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Journal

Analog Game Studies, 13(3)

Author

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Publication Date

2026-09-07

DOI

10.5070/V7.69064

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THE SEPARATION OF ANALOG AND DIGITAL GAME STUDIES

Evan Torner

Abstract

This essay is concerned about the substantially different perceived value of analog games vs. digital games in a field that otherwise seeks to unite them under the label of “games.” It first contrasts expectations regarding these two areas of game development before then investigating their origins.

Keywords

analog games, digital games, historiography, media studies, higher education, academic research, hierarchy, status

Editors’ Note: This essay originally appeared as a chapter in *Historiographies of Game Studies: What It Has Been, What It Could Be* (2025), edited by Alisha Karabinus, Carly A. Kocurek, Cody Mejeur, and Emma Vossen, and published open access by Punctum Books. Both author and press have given permission for this re-printing.

“[The] study of games cannot and should not be segregated into digital and non-digital,” wrote Espen Aarseth in the July 2017 issue of the journal *Game Studies*, “and for most of the field, in practice, as well as in theory, this has never been so.”¹ By writing these words, Aarseth sought to challenge perceptions that *Game Studies*—the journal he co-founded, which had openly committed itself to “computer game studies” in 2001—was not *also* open to articles about non-digital, or analog games. After all, had they not, for example, published Joris Dormans’s early analysis of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) as semiotic systems?² Aarseth’s words struck me as genuine and heartfelt when he wrote them. Yet as co-founder and editor of the *Analog Game Studies* journal, an organ that explicitly addresses the lack of scholarship on non-digital games, I have lingering doubts

¹ Espen Aarseth, “Just Games,” *Game Studies* 17, no. 1 (July 2017), <http://gamestudies.org/1701/articles/justgames>.

² Joris Dormans, “On the Role of the Die: A Brief Ludologic Study of Pen-and-Paper Roleplaying Games and Their Rules,” *Game Studies* 6, no.1 (December 2006), <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/dormans>.

that it has “never been so” that the field has neglected analog games: indeed, this essay is rumination on those doubts. Should game studies as a field continue to neglect analog games, it risks ignoring the fundamentals of game design and innovation in favor of a digital-screen-driven, myopic, “startup” cultural view of games history.

Capacious Notions of “Game”

A few definitions may help. A “digital game” I describe as a game that requires player input on at least one platform capable of electronic computation, often with output on some sort of electronic screen. For the purposes of this article, I refer to digital games as “video and computer games” (VCGs). An “analog game” I loosely define in direct contrast to the digital: as a game that primarily relies on the human being for computation and adjusts its game state using paper, pencil, boards, cards, dice, human voices, or human bodies.³ *Yahtzee* (Milton Bradley, 1956) is an analog game, as well as tag or *Dungeons & Dragons* (TSR, 1974, and Wizards of the Coast, 2014). In other words, analog games run the gamut from simple playground games and puzzles to adult pretend play and complex published commercial board games. It also deserves mentioning the difference between “traditional” games such as backgammon or go, and “hobbyist” games such as *Warhammer* (Games Workshop, 1983), or *Mysterium* (Libellud, 2015). Traditional games are non-proprietary in nature, meaning anyone can manufacture a go board and play without the approval of any rights holder. Hobbyist games are published by specific copyright and trade dress owners, often selling them at conventions or hobbyist game shops. In the 2020s, what counts as analog is becoming increasingly unclear.⁴ Referencing the work of Jonathan Sterne,⁵ for example, Emma Leigh Waldron, Aaron Trammell, and I wrote that “the term ‘analog’ only exists by way of negative comparison to the digital, such that our present-day digital forms of expression produce their analog heritage as a by-product.”⁶ Put a different way: the suffocating totality of the digital produces its own rebellion.⁷ In 2014, Trammell, Waldron, and I founded the *Analog Game Studies* journal because we saw there was not much scholarship at the time on the cutting-edge development happening in the hobby games industry as well as in the global live-action role-play (LARP), escape room, and playable theatre scenes. Marco Arnaudo agrees: “More analog games are being printed than ever before, generating unprecedented capital, and they are propagating innovative mechanics, majestic productions, and new ways for people to interact with each other. This leaves us with a spectacularly exciting, refreshing, creative environment of gamers and games, and one that is ripe for full academic consideration.”⁸

³ See also, Ian Bellomy, “What Counts: Configuring the Human in Platform Studies,” in *Analog Game Studies*, vol. 4, eds. Evan Torner, Emma Leigh Waldron, and Shelly Jones (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2020), 189–206.

⁴ Premeet Sidhu and Marcus Carter, “The Critical Role of Media Representations, Reduced Stigma and Increased Access in D&D’s Resurgence,” *Proceedings of DiGRA 2020*. (2020) <https://dl.digra.org/index.php/dl/article/view/1277> Melissa J. Rogerson, Lucy A. Sparrow, and Martin R. Gibbs, “Unpacking ‘Boardgames With Apps’: The Hybrid Digital Boardgame Model,” in *CHI ’21: Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (Yokohama: CHI Play, 2021), 1–17; and Ville Kankainen and Janne Paavilainen, “Hybrid Board Game Design Guidelines,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2019* (Kyoto: Digital Games Research Association, 2019), 1–4.

⁵ Jonathan Sterne, “Analog [draft] [#digitalkeywords],” *Culture Digitally*, May 15, 2014. <https://culturedigitally.org/2014/05/analog-draftdigitalkeywords/>.

⁶ Emma Leigh Waldron, Aaron Trammell, and Evan Torner, Aaron Trammell, and Emma Leigh Waldron (Alphabetically), “Reinventing Analog Game Studies: Introductory Manifesto,” in *Analog Game Studies*, vol. 1, eds. Aaron Trammell, Evan Torner, and Emma Leigh Waldron (Pittsburgh: ETC Press, 2016), 2.

⁷ David Sax, *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter* (New York: Perseus, 2016).

⁸ Marco Arnaudo, “Analog Game History: Notes for a Discipline in the Making,” *ROMChip* 1, no. 1 (2019), <https://romchip.org/index.php/romchip-journal/article/view/65>.

After years of cultivating this subfield, I read Aarseth's piece cited at the beginning of this essay and wrote the following response:

It should give one reason to pause, the sheer irony that—in the ideological universe of some—digital game reality is more “real” than our own physically embodied cognitive reality. Something appears amiss about this, and Aarseth has come to recognize it...Nevertheless, the hard work only begins now: to staff game design programs with tenure-track faculty who have years of experience in non-digital design; to pivot institutional glorification of the digital millennium toward a more nuanced perspective that includes contributions of the non-digital; to examine and follow movements within analog game design theory and their epistemologies regarding actual play. The field must push back against backward notions that design begins with programming and 3D modeling, or that [massively multiplayer online games] (MMOs) or massive open-world [computer role-playing games] (CRPGs) matter more than TRPGs and larps, or that “play” can only happen once massive hardware investments are made, as we currently see with the trend toward Virtual Reality (VR).⁹

In effect, my response affirmed Aarseth's and *Game Studies*' commitments to a capacious notion of “game” rather than a narrow one focused only on VCGs. But I also state that the damage has already been done: game studies has institutionalized itself around digital games, leaving those who study board, card, and role-playing games feeling less legitimate, their creators like lesser “game designers” than those who program or 3D model, and the funding for relevant research scarce. We can point out the lack of research on analog games until we are blue in the face, but that does not eliminate the rampant institutional rationality that nevertheless stubbornly reproduces this hierarchy in the game studies field.¹⁰

Anecdotes of such a hierarchy abound. The Game Developers Conference (GDC) and International Game Developers Association (IGDA) only care about digital games, never analog games. Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) and GDC have been seen as worthwhile conferences for one's career, when board and TRPG-centered conventions Gen Con and Origins are not, despite having featured mixed VCG and analog content, as well as popular and academic panels, for many decades. Analog game designers who want to “legitimate” their cred as designers regularly slap together Twine games to prove to VCG employers they can design a “real” game. Those Twine games often take them less than 24 hours to create and nevertheless land them jobs. The TRPG they might have spent hundreds of hours developing will land them nothing. I myself ran a LARP for someone who turned out to be a



Figure 1: A player mulls over their options while playing *Spirit Island*. Photo by the author.

⁹ Evan Torner, “Just (the Institution of Computer) Game Studies.” *Analog Game Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018), <http://analoggamestudies.org/2018/06/just-the-institution-of-computer-game-studies/>.

¹⁰ See Sidhu and Carter, “The Critical Role,” and Paul Booth, “Missing a Piece: (The Lack of) Board Game Scholarship in Media Studies,” *Velvet Light Trap* 81 (2018): 57–60.

developer for *The Division II* (Ubisoft, 2019), and he said over beers: “Ubisoft pays the bills, but playing larps here is far more meaningful gaming in my opinion.” Games journalists trained only in VCGs still equate all advances in TRPGs with whatever *Dungeons & Dragons* is doing at the moment, when creators in the industry can attest to Wizards of the Coast, the company that produces it, always being around 5 years behind the curve in design.¹¹ Game scholars ask at conferences why one should care about the rhetoric of colonialism in analog games such as, say, *Goa* (Hans im Glück, 2004) or *Puerto Rico* (Ravensburg, 2002), when they would not question such an interrogation of the same rhetoric of colonialism in VCG *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft, 2012). The “cutting edge” of queer gaming is sought at VCG-heavy QGCon, rather than analog-game-focused Big Bad Con, which is four times the size and humming with the queer indie “physical games” scene from itch.io.¹² Everyone in game studies seems to know Greg Costikyan’s work “I Have No Words and I Must Design,” but comprehensive studies of his numerous innovations in TRPG design—including *Paranoia* (West End Games, 1984), *Toon* (Steve Jackson Games, 1984), and *Violence!* (Hogshead, 1999)—do not exist in the field at this time.¹³

Why does game studies value digital games over analog games? What makes a game with cardboard and chits, with dice and cards, with costumes and foam weapons somehow of lesser research value than a game on a screen? How did the word “game” become so irretrievably bound to a hyper-specific mode of play, namely that of VCGs? These questions are worth asking, given the meteoric rise of playable theatre,¹⁴ board games,¹⁵ escape rooms,¹⁶ and non-digital role-playing games in the past three decades.¹⁷ Despite these efforts, our field still seems ill-equipped to properly apprehend and analyze the cultural moment in which we live and its recent past. This chapter looks at how the study of analog and digital games became estranged from each other, and offers a few modest suggestions on what might be done to make the term “games” more inclusive of the objects it claims to represent.

Field States

Anthropologists have documented at least 5000 years of human games activity.¹⁸ If we look at the roughly 60–70 years in which VCGs have existed as a slice of time, this constitutes maybe 1% of known human games history. VCGs are directly connected to this history, from senet and tag to patience, chess, and *Scrabble* (Hasbro, 1948). Nevertheless, early VCGs served and supplemented analog games, not the other way around. For example, Peter Perla chronicles the introduction of the Navy Electronic War Simulator (NEWS) to the United States Naval War College in the late 1950s.¹⁹ NEWS was three stories tall, cost \$7.25 million, and could not operate as an autonomous game system without human umpires adjudicating both information displayed on the screen as well as the

¹¹ Gwyndaf Hughes, “Covid-19: ‘Dungeons and Dragons got us through lockdown.’” *BBC*, July 3, 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-57636378>.

¹² Evan Torner, “Paradox and Promise of ‘Physical Games’ on itch.io,” *Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies*, September 20, 2019. <https://coe-gamecult.org/2019/09/20/paradox-and-promise-of-physical-games-on-itch-io/>.

¹³ Greg Costikyan, “I Have No Words & I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games,” in *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*, ed. Frans Mäyrä (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002), 9–33.

¹⁴ Celia Pearce and Nick Fortugno, eds., “A Special Issue on Playable Theater,” special issue, *Well Played* 10, no. 2 (2021).

¹⁵ Booth, “Missing a Piece,” and Arnaudo “Analog Game History.”

¹⁶ Scott Nicholson and Liz Cable, *Unlocking the Potential of Puzzle-Based Learning: Designing Escape Rooms and Games for the Classroom* (London: SAGE, 2020).

¹⁷ José Pablo Zagal and Sebastian Deterding, eds., *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁸ Ian Livingstone and James Wallis, *Board Games in 100 Moves: 8,000 Years of Play* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2019).

¹⁹ Peter Perla, *Peter Perla’s The Art of Wargaming*, ed. John Curry (Bristol: History of Wargaming Project, 2011), 84.

damage computer, “a specially designed, time-shared, analog machine.”²⁰ The main function of NEWS was to introduce the officers-in-training to the pressures of real-time decision-making while relieving the umpires of tedious and time-consuming calculations. In our VCG game histories, it is convenient for us to begin with *Tennis for Two* (Brookhaven National Laboratory, 1958) and *Spacewar!* (MIT, 1962) because they prefigure modern “action” genre games and could be reasonably emulated on computers over the decades, but forgetting NEWS and other early electronic board-game simulation efforts means forgetting the complicated circuits between human players of analog games and electronic modes of feedback and presentation.

Studies of play and games prior to the 1980s were admittedly not even focused on top-secret military exercises, but rather more preoccupied with traditional game rule variants,²¹ the anthropology of play,²² or the overlap between VCGs or analog gaming and simulation overall.²³ Many of the foundational texts of the modern-day game studies field published in the 1990s indeed cut between the “legitimate” cultural spheres of literature²⁴ and theater performance,²⁵ but almost always seek some common ground between programmed VCGs and their analog predecessors and contemporaries.²⁶

During this period of the 1960s–2000s, we can no doubt point to several moral panics that also shaped the reception of games and their effects, namely the Satanic Panic around TRPGs in the 1980s²⁷ and the “violence in video games” discourse of the 1990s.²⁸ The hobby’s shared defensive posture against attacks from powerful white Christian American lobbies made “gaming” a generally forbidden activity in middle-class households, even when youth gameplay was also absolutely widespread at this time. In the North American context, VCGs and hobbyist analog gaming offered different variations on some mutual themes: VCGs were presumably for addicts and sociopaths; hobbyist analog games were for nerds and social rejects. *Dungeons & Dragons* sales actually *increased* in the 1980s thanks to the game transforming into a means for disaffected Generation X teens to rebel against their parents,²⁹ with a similar phenomenon transpiring in the 1990s with flagrantly bloody VCG titles such as *Doom* (id, 1993) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway, 1992). But, as Eric Rosenfield argues, this particular move by the early 2000s toward adrenaline-fueled shooter games by the early 2000s counted as a kind of male insurgency against the overwhelming popularity of the pacifist CD-ROM puzzle adventure, *Myst* (Cyan, 1993).³⁰ Both *Doom* and *Myst* blew past all

²⁰ Perla, *The Art of Wargaming*, 86.

²¹ David Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²² Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et Les Hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), and Elliot M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Study of Games* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1971).

²³ Carole Spearin McCauley, *Computers and Creativity* (New York: Praeger, 1974), and Richard D. Duke, *Gaming: The Future’s Language* (New York: Sage, 1974).

²⁴ Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

²⁵ Brenda Laurel, *Computers as Theatre* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1991).

²⁶ Costikyan, “I Have No Words”; Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003); and Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, eds., *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

²⁷ Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

²⁸ Gareth Schott, *Violent Games: Rules, Realism, and Effect* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), and Aaron Drummond, James D. Sauer, and Shaun S. Gare, “The Infamous Relationship Between Violent Video Game Use and Aggression: Uncharted Moderators and Small Effects Make It a Far Cry from Certain,” in *Video Game Influences on Aggression, Cognition, and Attention*. ed. Christopher J. Ferguson. (Cham: Springer, 2018), 23–40.

²⁹ Shannon Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons*, vol. 2: *The 80s: A History of the Role Playing Game Industry* (Silver Spring: Evil Hat Productions, 2013).

³⁰ Eric Rosenfield, “*Doom*, *Myst*, and the War for the Soul of Video Games,” *Literate Machine*, November 20, 2020. <https://literatemachine.com/2020/11/20/doom-myst-and-the-war-for-the-soul-of-video-games/>.

previous sales records in computer gaming, but *Doom* itself helped craft a specifically *male* ideal gamer type, as Rosenfield claims:

The problem is with the methodology of slicing off a demographic, targeting it relentlessly, encouraging people to associate brands with their self-identity, making what they sell not just a product but a lifestyle. It's with aggressively crafting and marketing that brand through toxic masculinity because it sells, without any regard for the repercussions.³¹

I bring this up because the gendered struggle between adventure games—with creators such as Brenda Laurel, Roberta Williams, Jane Jensen, and Tim Schaefer—and first-person shooters (FPS)—with creators such as John Romero, John Carmack, Alex Seropian, and Cliff Bleszinski—helped fuel early scholarship on VCGs, especially regarding violence and gender.³² In the analog gaming world, no such struggle was present. The Satanic Panic had, in the words of Shannon Appelcline, made roleplaying become “feared and hated, ... demonized during the time of its greatest popularity.”³³ This struck a serious blow to the commercial TRPG industry by the end of the 1990s, only for it to be revitalized by the indie scene in the 2000s and 2010s. Meanwhile in board games, the *Myst*-equivalent—by which I mean a breakout non-violent 1990s hit—would have been *Settlers of Catan* (Franckh-Kosmos, 1995). *Settlers of Catan* popularized so-called “eurogames” as a global genre, but its well-balanced design was initially only noticed in hobbyist circles until the game, along with *Apples to Apples* (Out of the Box, 1999), leapt into mainstream popularity in the early 2000s. The first academic paper on *Settlers of Catan* is notably only interested in the game as an algorithmic test case for artificial intelligence, and not interested in the game's values and aesthetics.³⁴ David Novitz and Daniel Mackay were toying with the TRPG as a performing art,³⁵ about 5–10 years after Laurel had already conceived of computer games as such.³⁶ Janet Murray projected that VCGs as media would generally and ultimately transform all human narrative.³⁷ VCGs had piqued the interest of Henry Jenkins and other prominent media scholars by the early 2000s; the same could *not* be said for analog hobbyist gaming.³⁸

In addition to the post-Satanic-panic timidity of analog game publishers and the toxic, violently gendered public gaming sphere that was fueling academic debate in the early 2000s, there are three further developments that separated VCGs from hobbyist analog gaming, despite deep shared roots, overlapping communities, and academic efforts to recoup such integration.³⁹ These three developments are: (1) VCGs exist at an exponentially larger economic and cultural *scale* than hobbyist analog gaming, (2) academic research funding and student enrollments are *financialized* to such a degree as to be unruffled by experimental recent analog games, and (3) film and media studies' have made long-term investments in game studies. These developments, which I will

³¹ Ibid.

³² Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, eds., *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

³³ Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons*, 351.

³⁴ Robert Thomas and Kristian Hammond, “Java Settlers: A Research Environment for Studying Multi-Agent Negotiation.” *IUI '02 Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of Intelligent User Interfaces* (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1145/502716.502779>

³⁵ David Novitz, “Disputes About Art.,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 153–63, and Daniel Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001).

³⁶ Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*.

³⁷ Janet Horowitz Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

³⁸ Henry Jenkins, “Reality Bytes: Eight Myths About Video Games Debunked” (PBS 2004), <https://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html>.

³⁹ Aarseth, “Just Games”; Booth “Missing a Piece”; Torner, “Just (the Institution)”; and Aaron Trammell, “Analog Games and the Digital Economy,” *Analog Game Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019), <http://analoggamestudies.org/2019/03/analog-games-and-the-digital-economy/>.

discuss in turn, contributed to a separation of VCG and analog game studies in the mid-2000s, despite rekindled interest in play studies⁴⁰ and material bodies in the meantime.⁴¹ An unnecessary and largely unintentional division in the study of various games media has become codified and reinforced by financial incentives and institutional structures.

Scale, Higher Education, and Media Studies

The economic and cultural scale of VCGs simply cannot be overlooked as a factor for why we pay them more attention. In 2021, the global VCG industry was worth roughly \$151 billion. Meanwhile, the global board games industry that year was worth \$12 billion, or around 7% of VCGs' size. My earlier comments about the tiny fraction of games history that VCGs occupy can be safely flipped on their head: VCGs have an enormous financial and entertainment footprint, one larger now than film.⁴² From the stories of the early *Pong* (Atari, 1972) arcade machines being broken due to being overstuffed with quarters, to today's ultra-monetized loot-box environments, VCGs are designed to coax maximum financial investment from players. Thanks to VCGs becoming established in bars, in malls and, later, in homes in the 1980s, digital gaming as an activity has long had its growth naturalized and justified: VCGs were and are "the future."⁴³ During the 1970s and 1980s, hobbyists of all genders would assemble their own personal computers, with computer programs and hardware being hawked in analog gaming magazines such as *Dragon*, and hobbyist analog games had advertisements in comics and in computer magazines. This overlap was part of what Jon Peterson calls the "elusive shift" in game cultures, when the science-fiction/fantasy communities and wargaming communities began to meld in the late 1970s to create modern geek culture.⁴⁴ In other words, VCGs were "the future," but hobbyist analog games were certainly present and along for the ride.

In the materials of most higher education games programs, however, the dollar value of the global VCG industry is all that bears mentioning, it seems. Students, parents, and other stakeholders are not presented the "renaissance" in board games and TRPGs that Arnaudo cites.⁴⁵ Here, we can observe a financial picture that extends from our objects of study to academia itself: a financialized higher-education establishment that prioritizes student enrollments and large donations or grants above all else.⁴⁶ In this environment, the curriculum and concurrent research interests are steered both toward those areas likely to attract student enrollments, and to "future-oriented" research programs likely to attract grants and donors. VCGs inheriting the mantle of "the future" despite vast recent innovations in analog games ensnares such programs into the shortsighted profit models of the corporate VCG industry. VCG media become thoroughly disenchanted, a sort of hollowed-out lure for undergraduates rather than serious objects deserving of study and investment. It would be very difficult to ask for tenure-track faculty lines in "analog games" when VCGs are already deployed rather cynically in the current system.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014), and Ian Bogost, *Play Anything: The Pleasure of Limits, the Uses of Boredom, and the Secret of Games* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

⁴¹ Brendan Keogh, *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018).

⁴² Gavin Divers, "Gaming Industry Dominates as the Highest Grossing Entertainment Industry," GamerHub (January 24, 2024) <https://gamerhub.co.uk/gaming-industry-dominates-as-the-highest-grossing-entertainment-industry/>

⁴³ Duke, *Gaming*.

⁴⁴ Jon Peterson, *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020).

⁴⁵ Arnaudo, "Analog Game History."

⁴⁶ Jeffrey J. Selingo, *College (Un)Bound: The Future of Higher Education and What It Means for Students* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2013).

⁴⁷ See, for example, Judd Ethan Ruggil's interview with Ken McAllister in this volume.

But perhaps most disappointing to me as a film scholar is the role that the discipline of film and media studies has played in the downgrading of analog game studies. For example, game designer and art historian Mary Flanagan sought to interweave contemporary game design to past art movements and analog traditions,⁴⁸ but her work has received far less attention than that of media scholar Mark J.P. Wolf, whose “integrated examination of imaginary worlds from a Media Studies perspective”—perhaps unintentionally—constructs a narrative leading from child’s play to tabletop games to literature to films, video games, and transmedia franchises.⁴⁹ Wolf’s media studies perspective is valuable, but board games and TRPGs are not simply a stepping stone to other media or virtual reality. Each are powerful forms in their own right. Bernard Perron joined forces with Wolf to create the *Video Game Studies Reader* series, which performs the bait-and-switch trick of bringing in games scholars with ample proficiency in both VCGs *and* analog games, only to solicit solely material on VCGs.⁵⁰

Sheila C. Murphy rightly argues that what we now call “new media”—video games among them—were more-or-less brought into being by way of television, itself a mass medium in thrall to the rhythms of radio before it.⁵¹ After increasingly cinematic games such as *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) were released, film and media studies interpreted video games as being within their overall purview, much like television, and set about wedding the discourse about VCGs to concepts of “screen media” or “immersive media.”⁵² If the concept of “analog” came into being thanks to the incursions of the digital, then so-called “new” media seems like terminology almost *deliberately* designed to bracket out analog media, despite analog media’s resurgence in importance and constitutive interrelation with the digital.⁵³

Even with major corporations such as Hasbro or Asmodee making games accessible to all in large retailers such as Target, board games are both terrific objects of mediation and terrible as *mass* media,⁵⁴ a central preoccupation of film and media studies. The chief stakeholders in analog games continue to be invested designers and community organizers,⁵⁵ whereas VCGs can count on a wider base of emotionally invested players who have also experienced, say, a more standardized experience than the average TRPG or larp. VCGs are more contained as media objects, profitable as industrial products, and teachable in an era



Figure 2: Arcade. Photo by Soheb Zaidi on Unsplash. Free to use.

⁴⁸ Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

⁴⁹ Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 12.

⁵⁰ Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf, eds. *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁵¹ Sheila C. Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

⁵² Jacquelyn Ford Morie and Kate McCallum, *Handbook of Research on the Global Impacts and Roles of Immersive Media* (Hershey: IGI Global, 2019).

⁵³ Sax, *The Revenge of Analog*, and Sterne, “Analog [draft].”

⁵⁴ Paul Booth, *Board Games as Media* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

⁵⁵ See, for example, Livingston and Wallis, *Board Games in 100 Moves*; Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*; and Appelcline, *Designers and Dragons*.

of streaming, “Let’s Play” video recaps, and instant-access downloading, all of which is additionally fetishized by venture-capital-funded tech culture. The stubborn materiality and cognitive investment of analog games confound a film and media studies establishment accustomed to certain flows of cultural production and distribution, even though our training in visual studies and the aesthetic framing of arguments should otherwise make us attend to the unique flows of analog gaming as well.

A final dimension to this discussion is the simple visual pleasure of VCGs. Analog games continue to enhance their box and cover art over time, just as VCGs deliver modest improvements in graphics quality. But perhaps it is the latter that draws the attention of the media scholar in the end: moving images, on a glowing screen. Images that one controls. Already in 1977, still during the relative infancy of the VCG as game mode, Len Buckwalter describes these images’ arresting quality:

The videogame's delight is that it's a computerized magic lantern. Dancing images radiate the kind of lure that attracted our grandparents to the nickelodeon and the stereopticon viewer. You can see it in the radio-TV department of almost any large store on a Saturday afternoon. Huddled around TV screens are people enchanted by the careening images, psychedelic colors, and digits that tot up the score with the authority of a cash register. Soon the spectators examine the price tag and make the connection: a videogame can illuminate their TV screen at home with the excitement of a penny arcade.”⁵⁶

We are unfortunately not in much of a different discursive space than 1977, even if the past 45 years of analog games developments, let alone VCGs, have been nothing short of seismic. Buckwalter is reading *his* cultural moment through the lens of late nineteenth-century entertainment technologies: games researchers connect with both the dancing images on the screen that they can manipulate with their own bodies, and the play cultures that supply meaning beyond the endogenous meaning of the game’s own rules structures. Moving beyond the dancing images requires an acknowledgement that, yes, we humans are the computing platforms, with “screens” in our imaginations, and that those media which activate these capacities within us are no less “media” for their oral, written, and pictorial nature.

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