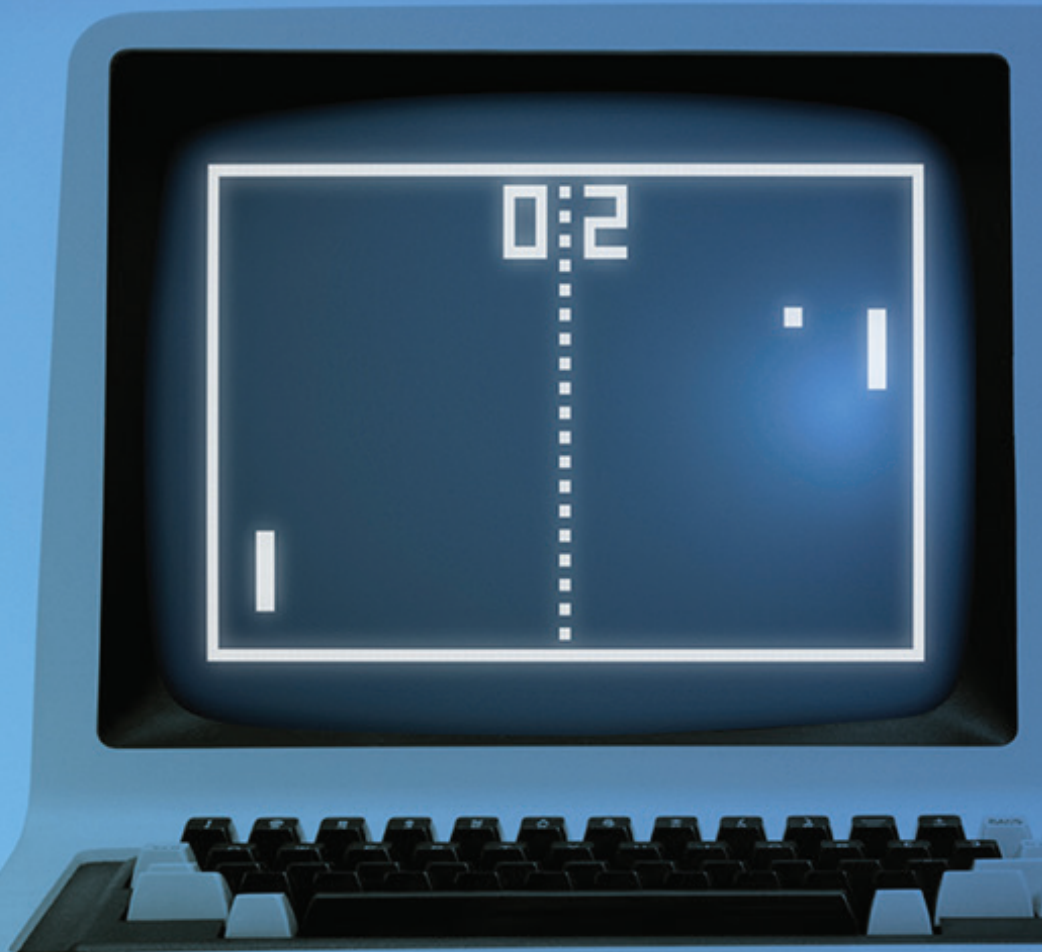


VIDEO GAMES AS CULTURE

Considering the Role and Importance of
Video Games in Contemporary Society

DANIEL MURIEL AND
GARRY CRAWFORD



There are only a few works that aim for a comprehensive mapping of what games as a culture are, and how their complex social and cultural realities should be studied, as a whole. Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford have done so, analyzing both games, players, associated practices, and the broad range of socio-cultural developments that contribute to the ongoing ludification of society. Ambitious, lucid, and well-informed, this book is an excellent guide to the field, and will no doubt inspire future work.

Frans Mäyrä, *Professor of Information Studies and Interactive Media,*
University of Tampere

This book provides an insightful and accessible contribution to our understanding of video games as culture. However, its most impressive achievement is that it cogently shows how the study of video games can be used to explore broader social and cultural processes, including identity, agency, community, and consumption in contemporary digital societies. Muriel and Crawford have written a book that transcends its topic, and deserves to be read widely.

Aphra Kerr, *Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Maynooth University*

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VIDEO GAMES AS CULTURE

Video games are becoming culturally dominant. But what does their popularity say about our contemporary society? This book explores video game culture, but in doing so, utilizes video games as a lens through which to understand contemporary social life.

Video games are becoming an increasingly central part of our cultural lives, impacting on various aspects of everyday life such as our consumption, communities, and identity formation. Drawing on new and original empirical data – including interviews with gamers, as well as key representatives from the video game industry, media, education, and cultural sector – *Video Games as Culture* not only considers contemporary video game culture, but also explores how video games provide important insights into the modern nature of digital and participatory culture, patterns of consumption and identity formation, late modernity, and contemporary political rationalities.

This book will appeal to undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as postdoctoral researchers, interested in fields such as Video Games, Sociology, and Media and Cultural Studies. It will also be useful for those interested in the wider role of culture, technology, and consumption in the transformation of society, identities, and communities.

Daniel Muriel is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow and Lecturer at the Leisure Studies Institute, University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain.

Garry Crawford is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Salford, Manchester, UK.

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For Victoria, Joseph, and Grace – G.C.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the outcome of over three years' research. It has been a long and sometimes difficult journey, yet a very gratifying one. Although, as long-term gamers and scholars we were already well-aware of the growing importance of video games in today's world, this process has helped us to more fully realize and explore just how significant video games are for understanding contemporary society. Video games are undoubtedly an important part of our cultural landscape, and as with other media forms, such as films, music, television, or books, are increasingly becoming embedded in our everyday lives and impacting on other areas of social life. But video games are more than just another media product. Video games, we suggest, are also informing and driving the very culture that determines our lifestyles, meanings, and relationships. That is why this book is about not just video game *culture*, but rather also, and more than this, video games *as* culture.

It is almost an impossible task to thank everyone and everything (we must acknowledge, at least generically, the importance of our fellow non-humans) that made this book possible. We will try our best, though.

As rewarding as doing research is, this usually needs some form of material support, and mostly typically, money. Therefore, we need to thank the Basque Government and its Postdoctoral Programme for their funding support and for making the research and the meeting of these authors possible. In relation to this institutional support, we also wish to thank the University of Salford – in particular the Directorate of Society in the School of Health and Society, and the University of the Basque Country – and the Department of Sociology 2, in particular the research centre 'Social Change, Precarity, and Identity in Contemporary Society'. In Salford, we would particularly like to thank Muzammil Quraishi, Gaynor Bagnall, Victoria Gosling, Ben Light, Christopher Birkbeck, Anthony Ellis, Steve Myers, and Carlos Frade. In the Basque Country, we would particularly like to thank Joseba García Martín, Ivana Ruíz Estramil, Ander Mendiguren, Iñaki Robles,

Carlos García Grados, and Benjamín Tejerina. In both places, their help, conversations, and views – including shared thoughts, coffees, and meals – were always inspiring and refreshing (and this goes beyond the book and the topics it covers). We think that Ying-Ying Law, from Salford, deserves a special mention; we both were lucky enough (alongside Victoria Gosling) to have her as a PhD candidate, and from whom we learnt probably more than she would concede or imagine. Also, we are particularly fond of the many fruitful discussions with Iñaki Martínez de Albeniz and Diego Carbajo (Basque Country), full of video games, brownies, candies, donkeys, mediations, and *agencements*.

Besides funding, institutional and material support, social research would not be possible without those who kindly agree to participate in it. Their generosity to help us better understand the vicissitudes of video game culture from such a diverse and range of points of views was astounding. The research participants offered rich, varied, and insightful knowledge; we hope to have done it, and them, justice. For obvious methodological and ethical reasons, we cannot thank them personally by name, but we would like to acknowledge their fundamental contribution to our research and this book. We owe you a lot. What we can do is to personally thank Karla Zimonja, Pawel Miechowski, and Victor Somoza, not only for participating in the research, but for being so kind (and brave) by letting us use their ‘real’ names in the book to facilitate the connection of their discourse with their work. We really appreciate your kindness and openness.

If research needs funding and participants, a book needs a publishing house. In this sense, we would like to express our gratitude to Routledge for placing their trust in our work. Specifically, we would like to thank Emily Briggs – Editor for Sociology, who showed her interest in our research from the outset and whose help was fundamental in bringing our work to Routledge; and Elena Chiu – Editorial Assistant for Sociology, who has accompanied us during a big part of this endeavour and has always offered her help. Both Emily and Elena have always been very kind and supportive, so we hope they are as proud of this book as we are.

We are also grateful to those video game publishers and developers that were open to our questions and gave us permission to use their video games’ images (whether their games are directly cited in the book or not). Our thanks to Sony PlayStation (Cameron Wood, Ignacio Rodrigo), Square Enix (Ian Dickinson), Bethesda (Alistair Hatch), Fulbright (Karla Zimonja), 11 bit studios (Pawel Miechowski), Lucas Pope, Campo Santo (Erin Yvette), Robert Yang, EA Maxis (Nicole Rauschnot), Nordic Games (Reinhard Pollice), Frictional Games, Funcom (Tor Egil Andersen), Red Thread Games, Bloober Team (Rafał Basaj), Failbetter Games (Hannah Flynn), IMG.N.PRO (Jakub Ryłko), Tale of Tales (Michael Samyn), Giant Sparrow (Ian Dallas, Janelle Grai), and Everything Unlimited (Davey Wreden).

Furthermore, any research or book in progress needs to be debated and scrutinized by the public eye in order to test its limits and detect any shortcomings. In this sense, we have expounded our findings in different academic spaces, including seminars, conferences, courses, and symposia. Events where early drafts of our work were presented at include: The British Sociological Association

Annual Conference in Glasgow (Scotland), the joint DiGRA-FDG conference in Dundee (Scotland), the Directorate of Social Sciences Research Seminar Series at the University of Salford, both the Research Seminar Masters and the Research Seminar for Undergraduates at the University of the Basque Country, the Cabueñas International Youth Conference in Gijón (Spain), the Sociology of the Ordinary Meeting in Madrid (Spain), the Workshop Identity and Video Games at Carlos III University in Madrid (Spain), and the 2nd Forum on Social Change in Santander (Spain). We would like to thank the organizers and delegates at each of the events, at which we came across a multitude of enthusiastic scholars and individuals interested in our research, who exceed our capacity to mention them here. Nevertheless, we would like to thank them all, and in particular (even at risk of forgetting many names) Carlos Gurpegui, Chuso Montero, Antonio Planells, Daniel Escandell, Justyna Janik, Alexander Muscat, Daniel Vella, Óliver Pérez-Latorre, César Díaz, Jorge González, Ruth García, Josué Monchán, Claire Dormann, Iris Rodríguez Alcaide, Adam Duell, Karl Spracklen, Elena Casado, Amparo Lasén, Antonio García, Rubén Blanco, Pablo Santoro, Luca Carrubba, and Miguel Sicart.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary culture through the lens of video games

Introduction

In the new preface for the 2010 edition of the first volume of the book *The Information Age*, Manuel Castells (2010: xvii) states that we ‘live in confusing times, as is often the case in periods of historical transition between different forms of society’. It is difficult not to agree with this statement, but that is probably because we always live in confusing times: we are perpetually between different forms of society. Almost two decades into the twenty-first century and the diagnosis has not changed; social reality is the outcome of complex and major transformations that affect how we experience, think, and act within contemporary society.

The main task of sociologists is to understand the social reality that surrounds them. The social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, are concerned with a particularly sensitive area of study because they affect a portion of reality – the social – that heavily influences how we are as individuals and groups, societies and communities, citizens and human beings. Sociology dangerously participates in the construction of regimes of knowledge – or even of *truth* – that determine the social life and its structure. In this sense, Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron (1991: 69) suggest that ‘the frontier between common knowledge and science is more blurred than elsewhere’. This *proximity* between the sociologist and their object of study brings about several risks, and not least a conflation between the knowledge generated by the academic and that produced by other social actors.

However, precisely because society and sociology are so intertwined, there is room for using this proximity as an epistemological vantage point; that is, it is a position, or lens, we can use to try to better understand contemporary social reality. As Georg Simmel (2004: 53) proposed more than a century ago, society can be found even in the most, apparently, insignificant interactions: the work of research thus lies in the possibility of ‘finding in each of life’s details the totality of

2 Introduction

its meaning' (Simmel, 2004: 53). We do not claim that in this book we will be able to grasp the totality of contemporary social life, but we can certainly shed new light on important aspects of contemporary society through the study of video game¹ culture.

Of course, the (very valid) argument could be made that one cannot discuss a single and coherent video game 'culture'. The argument has often rightly been made that we cannot homogenize video games, their players, and their culture. It is, of course, obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge of video games that playing a game such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) on a personal computer is very different to playing *Call of Duty* (Activision, Infinity Ward, 2003–to date) on a games console, which is vastly different to playing *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012) on a mobile phone. Similarly, how video games are played and experienced in the UK is very different to how this happens and is socially located in, for example, India (see Chhina, 2016). This is, of course, something we recognize and acknowledge, and seek to elaborate in this book. Video game culture is diverse, complex, and constantly evolving. Hence, we recognize that it is problematic to talk about a singular video game culture. All cultures are complex and never static, and inevitably video game culture is the same. Nonetheless, just as we can at a certain level discuss the contemporary nature of 'British culture' or 'Spanish culture', we can articulate an area of study, even if this is at the level of the imagination, that is video game culture. As Simmel (1964) argues, it is obvious that in the same way that we can talk about the behaviour of the Greeks and the Persians in the Battle of Marathon without knowing the behaviour of each and every individual involved, it is possible to separate – if only analytically – form (video game culture in general) and content (the concrete cases: the different types of video games, styles of play, gamers, platforms, social contexts, and so forth).

The fundamental premise of this book is that there is a growing and consolidating video game culture (understood as the institutionalization of video game practices, experiences, and meanings), which permeates our societies, and provides a significant lens from which we can analyze wider social issues in contemporary society. Video games are therefore understood as an expression of life and culture in late modernity. Hence, this book provides an important perspective for understanding video games as experience, culture, and sociotechnical assemblage, but it also provides a consideration of how video games and their culture can help us understand aspects of social life such as work, education, culture, agency, power, experience, empathy, and identity in today's world. In particular, the book introduces complex notions that affect contemporary society through video game culture, making these ideas more tangible and accessible.

This book, then, makes an original and novel contribution to knowledge, particularly in the fields of sociology, media and cultural studies, and game studies. In this sense, the book employs insights from a range of social actors implicated and influential in various areas of video game culture. While most research in this field tends to focus on a particular aspect of gaming, or a particular type of social actor such as certain kinds of video gamers, developers, or other professionals of the

industry, this research considers the roles and attitudes of those in various positions ranging from casual to avid gamers, to games designers, journalists, and also those often missing from research in this field, such as games academics, and those involved in the wider cultural interpretation of games, such as museum directors. This text also integrates a number of key concepts and ideas frequently employed in game studies, but rarely is their meaning, value, or use fully elaborated. Thus, the book pushes game studies into a number of scarcely explored areas, and sets out new theoretical and methodological frameworks for the analysis of video games, gamers, and video game culture.

Why video games?

So why and how do video games and their culture allow us to understand wider social issues? Primarily, the decision to study video games in order to understand contemporary society and the transformations that define it is based on four key assumptions:

1. Video games are an undoubtedly contemporary reality;
2. Video games embody some of the most important aspects of contemporary society;
3. Video games are established cultural products;
4. There is a growing and consolidating video game culture.

First, video games are, undoubtedly, a contemporary reality. If the aim of this book is to shed light on key aspects of contemporaneity from a sociological and cultural and media studies point of view, the universe of video games is then an excellent field to help us illustrate those aspects. The phenomenon of video games has only been relevant, at least socially speaking, since the 1980s (Kirkpatrick, 2015). From then onwards, video games have grown exponentially, especially in the last decade or so, with the so-called 'casual revolution' (Juul, 2010), and the expansion of video gaming to mobile devices and online social networking sites, such as, most notably, Facebook. Video games are postmodern, and as such, contain promises of a coming new reality:

Digital games emerged in an era when discourses of the post-industrial and the post-modern dominated and when existing public regulation of the media and communications institutions was being dismantled. [...] It is perhaps unsurprising that they should at the same time hold out the promise of new spaces for sociality, virtuality and identity construction while also embodying fears about the increasing levels of violence, individualisation and consumption in society.

(Kerr, 2006: 2)

This then directs us to our second reason, which is to suggest that video games are a key vantage point from which to approach the ongoing crucial transformations

4 Introduction

of society. In this sense, video games embody some of the most important aspects of wider society such as a pervasive digital culture, the hegemony of neoliberal political rationalities, the emergence of participatory culture, and the rise of new modes of meaning construction, to name but a few. We face a world that has been completely inundated by digital technology (Castells, 2010), which affects our social lives in multiple and significant ways (Gere, 2008), and mediates how we interact with our environment. Video games, digital by definition, are bound to be one of the most important cultural products of this digital age (Kirby, 2009); which turns them into one of the best entry points to understand digital culture. Similarly, video games reflect and reproduce the hegemonic political rationalities of contemporary society, those of neoliberalism, in which individuals are governed through their freedom to choose, and responsibility is bestowed upon the individual (Rose, 1999). The central role attributed to the video game player as the demiurge of what happens in the act of playing video games, reinforces this position. However, video game culture also involves more collaborative and participatory rationalities and cultures: it is a 'participatory culture' (Jenkins, 2006), which can be defined as the culture that enables ordinary consumers to actively participate in the construction and modification of media content. Video game culture is full of participatory potential, such as the production or use of wikis, tutorials, walkthroughs, fan fiction, cosplay, modding, and much more (Newman, 2008). Finally, video games also exemplify how identities are formed today; the 'gamer' category and the communities that are built around video games are clear examples of fluid, multiple, and fragmented identities (Bauman, 2004; Giddens 1991), to the point that they anticipate post-identity scenarios (Agamben, 1993).

Third, video games appear as one of the most relevant cultural products and objects of our time. If, as Kirby (2009) suggests, digimodernism is the hegemonic cultural logic of contemporary society and both the video game and the video gamer are its principal object and subject, then studying video game culture provides us with the key tools with which to understand our contemporary cultural landscape. The video game industry is a thriving culture industry that is becoming hegemonic in the field. Revenues of video game companies are higher each year (Chatfield, 2011; ESA, 2016) and do not seem to have reached their peak. Statistics tell us that video games are played by increasing numbers of people, regardless of their demographics (ESA, 2017; Ukie, 2017). In a similar way, video game exhibitions and museums (Antonelli, 2013), along with conferences, festivals, tournaments, and all sorts of events on video games (Taylor, 2012; Law, 2016) have proliferated in the last few years. Also, not only have the number of specialized websites on video games vastly increased in number, but also the traditional media has started to regularly include sections dedicated to video games. Additionally, a multitude of jobs, courses, and degrees focusing on the development, design, and study of video games have emerged in the sectors of education and work (Kerr, 2017). In relation to the academic world, the emergence of the discipline of games studies (Aarseth, 2001; Wolf and Perron, 2015), along with a growing interest in studying video games from a wide range of disciplines (social sciences, humanities,

arts, natural and technical sciences) corroborate the relevance of video games in our contemporary society.

Finally, it can be argued that there is a growing and consolidating video game culture (Mäyrä, 2008; Crawford, 2012) understood as the institutionalization of video game practices, experiences, and meanings in contemporary society, which permeates almost every corner of the social fabric. This means that many aspects of our society can be increasingly understood in terms of video games, that is, we are in a growing process of the videoludification of society (Raessens, 2010; Walz and Deterding, 2014; Zimmerman, 2014; Mäyrä, 2017). Not only do video games reflect wider social issues, but they also shape those social matters and drive their transformation. This can be seen in how certain areas of social reality are being gamified, that is, the use of game elements – particularly from video games – applied to other fields such as, education, labour, therapy, business, warfare, academia, and social relationships. Social reality is turned into a (video) game, and, in doing so, video game culture significantly affects society as a whole. Therefore, though there might be social actors that ignore video games as culture, the culture of video games is affecting them. It is affecting all of us, regardless.

For all these reasons, this book advocates and explores the value of video games as a focus and tool for understanding wider social and cultural changes and processes. It is therefore an exploration of *video game culture*, *video games in culture*, and *video games as culture*.

Methods

From a methodological point of view, the research on which this book is based builds on an actor–network theory approach, in accordance with the works of Latour (2007) or Law (2004), focusing especially on the innovative aspects of a digital ethnography (Hine, 2000), and how it intertwines with more traditional methods (Thornham, 2011). This approach seeks to focus not only on social agents or actors and their discourses, but also on their ways of doing and proceeding. For example, this is why the interviews included questions about the interviewees' regular activities, aims, and feelings, along with more theoretical interrogations about their views on certain issues related to video game culture.

Hence, this book draws on data gathered from ethnographic research on video game culture, conducted between January 2014 and June 2017. This employed a mixture of research tools including the use of formal semi-structured interviews, observations, informal interviews, a focused engagement with video game culture online and offline, and the use of play as a method of research. All the data gathered is used to illustrate, and give voice and weight, to the arguments and ideas we set out in the book.

In order to gather a wide range of opinions of various social actors, the research involved semi-structured interviews with 28 participants in Germany, Sweden, Luxembourg, and the United States, but primarily, in the UK and Spain – some face-to-face, but most commonly via Skype. The interviewees were categorized, by

the researchers, to broadly include individuals from a range of video game-related roles or groups. This includes, (but is not limited to) video gamers, developers (such as designers, programmers, and artists), academics, journalists, website contributors and bloggers, and those in the arts and culture sector. It is important to note that these categories are only an analytical tool, and were simply used to gather a broad range of actors implicated within video game culture. These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive or even clearly bounded. Therefore, significantly, where most empirical studies of video game culture focus on only a particular type or role of actor, such as video game players, developers, or journalists, this book explores the nature of this culture and its networks from multiple perspectives.

The aim of this varied pool of participants is to grasp – on a small but detailed scale as we are using an in-depth qualitative and ethnographic approach – the diversity of actors that are part of video game culture. Our purpose is not to establish differences between video game industry professionals and video gamers, or between individuals from different nationalities or backgrounds (which are taken into account, nonetheless), but to study video game culture as a whole and its impact on society. All participants cited in the research have been given pseudonyms except three interviewees who appear with their real names, with their explicit consent, in order to be able to refer to their works with more freedom. This is the case for: Paweł Miechowski, senior writer at 11 bit studios, developers of *This War of Mine* (2014); Karla Zimonja, co-founder of Fullbright, developers of *Gone Home* (2013), and Víctor Somoza, director of the documentary on video games *Memorias: más allá del juego*, which translates into English as *Memories: Beyond the Game*.²

With regard to ‘video gamers’, the interviewees were purposefully sampled according to their (self-defined) various levels of involvement within video game culture and their own identification as (or not) a ‘gamer’. For example, some of them were highly involved in aspects of video game culture and self-identified as gamers, while others were less active and did not necessarily label themselves as gamers. The interviewees who were members of the video game industry were chosen again to provide a range of participants according to their role within the industry (such as, managers, programmers, designers, artists, and marketing), type of company (size, if they are developers and/or publishers), and the kind of video games they worked with (AAA, indie, free-to-play games). The interviewees categorized as belonging to ‘the media’ were again purposefully selected in relation to their primary type of medium (primarily print or online), and the role they play in that particular media form. Finally, we interviewed individuals working in the ‘arts and culture’ sector relating to video games, such as directors of video game museums.

Additionally, gender and age were also taken into consideration to try and again get a diverse range of participants, which provided us with a sample age range of 24–54 and a gender divide of 7 women and 21 men (among video gamers the divide was fifty–fifty). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically. Also, notes were taken from more informal conversations and communications with the interviewees and fed into the research; for example, information about their work and experiences. See Table 1.1, which sets out the list of interviewees

and some basic information. In the book, in each chapter, the pseudonyms of the interviewees and some basic information is provided the first time they are mentioned, then after that, we only refer to them using their pseudonym.

In part, this research is also autoethnographic. Both of the authors identify as gamers, and both have been playing video games since early childhood. Hence, the research elicits and draws on the authors' own gaming knowledge and experiences; however, the decision was made to engage more deeply with video game culture, and play games much more regularly and analytically, during the research period. Over the entire period of the project, detailed research diaries were kept, documenting this (auto)ethnographic process, including thoughts, observations, play sessions, and informal conversations.

TABLE 1.1 List of interviews

<i>Interviewee</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Gender</i>
Albert	Developer, artist	25	Male
Alfred	Strong identification as gamer, highly involved	26	Male
Ander	Not identified as gamer, loosely involved	33	Male
Carl	Strong identification as gamer, highly involved	28	Male
Conan	Youtuber, games, and films critic	23	Male
Dante	Head of a video game website	31	Male
Darius	Developer, game designer, indie	28	Male
Edward	Head of a Masters' on video games	54	Male
Elisabeth	Not identified as gamer, loosely involved	25	Female
Emmett	Head of video game cultural site	48	Male
Federico	Head of community management department, online games	31	Male
George	Developer, level designer, AAA games	42	Male
Iker	Not identified as gamer, loosely involved	43	Male
Jack	Coordinator of two degree programs on video games development	46	Male
Javier	Developer, game designer, big company	32	Male
Jill	Mild identification as gamer, loosely involved	26	Female
John	Former pro gamer, manager of pro gamer team	32	Male
Karla Zimonja	Co-founder of Fullbright, game artist, <i>Gone Home</i>	37	Female
Laura	Developer, artist, indie games	26	Female
María	Translator, player experience, online games	39	Female
Marta	Mild identification as gamer, highly involved	24	Female
Noel	Developer, programmer and game designer	24	Male
Pablo	Developer, programmer, AAA games	35	Male
Patxi	Developer, programmer and game designer, indie, and AAA	38	Male
Pawel Miechowski	Co-founder of 11 bit studios, senior writer, <i>This War of Mine</i>	40	Male
Robert	Head of video game cultural site	47	Male
Víctor Somoza	Director of a documentary on video games, <i>Memories: Beyond the Game</i>	27	Male
Zelda	Mild identification as gamer, highly involved	25	Female

This research then involved the use of play as a method of research (see Mäyrä, 2008; Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011; Karppi and Sotamaa, 2012; van Vught and Glas, 2017). In this sense, and following actor–network theory, video games are also seen as active ‘participants’ in this research. Frans Mäyrä (2008: 165) argues that playing games is the ‘most crucial element in any methodology of game studies’. Hence, it is argued by several authors that in order to fully understand video games, it is essential that the researcher plays them. However, how a researcher plays and analyzes a game can vary greatly. It is not our intention here to set out a full consideration of the value, limitations, and use of play as a research tool, as others, such as Jasper van Vught and René Glas (2017) already offer an excellent overview of this method; nevertheless, it is important here to at least briefly highlight some of the main features of what is still a largely new and innovative research method, as well as setting out our own particular approach here.

In particular, van Vught and Glas (2017) set out a categorization of ways of using play as a research method, organized around the two axes: focus and style. In terms of focus, van Vught and Glas suggest that researchers can adopt what they term an ‘object’ or ‘process’ focus. They categorize an object approach as research that focuses on games as a specific object or a text that are analyzed to understand their structure or content. This can then draw on a more literary tradition, and consider a game’s narrative or iconography, for example, or a more ludology-inspired approach and focus on aspects of the game such as its structure and rules. A process approach involves ‘pushing the analysis past a focus on either the player or the game and towards the various forces and connections holding up the assemblage of games as processes’ (van Vught and Glas, 2017: 3). This then provides a more contextual approach, which locates games, players, and the researcher within a wider socio-cultural framework and understanding.

Next, van Vught and Glas (2017) highlight, how the researcher chooses to play the game, matters. Here they contrast ‘instrumental’ and ‘free’ styles of play. Instrumental play is where the researcher seeks to survey the full range of possibilities in the game, such as exploring all game areas or styles of play. In contrast, free play is where the researcher seeks to subvert the preferred reading of the game, and instead engages in ‘transgressive play’ (Karppi and Sotamaa, 2012), such as cheating, and pushing the boundaries of the game to see what is possible.

Of course, the model set out by van Vught and Glas (2017) is largely an analytical tool, and many researchers combine or blur the lines between different styles of play; and, as with most game scholars, our particular approach does not necessarily neatly fit into one particular type. As sociologists, and also given the particular focus of this book and our theoretical approach to this, we do mostly adopt a *process* orientated approach, which seeks to analyze games as actors within a wider social framework. However, in doing so, we also often seek to focus on the narrative, structure, or content of particular games, where these are relevant. Similarly, our styles of play varied greatly. Sometimes, this involved little more than what Aarseth (2003) refers to as ‘superficial play’, where we merely dipped into a game for a few minutes. Other times, this involved a much more detailed and systematic playing of

games to explore as many avenues and play possibilities as we could; while at others, we tried to stray from our, and others', usual styles of play, and experiment, and see what was possible with particular games.

Hence, all of the games listed in this book have been played by at least one of the authors, and most by both during the course of researching and writing this book; sometimes at length and to completion, or sometimes more superficially. At the beginning of this project we began with a list of different kinds and genres of games, on various platforms, we intended to play, and over the course of the project added many more titles, as they become available or we became aware of them. This included AAA games, indie games, games on personal computers, on various consoles, old and new, on mobile devices, on web-browsers, online, offline, alone, with others, and much more. Some were the kinds of games we might normally play, and these we often played to completion, such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015); some we had not played in a while and we revisited in a more focused and analytical way, such as *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007); some we played with others, such as with our children, like the *CBeebies Playtime* app (BBC Media, 2015); while some we played merely to push the boundaries of the kinds of games we would normally encounter, such as trying our hand at *Pokémon GO* (Niantic Labs, 2012). This then gave us a long and diverse range of games, many of which we reference in this book, but the list of those we played analytically extends many times beyond those referred to here. Though of course the list of games played in this research and referenced in this book is far from exhaustive, and tends to include mostly very contemporary games, this is far more lengthy and diverse than that typically seen in most video game studies.

In addition to playing many more games than we normally would have, and doing so in a much more focused and analytical way, we also chose to try and engage with wider video game culture, in a deeper and more meaningful way. This mostly involved much more regular and focused non-participant observation of online and offline game culture than we would have normally engaged in; such as regularly reading and watching video games magazines, blogs, reviews, message boards, and YouTube and Twitch channels. For example, magazines, websites, and blogs such as *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*,³ *Polygon*,⁴ *Kotaku*,⁵ *GiantBomb*,⁶ *Gamasutra*,⁷ *Edge*,⁸ *Waypoint*,⁹ *PC Gamer*,¹⁰ *Eurogamer*,¹¹ *Kill Screen*,¹² *AnaitGames*,¹³ *Zehngames*,¹⁴ *Deus Ex Machina*,¹⁵ *AntiHype*,¹⁶ *Presura*,¹⁷ and *FS Gamer*,¹⁸ to name but a few. In relation to YouTube and Twitch, we regularly followed channels such as *PewDiePie*,¹⁹ *Feminist Frequency*,²⁰ *TotalBiscuit – The Cynical Brit*,²¹ *The Syndicate Project*,²² *Pushing Up Roses*,²³ *PBS Game Show*,²⁴ *Markiplier*,²⁵ *Jim Sterling*,²⁶ *Scanliner*,²⁷ *DayoScript*,²⁸ *Bukku qui*,²⁹ *SonyaTheEvil*,³⁰ *Fremily*,³¹ *Littlemisspiss*,³² and *Silentsentry*.³³ We also looked into comments made on social network sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. Daniel Muriel also made the decision that it would be useful to participate in this culture in a more active way, and hence, decided to create a blog (*The Three-Headed Monkey*³⁴), on which he could engage with an online gamer community, test out ideas, and explore their validity. He too contributed to media outlets specialized in video games.³⁵ Additionally, we also undertook specific

case studies where observations were made around following various video game titles (including *Gone Home*, *This War of Mine*, *Titan Souls*, *Papers, Please*, *Gods Will Be Watching*, *Watch Dogs*, *Life is Strange*, *Skyrim*, and *Bloodborne*) online, and what was said in relation to them by three main communities of actors: video gamer communities on online forums and social media, media professionals on specialized websites, and developers on websites. In a social context traversed by a preeminent digital culture, what happens on the Internet is crucial to understanding the social realities that are forming around it. Among other things, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, YouTube, websites, and blogs form a social space where social relations are established, and social reality takes shape. This is particularly important for video game culture.

Book structure: X marks the spot

At the beginning of *The Secret of Monkey Island* (LucasArts, 1990), its protagonist, Guybrush Threepwood, had to appear before the three pirate leaders of Mêlée Island in order to fulfill his wish of becoming a pirate. In order to show his worth, the pirate leaders set Guybrush three trials: sword fighting, thievery, and treasure hunting. In relation to the treasure hunting trial, the bold, but not so brilliant, Guybrush – his only skill, remarkable nonetheless, consists of holding his breath for ten minutes – asked the pirate leaders if he needed a map to find the treasure. ‘Ye can hardly expect to find a treasure without a map!’ answered one of the pirate leaders with undisguised disdain. And they added: ‘X marks the spot!’.

If the aim of this book is to map the different ways in which video game culture intertwines with important aspects of contemporary social life and culture, then before we progress on this task, it is necessary to pause for a moment to set out the latitudinal and longitudinal lines that this book will follow; and where necessary, throughout the book, signpost them again.

This book is intended for a wide range of potential readers; from game studies, social science, and media and cultural studies scholars, to PhD, Masters, and higher-level undergraduate students, including anyone interested in the study of video games, its culture, and wider issues that affect contemporary society. *Video Games as Culture* is a book that offers original, novel, and significant insights into different areas, topics, and notions that are relevant to contemporary society such as: video game culture, video gamers, video game experiences, identity, agency, experience, empathy, digital and participatory cultures, and neoliberalism, to name but a few.

Chapter 2 considers a few key examples of how and why video games are becoming a growing cultural phenomenon that is contributing to wider social transformations. After proposing a definition of video game culture within the context of the rise of the (video)ludic century and digital culture, the chapter explores different cases that help us to understand the emergence and consolidation of video game culture. Among them, the gamification of reality, the growing interest of video games amongst the general public, a flourishing video game industry,

the links between video games, education and work, video game audiences, video games in academia, and video games as a cultural product.

Chapter 3 approaches the contemporary nature of agency and its sociopolitical constraints and possibilities in the context of video games. Building mainly on actor–network theory and also the work of Michel Foucault, the chapter understands the notion of agency as the multiple, distributed, and dislocated production of transformations that can take a multitude of forms. Thus, agency is defined as what transforms reality one way or another within the framework outlined by the political rationalities linked to the neoliberal dispositifs and assemblages. Although the notion of agency in video games seems to be dominated by the referents of neoliberalism, it is still possible to imagine ways in which agency heads towards more promising outcomes.

Chapter 4 argues that video games can be understood as postphenomenological experiences. In this sense, video games help to channel different experiences in order to connect with other realities, game experiences are often recounted as any other lived experience, video games are necessarily enacted and embodied experiences, and video games are linked to a wider social tendency that sees reality in terms of a set of experiences. Furthermore, not only can video games be understood as experiences, they are also helpful in shedding new light on our understanding of the contemporary nature of experience. Hence, experience can be described as, at the same time, individual, unique, and contingent, but also collective, shared, and stable.

Chapter 5 further explores how video games can create different experiences of play, focusing here specifically on those that promote social empathy and processes of identification, and challenge the idea of video games as exclusively an escapist activity. Not only are video games self-contained universes designed to escape to, but they are also a medium to connect with different aspects of reality. The key to understanding the fundamental and interrelated mechanisms of empathy and identification as ways to connect with other social realities rests on the idea that video game experiences do not necessarily substitute the experiences they are based on, but rather, mediate between them and video game players.

Chapter 6 focuses on the contemporary nature of identity in relation to video gamers. In particular, it suggests that video games provide a useful vantage point from which to observe the process of identity formation in contemporary society. In particular, it is argued that video game culture anticipates and helps us to understand new modes of meaning and processes of identity construction. The chapter reviews some of the theoretical discussions on identity that have taken place in recent years, and looks at the different conceptualizations of the video gamer and its communities that emerge from our research. Finally, here we envisage the rise of a post-identity scenario, in which the processes of identity formation change radically and the very notion of identity is jeopardized.

Chapter 7 sets out the conclusions of the book, summarizing its main findings and the theoretical debates that were discussed. This includes, first and foremost, the main idea of the book: that key aspects of contemporary society can be understood

through the lens of video game culture, which not only mirrors those fundamental dimensions of social reality but also, within its limits, takes part in them. The chapter then navigates the many ways in which video game culture represents and affects society: video games and their culture then appear as the beta version of a society to come, a video game culture that helps us visualize the ontological and sociopolitical articulations of agency in contemporaneity, the fundamentals of video games that anticipate a society that is progressively becoming an assemblage of technologically mediated experiences that connects different realities, situations, and cultures, and the video gamer identity as the epitome of identity construction in contemporary society.

Hence, the 'x' we are seeking to place on the map is added knowledge and a deeper understanding of an extremely significant, though still under-researched, culture. However, we cannot forget that in research, as in the *Monkey Island* game, we find a big X already inscribed on the land in front of us, which always raises the same questions: What x was carved first? The 'x' on the ground, or is this big 'x' merely replicating what was on the map first, or were they created simultaneously? And can one exist without the other? In any case, the 'x' always marks the spot, because the real treasure is that 'x' and not what is buried below. We hope this book points you toward the relevant 'x's' of video game culture and its relation to contemporary society and culture.

Notes

- 1 'Video games' is our preferred term to refer to all games played on electronic devices, such as video games consoles, personal computers, mobile telephones, and tablet computers.
- 2 https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6th9XqkD_C19K_eSPbcVv4VL9fTa-TH
- 3 <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/>
- 4 <https://www.polygon.com/>
- 5 <http://kotaku.com/>
- 6 <https://www.giantbomb.com/>
- 7 <http://www.gamasutra.com/>
- 8 <http://www.gamesradar.com/edge/>
- 9 https://waypoint.vice.com/en_us
- 10 <http://www.pcgamer.com/>
- 11 <http://www.eurogamer.net/>
- 12 <https://killscreen.com/>
- 13 <http://www.anaitgames.com/>
- 14 <http://www.zehngames.com/>
- 15 <http://deusexmachina.es/>
- 16 <http://antihype.es/>
- 17 <http://www.presura.es/>
- 18 <http://www.fsgamer.com/>
- 19 <https://www.youtube.com/user/PewDiePie>
- 20 <https://www.youtube.com/user/feministfrequency>
- 21 <https://www.youtube.com/user/TotalHalibut>
- 22 <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheSyndicateProject>
- 23 <https://www.youtube.com/user/pushinguproses>
- 24 <https://www.youtube.com/user/pbsgameshow>
- 25 <https://www.youtube.com/user/markiplierGAME>

- 26 <https://www.youtube.com/user/JimSterling>
 27 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWz51s7gd-p55UXY_xm69FQ
 28 <https://www.youtube.com/user/DayoScript>
 29 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGO1Jl3yFtHJbTnoZgeoKZg>
 30 <https://www.twitch.tv/sonyatheevil>
 31 <https://www.twitch.tv/fremily>
 32 <https://www.twitch.tv/littlemisspiss>
 33 <https://www.twitch.tv/silentsentry>
 34 <http://the3headedmonkey.blogspot.co.uk>
 35 To access the complete list of contributions, see: <https://danielmuriel.com/other-contributions/>

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