

Considering the Sequel to Game Studies...

Aaron Trammell & Zack Lischer-Katz, guest editors

Like any good sequel, a band's sophomore album is replete with its own mythology. Often conceived as a cash grab while the success and clout of a band's first album keeps the audience interested, second albums are all high-highs and low-lows—they are the sound of youthful idealism crashing against the eternal stoicism of the industry. As such, sophomore albums are the definitive record of a band's growth, a snapshot of an interregnum between creative regimes. Sophomore albums are a way to work through the messiness of the past and to construct the new creative vistas essential to an imagined future.

This collection of essays was developed from presentations at *Extending Play: The Sequel*.¹ When considering the event, we were very much aware that it was the sophomore effort of the *Extending Play* conference series. As such, we took an ironic approach when drafting the abstract and call for papers that would be self-critical of the role of sequence, sequels, and iteration in contexts of play. We hoped to poke fun at our own iteration, while also calling attention to the degree to which game studies itself is meta-theoretically a sequel to play studies—a sequel that is still grappling with the pressures of industry (the still uncomfortably close relationship between game studies and the game industry), the academy (the scarcity of jobs versus the imperative to present and publish in an abundance of venues and conferences), and autonomy (#gamergate's post-DiGRA surveillance of game studies²). These various disciplinary pressures prompted us to consider how game studies had been captured by the logic of sequence and repetition, and whether or not this logic is productive.

We learned three lessons from re-staging *Extending Play*: First and foremost, it became clear that sequence is under-theorized and rarely considered as a theoretical site of inquiry. Compared to the first *Extending Play* where our goal was to re-envision play studies in a radically interdisciplinary fashion, with *The Sequel* we found a more specialized group of people interested in “playing” with sequence and iteration in their scholarship. Whereas some considered sequels literally, looking at sequels to movies and games, others grounded their work through a consideration of sequels and sequence in terms of the associated theoretical implications of such related concepts as return, rejuvenation, and reiteration. Throughout the conference, sequence could be seen to function within two major modalities, one that related to the material repetition and iteration of objects—within the space of industry and production—and a second that related to the (re)sequencing of ideas and ideology—within the sites of play.

The second lesson learned is that play is always already captured by the logic of sequence and iteration. While games clearly set order to wild and careening practices of play, play itself emerges within a sequence of past encounters and experiences. To play is to imitate, to iterate, to reiterate, to repeat, to reinforce, to resist, and to insist. Through repetition, play becomes habitual and is therefore the manifestation of the sequential logic of physical and physiological development. Although this insight has been gleaned, in part, from psychologist Jean Piaget's work on play and early childhood development, many papers presented at *The Sequel* offer conceptualizations of play that challenge Piaget's often too neat compartmentalization of play, bodies, and culture, instead considering play through an integrative lens that acknowledges the interpenetration and irreducibility of play/bodies/culture.³ For instance, we see in Samuel Tobin's essay that even bodies loitering in the spaces of arcades are *at play*, and in Erin McNeil's article, where play is considered within the sequential unfolding of art history, we see that play iterates and repurposes prior cultural foundations and is replicated across a broad spectrum of individuals and objects.

The third and final lesson that we have learned by staging our sequel is that controversial

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events in games culture can implicate play in the replication of ideology. Although this may seem obvious to many critical studies scholars, a case study bears mentioning. #gamergate⁴ requires the sequel to game studies to rethink how it interacts with some of its earlier work. Specifically, as the ludologists group (Aarseth, Frasca, Juul) sought to disambiguate themselves from the more narratively and culturally interested scholarship of the narratologist group (Laurel, Murray, and Jenkins), game studies scholarship set games within the binary trap of either representational or procedural. Thus, a strong argument was made for the study of games without representation. And although many would locate their scholarship within a middle ground to this binary in the years that followed, the sequencing of #gamergate forces a conversation around representation, identity, and power in all of our work. It haunts game studies like a specter.

Let's briefly consider the three elements embedded in the rallying cry of #gamergate in order to reveal the tensions embedded within the social and political economies of games, and by extension, game studies:

- As a **hashtag**, #gamergate denotes collectivity, anonymity, trolling, and tricksterism—things that are now spliced into and replicated throughout the DNA of digital, social media.
- With the historical emergence of the “**gamer**” we find a social label without definable origin, constituted by a nebulous constituency of followers. Certainly, we can find some traces of the term in the many magazines published in the 80s and 90s around games and home computing, but it is invoked there as a form of marketing magic—a way to produce a loyal audience of game buyers, interpellating consumers for the electronic commodities of late capitalist production.
- The third reference embedded in #gamergate is distinctly the **Watergate Scandal**, and the questioning of the infrastructures of democracy and rule of law that it wrought. Here, the legitimacy of American politics in the 1970s was brought into serious doubt. Watergate spoke to a moment when elected officials were unveiled to be gaming our political and economic systems. It was not play itself that ruined politics, but Watergate revealed how politics had become a game that was rigged from the start. It revealed that the game provided key players with networks of power, advantages, anonymity, fall guys, publicity teams, money, and, the ultimate cheat code for invincibility, presidential pardons. Since then, the –gate suffix has generated a sequence of sequels, each one reveling in new presumptions of corruption, and each presenting further evidence of the gaming of the system.

#gamergate is a strange iteration—it is, in fact, a confluence of the anonymous collectivity of social media, the consumer cultures built to sell computer and video games, and the fact that we live in a world where neither corporations nor politicians make the rules. #gamer-

gate defines our present moment of ludic anxiety by revealing how the multiple procedures, systems, and institutions we surround ourselves with are, in fact, devoid of an ethical foundation and are as corruptible as the players they are tasked with regulating. It unveils a game world found to be ethically debased because its constituents believe in the authority of systems that are now revealed to have been rigged in order to support the ends of capital and the replication of white supremacy and patriarchy—and the revelation of a rigged game loses its sense of fair play...

It is only by reimagining a future where game studies “sequels” multiply as needed that we can begin to imagine how to grasp the future of games and their study. Having considered how #gamergate problematizes the sequential logic of game studies, we can now begin to consider new directions the field might turn to in its wake. This special issue is a speculative pitch for a sequence of sequels to game studies that could/should/will happen, but have not yet come to pass.

Two conversations sit alongside the various essays included in this issue. These conversations are transcriptions of the two *Extending Play* keynotes. Both keynotes question the degree to which games can constitute a radical medium. They interrogate the intersection of games and ideology, and question the degree to which play might serve as a way out of the ideological trap.

First, critical media scholars Adrienne Shaw and Marcus Boon investigate how ideology permeates every aspect of games, play, and the work of scholarship. In their talk, “The Replication of Ideology,” Boon asserts that we are always already saturated with ideology, and so the politics of iteration must always be called into question. Shaw offers a sharp critique of the game industry as she points to how the culture industry produces and reproduces a limited space for social representation in games. Shaw and Boon envision a future in which game scholars take into account the degree to which the invisible contours of power are always acting upon us even when we are at play.

Despite the pervasive momentum of power within and around all games, radical play critics Anna Anthropy and Miguel Sicart consider how to resist the hegemony of games in their conversation “Liberating Play.” Here, Anthropy and Sicart challenge the embeddedness of games within the discipline of game studies and consider how lessons learned from play studies might curb stagnation in the field. Both call the status of the game as object into question as they ask us to consider why we treat our games, consoles, and computers with such austere respect. They consider radical new ways to subvert conventions, think outside of the console, and play with ludic concepts anew!

Picking up on the role of ideology in structuring play, Samuel Tobin’s article, “Hanging in the Video Arcade,” recovers the video game arcade as a contested disciplinary site through an analysis of non-players. Tobin challenges the tendency of game studies to forget what

is lost when we only focus on the technology surrounding games, namely the rich cultural and historical contexts that have surrounded games and playing. He imagines a sequel to the study of arcades, one in which the lurkers, workers, and non-players get the spotlight of analysis. He asks why study what's inside video arcade cabinets and the players who pump endless rolls of quarters into them when there are rich discussions to be had about the social practices of labor and leisure going on around them. Particularly resonant in the present moment of bar-cades and retro-arcades, Tobin's essay shows us how considering the culture of "hanging" in the arcade is just as important for understanding game history as the culture of playing.

While Tobin encourages us to think outside of the game object in a speculative sequel to game studies, Lindsey Joyce's essay "Assessing *Mass Effect 2* and *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*" challenges us to find new frameworks for reconciling traditional analytic strategies for analyzing games. By developing and refining an analytic framework for studying iterative narratives, Joyce reimagines the ludology versus narrative debate, showing us how agency is fundamental to our understanding of both play and narrative. By situating agency at the heart of player practices and level design, Joyce asks us to imagine games as agential systems that play with player expectations just as much as they are played with.

While perhaps Joyce's vision of ludic agency may at times become overly optimistic, other visions of game studies in this collection consider how game studies must contend with the iteration of warfare within mass-market video games. Ansh Patel's essay, "Imperialism in the Worlds and Mechanics of First-Person Shooters," offers insights into the degree to which the game worlds and mechanics in first-person shooter games must be regarded as replicating imperialist logics. Performing a close reading of *Far Cry 2* and *Far Cry 3*, Patel captures warfare as it unfolds in iterative game franchises, and questions how earlier subversive narratives around warfare vanish as the industry churns out sequels.

Erin McNeil's essay, "Ludic Spolia," cuts to the heart of the military-entertainment complex by demonstrating how ancient practices of warfare have migrated into the design practices of the game industry. Just as the concept *spolia* has its etymological and historical roots in the Roman's "spoils" of war, McNeil shows how the design practices of game asset re-use can be seen to have antecedents in the ancient practice of spoliation—where the art and architectural artifacts of one civilization are captured and repurposed by its conquerors. "Ludic Spolia" draws on the history of art and design to bring the concept of *spoliation* to game studies for use as a rich analytic concept for considering how game industry practices of reusing and repurposing game elements shape the replication of game sequels.

Gillian Smith considers another possible future of game studies in her essay "A Proceduralist Approach to Diversity in Games." In her essay, Smith brings Judith Butler's theory of performativity into conversation with Ian Bogost's conceptualization of procedural rhetoric. She considers the space of possibility that emerges when player performance meets algorithmic

performativity and imagines an ethic of design that might better accommodate the needs of players from diverse backgrounds. She asks questions about how systems and algorithms perform race, class, and gender, and thus reveals the invisible politics of computational media through this analysis.

Each of these “sequels” presented here in this special issue helps us to pave the way for a new self-critical game studies sequel—a sequel that reflects on its own position in the replication of ideology, and thus offers critical perspectives on the risks it runs of replicating inequality and reconstituting power structures, risks dramatically articulated by scandals such as #gamergate. The very political economic conditions, concretized within restrictive regimes of intellectual property rights, privilege cultural replication over radical innovation. More importantly, a consideration of sequels, sequence, iteration, and replication draws important focus to the ways in which games may replicate structures of inequality. In the sequel that is game studies, we must be careful not to let the fog of ideology veil our scholarly interventions within the world of sequels and repetition, or forget how the loss of legitimacy of our social institutions can contribute to unreflective cynicism. Instead we must continue positioning our work as critical interventions in an unequal world, one where all the games are rigged, and agency can be only located elsewhere...say, the ruins of long-forgotten arcades.

So let us be playful as we critically engage with a world of sequels, and let us never forget our role in the unveiling of ideology, as we reimagine the future of game studies together.

Acknowledgements

This collection was written with the support of a Refiguring Feminism in Games (ReFiG) grant.

The authors would like to thank the following folks whose endless support made *Extending Play: The Sequel* possible: Frank Bridges, Steph Mikitish, Katie McCollough, Andrew Salvati, Fanny Ramirez, James Hodges, Nadav Lipkin, Ian Dunham, Marie Haverfield, Weixu Lu, Charlie File, Heewon Kim, Si Sun, Peter Sutton, Teis Kristensen, John Leustek, Sarah Barriage, Fredrika Thelandersson, Thiam Huat Kam, Bryce Menninger, Xiaofeng Li, Jacob Sanchez, Jennifer Sonne, and Jonathan Bullinger. This one was bigger, better, and more original, team. Thanks!

Endnotes

1. *Extending Play: The Sequel* took place on April 17th and 18th, 2015 at Rutgers University.
2. For a recap on the surveillance of game studies via #gamergate, please see Adrienne Shaw

and Shira Chess's (2015) excellent article "A conspiracy of fishes, or, How we learned to stop worrying about #GamerGate and embrace hegemonic masculinity."

3. See the chart on p. x of Jean Piaget's (1999) *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Early Childhood*.

4. To learn more about the more public events which constitute #gamergate, please see Jay Hathaway's (2014) "What is Gamergate and why? An explainer for non-geeks."

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