoW*. Second, an analysis of what players have to say about theorycraft focuses on what they find to be the relative merits of theorycraft. Finally, the chapter turns to what theorycraft means for wordplay, game studies, and game design.

THEORYCRAFT: A HISTORY

Understanding the growth of theorycraft requires an examination of the history of the practice and a broader look at a cultural turn toward statistical

analysis in sports and society. Although data has been tracked for decades, the last thirty years have seen an explosion in the use of statistical analysis to facilitate understanding. The most overt sign is seen throughout society, with *The New York Times* describing statistics as an attractive college major for future employers, describing statistics as a "cool" and "sexy" area of study.[3] Some argue that the 2008 implosion of capital on Wall Street was largely driven by the influx of quantitative analysis into economics that began in the 1980s.[4] Nate Silver started with statistical analysis of baseball then turned to U.S. politics, leading to his inclusion as one of *Time*'s 100 most influential people in 2009.[5] Statistical analysis holds a substantive role in society that can propel a person to fame and fortune, cause a financial collapse, or make a person seem even sexier.

Beyond the broad social trend toward the increasing role of statistical analysis, sports offer a look at the roots of theorycrafting. In addition to the connections between professional gaming and professional sports, sports are generally subject to rule sets. Although the tracking of statistics has a long history in sports, the use of those statistics for team building and strategy is a more recent phenomenon. Michael Lewis detailed how Billy Beane sought to apply statistical analysis to the running of a Major League Baseball team, with the goal of appraising "the events that occurred on a baseball field more accurately than they had ever been valued."[6] Lewis shows how this approach allowed Beane to build a successful team on a budget, yet was anathema to the baseball establishment. Statistical analysis in sports has spread beyond baseball, with MIT graduate Daryl Morey working as general manager of the Houston Rockets, where he received notoriety for recognizing the value of players like Shane Battier, his "no-stats All-Star,"[7] and for founding an annual sports analytics conference at MIT.[8] Statistical analysis is a multi-million dollar budget line for many teams, one where Morey and others can invest resources that help teams win, without worrying about a salary cap for statisticians.[9] Effectively, statistical analyses seek out the hidden rules of their sport. What action will maximize the chance to score a run or a basket? What is the best defensive approach or who is the best defensive player? Prior to statistical analysis the answers to these questions were subjective, but statistics give the impression of clear, certain answers.

This desire to understand the rules of a game and maximize odds of success is where statistical analysis of sports connects to the approach of a particular kind of gamer. Often gamers are split into categories of casual and hardcore. According to Clive Thompson, *Peggle* became a hit with hardcore gamers when they recognized the geometry built into the game. He writes that the hardcore "players are able to see past the apparent luck of *Peggle*, and to spy its underlying—if extremely complex—rules."[10] In so doing, gamers apply a different kind of tool to understand the game, like the way in which Beane and Morey use statistics to understand their sports and theorycrafters seek to understand how *WoW* works. Optimizing play

can also be applied to other games, from the city experiments of *SimCity* to almost any game through the use of GameFAQs or walkthroughs, which present an ideal route through a game. Gerald Voorhees briefly mentions a similar approach for *Civilization* players who offer "detailed roadmaps for civilizations that more resemble a math problem than a strategy guide."[11] These theorycraftesque approaches work from outside the game to change how it is played, potentially in ways that were not anticipated by developers, radically expanding the influential forces relevant to games.

The term theorycraft was coined before *WoW*, as Starcraft players engaged in debates about optimal strategies and approaches.[12] However, much like the reaction of mainstream baseball to Beane's different way of building a team, theorycraft was a derogatory term, a dismissive rebuttal emphasizing the importance of playing the game in practice, rather than debating how the game works in theory. In spite of this, *WoW* players took the idea and ran with it, blending theory with practice to offer a form of theorycraft predicated on working outside the game to improve the quality of play inside it.

Theorycraft in *WoW* began with the first expansion to the game, with several factors encouraging the move toward statistical analysis. New tools for tracking what was done in a raid, like *WoW* Web Stats,[13] provided clear, detailed data for subsequent analysis. Dr. Boom, an NPC[14] in Netherstorm, was a suitable testing dummy, as he could not be killed through normal player attacks and posed little risk to the player, which let theorycrafters bombard him with spells while testing various hypotheses. The tenor of raiding also changed, as the profusion of enrage timers[15] forced raiding groups to perform with greater skill to ensure success. The designed increase in expectations pushed players to better understand how *WoW* worked, driving the growth of theorycraft. One player defines theorycraft as "to hyperanalyze, mathematically, game mechanics and abilities to gain a deeper understanding and to ultimately maximize effectiveness."[16] Theorycrafting shifts how the game of *WoW* is played for practitioners, focusing on "using math to guide your choices, instead of simply playing from your gut."[17]

Theorycraft is at the core of *WoW* metagaming, the game outside the game. In describing the philosophy behind metagaming for new players, Lisa Poisso writes,

> Welcome to metagaming. Researching your *WoW* game—your crunchy bits—can be one of the most enjoyable aspects of playing *World of Warcraft*. While some players relish tackling new content with no preparation and no spoilers, others enjoy digging up encounter strategies and mapping out intricate leveling, gear and crafting plans.[18]

For some players proper play means that "you're going to have to theorycraft every piece of gear, every talent choice, and every ability that you use at any given time"[19] or that "we're talking about squeezing the last bit of dps [damage per second] from your toon [character] (i.e. 902dps to 904dps) and then having the awareness to notice if, in fact, the dps changes are

being effective."[20] Although I am not sure anyone can parse such a minimal difference in damage, theorycrafters seek to eke out every possible edge.

Theorycraft moved from the margins of the game to near its center, with the clearest nod to theorycrafters being the training dummies installed in all major cities with the advent of *WoW*'s second expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King*. Training dummies allow players to test their theories and ideas about how the game works in a "more universally accessible" manner than previously available.[21] Prior to the training dummies, theorycrafters relied on things like a "theorycraft suit" that let them test their hypotheses, but training dummy tests are now run to "find your flaws. Find why you suck. Or rock. The dummies are there, standing around, waiting only for you to go beat the tar out of them . . . It's theorycraft in it's [sic] most basic form. Standing there, casting spells, observing what happens. Ahh, science! And it's science everyone can do!"[22] Theorycraft is a key part of the early preparations for the best guilds in the world, like Stars and Premonition, who cited the role of theorycraft in their Worldwide[23] and U.S.[24] first accomplishments.

At the center of the growing importance of theorycraft is the guild website and forums for the Elitist Jerks (EJ). Generally hailed as a key source of theorycrafting information, the EJ forums get hundreds of posts a day and actively monitor the quality of the discussion on their site.[25] The forums are "a high-end raid-orientated discussion forum (with a nice guild attached)" that is "read by almost half a million people each month. Yet Elitist Jerks remains the type of site that someone refers you to."[26] Although a valuable resource, EJ is like the club relatively few people know about, as half a million viewers is still only about 5% of the *WoW* player base. However, that group is disproportionately influential and the word is spreading about the resources available on EJ. When one *WoW* blogger requested information on how to better play a particular class, a player promptly referred him to the EJ forums.[27] EJ is the central source for theorycrafting knowledge, a place where Blizzard developers exchange ideas with players and where cutting edge theorycraft is debated.

This growing application of a formerly marginal practice is fueled by its success, much like the trend spreading throughout competitive sports. Wordplay helps articulate how elements of *WoW* ranging from concepts like theorycraft to the structures that support it, including online resources like Elitist Jerks and World of Logs[28] and in-game mods[29] like damage meters, impact the design and play of the game. These objects support and advocate a way to learn about, think about, talk about and play *WoW*, predicated on 'right' and 'wrong' approaches to the game.

THEORYCRAFT: WHY IT IS USED

The greatest benefit from theorycrafting is most clearly seen in the play of those who choose to pursue player versus environment content, or raiding. The discourse of theorycraft indicates three main positive themes about

how theorycraft impacts play. Theorycraft is generally tied to a higher quality of play; increased understanding about the game and how it works; and as fun in its own right.

The dominant reason why many choose to theorycraft is that it makes them better players. This idea frames almost all of the discourse, as being better at *WoW* is tied to understanding the game better, having a positive reputation and having a good time playing the game. The idea of being better or doing more permeates the rhetoric of the game, suiting an achieving mindset and coming to a head in the discussion of theorycraft. In response to a *WoW* Insider column about how to play a rogue, one commenter mentioned he was a fan of "combat daggers," which prompted a number of responses, including Pokin, who wrote,

> Bah, you can't rain on his parade. Combat daggers are sub-par DPS for sure, but if he isn't raiding he has every right to play how he'd like . . . In *WoTLK* [*Wrath of the Lich King*] the difference in DPS for combat daggers versus other specs is much larger and I've conformed to the cookie cutter mutilate spec. I'm no theorycrafter and I find that maximizing DPS is more important to me than play style—but not everyone has the same priorities.[30]

This idea is a nice introduction to how theorycraft leads to better play, as Pokin clearly states that he is not a theorycrafter, while simultaneously pointing out key holdings of theorycraft for rogues. Pokin observes that one approach to the game will generate more damage, and although he is not a theorycrafter, he certainly knows enough about theorycraft to know how to generate the most damage, even noting that doing more damage is more important to him than a particular style of play within the game. The response also includes the implicit contention that, if you raid with others players, you lose the right to play as you would like and you should bend the knee to the holdings of theorycraft to improve the group's odds of success.

The intersection between theorycraft and better play can also be seen in player recruitment ads.[31] The guild recruitment forums on World of Raids offer perspective on the assumed connection between theorycraft and quality of play made by many of the top guilds in the world. The guild recruitment forums are where guilds from around the world can solicit new members by posting an explanation of their accomplishments and detailed terms of what they expect from members. Many of these guilds expect applicants to be well versed in theorycraft. Spike Flail, a U.S. based guild, expects applicants to "be able to explain your class weakness and strengths, know the theorycraft to min/max your class, and what abilities to use when," adding "prospective trials must be completely knowledgeable of their class's theorycraft and mechanics, dedicated and dependable raiders, and overall knowledgeable and skilled players."[32] For applicants to

Spike Flail, expectations about their knowledge of theorycraft come before their dependability. Bad Omen, a E.U. guild, puts their requirements more clearly, listing three expectations for prospective applicants in bullet form, the third of which is "If you do not want to min-max/theorycraft on your char[acter], do not apply."[33] Bad Omen places willingness to apply and knowledge of theorycrafting with guidelines for attendance and availability, clearly linking theorycraft with an expected level of play. These are but two of the scores of guilds that lay out theorycrafting as a key component of the application process, ranging from essential knowledge to a highly encouraged bonus. Much like computer skills are increasingly important to get a job, knowledge of and fluency in theorycraft is used to separate applicants to guilds and determine who is of sufficient quality to invite and who is not.

A second theme in the positive discourse about theorycrafting is the way theorycrafting helps players understand underlying features of the game. In the introduction to a user modification designed to aid in in-game theorycrafting, Sean Forsgren writes,

> You all know a *World of Warcraft* number cruncher. You may, in fact, be that person, the one who can spout of [sic] stats about your class or game mechanics. Although, in the beginning, I rolled my eyes at people who pondered the math of the game, today finds me holding a deep respect for you number junkies. You've all helped many of us become uncrushable, uncrittable and even understand how +spell damage and +healing work.[34]

In the midst of articulating that numerical analysis had moved from a marginalized activity that caused him to "roll my eyes," Forsgren frames his respect for theorycraft in how it helps to explain how *WoW* is designed and works in practice. Playing with numbers may be mockable, but once those numbers are put to use and Forsgren can see the practical application of the theoretical analysis, respect for theorycraft can be garnered, similar to the way that Billy Beane's approach to baseball was denigrated until proven effective.

However, the understanding granted by theorycraft is generally incomplete, subject to testing and hypotheses, rather than definitive, as Blizzard rarely releases the exact formulae that govern play in *WoW*. In a forum thread where this general principle is overlooked, Blizzard designer Ghostcrawler presented the actual formula for armor penetration in *WoW*.[35] Later in the thread, after a player expresses dismay that hours of work testing were worthless, as it was based on incorrect assumptions, Ghostcrawler wrote,

> This is honestly one of the reasons we don't do this more often. There is a risk players will stop experimenting and theorycrafting if they think we will eventually just dump all of the answers on them. We like for players to experiment with gear, talents and the like. Having black

> boxes adds depth and a sense of exploration to the game. When everything is known with certainty, you can do things like definitively know the best choice in every situation. Theorycrafting is dead.[36]

Ghostcrawler resituates theorycraft, emphasizing it is incomplete, but a good way to understand the game. He posits that theorycraft helps Blizzard find bugs in the code that could negatively impact the game. Effectively, theorycrafting is the player's guide to the game, which illustrates how the presence of theorycraft as a paratext alters design of the game. Sharing some information is good and lets theorycrafters continue its development by fostering participation, but given ultimate answers, players would abandon the refinement of theorycraft, as the delineation between external text and internal design would be erased. Failing to maintain that boundary would leave no need for players to articulate their version of how to best play, as they would no longer need to investigate the black boxes that obscure the inner workings of the game.

The final positive association of theorycraft is that theorycrafting can be fun. In response to a post about what players enjoy about *WoW*, one writes, "[B]eing a mathematician, I totally get enjoying the theorycraft part. Some years ago, I tried designing a RPG-esque [role-playing game] system, balancing stats and results, any [sic] boy were the equations difficult."[37] Theorycraft involves a different form of play, one that can be fun in its own right. Figuring out how things work, like a person who likes to tinker with things, can be entertaining. Fun in the game is also linked with success. Losing is less fun than winning and, in optimizing play; theorycraft is fun because it increases the odds of success.

The positive associations of theorycraft frame the words around it. Theorycraft is tied with optimization and understanding; it makes players better within the game and a thorough understanding of it is considered a requirement for many high-end raiding groups, but theorycrafting can also be fun in its own right. That said there are limiting elements, as theorycraft normalizes and structures a particular way of playing the game, restricting choices by dictating the optimal approach.

THEORYCRAFT: WHY SOME RESIST

Despite all of the positive associations surrounding theorycraft, there is some vocal opposition to the impact theorycrafting has on *WoW*, especially when familiarity with theorycraft is perceived as being connected to success or opportunity. This side of the discourse is best encompassed in a forum thread titled "Does Elitist Jerks make everything suck?" as it emphasizes two themes frequently used in critiques of theorycraft, that it restricts options in the game and can often lead to misunderstandings. These critiques focus on the ways in which theorycraft is not just a way to

play the game, it has become *the* way to play the game and the means by which players justify perceived imbalances in the game, the locations where game design procedures are not functioning 'properly.'

"Does Elitist Jerks make everything suck?" is a massive forum thread on the North American version of *WoW*'s official forums. The thread was started by a warlock named Angkorwat and includes a response from *WoW* developer Ghostcrawler. The initial post lays out three reasons why EJ has a negative impact on the playing environment in *WoW*: "it fuels a kind of dismissive attitude in the player community that actually diminishes the quality of debate," it "discourages experimentation with unique playstyles/specs/glyphs," and "it fuels outrage in places where there would often be none."[38] The central point of the critique is that EJ changes the way in which players engage the game. Instead of simply playing a game, the goal becomes attempting to optimize one's button pushing. In so doing, play shifts from something where there are many choices to make to one where there are clear rights and wrongs.

The second and third issues are connected, as they are both about how players engage the game and the amount of choice players believe they have in *WoW*. Technically, *WoW* has an incredible number of options available to players. The game features ten races and ten classes, with three different talent specializations for each class, on top of an immense number of customization options available when one considers other aspects of the game, like gear, glyphs, gems, and enchantments. However, the goal of theorycrafting is to figure out what is best; once the best option is determined, choices are distilled to that single answer. The moment total understanding is derived, or the perception of total understanding exists, there is only one decision for good, properly socialized, players to make. Consequently, a host of problems are created as players believe anything that is not best is broken. Effectively, theorycraft alters how players engage *WoW*. The game shifts toward what one player describes as "largely 'math with pretty scenery' . . . This game is a Economic/Mathematical simulator with pretty picture [sic] not a Fantasy/RP game."[39] Theorycraft changes *WoW* from a fantasy world to be experienced into a math problem to be solved. This shifts the mode of play and, when extended to other games, marks a situation in which the nature of play is altered. Certainly games are an assemblage of procedures, but when they are reduced to the algorithms that drive them, a risk is run that the fantasy melts away, reducing a game to a system of rules. In the case of theorycraft, its prominence marginalizes all other modes of play, creating a situation where you either use it or are left behind.

A number of *WoW* blogs weighed in on the thread, with responses ranging from "*you cannot escape mathematics!*"[40] to those who agreed with the original poster. One wrote,

> If *WoW*'s high level game can be said to be worse because of the low choice, highly modellable [sic] systems, then I would suggest that the evolution of

> early theorycrafting indeed helped prompt that . . . All of which is to say, yes, Theorycrafting probably does help make *WoW* suck.[41]

Although you likely cannot escape mathematics, the focus on math changes the way in which *WoW* works. Unlike sports or the live role-playing and dice rolling that happens in a traditional role-playing game, video games like *WoW* are ultimately inflexible and strictly rule governed. The intent of theorycraft is to divine these rules and present them as solved math equations. Once the right answers are attained, there is no need for or possibility of a saving roll; the discourse surrounding *WoW* shifts from a focus on fun or choice to one of figuring out which choice is right.

A practical impact of theorycrafting on *WoW* is that it checks attempts to make the game approachable to more players. Despite the general sentiment within the *WoW* community that content and raiding has become more accessible for players, the benchmarks theorycraft facilitates alters the discourse of game in practice. As one observer puts it,

> All those 'accessible' raids and achievements and gear are suddenly sounding more and more like 'requirements.' DPS minimums, required achievements and Armory checks serve as your credentials to get into groups. Everywhere a new level 80 turns, there's something new to measure up to.[42]

As acceptance of theorycraft seeps into the rhetoric of *WoW*, expectations of players change, especially as there are far more ways to compare performance to expectation now than in classic *WoW*. From looking at a player's gear, to looking at their achievements, to searching for their Armory page on the *WoW* website, perceptions of players performance can be shaped well before one actually plays with them. This is exacerbated because theorycraft encourages players to see things as right and wrong, which effectively means that a very good, but new player, with lesser gear, fewer achievements, and an unimpressive armory page may have a more difficult time latching on to a group in an era of theorycraft than they did when *WoW* first launched.

The final issue with theorycrafting is that the analytical mode it promotes can give a partial, slanted view of what actually occurs within a dynamic fight by fostering an overreliance on quantity of production over quality. Although aggressive tracking of data may be a good way of assessing the skill of damage dealers, evaluations for other members of groups, particularly healers, is a more complex process than simply looking at quantity. Gevlon argues,

> When complicated decisions are to be made, "better" or "worse" depend on the effect on [sic] the outcome that cannot be measured during one fight. It could be measured by comparing 10 fights where the

> first healer was present with 10 with [sic] the second was not, though such experiments would be quite hard to make.
>
> The McDonalds employee who packs 2x more hamburgers is 2x better than the other employee. The university professor who does 2x more lectures is definitely not 2x better (often not even better at all) than his [sic] colleague.[43]

The presumption lurking behind theorycraft, that more is better, stands the risk of homogenizing jobs and not offering the flexibility of looking to the other things members can add or detract from a group. Elements of situational awareness and larger social issues, like attendance and collegiality, cannot be tracked by traditional theorycrafting metrics. Theorycrafting gives a picture of the game, but the way that it is often situated within the discourse of *WoW* makes it central to all decisions, even if its holdings only focus on part of the picture of play. Procedure is overcome by paratext and the game changes. The desire to understand and optimize creates a lens through which what counts is only what can be counted. Lacking other modes of analysis the game loses depth, variety, and choice, as one approach marginalizes all others.

Theorycrafting is always partial, as players only know so much about the rules that govern *WoW*, so attempts to deduce the answers to how the game works are frequently checked by the limited number of actual, published formulae that dictate action within the game world. This leads to players crying foul about mechanics of the game because they think they have a working understanding of *WoW*, even if they do not. One such example can be found in Landsoul's "Newly Discovered Rage Ghost Nerf Unveiled!" thread.[44] The thread led to a Blizzard investigation of the issue, which found that "it was not true—the rage generation formula has not changed anytime recently."[45] Central to the misunderstanding is that players were using old numbers that had been changed. The problem was that players read the situation as a horrible affront to warriors, one that was both a "nerf," something that made warriors weaker, and needed to be "unveiled," as Blizzard was not forthcoming about the supposed change. Likely by virtue of both the assumptions of theorycraft, that math is right, and the dynamics of online discussion, deliberative debate was not encouraged and sweeping statements were made. In these cases, developers are put into a limited, structured box by players, as they must defend themselves and *WoW* from accusations that are based on incorrect information.

Theorycraft is often portrayed as a clear good, something that helps *WoW* players understand the game they are playing and experience success. Unfortunately the constraints to theorycraft, from the way discussion about *WoW* has changed to the attitude it fosters are not often discussed. A key thing theorycraft does illustrate is that the means by which games are played have a material impact on their rhetorical construction.

OPTIMIZING WORDPLAY

The emergence of theorycraft is telling about the *WoW* playing community, but also offers key insights into wordplay. Theorycraft indicates the *WoW* community is robust and develops approaches to play that change how they interact with the game. It shows players are interested in the process of metagaming and are interested enough in the game to pursue lengthy discussions outside of it. Beyond the bounds of *WoW*, there are three keys to what theorycraft presents: a changing notion of the forces shaping a game, a rearticulation of procedure and process constructed through both game design and paratexts, and an expression of the achieving mentality.

Most clearly, the development of theorycraft forms what counts as knowledge and 'good' play. Theorycraft changes how play occurs, shifting it from sifting through a sea of choices to a search for the optimal solution, resulting in what are often called "cookie-cutter builds." This changes the way *WoW* works, as it ceases to be a dynamic role-playing world that is ventured through with friends and becomes a series of math equations to be solved and lists of buttons to push. Although this may not be a change felt by every player and some could resist dominant norms, all are impacted when getting into certain groups requires specific choices or when game design is altered to please the vocal contingent of theorycrafters. Beyond the game, theorycrafting changes how discussion occurs, as math equations are often a search for the ultimate correct answer, rather than a discussion of the relative merits of different options. This means that debates are often framed in terms of 'right' and 'wrong,' rather than focusing on the relative merits of a number of different decisions with a focus on better and worse. This is a lesson that could apply to other games, as the increasing role of statistical analysis in sports and the presence of similar kinds of activities in games like *Civilization* and *SimCity* transforms the way the games are played and need to be studied. The single-minded pursuit of a best or an optimal approach reshapes notions of play and redefines game design.

Theorycraft also illustrates how wordplay encompasses both the paratexts and processes of games. Theorycraft drives design and consumption of various encounters in *WoW*. Top guilds expect new recruits to be fluent in theorycraft, and game designers expect the same of guilds. This relationship expands the surfaces for wordplay as a critical tool. Although the processes of games are persuasive, they are not the only consideration of wordplay. In this case, theorycraft rearticulates what counts as knowledge about *WoW* and how *WoW* is played. In the case of iterative games this relationship is especially dynamic, as they are regularly in a state of development. Player behaviors dictate future processes, which require looking beyond the strict boundary of game procedures to understand the discourse of video games. Theorycraft could not be executed without the game, as there would be nothing to develop theory for, but for a dedicated theorycrafter, it is difficult to imagine the game of *WoW* without the theories designed to optimize

play. The dynamism and iterations of *WoW* also means that neither the game nor theorycraft are ever fixed, final products.

Theorycrafting is almost exclusively developed outside of the game of *WoW* but is aimed at understanding and modeling the interactions that happen within the game. The depth and volume of theorycraft offers a slice of how the words, design, and play of video games are often a complicated, complex process that reach well beyond the limits of the computer programs that govern them. Given a deep look at specific elements of games, the final piece of the textual considerations of wordplay is developing an understanding of how these disparate pieces work together to develop an ordering logic of balance.

9 Balance and Meritocracies

One of the key themes of this book is that the words we choose to use matter. In regular life, selecting to use 'like' rather than 'love' may have a substantial impact on how that life plays out. Although microlevel examples are relatively straightforward, examining situations with higher stakes provide an opportunity to ascertain more information about how larger social structures work and what their value systems are. Take, for example, political speech. In giving a political speech, a leader often taps into larger social forces by using specific words that trigger certain emotions or shape belief toward policy. In the wake of the Watergate investigation, Richard Nixon opted to pit beliefs about 'confidentiality' against the 'rule of law.'[1] By appealing to two prominent values in U.S. culture, Nixon sought to excuse his actions, asserting that the confidentiality required by a president required him to keep certain information secret. In repeatedly appealing to confidentiality, Nixon demonstrated what he thought was most important in the wake of the scandal. Although confidentiality may not be a prominent appeal in video games, the notion of balance is, and using wordplay to investigate how balance is employed in game design and play is instructive in understanding several of the values present in the discourse of video games.

The importance of balance is particularly noteworthy when the focus of video games shifts from individual play against the computer into larger, more competitive environments. When playing against the computer, if the player always wins, the computer is not likely to quit the game in a fit.[2] Many players, however, do not like losing repeatedly—particularly if they feel that the terrain for play does not treat them fairly. Computers help shape the circumstances of video game play and our interactions with other players in games emphasize the importance of balance. Applying wordplay to balance offers a chance to assess how game design and structures within games impact actual game play and discussion about games. Analyzing how the word and concept of balance cuts across categories like design and play of online games enables a critical look at the values present in the discourse of video games and the power structures enabled by video games.

Understanding the importance of balance in online games requires a brief discussion of Michael Calvin McGee's articulation of ideographs, as it provides the background for the importance of particular words and ideas in communication. With an understanding of ideographs in hand, it is

possible to turn to general tenets of online game design and specific examples of how balance is a key component of video game discourse. These steps offer the ground to understand why balance has become so important in online games and how wordplay tells us more about the games we play.

BALANCE AS IDEOGRAPH

Of the many tools that help articulate the value of wordplay, ideographs place focus on words and phrases and their ability to function ideologically. Originally designed to aid in analysis of political rhetoric, McGee uses ideographs as a means by which to identify and critique the ideologies present in public discourse. Paying careful attention to ideographs aids in understanding how specific words and phrases are mobilized to shape decision making and public behavior. Analyzing ideographs enables critics to identify how discourse intersects with public motives, facilitating understanding of the ideologies functioning in a discursive environment.[3] Ideographs are taken as fact by their audience, as audiences see the terms as a core part of the society of which they are a part. 'Freedom,' 'equality,' and the 'rule of law' are more than simply words or phrases; they embody positions that bring an audience together and can define them against another group. To understand an ideograph is to better understand the beliefs of the group that uses it, as the words become powerful symbols that contain elements of cultural commitment, ideology, and preferred practices of behavior.

McGee argued that certain words were used in seeking to legitimize Richard Nixon's actions in the wake of the Watergate scandal, while others functioned to define political subgroups and different cultural practices. Scholars employing ideographs as an analytical tool have often stuck to the realm of political discourse, analyzing ideographs present in things like how a redefinition of the ideograph 'law' could be used to mobilize Parliamentary opposition to the British crown.[4] However, the concept of the ideograph has been extended into the realm of sports and games. By identifying 'sport' as an ideograph in the television coverage of poker, it is possible to see how the use of the term enables poker to be seen as both masculine and suitable for television coverage and consumption.[5] By deploying a well-known, accepted term to redefine poker, the new 'sport' is cast into a known set of associations. Instead of holding on to the prior belief that poker is a game played in smoky backrooms by gamblers who may be breaking the law, a sport is a regulated, encouraged form of competition contested by athletes. In tandem with using the term sport, discourse about poker began to focus on the mental discipline required to play it, as well as the physical stamina needed to endure long sessions at the table. By using the ideograph of sport and employing surrounding descriptions that parallel the actions of athletes, the game of poker became a different kind of product, one that tapped into existing marketing and television

opportunities. In this case, analyzing the use of the ideograph enables a complex focus on the ideological beliefs underpinning sports, television consumption, masculinity, and poker.

Ideographs mobilize a larger cultural belief or concept to shape the ways in which the audience conceives of a subject area. From enabling a political defense or rallying a revolution to redefining an old game into a form of televised entertainment, a focus on ideographs facilitates a better understanding of the underlying values of both author and audience. These small pieces are instructive for better understanding how balance shapes design and play, particularly in online or competitive settings. By deploying balance as a standard, a goal, an ideograph, designers and gamers indicate their ideological assumptions about how video games should operate.

BALANCE AND GAME DESIGN

One of the key principles of video games is that they are overtly designed, constructed worlds. Although there are certainly elements of emergent play and games are entering larger popular culture in powerful ways, most of the video games we play are subject to explicit rules that were set forth by a (team of) designer(s) and executed by a computer. The dynamics of this relationship are magnified when analyzing competitive multiplayer games, particularly those found online. There is no technical requirement for balance; a design team could quite readily assemble a very unbalanced game. However, the focus on balance, in conjunction with the fact that game worlds are deliberately constructed is at the core of why balance is an important ideograph. Understanding the role of the ideograph begins by analyzing how designers build balance into their games and then looking at players' perceptions with regard to balance.

Perhaps the best starting point for the analysis of the role of balance in online games is to look back to the original online game, Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle's *MUD*. In designing the world, Trubshaw and Bartle made a number of choices that still shape the worlds designed decades after *MUD*. A pivotal choice was the inclusion of a leveling system, which they designed as a means to escape the class system seen in the real world. Bartle states that within *MUD*, "there was nothing stopping you from going up a level because you were a girl, or because you were slightly socially inept, or because you are from the North of England. It was a kind of meritocracy where everyone could succeed."[6] Tabling any analysis of whether or not there were barriers for some people in the game or are barriers in contemporary games, this quote is quite interesting. Bartle portrays *MUD* as a world different from a life on Earth that is typically described as unequal. Instead of a world where one's status is dictated by many factors beyond their control, the computer literate could find a meritocracy in *MUD* where the best would become the most successful.[7]

In response to this notion of a meritocracy, "*MUD* had a fascinating context: Two angry young men, feeling oppressed, creating an escape with their own two hands; a place where the laws were fairer, where the experience was not so unkind."[8] Effectively, this is the foregrounding of the perceived 'need' for balance in online worlds. Creating the perception of a meritocracy requires a setting that is balanced, one where skill, rather than birthright, will enable players to succeed.

Focusing on balance stretches well beyond *MUD* and the MMOGs that descended from it. Balance is a key aspect of game design discussions and statements about properly balancing a game are frequently tied to making the game good or fun. One game designer, who works predominantly on fighting games, argues that proper game balance requires both a variety of viable options and an overarching fairness in the game that allows "players of equal skill [to] have an equal chance at winning even though they might *start the game* with different sets of options/moves/characters/resources/etc."[9] The overriding perception of this kind of design is that, much like Trubshaw and Bartle's *MUD*, games should be set up in a way that skill is showcased and those that are of the greatest talent can rise to the top of the meritocracy. One could choose to balance, or not balance, a game in many different ways, but the dominant means by which to balance video games is to make them appear fairer. Interestingly enough, for some designers, proper balance is more often found in the realm of intuition, rather than through complex statistical testing.[10] Intuition, which is more likely to be the product of experience and repeated practice than a complicated set of mathematical calculations, is particularly noteworthy when centered in the proper balancing of games. The only way to develop the intuition needed to understand 'proper' balance is to make and play games and the only ones who can assess balance are those who are making and playing games. By extension, if balance is a key component of gaming, having the skills necessary to produce or recognize whether or not a game is balanced requires participating actively in the discourse of gaming. In so doing, players and designers buy into the ideograph of balance, recognizing it as important and then expecting it in future games, and potentially rejecting games because they are not properly balanced.[11] By placing balance and intuition at the center of game design, the ideograph of balance is reinforced and perpetuated within the community of those playing games.

Balance within game design is also discussed in two other meaningful ways. First, there are occasional efforts by designers to rearticulate what balance means in the design of games. One designer articulates an interest in shifting the focus of balance from making the game perfectly even to making the game 'awesome.'[12] The traditional approach for system designers is to ensure that different choices result in similar kinds of power for the player, much as the position outlined above. However, in striving for perfection in balance, one could lose sight of what makes the game fun, forcing changes in an effort to make the game even, rather than focusing

on making the game enjoyable. This different notion of balance, one where "if all the classes [players can choose] feel really fun, then I'm doing a good job"[13] redefines the initial idea behind *MUD*, as it focuses on having a good time playing a video game, rather than on designing a perfect meritocracy.

The second issue with balance in online games is that there is a stark difference between playing against the computer and playing against other players. If we think of balance in the sense of trying to make the game a fair and even platform within which there is a meritocracy, then the design of a game where one fights computer-controlled opponents can be structured quite differently than one where players fight against each other. Complicating this further is the problem that

> if video games have one bad influence on players, it is that they teach us the wrong belief that you can always win. This is because the computer opponents are designed to lose most of the time. Players got so used to winning all the time that they go to great lengths, including cheating, to not lose. Unfortunately in PvP [player versus player] by definition some player must lose, not a computer who doesn't mind.[14]

This has a substantial impact on games, as players may regularly make choices that maximize their odds of success, which may place a substantial drag on any attempt to balance the game. In many games where one faction of players fights another, there is generally a better and worse side, which could drive player choice and alter the ability to build a meritocracy in the game. Even more troublesome for designers is that players may have a limited ability to appreciate the larger global balance issues that go into a game, focusing instead on their potentially idiosyncratic experiences. As one *WoW* developer notes in response to complaints about PvP balance in *WoW*,

> I also feel the need to state yet again that remember even when Arenas [a location for competitive PvP play in *WoW*] are working perfectly, you are going to lose about half your matches and possibly more. *Arena balance does not mean that you win a lot*. This is a very different experience from PvE [player versus environment/computer] where you do win almost every fight. We'll take our share of the blame for class imbalance problems, but don't look at every single PvP loss as being all because of us. :)[15]

These two factors make balancing a game with the intent of reaching perfect equity quite difficult because players tend to seek any advantages they can get, causing potentially small initial imbalances to spiral out of control. Furthermore, players are generally less interested in the balance of the game than of the balance of the parts of the game that they see, while designers are compelled to keep an eye on the game as a whole. Somewhat

separately, computers also function to change the dynamics of games, as balance can be continually sought through patches or changes designed to fine tune the game in response to game play in practice. This ongoing relationship between designers, players, and games allows balance to be an ongoing subject of discussion as contemporary video games are rarely in a fixed, final state.

The obsession with balance in video games is particularly notable because it is not necessarily a feature of the many other games people play. In professional sports, there is frequently an understanding that the terms of the game are unbalanced. Most sports have some features that make some effort at balance, from revenue sharing to salary caps, but balance is not pursued in nearly the same way that it is in video games. Major League Baseball suffers from large and small market teams, where the Yankees and Red Sox spend far more than the Royals and Pirates, giving the larger teams a substantial advantage. Refereeing in the National Basketball Association is rife with "superstar calls," where LeBron James can draw calls that may not be given to a rookie or benchwarmer because of the added attention paid to the best athletes in the sport. European soccer features the "Big Four"[16] in the English Premier League, and Barcelona and Real Madrid who dominate the Spanish league. In all of these cases there is no assumption of a level playing field in building a team. Some organizations have far more money to spend or players that attract far more attention than their opponents. Further, it is understood that the playing field within the game may not be balanced, as some players and teams are treated differently than others. In stark contrast to the meritocracy of *MUD*, professional sports are laden with examples where imbalance is the norm.

A lack of balance also can be found in other games, from collectible card games to board games. Many collectible card games have imbalance built into the structure of the game. Making cards a commodity that can hold investment value requires limiting their availability to players. In many collectible card games, the most powerful, rarest cards are also the most expensive.[17] This means that if a player has invested more money in buying cards there is a greater chance of winning, which certainly parallels the real world inequities that Trubshaw and Bartle identify as prompting their creation of *MUD*. In casual play, many board games are driven more by luck and good fortune with dice or other objects than with skill. Once all players are pursuing a similar strategy in a game like *Monopoly* or *Life*, the player who wins is likely to be the person who had the lucky dice roll, which is not really a balanced measure of skill or merit. Although reliance on a dice roll mirrors what happens in the algorithms of the computers processing video games, there is generally a difference between the number of choices in video games and board games. *Monopoly* and *Life* feature a fairly slim set of options in comparison to contemporary MMOGs or console games, which increases the role of luck and imbalance in shaping the outcome of the game.

Balance drives design decisions in video games, as developers seek a proper balance for the game and players seek to gain any marginal advantage they can find. Balance is an organizing principle of video games that can be dated back to Trubshaw and Bartle's attempts to develop a meritocracy. Although balance may feel like an intrinsic part of video games, something that is just part of a good game, the emphasis on balance is particular to video games, as many other games are structured by other ideographs and approaches. Recognizing just how important balance is to video games requires a deeper look at situations where games fell out of balance and the consequences of the resultant imbalances.

WHEN BALANCE GOES BAD: BREAKING GAMES

Identifying that balance is an ideograph and tracing the conditions surrounding its use and introduction to video games demonstrates that the term is important and notable, but does not illustrate the stakes of careful thinking about the importance of balance and why it matters. The political and social implication of balance can best be seen by applying wordplay to look across a variety of different games, with a particular focus on how debates about balance structure elements of the discourse of video games. Debates about balance can be seen in games ranging from *Team Fortress 2* to *Forza Motorsport*, with the MMOGs that are more directly descended from *MUD* providing a recurrent source for examples of how balance is a key part of the words about the design and play of video games.

In many ways *Team Fortress 2* (*TF2*) is a remarkable game. A shooter that was originally released as part of a package called *The Orange Box* by Valve Software, the game has had a long life smattered with a number of free patches and free promotional weekends of play to draw in new players. The game features a variety of player classes within a shooter, so properly balancing player abilities is a key part of the game's design and execution.[18] However, in the fourth quarter of 2010, *Team Fortress 2* shifted its business model, integrating virtual item sales into the game. Realizing that this was a substantial change to the game, the announcement was made in a contrasting style to much of the developer communication about *TF2*. Instead of the typical style of "being as vague as possible," the addition of item sales was announced in a FAQ format that sought to "lay out precisely what we're doing and what this update is about."[19] Promising that the addition of a virtual item store was "simply an alternative way of obtaining items that other players can earn during gameplay," players were informed that they would not need to spend money to "remain competitive" and that their existing hard won items were "even rarer, because they're limited editions now."[20]

Shortly after the announcement, the game's forums "predictably lit up with debate and continue to smolder. Some argued that items like these

new, expensive stat-boosting hats—difficult to come across in normal gameplay—will throw off *Team Fortress 2*'s balance."[21] Although the "fairness and balance aspect will sort itself out,"[22] the initial response is instructive about how the community of players hold balance as sacred and fear that the introduction of virtual item sales will upset one of the things appreciated most about playing online games. Rallying players to protest the decision, one player argued that the introduction of virtual item sales threatens the game, as items that were once rare become common. Even more troubling to many was the fact that the players who get a newfound advantage will be those who possess the offline wealth to purchase the previously rare items, not necessarily the best *TF2* players. Arguing that the introduction of item sales commodifies the economy, the rare hats needed to complete a set bonus require players to either "PAY. (or get insanely lucky, which can take months or YEARS.)"[23] The problem identified throughout the discussion was that players who paid for items were more likely to be successful than those who did not pay. Players acknowledged that the game's publisher, Valve, deserved to make money for producing and maintaining the game, but felt that those funds should not be generated in a way that could upset the balance of the game.

Developers, players, and opinion writers all quickly realized that the introduction of these items was noteworthy, largely because it would change the balance of the game and how it was played. In releasing the FAQ about the Mann Company store, the developers were quick to note that the change would not impact balance in any meaningful way. The items players already had were being made more valuable and those that did not yet have the items were offered an opportunity to play in a more enjoyable way. The development team clearly noted the importance of proper balance in their missive to players and the players responded in kind. With both sides acknowledging the importance of preserving the balance of the game, it is plain to see how, in this case, balance functioned as an ideograph that structured the discourse surrounding *TF2*.

Although the fear of virtual item sales resided in the belief that it would lead to an imbalanced game, there are other situations where aspects of games fell far out of balance, resulting in substantial discussion about the state of the game in question. In the case of *Halo 2*'s online play, the sniper rifle quickly became the exclusive weapon of choice for players seeking the optimal means by which to dispatch their opponents.[24] The weapon was so powerful that players used it outside of its original context, wading into close quarters combat wielding a weapon originally intended for long-range, stealthy attacks.[25] The impact of displacing other weapons to a single choice is limiting and substantial design resources are wasted, but massive numbers of people still played *Halo 2* online. Although this imbalance did not necessarily hurt the game, the dynamic adjustment of players and the concerns of designers illustrate how central the idea of balance is to the discourse of video games. *Halo 2* may have been fortunate based on the

size of that game franchise, but balance issues in two other games had far larger negative impacts on their ability to function successfully.

Warhammer Online (*WAR*) was originally billed as a primary competitor to take on, and possibly take down, *WoW*. Focusing on player versus player combat and sporting the support of Electronic Arts, the game featured a large launch and then hemorrhaged players as many opted not to subscribe after their free month of play. Eventually needing to merge low population servers, the game only retained about 300,000 subscribers roughly a year after its launch,[26] which stood in stark contrast to the 11.5 million subscribers *WoW* was claiming at a roughly similar point in time.[27] Although there are many reasons why *WAR* struggled to retain subscribers, several of the issues can be attributed to game balance. In designing a game predicated on playing against other players, one of the first things expected by players is for the combat within the game to be 'balanced.' Hence, in recounting a variety of reasons why *WAR* failed, many were connected to a lack of balance in the game.[28]

Instead of electing to take a relatively straightforward shortcut to balance by including three factions so two weaker sides could team up against the most powerful one, *WAR* chose to use two. This meant that if one side had more players or more powerful players or more skilled players than the other, the combat in the game would cease to be balanced, possibly prompting players to leave the game. In practice *WAR* also suffered from substantial game design issues with balance, as certain classes, notably Bright Wizards and Warrior Priests, were wildly more powerful than their opponents. The lack of balance in fighting other characters made the player versus player combat that was supposed to be the grand contribution of the game substantially less fun. Although the game worked out some of the issues, "the damage is done and hundreds of thousands of former subscribers are unlikely to give the game another chance after suffering horrible class balance for months on end."[29] A second major balance issue was with the population of the game. Players flocked to the Destruction side character models that featured much better art and more compelling stories than the bland Order characters. With one side vastly outnumbering the other on many servers, many found PvP battles to be a *fait accompli*, as the Order side was repeatedly overrun by the superior numbers of Destruction players. Add in the general bugginess that accompanies any MMOG launch and suddenly lack of balance is a likely reason why *WAR* failed to meet expectations. Players expected even, tightly contested battles reminiscent of the world designed by Trubshaw and Bartle, but when they did not find it, they simply moved on to other things.

A different balance issue plagued *Aion*. Published by Korean company NCSoft, *Aion* features a gorgeous world with complex combat systems that encourage players to chain together a sequence of skills in smooth and visually attractive ways.[30] The game is also designed in a way that requires players to venture into contested space in order to complete quests

for most of the game. After Level 20, players must enter areas where groups of high-level characters can wait to slaughter them.[31] The problem of ganking, being repeatedly slain by higher-level opponents, is not unique to *Aion*, although the prominence of ganking can be seen as an issue of balance. Compounding the problem for *Aion* is the state of the economy, where massive hyperinflation, which is attributed to both professional gold farming[32] and bugs in the game's code,[33] changed the balance of the in-game money supply. The combination of player versus player content, ganking, and massive hyperinflation created a situation where game play fell out of balance and the "fun is now absolutely dictated by how much real money you spent to buy Kinah [*Aion*'s currency]. Skill is useless when you are facing a rich noob who got the best armor and weapon he surely bought with Kinah from gold sellers."[34] Critiquing the lack of control over the economy, one critic contended that gold sellers need to be shut down for NCSoft to show that "they are really serious about protecting the integrity of *Aion*'s economy and game play balance."[35] An economy out of control led to play out of balance, which drove people away from the game. Players had an expectation of balance, that success and failure in *Aion* should be based on skill at play, rather than the size of one's wallet.

In addition to the cases explored so far, concerns about balance in online games can be seen throughout the discourse surrounding them. Players routinely appeal to developers with balanced based concerns about their games of choice, whether it be to balance their preferred style of combat[36] or to decry a sudden change that put the game out of balance and led to a rage quit.[37] Developers seek to explain the balancing issues in their games, as it becomes an ordering principle for what they think the game should be like.[38] Players lament a game's death spiral based on others gaining an unfair advantage,[39] placing the game out of balance, as "speed glitch losers" dominate *Forza Motorsport 3*'s leaderboards.[40] Rewards that are too good to be true can also be a problem, as players feel they become so powerful that the challenge is sucked out of the game and the content is facerolled.[41] In all of these cases balance is expressed in various ways, but the central focus on and need for balance is never questioned. Balance is an ordering principle of video games, one that drives both design and play and feels like a natural, unquestioned part of video games, even if many of the other games we play are not balanced. Wordplay shows how this focus on creating a different kind of world, a balanced one, is one more key to unlocking how discourse shapes the terrain for video games.

BALANCE: WHY IT MATTERS

One of the clear results from the focus on balance is that video games feature something akin to the more perfect world that Trubshaw and Bartle first sought out to make with *MUD*. For many, this is an appealing vision:

a perfectly balanced meritocracy where hard work, effort, skill and knowledge can be rewarded as players become more powerful based on their actions and knowledge. However, this desire for balance also has a notable impact on video games, shaping development and potentially altering the demographics of those designing and playing games. Balance can obscure the need to look more critically at some aspects of the game industry and of game players, as video games can be seen as 'perfectly balanced' worlds where the strong and skilled thrive. Further, the dynamics of design are changing, as corporations lead a push toward a different kind of game world, the one represented in the Mann Company Store, where players are able to buy their way to success while generating revenue for the game developer. Understanding the impact of the ideograph of balance requires looking beyond the games and toward the ideological framework the focus on balance supports.

Some of the framework for the tension about how balance works in games can be seen in player discourse about balance. In the midst of a post about how hard it is to balance player classes in MMOGs, one writer concludes,

> In some respects, I kind of like it when games . . . are imbalanced. Life, after all, isn't fair. We don't have obsessive-compulsive deities lording over us and tweaking various country factions and vehicles and modern day firearms to ensure that a broadsword is "competitive" with a submachine gun. The obsession over balance can be overrated, and it can sometimes do more harm than good. A game's class system is a large, complicated machine with many expensive, moving parts. Tweak one thing on one side and another thing goes out of balance. It's an impossible tight-rope to walk. Just look at *WoW*! They've been "balancing" that game since release . . . The question becomes . . . is perfect balance possible? Should we even try? Or should we just make a bunch of cool stuff and toss it up in a big, chaotic salad? As a woman, of course I prefer salad. And chaos.[42]

This argument is fascinating in that it is almost a direct refutation of what Bartle sought to put into the original *MUD* and stands in opposition to many of the designer quotes mentioned previously. Similar to a mode of design focused on awesome, this places a focus on cool and notes that life on Earth is not balanced, so why would you balance a video game? Additionally impressive is that the author chooses to declare her subject position as a woman, a minority demographic in the genre of the games she is discussing. This argument inspired discussion, including the observation that "[v]ariety is all well and good, but sooner or later, if there's no balance, everyone's going to end up choosing that [most powerful] class, and then you might as well not have all those other possibilities."[43] Although not an outright attack, this response voices the presumption that the reason why

you need balance is that every player will act in self-interest, seeking the path of least resistance or greatest maximization. This is the apologia for balance, that it is needed because every player is intensely self-interested. More aggressive responses also followed, including,

> This is a horrible, horrible article. In any PvP game you need to make sure each class at least has a chance of killing any of the others. PvP should be decided by skill, not by whoever has the most unbalanced class. Everyone has their own style, it's wrong to make them feel bad about the one they identify with. These are video games meant for entertainment, not the real world which is so used to crushing dreams and breaking hearts. No victory should be granted, each should be savagely earned in a fair but intense contest. The smallest delay or misstep should be the determining factor.[44]

Contending that there should be both freedom of choice and equality of opportunity, this response exhibits a different aspect of the Bartle quotation. Video games are portrayed as an escape from a world that is not fair, so why would one construct something that is just as harsh? Players should be able to retain their own approach to the game, while trusting the development team to ensure that each approach is equally valid. Combat should be fierce and fair, not chaotic and based on a granted entitlement from choosing a more powerful class. The original post and commentary in response to it go a long way in illustrating the ideological stakes of the presence of balance as an ideograph. Claiming salad, chaos, and womanhood, on one side, the original poster questioned the practical and theoretical obsession with balance. Commentators responded by stressing the self-interest of players and the desire for an escape from the cold, cruel world. This backdrop offers an opportunity to look more deeply at why the stakes matter and how discourse could be reconstructed by looking at different ways of conceptualizing how balance can work in video games.

A starting point for understanding the ideological implications of balance is to look at the larger forces within the games industry, most notably the structural changes that alter the ways in which games are designed. The growth of the market in selling virtual goods within games for 'real' money shakes the foundations of typical game design, as players with offline wealth can become more powerful online. Although real-world trade in online items has existed for years, the legitimacy gained by item sales that are now integrated into games has led to the growth of a multi-billion dollar worldwide market in item sales[45] that promises to reshape notions about game design. Zynga-style games, like *Farmville* and *Frontierville*, are normalizing game worlds with two currency structures, where one is earned within the game and the other, generally more powerful currency can be gained much more rapidly by investing dollars or Euros.[46] A change like this alters what constitutes balance, as players can buy their way to a more sophisticated,

more attractive homestead. MMOG publishers have joined in, offering virtual goods on limited servers through Sony's Station Exchange program[47] or *Warhammer Online*'s Specialized Training Pack, which allows players to spend dollars to get levels for each character on their account.[48] The changes and introduction of different means by which to generate revenue certainly increases options for game publishers when it comes to recouping their investment. At the same time it leaves gamers worrying about where these changes will lead[49] and concerned that micro-transactions and item sales do not "fit a lot of traditional mmo [sic] senarios [sic] and if you try and shoehorn it into these you could break your game balance horribly and end up pissing off your fanbase."[50] The terrain in which games are played are changing, altering the audience for games and the beliefs of the player base. These changes, particularly the strong response from some players, is indicative of the most substantial stake in the heart of balance as an ideograph, that the obsession with balance is representative of a relatively homogenous group of designers and players.

One of the key functions of an ideograph is that it represents the ideological biases of the community in which the ideograph is used. As a large portion of the focus on balance comes from game designers, it is relevant to note that the game design industry is largely a homogenous group of white men.[51] When over 83% of game designers are white and over 88% are men,[52] it becomes reasonable to understand why some elements of game design may be common across a variety of different game genres and over time. Add in the fact that a substantial portion of gamers tilt in the same direction as developers, as 72% of console gamers are men,[53] and it is relevant to question the ramifications of seemingly small elements of the discourse of video games. When most game developers and console game players are demographically similar to Trubshaw and Bartle, it is reasonable to think that they may seek similar things from video games, like an escape from the real world where they see a lack of balance or the opportunity to test their skills on the field of battle.[54] Game worlds give the opportunity to completely construct the environment desired and, if the group of people playing and designing games is relatively homogenous, there is no perspective from which to critique the dominant ideographs of their industry. The political function of the ideograph is to shape action by tapping into previously held beliefs and the homogeneity of the traditional gaming audience has meant that there are few to question the perception of a naturally balanced order of things.

Beyond the homogeneity that allows the focus on balance to persist, an obsession with balance becomes a political excuse for a single approach to games. If the presumption is that good games are balanced, the approaches to games are limited. I suspect almost every gamer has decried a cheap loss or a computer game that somehow cheated, but there is a gap between having some balancing principles within games and being focused on perfect balance. Two easy examples of a potentially different approach are found

in the Nintendo games, *Mario Party* and *Mario Kart*, which are generally appreciated by a broader audience, but often harshly criticized by hardcore gamers. Many Nintendo games feature means by which to handicap the game to allow players of differing skills to play against each other, but these two games are particularly punishing for those that are 'good.' Unlike *Forza Motorsport*, where the best racer should win, *Mario Kart* routinely slows whoever is leading, as the game and players team up on the kart in first place and conspire to do things to place obstacles in their path. Redefining the focus on game play the prevalence of titles like these on the Wii led to a 5% growth in the number of female console gamers, demonstrating the importance of looking at how different modes of play can attract a different kind of audience.[55]

The perception that hard work and skills should win games is also brought into question by the prevalence of Facebook and PopCap games that may require both, but also reward elements like obsessive checking in to the game and luck. Although games like *Peggle*[56] can be played with both a highly analytical mode and with a more casual, luck-based approach, the integration of both elements has enabled the game to become popular across a broad audience.[57] It is no wonder that more women play PopCap games than men[58] or that almost 70% of Facebook gamers are women.[59] Although there are a variety of reasons why these games are played by a different audience, it is notable that there is far less of an obsession with balance in them. Instead of focusing on crafting game worlds in which players can test their skills of battle on a level field or spend eons obtaining arcane knowledge with which to impress others, these games deliver other experiences that reward subtly different behaviors. Facebook games generally reward frequent check-ins, punishing a lack of attention, while also encouraging players to invest out of game currency to advance within the game and coercing them to enlist their friends to join them in playing their game of choice. Moving outside of the ideograph, providing games with different approaches to design may help diversify the demographics of gamers and the audience of people who seek to become game designers.

The last principle of the focus on balance is the presumption that hard work and skills should win games, which elides any focus on the larger social issues surrounding gaming. Calls for balance frequently focus on the conditions of the world within the game, not the world outside of it. Bartle explicitly sought to design a place that would stand in opposition to the inequity he saw in the real world, but participating on equal ground in that world requires a set of skills and fluencies that should not be overlooked. Playing an MMOG, like *WoW*, requires a certain kind of computer, internet connection, and skill set tied to navigating in a 3D world. It further requires the ability to figure out quests, which is far easier if you have access to a social network engaged in a similar set of activities. Should you have difficulty moving around or find the effort to complete a quest too daunting, you will likely quit playing, rather than worry about whether or not the

game was properly balanced. Although those issues could be tied to skills or merit, they are also intensely tied to socialization in particular forms of play. The means by which balance is discussed points to a particular kind of balance, intending for the in-game interaction to be equitable, even though the out of game circumstances may not be. Without looking at the social structures beyond the game, the ideograph of balance works as an alibi, one where players and developers can contend that anyone can succeed in a balanced world, without noting all of the out of world structures required to join the 'level' playing field in the first place.

BALANCING WORDPLAY

The value of identifying ideographs is in the understanding derived from becoming aware of how the values and beliefs of a specific group are shown in specific words and phrases. Using wordplay demonstrates how the discourse of video games is composed of a variety of elements and, in this case, balance has a clear ideological function in structuring the kind of games that are produced and, most likely, who is designing and playing games. There is nothing wrong with crafting games that focus on balanced environments, but they need to be designed with attention to their limitations. Games structured with a conventional notion of balance should not crowd out games that may not hew to the same sort of ideological orientation or relegate those games to secondary status. Recognizing the force of words, design, and play, and how a single idea can structure both who plays games and what games are available, aids in the identification of the biases inherent in the discourse of video games. In marking the underlying presumptions of video games and the social structures surrounding them efforts can be made to address existing preconceptions.

Wordplay is a critical tool that can be used to address a big picture view of the discourse of video games. By focusing on the words, design, and play of video games, wordplay can be used to identify structures and biases both within specific games and in the cultural environment surrounding them. Using the concept of ideographs to assess the role of balance in the discourse of video games is one example of how words and beliefs can fuse to shape how we conceptualize of video games. With the examples of the context and texts of video games in hand, it is appropriate to turn to the three themes of wordplay: words, design, and play.

Part III

Using Wordplay

10 Words, Design, and Play

Wordplay looks at games differently. Wordplay is predicated on identifying ways in which video games persuade, create identifications, and circulate meanings. This process of investigating video games leads to paying more attention to three crucial elements of video games: words, design, and play. The words in and surrounding video games are of particular interest to rhetoricians whose tools are well designed to analyze texts composed of words. The design of video games and the society surrounding games shapes the terms of play and represent elements of procedurality often specific to the processes of video games. Play addresses who uses games, how they play, and what they play. Play cuts across design and words, emphasizing that video games come into existence through a particular form of doing and a necessary set of actions.

Traditional rhetorical analysis handles words well, but is not always used in a way that respects the dynamic impacts of design and play on video games. Procedural rhetoric handles design well and can address play, but is prone to ignore the powerful impact of words. Game studies addresses play and design, but does not offer wordplay's strength in addressing the role of words. In analyzing words, design, and play, wordplay offers a way to analyze the whole of the discourse of video games.

The chapters throughout this book emphasize the context and text of games, elements that can be seen in words, design, and play. With the specifics of several examples in hand, it is appropriate to look more deeply at how to apply wordplay and how it helps explicate the broader terrain of video games. Working from smaller, more discrete examples, focus can be placed on notable elements of video games and why understanding their rhetorical construction is important.

WORDS

Words are at the foundation of both wordplay and video games. Words are the heart of many games, offering narrative structures and immersive depth to develop a character like Niko Bellic. There are other cases, like welfare epics or theorycraft, where words from outside a game impact the design and play within the game. Words are a key part of what makes video games

what they are. Just as the presence of words is important, the absence of words can be just as notable. Video games that displace words with images, sound, or interaction demonstrate the impact of video games as a medium of communication. Using wordplay starts by looking at the notable elements of the words or the lack of them, moving outward to design and play. This book emphasizes how the analysis of words can be integrated with design and play, but a closer examination of the words in and around *EVE Online* offers a nice case study of how to use wordplay to better understand the words of video games and how they function.

EVE Online (*EVE*) was the subject of extended analysis in Chapter 1, but describing the socialization of players into *EVE* only gives a tiny glimpse into what makes *EVE* interesting. As a massively multiplayer online game, much of what makes *EVE* special are elements of design, like the space-based theme, the sandbox-style design that allows players to do almost anything they want, or the Council of Stellar Management (CSM) that helps govern *EVE*.[1] Enabling players to elect a council to parlay with developers is predominantly a design decision, but it also hints at the increased openness found in the words surrounding *EVE* because it erodes the distinction between players and designers. Focusing more closely on the words in and around *EVE* illustrates that words help shape the discourse of video games and how to use wordplay.

Cultural objects are subject to a massive number of descriptive words. From online screeds to the discussions provoked by them, one of the reasons cultural objects are notable is because they are widely analyzed. Although *EVE* is a relatively small game in terms of the population of people actively playing it, the game has a massive footprint because of the words connected to it. In focusing on the new player experience, Chapter 1 noted how the words within *EVE* drive perceptions about the freewheeling, survival-of-the-fittest mentality of the game and how notable absences in the tutorials for new players make them look outside of the game for help. However, the outsize impact of *EVE* is best seen in the words surrounding the game and the massive amount of time and energy spent constructing what *EVE* is as a cultural object.

It is likely that fewer than 200,000 people actively subscribe to *EVE*,[2] but online discussion about the game belies an assumption that the importance of the cultural object is dictated by the number of people engaging it. The words about the game start with the production made and led by the developer of *EVE*, CCP. Over the years, CCP has become increasingly transparent to their player base, issuing regularly updated developer blogs[3] that address a variety of different topics related to the game and posting quarterly economic newsletters that offer market reports on the *EVE* economy.[4] The ability to interact with developers keeps players informed about the latest changes in the game, while giving them the impression that they are involved in the development of something they care about deeply. Economic information functions similarly, while facilitating the development

of an extraordinarily deep and complex player-driven economy. CCP also hosts the EVElopedia, a far-reaching wiki dedicated to educating players about the game by offering a repository of information about getting started and a basic understanding of any of a variety of *EVE* topics. Primarily authored by the player-volunteers of the Interstellar Services Department, the words of the EVElopedia offer a backstop for the rhetorical construction of *EVE*. By hosting a large, developer-driven wiki, the immense depth of the game is supported through a wealth of resources. In this case, CCP facilitates the development of an online instruction manual that helps bring players into the game. In their official communications, CCP uses words to increase the depth and complexity the game can support, while enhancing the identification players feel with the game they are playing.

Words about *EVE* go far beyond the direct production and support of CCP. Fulfilling the news and information function of developer blogs and EVElopedia, *EVE* News24[5] is akin to a daily paper about *EVE*. Complete with investigative journalism and near daily reporting, *EVE* News24 fulfills a similar function to a town newspaper. There are ways in which this production of words overlaps with design, as correspondents are called writer/spymasters and are compensated with *EVE* currency, but the overwhelming contribution of *EVE* News24 is the words they issue that detail the intricacies of *EVE*. Much like a newspaper sets perceptions about what is newsworthy, *EVE* News24 helps frame the narrative of play in *EVE*. Simply having a website that details the news of the game is a rhetorically powerful message about how much the game matters to those who play it. Read by both players and developers, *EVE* News24 is a key piece of the words of *EVE*, indicating the depth of the game and the commitment of those who play it.

Akin to *EVE* News24, *EVE* Marketdata[6] is a player-supported resource designed to circumvent design elements of the game. *EVE*'s economy is robust and subject to intense player scrutiny, as many choose to ply their time in *EVE* as traders. *EVE*'s markets are subject to certain design restrictions, like division of the game space into various market regions[7] and an inability to easily discern prices in other regions.[8] These design mechanics led players to focus on developing out of game tools to aid them in market arbitrage. *EVE* Marketdata uses a background uploader to compile data at their central website whenever players who use the uploader check the various markets of *EVE*. By crowdsourcing data gathering, players are able to collect information that aids them in game, outside of the control of CCP. Sites like this have the potential to give a substantial advantage to those who know about them, as they are able to leverage their special knowledge to enhance in-game exploits. External resources can use words to redefine the experience of play by functionally altering design for those who are in the know.

Notable words about games can also be found rooted in controversy, and *EVE* is no stranger to provoking uproar. Shortly after CCP integrated

a new expansion into the game that allowed players to see more of their characters,[9] the developer also released a new currency system that enabled players to buy premium clothes for their characters. *EVE*'s original currency is ISK, but a secondary currency of PLEX was introduced to help combat the real-money trade. PLEX offers players a thirty-day extension to player accounts, so players who are rich in ISK can buy more time to play the game with currency they earn in the game. Conversely, players seeking more in-game currency can use out of game dollars or Euros to buy PLEX, which they can sell for ISK in *EVE*'s markets. This system of exchange gives both PLEX and ISK a floating exchange rate with out of game currencies, leading to frequent USD valuations of various *EVE* items. The newly added currency was dubbed Aurum and is purchased by exchanging 1 PLEX for 3,500 Aurum.[10] Aurum can be spent on merchandise to accessorize your character, including an "infamous $70 monocle."[11]

Players were vocal in their opposition to these decisions, but their words were fueled by allegedly official CCP communication leaked to *EVE* News24. First, an internal developer newsletter titled "Greed is Good?" outlined ideas "to squeeze more money out of players and plans for further, game-altering microtransactions in the future."[12] This missive sparked a minor revolution as

> *EVE* players complain all the time, of course—nearly every change in the game brings some loud, vocal faction of players who dislike it. But this time the rage has gone Titan-sized: in-game protests of hundreds, reported subscription cancellations in the thousands . . . even players going so far as to name and shame (and possibly shoot down in-game) the few tens of monocle wearers.[13]

The design change sparked words from both sides, which was exacerbated by another leaked CCP document: an email CCP CEO Hilmar Veigar Petursson allegedly sent to the CCP global mailing list. The email called the player outrage "very predictable" and contended that "[h]aving the perspective of having done this for a decade, I can tell you that this is one of the moments where we look at what our players do and less of what they say."[14] The position taken by CCP, while blunt, highlights the weakness of a player's words in online disputes with game companies. It is quite easy for players to say they are going to quit over any little issue, but whether or not they actually quit is a matter of much greater import for developers. Words can mean a lot in the context of wordplay, but in practice they can also prove empty.

Rooted in a design decision that changed the economic structure of the game and intimately tied to the intense competition among players that drives play in the game, the Aurum controversy was driven by words. Words from both developers and players demonstrate their feelings about what the game is and what it should be. Tension was initially sparked by

design, but the drama was ratcheted up by the leaked CCP documents. Resolution also took the form of words, as CCP flew the players elected to the current CSM to Iceland to hold a two-day summit. Players on the CSM were given the opportunity to voice their concerns and developers got a chance to apologize and explain their plans. Subsequent to the summit, a joint-released developer blog outlined the position of CCP, and a statement from the CSM acknowledged that "they felt issues had been resolved to their satisfaction."[15] The introduction of Aurum into *EVE* set off a chain of events driven by words, starting with the frustration of players, then inflamed by leaked documents from CCP, and closing with the report on a summit designed to quell tensions.

With status as cultural objects, words are a key piece of the discourse of video games. Although elements of video games can never be wholly separated from each other, *EVE* is constructed from the words within and surrounding it. Understanding *EVE* starts by looking at how it is discussed by both those who play it and the company who designs it. Wordplay aids in the evaluation of those words, with a focus on how they help constitute *EVE*. Words are well suited to the background of rhetorical criticism built into wordplay, but boiling the entirety of video game discourse down to words would be folly. Production of words and the interaction surrounding Aurum are key to understanding *EVE* as a cultural object, but there are other cases where design is the crucial element to examine.

DESIGN

The second key area of wordplay is the design of games, with a focus on how the structures built in and around video games help define their discourse. Video game design can open up alternate worlds, introduce rules that contradict what we experience in real life, and let us live out or fantasies or confront assumptions that we make about life outside of games. Simultaneously the design of society sets the frame for game design. Game development does not happen in a vacuum, and game creators are subject to larger social forces, especially as they attempt to attract audiences. This book has addressed how a number of different design elements shape the rhetorical construction of video games. These pieces of design often overlap with words and play, but wordplay's strength in articulating the arguments made by design can be seen by briefly examining *NBA 2K11* and *Gears of War*.

Although I share a name with a star National Basketball Association (NBA) point guard, I rarely get the opportunity to match that Chris Paul's hardwood skills. However, one of the key features of *NBA 2K11* allowed me to debut my counterpoint to the other version of my name. My NBA version of Chris Paul is a 7-foot-5-inch, 350-pound behemoth that owns the paint and possesses an increasingly deadly jump shot. The My Player mode of *NBA 2K11* encourages players to build their version of an NBA

prospect and develop that player into a star by earning skill points based on their on-court efforts. Modes like My Player are fairly standard in sports games, and their design enables players to engage in a different sort of play while establishing identification with dreams they are unlikely to ever reach outside of video games. I can customize my Chris Paul, making him taller and faster than I will ever be. The design of the game enables me to pick up the Gothic-style C neck tattoo I would never get in real life and earn my own signature shoes. Although all these elements of design are key to the discursive construction of My Player in *NBA 2K11*, there are two other areas in which the rhetorical force of the design of the game has a tremendous impact on the discourse of video games.

I find the most interesting part of creating an avatar is pushing the limits of the character creator to see what can and cannot be allowed. Can I create a skinny character? A fat one? What about their biological sex? Can I create a woman? Which skin tones are enabled and which are not? *NBA 2K11* has a number of limitations, like a relatively limited range of options for how unchiseled your avatar can be and the fact that you can only create men, but the most interesting design constraint is the availability of six different skin tones. As a particularly pasty-skinned redhead, I often choose the palest skin tone available. Normally there are several suitable options available for the pigment challenged. However, in *NBA 2K11* the lightest skin tone prompted my partner to ask if my avatar was of a mixed race descent. In opposition to *World of Warcraft*, which shipped with very limited dark skin tones for humans, *NBA 2K11*'s six choices start at dark skinned and do not get all the way to pasty. This design element is fascinating to me, especially because there are a number of NBA players represented in the game whose skin tones are far lighter than the choices available in My Player mode. From the standpoint of wordplay, this design dynamic opens up a number of questions about how the game's developers perceive their audience and how they think players would like to be embodied. Adding a seventh or a tenth skin tone is not likely to be a substantial investment in design resources. Restrictions, particularly those that appear to be elective, are quite meaningful. Further, the gap in representation in *NBA 2K11*, where it is hard to be represented with my skin tone, and in *World of Warcraft*, where it is hard to be represented with the skin tone of millions of others, is a powerful statement about each of the games and who the developers expect to be playing them. Choices of player representation combine elements of game and social design, as these factors work together to set the terms for what kinds of games are made and how they are ultimately designed and made to mean.

Beyond the construction of avatars in *NBA 2K11*, the design of play in the My Player mode is interesting. Players earn the skill points to improve their player in a number of ways, but the vast majority of their points are derived from a statistic called "Teammate Rating." Teammate Rating takes a number of things into account, but is primarily based on the kinds of

tasks the designers of *NBA 2K11* have determined make a good teammate, rather than the skills of a dominant basketball player. Players get credit for dunks, blocks, and assists, but they only get credit for shots if they are judged as "good shots" and are penalized for "bad shots." The assessment of the quality of the shot is independent of whether or not a basket is made, and there is no direct teammate reward for scoring points, even though the primary objective of basketball is to score more points than the other team. Often, especially when first developing one's player, the easiest way to raise Teammate Rating is to set multiple picks[16] on every offensive play. This pick-based approach does not do a whole lot to help the offense succeed, but the design of the primary means of improving one's player is shaped by *NBA 2K11*'s assumptions about how basketball should work.

The final notable aspect of *NBA 2K11*'s design bleeds into concerns of words and play. In redesigning the game, developer Take-Two secured Michael Jordan as their cover athlete and made him a playable character within the game. Accompanied by breathless coverage about the decision by sports news leaders like ESPN[17] and FOX Sports,[18] the design choice of including the greatest basketball player of all time framed how the game was received. After predecessor *NBA2K10* sold 2 million copies, a 60% jump from the previous year,[19] expectations for *NBA 2K11* were high. Reception of the game marked it as "where amazing happens" and that "[i]t's fitting that *NBA 2K11* prominently features Michael Jordan. After all, His Airness is the greatest basketball player of all time and *NBA 2K11* is the greatest basketball game ever made."[20] A number of design improvements made *NBA 2K11* better than other games, but it was the Jordan Challenges that made the game shine. Incorporating key moments from various points in Michael Jordan's career, successful players could unlock a playable Michael Jordan to lead through My Player mode. For some, "the stuff with Michael Jordan is reason enough to pick up *NBA 2K11*."[21] Building from the design choices programmed into the game and the lack of a competitor from EA Sports, as *NBA Elite* failed to ship,[22] *NBA 2K11* went on to sell more than 5 million copies.[23] By structuring the game around an element of nostalgia and harnessing the likeness of a player rarely represented in video games,[24] the design choices of *NBA 2K11* set the game apart from other sports games by making it feel special and different. Escaping concerns about an oncoming obsolescence, the design of *NBA 2K11* was able to deviate from the annual cycle of sports games by looking backward to make the design of this version distinct. Although this approach may prove to be a one-shot success, the runaway sales of the game have prompted *NBA 2K12* and *Madden NFL 12* to more prominently integrate historical players.

The force of design decisions can also be seen in other kinds of games. With series like *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor* among the best-selling video games in the industry, competitors in the shooter genre are frequently measured against their massive sales totals. Although the science fiction inspired *Halo* managed to help sell the original Xbox, shooters that do not

mirror reality in their game design typically have not sold as well as reality inspired war games. The *Gears of War* series has been quite successful, bringing in both Game of the Year awards and acknowledgements for their sales totals, but its sales pale in comparison to *Call of Duty*. When asked if a fantasy setting was a liability for *Gears of War*, the executive producer of the series contended that the lesser sales totals are part of "being the kind of game we are. We have some elements in our IP [intellectual property] that are double-edged swords. The Lancer being a chainsaw gun is one of the things that draws people, but it's also one of the things that has the potential to repel some people because of its over-the-top nature."[25] The choices designers make impact how their games will be received and how they fit within the discourse of video games. In choosing a fantasy setting, *Gears of War* opens up additional possibility spaces for weapons like chainsaw guns and the ability to fight monsters, rather than people, but those options frame the reception to the game. The producer goes on to contend that the issue with sales is more about accessibility, rather than setting. But accessibility is talked about in terms of players trying the game and finding it lacking. Instead, if players are polarized away from the game because of the fantasy setting in the first place they are unlikely to start playing the game. Design sets the terms of engagement for play, shaping much of the initial discursive construction of the rhetorical message and shaping the audience likely to play.

Wordplay borrows partially from a background in procedural rhetoric to examine how games are deliberately crafted to address certain issues or attract the attention of the audience. In so doing, wordplay is able to help explain how the construction of video games aids in facilitating certain kinds of identifications and meanings, while rejecting others. Just as My Player and Michael Jordan form the design base with which to attract players and keep them playing *NBA 2K11*, *Gears of War* opted for a fantasy setting that brings in certain people, while repelling others. Wordplay aids in understanding the implications of these design choices, just as it helps in analysis of the final key piece of the discourse of video games: play.

PLAY

Adding play into the mix of video game elements for analysis helps represent what makes video games special and different from other media forms. Cultural objects are talked about and many things are designed, but it is the mode of engagement with video games that often makes them special. Critics need to understand that the words and design of video games can be different from similar concepts in other forms of media, but the modes of play embedded within video games are often unique to games. The means of play shape the audience for games, the topics that are addressed in video games, and the cultural environments in which games are played. Wordplay

looks at what makes video games special and different, dynamics that are often found in play. There are many aspects of play worthy of study, but two key elements that wordplay is well suited to address can be seen in the 'who' and the 'how' of play. For me, these elements are well represented in two stories about playing video games: playing the Nintendo DS with my mom and playing *Sally's Spa HD* with my partner, Erin.

My memories are filled with examples of my mom's relationship with games. I remember the first night we got a NES and my mom and dad stayed up late playing *Golf*. I remember Mom stealing my GameBoy to play *Tetris* and later playing *Dr. Mario* while she was recuperating from lung surgery. For a while, Mom's interest in games waned. She likes her games short and ideally driven by puzzles. She wants to play something quickly and then be able to move on to other things, with the chance to come back later and play more if she has the time. She's almost a core demographic for games made by PopCap and Big Fish Games. She hates Facebook games because she wants to be able to play by herself and be independent. Part of this is likely because she does not really talk about playing video games with her friends, as she is a retired librarian who would rather talk about books. Mom offers a different look at the 'who' of play and how play can be integrated into elements of game design.

Although there are many pieces of my mom's play that could be analyzed using wordplay, I think the most notable is our experience with the Nintendo DS. I knew my mom would like the DS because it is small, portable, and generally features games that are bite-sized. She could pick up games and quickly play for a bit, then move on to something else. However, she was unlikely to ever purchase one for herself because she would never put herself in a situation where she would see how well the game suited her. Fortunately for her, I visited her shortly after I picked up *Tetris DS*. Soon after I showed her how the game worked, my DS disappeared for the rest of my trip. After my stay ended, Dad bought Mom a DS of her own, and we have periodically swapped games back and forth. For Mom, wordplay helps explain how her play of games is governed by a number of different social factors. She plays video games almost daily, but is more likely to consider herself a player of games than a gamer. She prefers doing other things, so that her play has to fit her existing lifestyle. She enjoys playing, but is unlikely to go out of her way to keep on top of news about games. She is far more likely to try something when the chance to play comes at a low opportunity cost, which has meant that she is now more prone to play games on her iPad than her DS, as she loves to try games for free.[26] For Mom, wordplay helps focus on the circumstances of her play and how her practices of play may be quite different than for other gamers, reshaping the discourse of video games.

Wordplay also facilitates deeper examination of play in particular games. Similar to the focus on the rhetorical force of motion control used by the Nintendo Wii and the Xbox 360's Kinect, certain games on the iOS

interface alter both how play works and its communicative implications. Some of the changes in play on iOS extend the benefits of computerization, like board games where players no longer need to set up the board or keep track of the score. However, the touch interface built-in to iOS interaction reshapes the design and relative success of many games. For some, like EA Sports games or platform titles, the lack of buttons that can be felt without looking can make the game harder to play. For others, including time management games, like *Sally's Spa HD*, the touch interface often feels better than a mouse or separate game control pad. Applying wordplay to *Sally's Spa HD* demonstrates a different aspect of play, one that illustrates how the strengths of an interface like the iPad shifts how play works.

Shortly after I downloaded *Sally's Spa HD* on our iPad, my partner, Erin, developed an affinity for the game. She played nightly to the point that her arm started to hurt in an iPad version of Nintendoitis.[27] *Sally's Spa HD* is a straightforward time management game where players are tasked with the job of running a spa and tending to the various patrons who come in for things like facials and massages. The game starts at a basic level, adding complication and stress as players have to balance additional tasks within the spa and more patrons demanding service. Players have the opportunity to upgrade their spas, adding chairs that relax patrons or staff members to attend to basic jobs.

One of the most interesting parts of the game is its "Best Friends" mode, which does a brilliant job of leveraging the iPad interface. In Best Friends mode, the screen is split into two pieces, and two players play the game together by sitting on opposite ends of an iPad. Utilizing the benefits of a screen large enough for two people to use at the same time and a type of game where cooperation can be an asset, *Sally's Spa HD* alters play by encouraging players to work together and plan their efforts. As Erin and I began to play together we quickly realized that it was crucial to coordinate our play and, once we did, the game became much easier than either of us playing individually. The 'how' of play shifted in a way that would not easily work on another gaming platform. Certainly, there are plenty of games that feature cooperative play, but this mode of *Sally's Spa HD* leveraged dynamics at the core of the iPad's design. In this case, play is shaped by the device and its strengths. From the touch-based interface to the size of the screen, Best Friends mode is dependent on the iPad. The ability to make a cooperative time management game based on running a spa also means that this form of play stands to alter the 'who' of gaming as well, as the game is clearly aimed at a demographic quite different than the average console title. Finally, *Sally's Spa HD* also shifts the 'what' of gaming, as it is played on a device that is increasingly being defined by the games available for it.

Play is one of the foundational pieces of video games, an area that frequently distinguishes video games from other forms of media. Often the practices of play in video games have a tremendous impact on how they

work, driving beliefs about what 'real' games are and what 'proper' play is. For my Mom and in *Sally's Spa HD*, play is a driving force in how video games are constructed as cultural objects. In cases like these, wordplay must reach beyond the words and design to look at how play works and who is doing the playing.

WORDPLAY

Looking at the words, design, and play of video games facilitates understanding of what makes them unique and how they work. Words in and around games help construct what games are as cultural objects, defining and redefining their relationship to society at large and setting the terms for how games work and to what ends they are designed. Design of games demonstrates the choices made and the pieces that are omitted, both of which are crucial parts of understanding how games are iconic and how they persuade, create identifications, and circulate meanings. The design of society also exerts force on games, setting the terms for which games get made and which do not. Finally, one of the singular elements of games, the play, addresses questions like how we play, who plays, and what we play. Questions of play are central to what make video games special and wordplay helps focus on the elements of play that are particularly notable.

Wordplay drives critics to ask difficult questions about how games work and what makes them special. Better understanding the games we play is crucial to understanding how they function as increasingly powerful cultural objects. Wordplay illustrates the biases of games and game developers, pushing us to understand the messages contained within all games and why they matter. By pressing to understand how we shape video games and how they shape us we stand to better comprehend the discourse of an increasingly powerful form of media.

Notes

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

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NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

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5. 'Arcade port' is a term commonly used to refer to the home version of an established arcade title. In this case, Home Pong is the home version of the popular arcade game *Pong*.
6. This record has subsequently been smashed by a number of internet and technology firms.
7. A third party developer is an external company that makes games for a video game console. Activision was one of the first successful third party developers.
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NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

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3. See: http://www.eveonline.com/devblog.asp.
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5. *EVE* News24 can be found at: http://www.evenews24.com/
6. *EVE* Marketdata can be found at: http://eve-marketdata.com/
7. This is like the division of the markets of the U.S. and the E.U.
8. To see the price in a market region of *EVE* you have to be in that region. Players can move from place to place or position other characters in specific locations, but there is no built-in way to easily check the prices from multiple regions.
9. As discussed in chapter one, for most of *EVE*'s existence players were only represented by a passport photo.
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24. Michael Jordan appears in very few video games because he was not a member of the NBA Player's Association when he played and he holds controlling rights over his likeness. As such, game companies have to negotiate directly with him to include them in their video games. Charles Barkley is another player who is often omitted for similar reasons.
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26. Mom will not buy an iPad game that she cannot try first, and she tries about ten games for every one she purchases.
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