# Critical Games: Video Game Design Theory

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## Abstract:

This study examines video games as a form of literature or art, methodology to better create games of literary or artistic merit, and what roles in the social dynamic it plays, has played, and may play in the future. As such, this work is broken into several sections. The first is an introduction that serves to illuminate the author's background and experience and establishes some basic history and terminology in the field of video games. The next section, "Games As Art or Literature," addresses the idea of treating video games as a valid expressive device, and compares the trials it faces to the trials other media have faced in the past.. This in turn moves into the next section, "Game Design and Development Theory," which looks at methods for better integrating creative expression within video games, and examines several that succeed in a narratological or ludological fashion. The final section, "The Social Implications of Video Games," discusses the impact video games have had on society, and examines one of the more controversial video games to date. By the end of this work, the reader should have a greater understanding of the state of video games, and a general sense of how they can be explored as a expressive medium.

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# Preface:

As long as I can remember, I've been interested in video games. This is hardly rare in my generation, which was raised on the Atari, the Commodore, and the Nintendo, but what is perhaps a bit more notable was what interested me about them. While good game control was important, and good visuals were valuable, my main interests were in the stories the medium could tell, and the fact that the medium was inherently a blending of several other media: it was a hybrid of visual and audible media and writing, much like film and theater, but added an interactive element that allowed for an entirely new form of immersion and storytelling. Games became the pinnacle of creative media for me, in particular the visual and written elements of the medium.

I spent a good deal of my childhood playing games, reading about games, and thinking about games. By the age of ten, I had already written to Nintendo of America several times, inquiring about what new and exciting things they were doing. I was also an avid reader growing up, and read a great deal of science fiction in particular. More often than not, I reflected on what I read in how it would play as a video game, what scenes would translate well, and which would not. Unfortunately, the schools I went to encouraged sports over the arts, which left me with very little support for my interests outside of my family -- I cannot help but wonder where I might be if I'd had more support for this and other endeavors as a youth.

After graduating high school, I took some time off to travel before returning to school; at the time, there were very few programs suited to the field of game design barring that of actually programming the game, so I wanted time to reflect on what path I should take, as well as the opportunity to broaden my horizons through visiting different locales. When I finally decided to return to school, I chose to attend Vermont College (then part of Norwich University, now part of Union Institute and University), with a focus on writing. For a variety of reasons including health issues, I ended up withdrawing my first semester, and reassessing what I was doing. I was still interested in creating games, but simply focusing on the writing aspect had left me distracted and maundering through my work. Given the experiential and exploratory nature of the Vermont College program, I decided to take a more holistic approach, returning the following semester with a broader focus.

I ended up studying conservationism and the history of the U.S. national park system that semester, with Linda Gray. This proved to be a fun and rewarding semester, satisfying a continued desire to travel extensively, visiting nearly a dozen national parks in a three month span. This had very little to do with my overall goals, but it was something I was interested in, and gave me a depth of understanding of more than just history and the parks; it gave me an understanding of natural structure, breadth of environments even within a small area, and design principles such as effective use of local materials and curvilinear paths to create an aesthetically pleasing and efficient design.

During the course of that semester, I purchased my first digital camera, which re-ignited my interest in photography. My parents have both been professional photographers for my entire life, and I was raised attending seminars, participating in photo shoots, and discussing visual aesthetics, but much to my chagrin, my technical craft was woefully underdeveloped. With this in mind, the following semester I chose to focus on digital photography and developing that technical ability, this time with Martha VanderWolk. This was a very fun and rewarding semester, allowing me an opportunity to work on my technical composition and execution, as well as familiarizing myself with tools such as Adobe Photoshop. This was another case of taking a broader view to what would be applicable and useful within my ultimate goals, though certainly closer than my previous semester.

With my next semester, I significantly narrowed my focus, learning the fundamentals of 3D computer graphics and computer modeling, which also incorporated a geometry component, also with Martha VanderWolk. This semester was riddled with frustration due in large part to a hard drive failure that lost several months of work. The drive failure was a learning experience, however, and has encouraged me to adopt a regular schedule of backups and archiving to ensure it does not happen again. That said, the subject matter itself was fascinating, and was a great deal of fun to experiment with. There is still a considerable amount of craft to be learned in this field (notably effective model

optimization and recent advances in a technology called “bump mapping” that enhances the realism of a model), but for my purposes in game design, I was grateful for the chance to familiarize myself with the fundamentals of this integral medium.

Due to the drive failure, I ended up taking an extension during my 3D modeling semester, taking extra time between semesters to get married, move across the country, and work on my EXCEL essay called “Online Communities from a User and Administrator Experience”. This essay addressed my prior years of experience serving as an administrator and/or participant of a variety of online groups, with a focus on social psychology and communications. The essay was well received by committee, which put my timetable up by two semesters.

In the next semester, I decided to revisit writing, as well as the role of writing and art in spirituality. A few months into the semester, I hit upon some personal and marital troubles, and again had to withdraw, returning to school the following semester. This time I chose to study drawing and character design with Charlotte Hastings, which proved to be a great deal of fun, including taking a supplementary drawing course at the University of Washington in Seattle. By this point, my semesters had become significantly more focused and revolving around my central topic -- game design.

My second to last semester, I again worked with Charlotte Hastings, taking yet another (and this time finally successful) stab at a writing semester, studying narrative and voice in storytelling. This semester was immensely rewarding, and allowed me to get back into the swing of writing regularly, a habit I'd fostered in high school and then lost. This semester was the closest to what I wanted to do to date -- as I mentioned earlier, my passion has been using games as a storytelling medium. The role of writer within the field of game design is the one that most appeals to me.

This left me with only my culminating semester to go. In my eyes, it made the perfect sense -- the perfect culmination to finish my degree with a semester addressing game design and development directly. I'd browsed the game development section of my local bookstores many times, and I knew how daunting the reading would be in size and scope, but I was resolved to this decision, and more excited about it than any previous semester. I left for the residency eager to begin the semester.

Three days into the residency, my marriage abruptly and unexpectedly ended. I was unable to start my study that semester, and spent most of the summer dealing with divorce, moving back to Vermont, and several deaths in the family. It would not be a stretch by any means to say that 2005 was the worst year of my life.

I am not one to be daunted by some bad luck, however. I had already written most of my study plan, and researched a robust and complete bibliography. Amidst funerals and divorce proceedings, I ordered most of the books on my bibliography, and began reading in anticipation for the coming semester (and I'm glad I did! Some of these books are SUBSTANTIAL, and even speed reading them leaves a tremendous amount of content to cover). When the October residency rolled around, I'd begun three books and nearly completed one, and had a very firm understanding of what I wanted to do.

After some deliberation and shopping my study around to the faculty, I began working with Woden Teachout, who has proven to be an intelligent, diligent advisor who has been helping keep me on track with the topics I wished to address in this study. Given the breadth of the topic, in particular with current debates within the industry on the direction of the medium, plus the ethical and legislative debates that have been springing up in the news on a nearly daily basis, it is very easy to get side tracked by the peripheral (though still very important) issues surrounding games and the game industry. My focus for this semester has been threefold: games as art or literature (can games, or at least some games, be considered literature or art? What games have succeeded or come close? How can we make games that excel in the literary or artistic capacity?); design theory and methodology (how do we build the better mousetrap? What tools are available to the game designer? What tools could be improved or borrowed from other media?); games in the social tapestry (what

is the role of games in society? Can they serve as social commentary? Should they be used as social commentary? What influence have they had in the past, and where does it look like they're going in the future?). Given the scope of these foci, there has been very little room for addressing other topics, no matter how much I may want to give them proper attention.

# 1. Introduction:

Over the past two decades, video games have risen to a prominent role in entertainment worldwide, currently grossing more than the movie industry; in the U.S. alone, $10.5 billion was spent in 2005 for video games according to The NPD Group[1], compared to $8.75 billion in ticket sales during the same period, according to Variety[2], and this trend seems to be only increasing. Needless to say, it has become a central element in how we as a populace occupy our time and money.

Yet despite this popularity, video games are still in their infancy as a medium, with most released games being juvenile in nature if not in content. While other media maintain a broad range of styles that appeal to different audiences, the video game industry has devoted most of its fiscal attention to creating games involving wanton destruction, violence and gore, with very little supporting context for this content. This has generated a massive backlash from the press and conservative groups around the world, culminating in several lawsuits against the makers of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* for something called the “Hot Coffee” scandal, which I will be addressing more specifically later on. The general uproar has also motivated a number of legislators to attempt to create laws either banning or heavily taxing and fining the development and sale of violent video games. The laws that passed were almost immediately thrown

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[1] http://www.npd.com/dynamic/releases/press_060117.html

[2] http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117935318

out for constitutional violations regarding the First Amendment, yet lawmakers continue to not only try, but are basing their own attempts after the ones that were shot down.[3]

While a good deal of the press coverage concerning video games is currently sensationalist to the point of bordering on libel[4], that is not to say the game industry doesn't also have roles to play in the current state of things. While there will always be (and should always be) juvenile games in the same fashion that there will always be juvenile movies, books, comics, and any other form of creative work, the game industry has largely ignored the development of more nuanced, deeper, more mature works, games that provide context for the player's actions, and encourage personal exploration and growth. Without these games to "validate" the medium, the medium itself becomes susceptible to arguments that it offers little value as an expressive medium, and is relegated to "kids". While this outlook is slowly changing as the 18-25 age demographic (the largest game playing demographic) continues to age and begins to have kids of their own, the industry has been lagging behind this migration, continuing to put out games that they hope will appeal to a market that has already begun to move on. It is worth noting that in 2005, only one game on the top 10 sales list is a Mature rated game.[5]

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[3] http://www.iema.org/government/2005_Legislative_Tracker.pdf

[4] http://gamepolitics.livejournal.com/189165.html

[5] http://www.npd.com/dynamic/releases/press_060117.html

It is this maturation that motivates the central thrust of my study. I believe that it is essential to develop games that appeal to a more mature audience, and have strived to examine just how this could be done. I have broken my work into several short essays, examining the topic from different angles. These essays, in turn, are broken into a few larger categories:

Section 1 is this essay, and serves as a basic introduction to the topic of video games. Section 2 addresses the topic of games as art or literature. These essays are informal in nature, and address explicitly my opinions of using these idioms as methods of segregation and validation of some works and even some media over others. I also spend some time comparing the trials and tribulations the video game industry is facing now to the issues previous contemporary media have faced in the past.

Section 3 examines the theory behind game design and development, and possible solutions to making a more nuanced game. In particular, I examine tools from other media that could be used to good effect in video games. I have also included a few observations of games that call attention to the traits inherent in video games.

Section 4 delves into the social implications of video games. In particular, I examine the social dynamics that have arisen in online games, as well as the role of video games as a social commentary, and the role of games in modern

society. As an example of the social implications of games in society, I look more deeply at *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, which has caused so much controversy in recent months.

Since this is a relatively new medium, terminology has not really been codified into a common, generally accepted usage. As such, let me take a moment to lay down a basic framework of definitions. *Ludology* can be defined as the study of game play, or how a game is played, the mechanics and rules that go into playing a game (the term is derived from the latin term for “to play”). *Narratology* is defined as the study of narrative, in particular within games. The two terms are interrelated, describing the two central elements of a game -- how and what you are playing (ludology), and then why you are playing it (narratology). These two terms are enough to begin to build a successful dialogue about games.

By looking at different elements surrounding video games, my intent is to paint a deeper picture of what video games are and what they can be, in the hope of raising awareness of the potentials of the medium. I feel that if we can simply get past the growing pains the industry is currently going through, the medium will truly begin to come into its own.

# 2. Games As Art or Literature

## 2.1. Taking Back Literature

For nearly as long as there has been art or literature, there have been those who have tried to restrict the terms to only define the works that they have deemed worthy. This has become particularly prevalent in culture since the early Renaissance, with the sanctification and elevation of art and literature as the province of the refined and privileged, a method to further segregate the masses from the intellectual and social elite.[1] In modern society, however, there is no excuse for this segregation to continue. Art and literature can take many forms, and exist on a variety of levels throughout society, yet we continue to delineate only a few "classics" as qualifying for such a lofty term as literature or art. This needs to stop: art and literature are everywhere; art and literature are as varied and colorful as the individuals who create them; art and literature *cannot* be pigeonholed, categorized, or rigidly defined within a free society. We as individuals need to stand up for creative expression, and take back the language that has been subverted for so many years.

According to the Oxford American Dictionary, literature can be defined as, "written works, esp. those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit". Given this definition, it is hardly a surprise that there is so much difficulty in defining what is or is not "literature", and rightfully so: the definition is fluid, and ultimately subjective on what is of merit, as well as in what fashion it may be worthwhile. I

[1] For a more complete discussion of this topic, please see John Berger's Ways of Seeing.

believe that it is ultimately the individual's decision on the merit or worthiness of any given work. Whether or not a work is considered "literature" by some arbitrary group should not dictate the social, intellectual, or legal value of that work.

Over the course of centuries, various media have successfully taken their rightful place under the label of literature. Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are for all intents and purposes universally considered great works of literature, despite the fact that they were originally intended to be *performed*, not read. They're still considered literature, however, because they have been placed in a written form. By that same logic, epic ballads such as "Beowulf" have been accepted as literature. Poems of various forms have been accepted (ranging in style and nature from William Carlos Willams' "Red Wheelbarrow" to Homer's epic, The Iliad). Music, notably operas such as Wagner's Ring Cycle and Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* have also successfully earned their place as literature. There is a trend worth noticing, here: all these accepted forms of literature are hundreds of years old; contemporary media are conspicuously from popular acceptance.

What then of contemporary creators? Alan Moore's The Watchmen puts forth ideas in a cogent, eloquent manner that rivals the works of Steinbeck or Twain, and yet many scoff and pass it off as unworthy of such a "lofty" title as literature, because it is a graphic novel, sequential visual art accompanied and

interwoven with dialogue.[2] Pete Townsend wrote a scathing and moving social commentary of coming of age in 1950's and 1960's England in *Quadrophenia*, and yet it does not command the same respect within academic circles of its older, more traditional counterparts. These are not exceptions to the rule. If anything, the opposite is true: they are endemic of an entire category of creative work that deserves consideration and respect, and yet receives neither from those in authority.

Arguably the newest medium to the literature debate is video games. While not every game might be considered literature, since some are purely ludological in nature and have no narrative or written body to satisfy the needs of the term, there are some games that clearly deserve the title. (As for the purely ludological games, like *Frequency*, or *Dance Dance Revolution*, or *N*, they may not be considered literature, but they can still be considered **art**.) Some of the earliest video games available were text based (*Dungen* and *Advent* immediately come to mind), and early pioneers in the industry continued to incorporate narrative in their games (as an example, *Ultima*, followed later by games like *Dragon Quest*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Star Tropics*). The stories viewed from a technical level were often sub-par, but from a viewpoint of creating a meaningful impact within the viewer (player), the games *in toto* were successful works much in the same way that Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* does not carry nearly as much emotional or artistic weight without the accompanying remarkable musical

[2] For more information on the history of comics and their efforts to be treated as a valid form of expression, please see http://www.cbldf.org.

score. Even games with as simplistic a story as *Super Mario Brothers* (the princess has been kidnapped; it's up to you to save her) succeeded in making a lasting emotional and artistic impact on millions of people, influencing thousands to become involved in art, music, and writing. It's been easy to decry video games as without merit however, because it has taken time for those inspired individuals to reach a point in their abilities that such a positive impact could be noticed (examples include musical groups who play video game inspired music such as The Minibosses).

As video games have evolved as a creative medium, the quality of the narrative element of the games has improved. While on the whole there is still significant room for improvement, there are games like *Halo* and *Final Fantasy X* that not only successfully blend ludological and narratological elements together, but they do so on multiple levels, creating rich, robust cultures combined with compelling personalities and situations to interact with. Then there are games set within a contemporary world, which far more overtly indict modern culture, such as games like the controversy-laden *Grand Theft Auto* series of games. These games involve a wide variety of lewd, offensive behavior ranging from sleeping with prostitutes to cold blooded murder. This has incited a significant uproar within conservative circles, with varying levels of justification, though almost universally missing that the game is intentionally offensive as a means of *social commentary*.[3] A good comparison from a more traditional media is the

[3] See Sections 4.1 and 4.2 of this work for a more in depth examination of this subject and game.

novel, The Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger. When the book first came out, the book was widely banned and decried as offensive; a few decades later, the book is taught regularly in schools. Public views shift over time, and initial reactions often cool. There is nothing wrong with groups or individuals choosing to express their displeasure over something, just as much as there is nothing wrong with creating that thing in the first place. It's when those groups then choose to take restrictive, legislative action that something is wrong.

That is ultimately the crux of the matter, the reason why we should even care about what is classified as literature: the people who are making these decisions are often the same people who choose to enact new legislation, to bring the government into places where it is quite explicitly not allowed to go. Private groups may ban or protest a body of work; the government *may not*, as it is a clear violation of first amendment rights. By not defending video games and graphic novels and rock operas and movies as art and literature, we are forfeiting the protections provided under that amendment. We are enabling a mindset that pigeonholes these contemporary media as meaningless, without value, or exclusively meant for children and simpletons. This is why taking back the word "literature" matters: *because* there has been so much weight placed on the word, and by placing our work on par with the more traditionally hallowed material allows us to claim the same protections that have been afforded to them. By not doing so, we are setting ourselves up for continued persecution and misrepresentation.

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## 2.2. Narratology vs Ludology; Pictorialism Revisited

Video games are currently facing a slew of legislation attempting to ban or criminalize the representation or discussion of some topics within video games -- effectively censoring what can be made in games, or even what can be defined as a game. This is hardly the first time this sort of action has come up, however, if you look back to other contemporary forms of media. In the early 20th century, photography had split into factions on the nature of photography as an art form. The division was between a style known as pictorialism, which allowed and encouraged image manipulation and pre-composition, and straight photography, which disallowed any pre or post-processing manipulation of the image. About the extent that was allowed in straight photography was some dodging and burning applied during the printing process. These two factions each had an advocate in the public fora, notably William Mortensen on the side of pictorialism, and Ansel Adams on the side of straight photography. The debates often became heated between the two, with Adams becoming the winner by default after Mortensen passed away. There was also some dirty pool played on the part of the straight photographers, who deliberately removed any but the most cursory mention of pictorialism as a photographic movement in Beaumont Newhall's work, The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present.

My personal contention is that this turn of events has significantly marred the public view of photography as an artform, encouraging the mindset that photography is simply an objective view of what is or was (which is not the case

even within straight photography). It has taken decades and a fundamental paradigm shift in the realm of photography (ie digital manipulation; Photoshop, Painter, et cetera) to even make a dent in this perception, with considerable inroads still needing to be made. This denial of the more expressive, authorial form of the medium encourages the public view of the medium as a sort of stepchild to more accepted forms of art.

This denial is a recurring theme within media of the 20th century. Photography did it, and has suffered as a result, but is hardly the only medium to perform such self-mutilation. Comic books relegated themselves to irrelevance for decades with the self-imposed Comics Code, and has only recently begun to make inroads as a valid mature, creative medium. The Comics Code (enforced by the Comics Code Authority) was created in 1954, following public outcry and concern over violence, gore, and sexuality beginning to enter comics. It explicitly banned any use or reference to gore, sexuality, excessive violence, prohibited scenes with vampires werewolves, ghouls, or zombies, and required that authority figures never be disrespectfully represented or ridiculed, and that good must always win.[1] This thoroughly cemented comics as something meant for children in the eyes of the general public. Although there were a few exceptions made (where publishers chose to publish regardless of the CCA's rulings), it wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that there was much in the way of widespread publication of adult-oriented comics. Notable examples of breakout comics

[1] More information on the Comics Code and Comics Code Authority can be found here: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comics_Code

include Alan Moore's The Watchmen (1986-1987), and V for Vendetta (1982-1988), and later, Neil Gaiman's The Sandman (1988-1996).

Games, too, have largely ignored their ability to provoke thought and challenge paradigms. Games have some problems that are unique to the medium, such as the integration of interactive elements (thus making it a game), but there are still similarities between the medium and media that came before it. Like comics before it, self-regulation and early well intentioned but misguided attempts to make the medium safe for children has shifted the public perception of games to be something *only* meant for children. Solutions like the Comics Code are in essence the answer many legislators are looking at as solutions to troublesome video games (whether for excessive violence, sexuality, racism, et cetera). Like photography's concerns, games have also devalued the contextual, narrative potential of the medium in favor of the more objective "straight" (ludological elements in the case of games), which has similarly encouraged the public perception that games offer nothing of expressive merit.

Are games doomed to repeat the mistakes of other media? I'd prefer to believe that we can learn from past mistakes, and take a more proactive role in shifting general perceptions. Video games are already a multi-billion dollar a year industry, with several organizations speaking on behalf of large segments of that industry, which provides potential for significant fiscal weight to be placed against the problem that previous industries like photography and comics did not

have. This opens avenues for major campaigns and education about video games that were not viable for previous media. Before that can be effectively done, however, some things need to change within the industry itself. Developers need to take a greater responsibility for what they create, not creating grotesque games purely for the shock value, but placing their games within a greater context (both narratively and socially). That is not to say we should censor the industry, so much as that greater consideration should be made in what we create. We need to advocate for greater variety in games: rather than pursuing in essence only one type of game (power fantasies, a hybrid of warrior and hero archetypes), we should explore other ideas as well (social dynamism and community building, for instance, or games entirely based around the idea of exploration, physical and mental). More attention should be focused on the narrative capabilities of the medium, providing a greater expressive context and emphasizing the symbiotic nature of narratology and ludology (a purely ludological game can exist while a purely narratological game cannot, but the value of the ludological elements are significantly increased through narratological elements). When we have expanded the scope of games, perhaps then we will finally be able to shed the stigma that video games are kids' stuff.

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# 3. Game Design and Development Theory

## 3.1. The Role of Writing in Games

> *[S]ince the games are generally about power, control, and those other primitive things, the stories tend to be so as well. This means they tend to be power fantasies. That's generally considered to be a pretty juvenile sort of story.*
>
> *The stories in most video games serve the same purpose as calling the über-checker a "king." It adds an interesting shading to the game, but the game at its core is unchanged.*
>
> *Remember – my background is as a writer, so this actually pisses me off. Story deserves better treatment than that.* (Koster 86)

I would be hard pressed to state this thought in a more clear or concise fashion. Put simply, the stories in most games tend to be weak compared to their media counterparts (novels, comic books, movies, television). Over the years, there have been a few exceptional stories that span larger issues, or address the nature of power and control itself; a modest number of games have alternatively succeeded in refining the "power fantasy" into a more engaging telling, but the underlying principles have remained the same. Stories are tacked on, extraneous except in providing a context for player empowerment. While certainly not the sole issue, this is a fairly damning point when attempting to defend games as a valid form of creative expression.

So what can be done to improve the situation? The short answer is to hire professional writers. The vast majority of companies currently have their dialogue and story written and developed by the game designers, programmers, and artists themselves, rather than spending the money on a professional writer.

Take the hint from the media that have come before: games are not that far different from comics, books, or movies, all of which have had significantly more time to develop techniques to tell a compelling and nuanced story, techniques that are effective across media.

Hiring professional writers is only one part of the equation, however. A carpenter and a furniture maker may both have common tools in their toolbox, but from there the box will be filled with tools most effective for their chosen specialization. In the same manner, a novelist and a scriptwriter may both have common tools in their literary toolboxes, but from there they will have focused on methods most effective for their oeuvre. Writing for video games is yet another specialization, with unique challenges created by the interactive nature of the medium. Unfortunately, we have not yet developed our own tools for this medium, and then aren't effectively making use of the tools other media have provided us.

Part of the issue is how the game industry is set up in terms of bringing in new designers. While several universities and colleges have created game design majors, their focus has remained on the technical aspects, such as programming, game play, and the visual content of the game. Essentially, they are teaching one half of game design: they are teaching game structure, and how the game is played. Within academic circles, this has been titled ludology. There are plenty of games that are purely ludological in nature; *Tetris* immediately

comes to mind. However, the vast majority of video games have at least a basic story to build around their ludological concept. *Super Mario Brothers*, for instance, has a basic story that a princess was kidnapped by a villainous monster, and you must battle through his minions to save her. Despite this prevalence of incorporated narrative or story, most game design degrees have a remarkable lack of writing course requirements. Basic courses in creative, technical, and script writing should be a fundamental aspect of any game design degree; regardless of the value of hiring a writer specifically, many companies will continue to rely on their game designers to generate the narrative. As such, they should be prepared to do so. The study of narrative within games, or narratology, is the other half of game design, and it is currently SORELY lacking.

Even games lauded for their stories are at best juvenile in nature and shoddily developed. Take *Final Fantasy VII*, for example. *Final Fantasy VII* is commonly cited for its emotional impact, in particular for a scene where one of your primary characters is unexpectedly murdered. And yet, despite having travelled with her companions for most of the game up to that point, her death is not really addressed by the other characters. What little dialogue that is done to address it is stilted and poorly justified emotionally. This lack of attention to established characters during and in response to a pivotal scene in the game is sloppy narration at best.

The biggest challenge that I can see to writing more nuanced stories within the medium is how to integrate the story into game play. There are several problems that relate to this. First, there is the issue of player impact upon the story. Players tend to explore, to try and test boundaries, and this sometimes breaks the game by allowing the player to cause the story advancement to no longer function through getting into places they shouldn't be, or even killing off characters that are integral to the story. You can lock players down to a limited set of abilities or locations, but this ends up being just as detrimental to creating a nuanced story: either way, you are jarring the player out of an immersive state.

Game play itself is another problem. Boredom from an overly simplistic game mechanic will jar a player out of the story just as readily as an overly complex game mechanic. The game mechanic should be seamless, progressively more complex but quickly learnable, allowing the player to become immersed within the story. Any break from the immersion should be at the player's choice, such as the ability to pause, or a menu screen, rather than through a design failure (complex, difficult to read interfaces; long load times; incongruous game elements).

The third, and perhaps least definable problem is the fundamental differences between media. Again referring to Koster:

- *Games tend to be experiential teaching. Stories teach vicariously.*
- *Games are good at objectification. Stories are good at empathy.*
- *Games tend to quantize, reduce, and classify. Stories tend to blur, deepen, and make subtle distinctions.*

- *Games are external – they are about people's actions. Stories (good ones, anyway) are internal – they are about people's emotions and thoughts.* (Koster 88)

I do not feel that these distinctions are inherent to the medium, but I will readily admit that they are firmly entrenched within the industry as it stands. The nature of games as they currently stand I think has a great deal to do with the people who are designing them: while this is slowly changing, the background for most active game designers is in a technical field, such as programming. This certainly offers benefits from a ludological viewpoint, but in a narratological view it reduces the likelihood of a nuanced story within games. There is a great deal of talent already within the industry, but with their abilities trained in other directions; frankly, I think what would benefit the industry nearly as much as hiring professional writers would be to start sending their designers to writer's workshops – if we can't bring writers into the game industry, then we should bring the industry to writing.

Another problem, related to the previously mentioned designer problem, was recently addressed by Kyle Orland, editor of The Video Game Media Watch [http://www.vgmwatch.com], in his essay "It's Our Fault That Games Aren't Considered Art". The game industry is ultimately an *industry*, and as such is governed by financial needs. Developers and publishers are going to create the games that they perceive will bring the greatest return on their investment. Reviewers (and in turn, buyers) emphasize the objective aspects of a game, the visual representation, the technical qualities of a game, but do not dwell on the

content itself in terms of social or aesthetic value. We as reviewers, as people talking about games, tend not to discuss the artistic impact of a game, the social commentaries it may encompass, or the philosophical questions it may cause, even when these aspects do exist. How, then, are we supposed to convey to the publishers and developers that we desire this?

That is really what this all comes down to, of course: if we wish for games to be treated as a worthwhile, creative medium capable of artistic expression, then we need to start treating it as such. It is not enough to sit on our hands and wait for change to occur within the industry; we must work with what we have, and show the industry that it needs to change.

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## 3.2. Design Metaphors and Philosophies

Much like every other medium, there are really no hard and fast rules to making a good game. “Add nice graphics,” or “Make sure the gameplay is fun” is hardly a schematic for making a good game, and could be roughly equated with back seat driving, telling someone to be sure to remember to use their turn signal when their turn signal is already on. That said, there have certainly been some attempts to give a basic grounding in what design principles work or don’t work in game design, by a great many individuals. There are a fair number of similarities between these authors (which is unsurprising, since they all read each other and come from similar backgrounds in the industry), but what I personally find more interesting is the differences between different authors, and what metaphors different designers have found most effective for them.

One of the earliest books I read this semester was A Theory of Fun by Raph Koster. While not explicitly about game design per se so much as a discussion about the fundamental concepts of fun and play, Koster does also explore the method he finds most effective for game design. His metaphor is based around his theory that games are fun because the brain is constantly seeking patterns to process. With that in mind, he tries to find new patterns for the brain to process by thinking of a verb that would encapsulate an action or series of actions, and then designs the game mechanic around that verb (or if the game is expansive enough, verbs). From a ludological perspective, this is a very

appealing method of design, since the game mechanic quite literally designs itself. This does not leave much room for a narrative-centric game, however.

Chris Crawford in Chris Crawford on Game Design takes a slightly different tack on the issue. His design chain begins with some form of creative motivation (a particular idea for a theme or element in a game, like building a game around the idea of thermonuclear war), and THEN shifts to the verb-design principle. This is purely my personal opinion, but I really don't think it matters that much which comes first: the idea or the verb. In either case, you are defining a context and an interaction within that context before doing anything else, and whether you think of the context first or the interaction first, it still doesn't matter.

As a counterpoint to these design philosophies, several game designers interviewed in Marc Saltzman's Game Design: Secrets of the Sages opt to develop as robust a world as they can, and then find challenges for the player to overcome, with the form of interaction growing out of what those challenges are. What's interesting with this philosophy is that it creates the context, then the challenges for the player to overcome, then the action verb, and only then do you start discussing story progression and general fun factor. It is definitely worth noting, however, that the designers that discuss this method (notably Hubert Chardot, lead designer of *Alone in the Dark*) are fairly consistently designing adventure games, a particular genre of game where the player's areas of interest are generally prioritized in that same order: world, challenge, interaction. Other

designers in the book (in particular platform and action game designers) tend to follow Crawford's order.

In Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design, the authors take yet another tack. They break the elements of a game into three parts: game mechanics (how the world of the game functions), storytelling and narrative, and interactivity. Which element you choose to start with is then largely irrelevant and up to the designer's preferences on which they wish to start with. In their eyes (and I tend to agree with this particular philosophy the most), it doesn't matter if you decide you want to make a world where a particular logic or set of rules is in effect, and then make a back story to justify it, and *then* decide how the player interacts with that world, or any variation therein. What they really tried to drive home, however, was the importance of documenting each of these elements, so you aren't stuck in a perpetual loop of incremental additions or alterations.

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's writing on the subject in Rules of Play is arguably the most divergent syntactically, though the underlying concepts aren't really all that alien. They also simplify design elements into three parts, though what those parts are differ: the context, the participant, and meaning. The context is fairly self explanatory, defining the space of the game (objects, behavior, rules, narrative et cetera). What we've been defining as interactivity, however, has elements in both the participant, and meaning. The participant is the player, and as a design element, describes how the player interacts with the

context of the game. “Meaning” as a design element is describing the results of interaction, the impact on the participant and the context (what value does that action have? Are they awarded points? What do those points do? Does their action progress the story? What sort of feedback are we giving to create meaning?). This design metaphor is certainly the most organic of the ones I’ve discussed, which is part of the reason why I’ve found it so hard to describe. By not breaking down the design elements too much, it becomes easier to make a more natural design document, where each aspect of the game can (at least in theory) be more thoroughly encapsulated into a more holistic description. For small team development in particular, I think this method of design would be invaluable, since it would keep everyone involved and aware of the importance of each and every part. For large team development, where work tends to be parceled out and compartmentalized, I think the design document would become a bit unwieldy.

I’m not really in a position to judge which philosophy or design metaphor is more correct. I know which feels the most natural to my own creative process, though, and I suspect that ultimately is the real test of a metaphor’s effectiveness. The fact that these books are all written by successful game designers certainly points out that each process could technically be considered “correct”. My personal preference is first for the philosophy described by Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams, but the organic approach to design described by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman is also highly attractive to me. If I learned

anything from comparing these methods, it's that you simply need to choose a method and run with it. No matter how you choose to think about it, it's the actual act of making the creates a game.

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## 3.3. Critique: *Final Fantasy IV*

The Final Fantasy series of games, developed by Squaresoft,[1] have proven to be one of the few places one could consistently go to for a reasonable narrative within a story. The games are simple in terms of interface, and ludologically speaking generally don't need a great deal of timing or frenetic pace. *Final Fantasy IV* was originally developed by SquareSoft in 1991 for Nintendo's Super Famicom game console. Shortly afterwards, it was localized (translated), and brought to the U.S. as *Final Fantasy II* for the Super Nintendo (the original *Final Fantasy II* and *Final Fantasy III* never left Japan). This was really the first console based video game to heavily emphasize narrative, and enjoyed moderate commercial success for it.

*Final Fantasy IV* is a story centering around Cecil, a dark knight in the service of the king of Baron. After questioning a particularly brutal order, Cecil is stripped of rank and sent off on a courier mission, which ends with the destruction of a village. This is the last straw for Cecil, and he begins his quest to put an end to Baron's villainy. The plot takes several twists and turns, and ultimately ends on the planet's moon, where an evil being known as Zemus has been manipulating the chain of events transpiring on the planet. As far as subtle and complex story lines go, it's pretty simplistic. The dialogue is on par with a high school fantasy adventure, and none of the plot twists really take you by surprise at all (I should mention that I can say this about even the first time I

[1] Squaresoft has undergone several name changes, becoming Square Co., Ltd for several years, and now recently merged with another game developer (Enix) to become Square Enix.

played this game, when I was 11). Yet it still managed to immerse the player, encouraging attachment to the characters you enlist the aid of in the course of the story.

Each character is almost a caricature of a real personality, mannerisms and behavior taken to an extreme in a similar fashion to early Vedic mythology taking traits and aspects of gods and accentuating them to emphasize the role of that god (or in this case, the character). With unfailing persistence, Palom and Porom, twin wizards from the town of Mysidia, are arrogant or respectful appropriately. Tellah, a respected Sage, is the epitome of grumpy old man. Cid, a master engineer and inventor of airships, is quirky and blunt to a fault, but fiercely loyal to his friends and his principles. In the same way that a supporting cast in a theatrical performance is often filled with accentuated personalities, so is *Final Fantasy IV*, and much in the same fashion that Puck can be the favorite character of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, these characters quickly become endearing to the player because of their distinct personalities.

There are several occasions within the game where individuals in the player's party sacrifice themselves, and there is a genuine sense of loss felt when this happens. This accentuates the dramatic nature of the story, and further draws the player into the game, since these characters are the same ones that you spent several hours of gameplay becoming endeared to. During the course of the game, the party becomes trapped in a room with shrinking walls,

threatening to crush them all. The twin wizards, Palom and Porom sacrifice themselves to save the party by casting stone on themselves, turning into statues and thus blocking the walls. Later in the game, the sage Tellah sacrifices himself in order to cast one particularly potent spell in the hopes of defeating the man who had killed his daughter (in a case of bittersweet irony, the attempt fails, and the villain survives). As yet another example, during a high speed pursuit by enemy forces, Cid jumps off of the airship and detonates a bomb in mid-air, destroying the tunnel they were being pursued through. The player feels the impact of these sacrifices because the game has succeeded in being immersive thanks in large part to the story.

The game owes a great deal to having a compelling story, but that isn't all that was used to create an immersive game. The graphics are *far* from realistic, but succeed in being effective enough to convey emotion within characters and contribute to a distinct character construction of the cast of characters. Another major element in creating an immersive, story-driven game is the music or soundtrack of the game. *Final Fantasy IV* (and really, all of the Final Fantasy games) has a strong, compelling soundtrack that succeeds in generating nuance to a scene despite the limitations of the technology at the time (this was well before we had the technology to embed MP3s or other traditionally recorded music within a game; all music of this era was essentially a series of machine created beeps called MIDI -- Musical Instrument Digital Interface). The technological limitations of game making at the time were quite significant: the

capabilities of the hardware of the period put restrictions on what could and could not be done (the average processor speed of the Super Nintendo was 2.68MHz and had 128 KB of memory[2]. For comparison, a computer now might be 2GHz, with 1 GB of memory), and was further limited by space restrictions of early cartridge technology; ALL game assets, from game code, graphics, music, and anything else, had to fit in an 8MB space. Now, a modern game is generally made to fit on a 9GB DVD disc, over a thousand times more space. Games can even take up *multiple DVDs*, which was available with cartridge games.

I think it says a lot that one of the most successful early story-centric games based a great deal of its narratological aspects around a theatrical form of writing rather than an extended prose form. I strongly suspect that stage plays in particular are ultimately the closest form of established literature to that of narratological games. We as developers would probably do well to further examine this concept, and explore where this could be taken in the future. An early pioneer in the genre, *Final Fantasy IV* hit on a narratological chord; so early in the history of the industry, it may have gotten the narrative metaphor right.

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Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

[2] Technical Data for the Super Nintendo can be found on Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Super_Nintendo_Entertainment_System

## 3.4. Critique: *Xenogears*

While I may comment on the unfortunate lack of effective narratological games, that does not mean the field has been entirely devoid of effective titles; I would be hard pressed to make an argument for greater narrative in games if there weren't games that have done so in the past with varying degrees of success. Most of the *Final Fantasy* games are good examples, though they are not the only ones. In my estimation, one of the best narratological games to date is not in fact a *Final Fantasy* game, though it was created by the same developer. Released quietly in 1998 by Squaresoft, *Xenogears* quickly gathered a cult following, due in large part to quite possibly the most epic and involving story yet attempted in a video game.

*Xenogears* is actually part of a larger storyline known as Xenosaga, of which *Xenogears* is episodes 5 and 6. (In a similar fashion to the Star Wars trilogy, the prior episodes had not been developed or released; also similarly, these earlier episodes are now in the process of being developed and released, though with nowhere near the critical acclaim and fanbase the original had.) The game starts with an animated sequence that takes place 10,000 years prior to the events in the game, showing a starship being overrun by some unknown force and being destroyed, the remains crashing onto a nearby planet. The game then shifts 10,000 years forward, in a small village, where a young man named Fei lives, who is the central protagonist in the game. Fei is asked to collect some things for a wedding to be held the following day from the doctor

who lives above town. After making his way to the doctor's house, on the way back the village, a large "gear" (a mechanical piloted robot) flies by and crashes into the village, pursued by other gears. Fei rushes back to the village, where a fire fight between the gears has ensued. While helping evacuate the village, Fei notices that the gear that was being pursued was now unmanned, and impulsively leaps into the device to try and defend his town. Things are going well, until an event occurs that causes Fei to lose control of the gear, which causes a blast of energy that utterly decimates the village. Upon waking up, Fei is exiled by the remaining villagers, which begins his journey into the larger world.

As the story progresses, Fei befriends many people, and becomes involved in a rebellion to oust a dictator and reinstate the rightful heir to the throne in a nearby kingdom. In the process of aiding this rebellion, a secret, militaristic nation known as Solaris is found to be behind the dictator's rise to power, as well as most of the conflicts happening around the world, providing advanced weaponry to both sides of the battles in order to gather battle data and to keep the populace occupied. Later in the game, Fei and his friends discover what Solaris was doing with the battle data: the Gazel Ministry, the ruling body of Solaris, was honing humans to serve as organic components in reactivating "Deus", a sentient superweapon that incidentally was the force that tried to take over the starship in the prologue of the game. It is also discovered that Fei and his friends (notably Elly, the love interest) have roles to play in this grand plan:

Deus is powered by an infinite energy source known as the Zohar, which in fact is a trapped being from a higher plane (in all essences, a god); Fei (or more particularly, his soul) was the sole survivor of the starship's destruction -- all other humans were created using advanced technology aboard the ship used to augment colonization efforts. The being within the Zohar, in an attempt to escape from its prison, placed some of its power within Fei, who became known as the Contact. In order for the Gazel Ministry to fully reactivate Deus, they need to capture the Contact, and recombine the power hidden within him with the Zohar. Ultimately, after a great many revelations, plot twists, and adventures, Fei and his friends are successful in destroying Deus and releasing the being within the Zohar, marking the end of the saga and the game.

Even compressing the game into two paragraphs, the story is still quite complex. The concepts behind the game are taken from Nietzsche's theories (the ubermensch, and the will to power), with a lot of symbolism drawn from the mystic elements of several major religions (notably Gnosticism and the Kabbalah). In terms of technical construction, the game successfully avoids the simplistic trope of giving the protagonist a quest that encompasses the game, instead allowing the goals to unfold as the story progresses. There are clear reasons for the behavior of each character, even with the accompanying ethical and moral dilemmas that come with "doing what is right." You end up caring for these characters, at least partially because you are privy to these moral conflicts within the context of the game -- it's not just blindly assumed that everyone is

alright with everything that happens. This makes for a richer, more nuanced narrative.

Visually, *Xenogears* is done through a third person perspective in a three dimensional world. There is considerable distance between the character and the camera, which allows for a greater view of the surrounding environment, which is well worth seeing. The designers did a good job establishing a sense of culture in their areas, with distinct feels for different factions and nations, which helps further immerse the player into the game, and gives a sense of a greater world than just the immediate areas you pass through. The distance between the character and the camera has an additional role, however, in that it gave the game a more theatric feeling. Working within theatrical tools instead of cinematic tools was an excellent choice in my opinion: at the time, graphics were not at a level where it was feasible to show subtle emotion within a character (arguably, it still isn't). In theater, the audience is generally a fair distance away from the stage, so they are faced with a similar dilemma of how to express emotion from a distance, which is generally achieved with more pronounced body language and movement. Squaresoft used these tools to good effect, while supplementing it with a remarkable soundtrack that helped establish the mood of each scene.

Personally, I think games have a lot more in common with stage plays than movies, in terms of limitations inherent in the medium and solutions to work around those problems. I would even go so far as to say that at least in

traditional role playing video games, the games that adopted theatric attributes were more effective as a storytelling device than those that opted for more cinematic style. *Xenogears* is an excellent example of how effective it can be.

The game is not without issues, of course, which helps account for the fairly lackluster initial sales of the game. One of the major complaints was that it was too text heavy, though opinions differ about this: I enjoy having more dialogue rather than less, and they were fairly good about allowing you to skip through if it was failing to capture your attention (or more particularly, you accidentally started talking to someone immediately after already talking to them, which would re-initiate their dialogued response). Another complaint was that the graphics weren't as crisp as they could have been, which is true, but not as big a detractor as it could be: what quality of graphics they *did* have, they put to good use (and besides, as evidenced by the fact that people still play and enjoy their old 8 bit games from the 80s, graphics isn't necessarily the end-all be-all as long as they're good enough for the purposes at hand).

As far as I'm concerned, the largest real detractor for the game is that roughly halfway through the game, the style of gameplay changes: in the first half of the game, you have free reign to explore and speak to people; in the second half, it becomes a series of protracted battles and "dungeon crawls" (moving through an enemy filled area), with lengthy monologues used to transition between each. This change was jarring and unexpected, and in my opinion was

not nearly as effective as an immersive narrative tool. While I have no proof to back it up, I strongly suspect that the change was made due to time and budget constraints, and was rushed together to get the game to market. I found it jarring enough that it was only because the story had drawn me in so much that I wished to see it through and to see where things were leading.

Something I would like to make clear: narrative intensive games are not for everyone. But then, neither are ludological games. Individuals have individual tastes and preferences, and I would say without relative certitude that nothing suits everyone. The issue at hand, and the reason I am attempting to draw attention to games that have been narratological in nature and the need for more of them is because within the industry, they represent a small amount of the total games created. There is room within the market for both, but (due at least in part to fiscal concerns of creating enough quality content for a longer duration game) currently narratological games get short shrift, and what narrative based games there are, are not necessarily well developed as a story. This needs to change, but will not until we as designers, developers, and consumers stand up and demand more depth in our games. *Xenogears* and a few others succeed in proving that a complex, nuanced story can be achieved; now it's time to start making more of them.

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## 3.5. Critique: *Katamari Damacy*

While my personal focus is on story-centric, or narratological games, I would be remiss to not also address some gameplay-centric, or ludological games. Without some ludological elements, a game would not be a game; it is essential to the definition of what a game is, and good gameplay is often pivotal to an immersive storytelling experience. With this in mind, I've decided to take a closer look at *Katamari Damacy*, which was published by Namco in 2004, and is arguably one of the most pure modern examples of a ludo-centric game.

The basic premise behind *Katamari Damacy* is simple and surreal: your father, the King of All Cosmos had an accident, and destroyed all the stars in the sky. Your task is to gather up material to recreate the stars, using a rolling ball called a "katamari" that picks up any object smaller than itself. The game starts by rolling up items around a house, collecting push pins and ants and stamps and pencils and tape dispensers, and proceeds to target larger items as the game progresses, until you are able to roll up cars and people, and then even buildings. In the final stage, the task is to recreate the moon, which involves creating a katamari so large that you are able to roll up the islands themselves. The story is really an excuse for the gameplay, which is itself an evolution of an early gameplay pattern seen in games such as the Pac-Man series (navigate an environment collecting objects, try to avoid running into things you can't pick up). The game is simple, but engaging and more fun than its description suggests.

There are several elements at work that make *Katamari Damacy* fun. The music is upbeat and quirky, with a catchy beat that suits the style and pace of the game. The game control is very intuitive and simple, making the actual playing of the game easy -- the learning curve is short and shallow, so the challenge in the game is the game itself, not the interface. The materials you collect in the game are simply rendered, but distinct enough to make it clear what they are, and overall the colors are bright and saturated, yet fitting for the environment and outlook of the game. In particular, the graphics and colors help emphasize the overall simplicity of the game concept by enforcing the surreal nature of the game: it's hard to treat the game in anything but a lighthearted manner.

*Katamari Damacy* quickly became a best selling game worldwide, which serves as an indicator into just how important good gameplay is to players. The interface is incredibly simple, which encourages my belief that complexity of control does not make it compelling; the key to a compelling game is immersion, whether it is through story, or environment, or gameplay (and preferably all of the above), so any element that jars or creates an artificial barrier to the player hinders the effect and intent of the game. The theory of simplicity makes *Katamari Damacy* a game worth noticing, no matter what sort of game you are interested in.

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# 4. The Social Implications of Video Games

## 4.1. Games as a Social Tapestry

In a country of just under 300 million people, current statistics suggest that roughly 60% of the population plays games on a regular or semi-regular basis[1] -- that games have taken a central role in how we occupy our time is undeniable. What is still under debate, however, is how these games affect our lives outside the game, and how we interact with others in society. There has been some indication that video games temporarily increase aggression, but no more than watching an action movie or even a particularly rousing football game, with no long term corollary showing up to date.[2] Additionally, the role video games have on aggression is a relatively small element in the larger role games have on the social tapestry. The question that most interests me in this field is "How do games bring people together?"

One of the most immediately apparent examples of games serving as a coagulant for community building is the Massively Multiplayer Online style of game, which places thousands of players together within a persistent virtual world, where relationships with other players must be formed to survive. The most popular of these games is Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* (WoW), which recently passed the 6 million player mark, making it more than twice as large as its nearest competition. *World of Warcraft* has even been alluded to replacing

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[1] http://www.physorg.com/news5758.html

[2] A fairly recent (2003) collection of all empirical data and literature on the topic can be found here: http://gip.uniovi.es/docume/pro_vs/liter_emp_vv.pdf

golf as the networking tool of choice in the realm of technology oriented business.[3] The comparison continues to gather steam, with exclusive guilds replacing country club memberships, and a number of celebrities playing together (notably Dave Chappelle, comedian and star of *The Chappelle Show*, and rumors suggest that Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* also plays[4]).

The more interesting question to ask, however, is not how *World of Warcraft* reached this position, but *why* it did. It clearly is filling a role that society felt was needed; the game has largely operated on grassroots advertising and gamer-centric marketing, so the fact that it has garnered a wider market appeal suggests that it is fulfilling a role that was lacking in society. In The Great Good Place, Ray Oldenburg discusses the essential role a "third space" that is neither home nor work plays in the health of a community, and decries the destruction and devaluation of these places with the growth of suburbia and a commuter culture. I have a strong suspicion that the appeal for WoW, and other online games, is in its ability to create a virtual third space, a place for people to have shared experiences and garner a sense of comradeship. While it is not necessarily a perfect marriage, since it still ultimately keeps individuals physically apart and isolated, it is a stopgap solution the larger social organism has created to fulfill this necessary role in culture.

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[3] http://www.1up.com/do/newsStory?cId=3147826

[4] http://www.gamegirladvance.com/archives/2006/02/08/are_mmos_the_new_golf.html

Aside from the virtual third space, games also serve as a social coagulant in the real world in a number of ways. Clans and guilds within a variety of multiplayer games have formed in the past decade that can span several hundred players from around the world, or a dozen players all within a single locale. These groups grow out of bonds formed by the shared experience of a particular game, and in particular the closeness of working regularly with a set group to achieve common goals. Physically meeting other people in your group has become increasingly common, ranging from getting together at a bar or restaurant, or meeting at a computer center, or even someone's house, so everyone can play together while in the same room. General gaming conventions such as UberCon[5] and game-specific conventions like Blizzcon[6] have sprung up all over the world in the past decade, out of the desire to meet the people that you are playing with as well as wanting to celebrate your favorite games with like-minded individuals. The irony is that despite this overwhelming social adoption of the gaming hobby, much of this activity is ignored or discounted by public interest groups and media outlets that continue to perpetuate the sentiment that playing games promotes anti-social behavior, violence, and disconnection from parents and peers.[7]

Games also play an important but under-valued role in serving as a contemporary and historical tool for commentary on society. A popular genre of

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[5] http://www.ubercon.com

[6] http://www.blizzcon.com

[7] http://vgmwatch.com/?p=950

game is the First Person Shooter, and among these, one of the most popular sub-genres are war games, where you play in the first person perspective as a soldier set during one of the several major wars that have occurred in the past century (usually, World War II). As technology has advanced, so has the visceral, intense nature of of these games, getting closer and closer to an authentic military experience, and the brotherhood that comes out of trusting your compatriots with your life, even a virtual one. An excellent example of this sort of visceral feel can be found on popular gaming site, Penny Arcade:

> We were in the Gulf of Oman, retail version of Battlefield 2, thirty-two player variant. The northernmost point is a mess, tactically speaking. In fact, you could call it a Goddamn mess and not overstate the point. My friend Doc was heading up the squad, and though we had no great affection for the place we rolled up there in a jeep because we had a job to do and we weren't going to REMF it up with SlapNutzz back at home point, lounging around for his vehicle of choice.
>
> As soon as we pull in, I jump out and try to make this spawn work optimally for Team *Our Guys*. Almost immediately, he tells me to get back in the fucking jeep. I tell him that I don't truck with this kind of cowardice, *sir*. He tells me to get in, and clearly means it very deeply, which creates in me, his subordinate, a kind of panic myself, so I accept the ride. Apparently the Commander had chosen our squad and spoken directly to Doc, a voice from on high, the sort of pure, mighty voice I imagine Isaiah must have heard.
>
> "Get your men out of there," he had said. "There's a hard rain gonna fall."
>
> Now, when you're in an artillery zone, there's a huge icon like a headstone on the map - a powerful image that means death, death, *death* in any language. Death undiluted, black robe, sharp scythe. But you're busy, you know? You're doing stuff. That commander gave us the heads up, something he didn't have to do, and with it earned our absolute trust - we spent the rest of our time on that server making sure that our squad was first on the scene. That's a conflux of game and social mechanics you will see described in no manual. (Holkins, http://www.penny-arcade.com/2005/12/30)

I feel this is a remarkable example of just how much social impact a virtual experience can have. There is a level of comradeship that Holkins describes that has been the goal of many movies and books to create or convey, and successfully appears in a video game.

In the more contemporary world, there are other games that serve a commentary for segments of humanity that might not otherwise get attention, such as the urban jungles and ghettos which are currently represented by games such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, a game that is more often than not decried for its use of violence, profanity, sex, and drugs. People would rather ban these games than face the actual issues they call attention to – a trend that has followed social criticism in literature for decades (book banning in the 1950s; actor, author, and director blacklisting for creating or participating in controversial films and stories throughout the 20th century; banned comics in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and even today, the list continues). It is honestly astounding at just how often the right for words or images to even exist has been called into question over the years, in a country founded on the principle of freedom of expression.

It is possible that the cause of this perennial issue is that in our zeal to explore the limits of this freedom of expression, we cross into extremes that upset, offend, and outrage other segments of the population. It becomes an argument of glorifying an offensive act or period versus representing it. While technically both should be and are protected by the first amendment, it is

significantly easier to sway public opinion if you can make a case that the depiction is an over-exaggeration, stereotype, or caricature rather than an accurate depiction of reality. While this shouldn't be an issue, it unfortunately is, and will likely continue to be for quite some time to come. This is the curse of pushing limits, or expressing anything out of the ordinary, and the cost writers, artists, and designers must pay if they wish to create their own (often inoffensive) art. As H.L. Mencken once said:

> The trouble with fighting for human freedom is that one spends most of one's time defending scoundrels. For it is against scoundrels that oppressive laws are first aimed, and oppression must be stopped at the beginning if it is to be stopped at all. (Mencken, *Notes On Democracy*)

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## 4.2. Critique: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*

Released in October of 2004, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is the latest installment in the *Grand Theft Auto* series of games, developed by Rockstar Games and distributed by Take Two Interactive. This installment outsold its already best selling predecessors (*Grand Theft Auto III*, and *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* respectively), taking place in a fictionalized variant of LA in the early 1990's. The game's encouragement and emphasis of in-game violence had already caused a considerable amount of uproar from several advocacy groups, but did not receive its true level of infamy until early July of 2005, when a "mod" was discovered called "hot coffee" that allowed the player to participate in a sexual act, which was construed as a violation of its Mature game rating (instead of Adults Only), and has sparked a flurry of lawsuits, media attention, and reactionary legislation against video games in general.

Before I discuss the game itself, let's address the Hot Coffee scandal a little more directly. The content within the mod is overtly sexual, though nothing is actually seen beyond the player's character behind his in-game girlfriend, making sexual movements. Because of this, it is true that the game should have received an Adults Only rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), *had the content been available to players*. The only way to access this content is through manually altering the code through external means (on the PC, this involves physically altering game files; on the Playstation 2, this involves using another device such as a "Game Shark" to manipulate the game data or

downloading and installing a patch on a system that has no direct method of downloading or installing patches). Insisting upon an Adults Only rating because of this content is roughly akin to insisting that a movie be given an NC-17 or even X rating because of a scene that was filmed but then cut from the final version of the film. Given that the game's rating was already Mature, which has the same requirements for purchase or to watch as an R rated movie (age 17 or higher), this uproar becomes even more ludicrous. It has unfortunately caused a flood of knee-jerk legislation[1] and use as a political tool by those seeking re-election,[2] despite clear first amendment violations within the proposed laws that have already shut down early attempts at similar legislation.[3] The overwhelming amount of bad press and shoddy handling of the situation on the part of Rockstar Games and Take Two Interactive has caused company assets and stock value to plummet, inciting an additional string of lawsuits by the companies' own stockholders.[4] Regardless of whether or not any of this furor is merited, it may well mean no more *Grand Theft Auto* games, and potentially hard and restrictive times for the game industry as a whole.

But why the furor? Is the game really as bad as it's made out to be by the media? Personally, I found the game engaging and a valuable social

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[1] http://www.gamepolitics.com/legislation.htm

[2] http://www.siliconvalley.com/mld/siliconvalley/business/technology/13727237.htm, http://rocky2006.com/; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillary_Rodham_Clinton, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Lieberman

[3] http://gamepolitics.livejournal.com/148962.html

[4] http://gamepolitics.livejournal.com/195690.html

commentary of living in the ghettoes of early 1990's Los Angeles. The game more than any other source gave me a better understanding on the motivations and origins of "gangsta rap", a genre of music that grew out of the time and area depicted within the game. Like the game, gangsta rap is riddled with tales of violence, sex, and drugs, and conveys a message of a hard life doing what it takes to get by. While neither the *Grand Theft Auto* series nor gangsta rap is to my personal preference, I can still see the validity of it as a source of social commentary and creative expression. If anything, I would say that it is the job of its opponents to prove that it misrepresents that time period and locale in a gross or harmful way, rather than basing their arguments on it simply being "offensive". There is a considerable amount of art and literature that is offensive to *someone*; that does not mean it should be destroyed or prohibited.

The game's controls are slightly less intuitive than its predecessors due in my opinion to the addition of additional gameplay functionality, including role playing elements where you can improve your character's capabilities through training. Aiming is still not nearly as clean as I would like, and I suspect never will be; the gameplay perspective (3rd person, over the shoulder) isn't conducive to intuitive aiming. The game mechanics themselves are nothing new compared to the earlier games in the series: you can still mug or kill people, you can still steal cars, there are a variety of mini-games ranging from a taxi game to driving an ambulance, or fire truck, or police car. These have all been mainstays of the series. That's not to say that the game needs to innovate and reinvent itself

every time; I can completely respect the developer's decision to focus on new content rather than redesigning the game mechanic every time. It's actually something I've been frustrated by in other game franchises, where the developers are constantly reinventing how to play the game when the previous system had nothing wrong with it.

Visually, the game is reasonable but not spectacular. The character models are somewhat simplistic, with character actions being limited to a few poses that serve double or triple duty for various acts, and is far from fluid. Inanimate models, however, are significantly improved from previous games, with a lot of detail going into the cars and other vehicles, as well as decoration and scene setting within buildings and on the streets. The environment itself is improved, with a reasonable range of weather, and an excellent day-night transition that effectively includes dawn, dusk, and twilight.

The story is really where the game shines, however. Largely presented through cut scenes (non-interactive segments of dialogue and events), the story revolves around CJ, a former gang member who has returned to his old home after his mother is killed. The story is fairly straightforward: revenge is the main motivation, unraveling the who and the how and the why behind the murder; as the story unfolds, there is also the additional story arc of reuniting with his former comrades, and re-carving a niche for himself and his companions in the city. The cutscenes are performed by professional actors, and in general well directed and

performed, giving a real sense of the drama and moral dilemmas that unfold as CJ goes back to his criminal ways. The story unfortunately thins as it progresses, with extend periods of small jobs and short cutscenes involving side storylines marring the flow of the central narrative. Still, it's a compelling story, at least as compelling as other media with gang related stories.

The game is essentially a sandbox -- a place for players to experiment -- with a compelling (if violent and at times troubling) story used to immerse the player within the game more effectively, and provide further backdrop for the player's actions. While there are moral questions posed within the story, the gameplay itself is inherently amoral: all actions rely on the moral compass of the player, whom often does not consider the moral or ethical choices of what they are doing: it is an imaginary world, and allows a level of amoral experimentation that is not allowed in reality. To say that the game itself is immoral removes responsibility and culpability of the player, who not only chooses how to act within the game, but whether to play the game at all. It's definitely not for everybody, and despite the media and legislative misconceptions of such, it was never intended to be. For what it is, though, it's a good game, and worth the experience.

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# 5. Conclusion

Over the past fifty pages, I have touched on a lot of topics concerning various aspects of video games and the video game industry. That said, there is a vastly more substantial amount of material that I did not even cursorily touch upon. This material includes the poor management, poor business practices, and rife employee abuse that occurs within the industry, which is a topic that certainly merits its own, thorough investigation. There is also a considerable amount to be learned from a more detailed examination of the history of video games which would prove invaluable to anyone interested in contemporary anthropology or sociology. The technological side of games were also largely left out (by intent, since the field is in a constant state of flux), though the topic is quite pertinent in regards to the corollary of games driving technological advancement. There are also hundreds of games that merit attention that I simply lacked the time to cover, despite desire to do so.

This project has also faced the challenge of remaining pertinent and contemporary to research and literature about video games that is steadily being released. The topic of video game legislation in particular is an incredibly active topic currently, with well over a dozen states proposing censorial legislation against video games. On this particular topic, I have cited several articles by a website called GamePolitics.com, which has proven an invaluable resource for keeping a pulse on what is happening in the field.

Overall, this study has succeeded in discussing what I feel to be key topics that needed to be addressed to allow the medium to continue to advance, though there is still and will likely always be a need for further discussion. There is such potential for good literary and artistic work in video games, to speak nothing of its potential social and cognitive benefits. I sincerely hope that this collection of essays has enlightened and educated the reader about the value games can hold, and why it's important to learn more about this medium.

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# Annotated Bibliography:

Koster, Raph. A Theory of Fun for Game Design. Scottsdale: Paraglyph Press, 2005. This book discusses the nature of game playing and pattern processing in relation to what we find "fun." It also establishes several good working definitions for fun, play, and game. The writing is informative and easy to read; the book is well worth reading for anyone investigating video game design. I found his thoughts on the direction of games particularly invaluable, even though I didn't necessarily agree with all of them.

DeMaria, Rusel; Wilson, Johnny L. High Score!: The Illustrated History of Electronic Games. McGraw-Hill Osborne Media, 2003. "High Score!" is an informative look into the history and development of video games, from a commercial, social, and developmental standpoint. The collected screen shots of prior video games really helps to establish visually the evolution of the medium, making the book an invaluable reference within a historical context.

Zimmerman, Eric; Salen, Kate. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. The MIT Press, 2004. This is considered one of the seminal textbooks in the field of game design, and discusses the theory AND practice of game design within real world environs. The book is daunting at first, but the authors are knowledgeable about the subject without becoming overwhelming or dry. This book is necessary reading for anyone interested in game design or interactivity theory.

Rabin, Steve. Introduction to Game Development. Charles River Media, 2005. Introduction to Game Development is the first book to be based on the International Game Developer's Association's (IGDA) Curriculum Framework. This book is overwhelming in size and scope of the topic, addressing issues ranging from social game design, game world architecture, to intellectual property rights and legal handling. That said, it's still well worth using as an asset and reference tool due to its breadth of information. It would also be invaluable used as a specific textbook for a year long course within a game design degree.

Castranova, Edward. Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. Edward is an associate professor in telecommunications for Indiana University. “Synthetic Worlds” is one of the first books that examines online games from both business and social viewpoints, and discusses at length about the sub-cultures that have recently arisen through online multiplayer games. His book is an excellent starting point for exploring what contemporary studies are finding in terms of communication, community building, and social interaction, with seven pages of useful and up to date references and a ROBUST index for finding resources within the text. It's worth noting that Edward Castranova is also a contributor on the Terra Nova web log, where he remains as relevant and topical as his book.

Graham, Paul. Hackers & Painters: Big Ideas from the Computer Age. Sebastopol: O'Reilly Media, Inc., 2004. I've had prior experience with Paul's writing, so when one of my other books became unavailable, I decided to pick up what is considered his seminal work. “Hackers & Painters” is a collection of essays about the tech sector from the viewpoint of programmers as creators, as well as his experiences as the founder of one of the few successful "dot-com" businesses. The title essay is remarkably cogent, and does an excellent job examining the role of developers, designers, and programmers ("hackers") in comparison to other traditional "maker" professions, like painters, sculptors, and writers. The other essays are less related to the topic of content creation, but still a worthwhile read in regards to setting up a content-creation business.

Gee, James Paul. What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. James Paul Gee's area of expertise is not gaming or game design. Instead, his background is in cognitive theory and education, and serves as a Professor at the University of Wisconsin in that capacity. It's worth pointing this out, since despite his lack of background in gaming, he manages to make a sound case for cognitive value within games. His central thrust throughout the book is that games more effectively utilize modern cognitive theory and experiential learning than most modern school systems; they succeed in teaching individuals HOW to learn where traditional schools tend to fail. I found myself quite engaged with the topic, thanks in large part to his passion for it. It is worth reading as a designer for its insight into how

individuals learn, and also highly worthwhile for anyone interested in alternative education methods.

Poole, Stephen. Trigger Happy: Video Games and the Entertainment Revolution. New York: Arcade Publishing, Inc., 2004. “Trigger Happy” is an excellent look at video games as a cultural phenomenon, looking at the evolution from hobbyist pastime to multi-billion dollar business, and social reversals from it being a "geek" oriented media to being a popular media that a majority of our culture participates in. While it does not directly relate to better implementing narrative within games, it does serve a useful purpose of getting a grasp of what the cultural pulse of video games are today. There is a fair bit of prognostication on where things are going that I'm not sure I agree with entirely, but Stephen's upbeat writing style made for an enjoyable read.

Crawford, Chris. Chris Crawford On Game Design. Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing 2003. Chris Crawford has been involved in game design and development for over two decades at this point, and while not a game design "name brand" like Sid Meier or Will Wright, he is well known and respected within the industry. Chris Crawford On Game Design is a somewhat meandering look at the principles of game design, along with real and conceptual case studies of prior works. I found his writing alternatively insightful and annoying (and sometimes both at once), as good design theory was often buried in a brusque and somewhat arrogant anecdote or comment. One of the endorsement quotes

on the back of the book sums it up nicely: "I don't always agree with Chris, but I always pay careful attention to what he says." (Noah Felstein) It's worth reading, even if HOW he says what he says is frustrating at times.

Crawford, Chris. Chris Crawford On Interactive Storytelling. Berkeley: New Riders Publishing, 2005. From a technical perspective, Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling is an incredibly useful book, defining a number of methodologies used to establish character and plot development in an interactive medium. I say "interactive medium" rather than game, however, because Chris feels that games as games are unsuited to involved storytelling, an opinion I flatly disagree with him about. While he raises a some good points in regards to current limitations in establishing and developing relationships with characters, I do not feel that these are inherent to the medium, and have more to do with the social understanding of the people who are developing the games. (As Chris himself comments in Chris Crawford On Game Design, you can't create a social challenge if you don't understand how to be social!)

Miller, Carolyn Handler. Digital Storytelling. Burlington: Focal Press, 2004. Digital storytelling is a broader subject than interactive storytelling, since it encompasses both interactive storytelling AND any other digital based storytelling mechanism (computer animated movies, for instance, or machinima -- films created using game engines). Miller's writing style was refreshing after reading two Crawford books in a row. She is significantly more inclusive in her

viewpoints on the subject of potential storytelling media, and the writing is dense with case studies and real world observations. I found there was some overlap in topics between this and the Crawford books, but I found myself much less frustrated in the process, and would recommend Digital Storytelling over Chris Crawford On Interactive Storytelling for a broader view of the topic.

Saltzman, Marc. Game Design: Secrets of the Sages. Indianapolis: Brady Publishing, 2000. While not the most stellar work I've read for this study, Game Design: Secrets of the Sages does have some very worthwhile elements. Like Introduction to Game Development, this book examines the games industry in a broader sense, spending a bit of time on different elements within the industry, including design, the developer-publisher relationship, graphics, and even thoughts on getting into the industry in the first place. Saltzman works well as an editor and interviewer, collecting interviews and thoughts on the game industry from some of the biggest names in the industry. Overall, the book serves more as a very light and broad introduction to game development and positive PR for its contributors than anything else, but I did find some of the included sample design documents immensely useful, and would recommend the book if only to get access to real world examples of an effective design document.

Tufte, Edward R. Visual Explanations. Cheshire: Graphics Press, 1997. Visual Explanations is where statistics meets graphic design. In this book, the author discusses at length the role of visual aids in determining differences

between data sets, and the importance of taking all roles of that representation in its display. For instance, it is unfortunately common to see charts of data that are using visual representations as an aid for understanding what is being measured... but then only look at the height, or width of that representation, rather than the overall size difference between one data set and the next. This creates a false disparity between the visual explanation of the data, and the data itself. The reading is dry, but relatively fast, and is without question one of the seminal works in the field. In the realm of data design and display, it is not only recommended reading, but necessary reading.

Tufte, Edward R. The Visual Display of Quantitative Information. Cheshire: Graphics Press, 2001. Similar to his earlier book, Tufte's writing could be considered a little dry, but the information contained in that writing is invaluable in statistical representation. In hindsight, I probably should have chosen one of these books rather than wading through both. While there is a wealth of new or expanded information, the role of displaying quantitative data and statistics in a video game is at best a small portion of the greater scope of proper game design. That said, if I were pressed to choose between the two on which to read in regards to video game design, I would opt for The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, over Visual Explanations, simply because it covers in more detail a larger variety of what could be construed as "data" needing representation (global migration maps, for instance).

Friedl, Markus. Online Game Interactivity Theory. Hingham: Charles River Media, 2003. With this book, I have been given a unique opportunity to interact and communicate with the author, who contacted me when he saw my posted bibliography on my website, and saw his book on it. I have a great deal of respect for his professional work (he works as a game designer for a major development studio, where he has been able to put what he discusses in this book into practice to great effect), and his more scholarly work has proven to also be excellent. The book focuses on the specific challenges facing designers creating primarily online games, and helps call attention to the differences between creating an online game and a single player game, which include the development of in-game resources for building a sense of community as well as efficiently opening avenues of communication between players. While for my own purposes, I would have appreciated more attention to methods of storytelling within a multiplayer online world. Still, I highly recommend this book.

Bates, Bob. Game Design: The Art & Business of Creating Games. Roseville: Prima Publishing, 2001. As the title suggests, this book focuses more on the business side of game design. It is a considerable investment in both time and money to create a video game these days, which means that there are unfortunately more hurdles to cross in order to take a game from concept to market, many of which aren't readily apparent to the casual observer. This is a fact I learned the hard way earlier in the month, when I attempted to contact Nintendo to find out some basic financial information about their new

development systems. It was this experience that motivated me to pull this book out and dig more into the production side of the world. The content itself is fairly easy to read, and is designed to help spell things out on what the production pipeline really is for games. That said, I'm really not a fan of the book's visual theme -- an example of publisher imposed rules and direction, I suppose, which is something game developers have to deal with. Based on the content, however, I'd say it's well worth the time to read, especially for anyone who is thinking about starting a game business themselves.

Ray, Sheri Graner. Gender Inclusive Game Design. Hingham: Charles River Media, 2004. While this book is fairly small and short compared to some of the tomes I've had to read this semester, it is absolutely packed with worthwhile information and insight. Something I definitely appreciated in her writing was her willingness to not point fingers, but instead focus on solutions to make games more gender inclusive. The focus there is "inclusive" -- we're not talking about making games just for girls or just for boys, which is an entirely different topic. It's a far more challenging question than might be directly apparent: creating a female protagonist is not enough. One idea, which I agree with, is acknowledge that men and women tend to have different playing focuses, and then try to provide multiple solutions to a challenge. This book is invaluable as a reference and reminder, and I definitely recommend it.

Irish, Dan. The Game Producer's Handbook. Boston: Thomson Course Technology, 2005. I wish I had read this book earlier in the semester. The Game Producer's Handbook takes an in depth look at the role of the producer in video game development, which is an invaluable subject for me as I endeavor to start my own development company. In particular, the chapters discussing risk analysis, budget creation, and project management were illuminating to say the least. I would definitely recommend this book, including to designers -- it's important to know what other people on the team are doing.

Bartle, Richard A. Designing Virtual Worlds. Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing, 2004. Richard Bartle is something of an iconic figure for me; I've been an administrator on a MUD (Multi User Domain, a text based online game) for the past nine years -- Richard Bartle co-created the first MUD ever, back in 1978, and has continued to be a major contributor to the advancement of "virtual worlds" (any of a variety of online multiplayer games, including MUDs, MOOs, MMORPGs, and even FPS games) ever since. Most of his prior work was in the form of articles for various magazines, journals, and websites; this is one of the first book length pieces on the subject. I found this book immensely worthwhile, notably because of the holistic approach he takes to the design process: especially in the case of a multiplayer environments, it's not enough to look at the technical, ludological, or narratological elements of the game -- you need to examine the sociological elements as well, like communication methodology and community building. Put simply, these are people playing this game, and you

have to consider their needs as well, and Bartle provides some excellent solutions to this. I would recommend this book.

Rollings, Andrew; Adams, Ernest. Andrew Rollings and Ernest Adams on Game Design. Indianapolis: New Riders Publishing, 2003. It's a shame that this was the last book I finished, considering it was one that I was intending to start with, and contains a lot of interesting insight and anecdotes concerning game design. The book is broken into some fairly intuitive chapters, starting with the basics ("What is game design," a question I have seen answered far too many times at this point), and then moving on into more advanced topics such as storytelling, character development, and the user experience. Particularly useful for me, however, was one of the final chapters, discussing at length the process and importance of building good design documents, and what elements contribute to good documentation. I would definitely recommend this book, but my suggestion would be to read it towards the beginning of the semester, where more of the information will be new material.

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