

Refining and Redefining “Game Studies”

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Since its appearance around the late 1990s and early 2000s, “Game Studies” has pretty much come to mean the study of video games. At the same time, the term “Game Theory” has become ambiguous and context-dependent, meaning either theorizing about video games, or its older, original meaning referring to the mathematical modeling of rational decision-making and strategic interactions, as found in the work of mathematicians like John Von Neumann and John Nash. Certainly, there is good reason to suggest that the mathematical Game Theory should also be a part of anything we call “Game Studies”, as well as the study of the wide variety of games that exist beyond video games; and it is precisely this landscape that I wish to briefly survey here.

How did video games come to dominate the term “Game Studies”? In the early days the study of video games was establishing its legitimacy and seeking to become distinct from other disciplines like Film Studies. It shared many things in common with Film Studies, particularly from the late 1990s onward, when video games increasingly began adopting cinematic conventions, such as photorealistic graphics, three-dimensional worlds displayed on-screen, cut-scenes, opening title sequences and end credits sequences, and so forth; the high-profile games of the time seemed to aspire to become more cinematic, rather than become more like board games, card games, or other kinds of games. Around the same time, video game scholarship turned to the theorists of Play, namely Johann Huizinga, Roger Caillois, and Brian Sutton-Smith. Much of their writings applied to games of all kinds, and sometimes even more broadly to gamelike situations; but their work was easily adapted to the study of video games. Within the study of video games, there was also a variety of ways to refer to the subject of study; not only was there “video games” and “videogames” (considering them a peripheral technology like videotape or videodiscs), there was also “electronic games”, “computer games”, and “digital games”; with “electronic games” broad enough to include LED-based

and LCD-based handheld games, while the latter two terms referred to games played on home computers rather than home consoles. The terms “computer games” and “digital games” seemed more popular with European scholars, possibly because of how the spread of home computers rivalled the use home consoles as preferred gaming machines in Europe. So, without a single agreed-upon name, shortening the name of the field simply to “Game Studies” became a common solution to the problem of what to call the field, which we can see in the development, in 2001, of the first on-line journal devoted to video game scholarship, *Game Studies* at gamestudies.org.

The field of Game Studies has grown, but most journals and anthologies bearing the name are still largely devoted almost exclusively to the study of video games, which is only one area among many in the world of games. We might break the subject of Game Studies into a series of subfields, each studying different types of games: video games, audio games, tabletop games (which itself could be divided into further subsets of board games, card games, physical skill-based games, like Bagatelle, Pool or Tiddly Winks), sports games, casino games (many of which are akin to video games), arcade games (which include some video games, but also electromechanical games), alternate reality games, LARP, and other social kinds of games like Charades, and even the more broadly inclusive games covered by mathematical game theory. As even this very brief overview demonstrates, there is already much overlapping between these subfields, and even individual subfields, like video games, often have debates surrounding the exact meaning of terms and the demarcations they represent.

At present, many of these things are being studied, but some do not seem to be allowed under the umbrella of “Game Studies”. There are several books studying board games, for example, even though there are yet to specific college majors available for board game designers, much less board game studies scholars. “Game Studies” programs, Interactive Arts programs, and the like ought to broaden their scope to include more types of games outside of video games, even though video games are perhaps the most lucrative type of games one can go into for a career (barring, of course, professional sports, which relatively few can enter). It would also be interesting to see more Game Studies anthologies examining the links between these different areas of Game Studies, or at the very least, acknowledging them.

Perhaps it is just a matter of time; as the individual subfields grow by themselves, their boundaries will expand until they overlap other neighboring subfields, and when that happens, we will see more interaction between their scholars. Individual games can be, and have been, adapted between these different areas of games; video games can become board games and vice versa, board games can become card games (like *Clue: The Card Game* (2002) and *Monopoly Deal Card Game* (2008)), and so on, but even these adaptations have been overlooked by transmedia studies, which has typically been interested more in adaptations

between more distant and different types of media, like film, video games, and comics, rather than adaptations from one type of game to another. At any rate, there are still many vastly understudied areas of Game Studies, and much fertile ground for scholarship to be covered, within and between the many subfields that make up, or *should* make up, what we refer to as Game Studies.