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# Gaming for Beginners

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**Games and Culture**  
Volume 1 Number 1  
January 2006 5-12  
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10.1177/1555412005281403  
<http://games.sagepub.com>  
hosted at  
<http://online.sagepub.com>

This article examines the history of moral panics about media, gleans some lessons from media studies that can help the study of electronic games, and is critical of both utopic and dystopic, cybertarian and pessimistic accounts of gaming.

**Keywords:** *media studies; gaming; political economy*

Is it a new medium on a par with film and music, a valuable educational tool, a form of harmless fun or a digital menace that turns children into violent zombies? Video gaming is all those things, depending on whom you ask.

—(“Chasing the Dream,” 2005, p. 53)

Gaming has been around for a long time. Rule-governed, collaborative-competitive recreational practices that use tools are far from new. Neither are the anxieties and hopes they create: *Homo ludens* has been an object of inquiry for millennia. We even have years of familiarity with computer games. I was playing Pong upstairs in a friend’s house in 1971, struggling with his use of English on the ball, not least because I didn’t know it meant spin. And in my college bar a few years later, I watched as separatist men played Space Invaders in one corner while separatist women shot pool in the other. In the first case, women did not try to join in. In the second, men who did so were told to stay away lest they “invade our space.”

But there is something different about today, isn’t there, in the era of the more privatized electronic game, played by so many more people, in so many different environments? Aren’t we at a bold new dawn of meaning, one where cybertarian technophiles, struck by the “digital sublime,” attribute magical properties to a communication and cultural technology that supposedly obliterates geography, sovereignty, and hierarchy—a combination of truth and beauty that has the potential to heal the wound of the division of labor? The gaming environment makes consumers into producers, frees the disabled from exclusion, encourages new subjectivities, rewards intellect and competitiveness, links people across cultures, and allows thousands, perhaps millions, of flowers to bloom in a postpolitical cornucopia—or at least, that is what some analysts fantasize. I suspect that they do so because of an amnesia and awe that are occasioned by the fog of hot air and an ahistorical, apolitical grasp of media studies (Mosco, 2004). I hope in this short note to encourage us to avoid making some of these mistakes.

Every cultural and communications technology has specificities of production, text, distribution, and reception. But the utopias and dystopias of successive innovations share much in common. As private excitements and public moral panics swirl, they also repeat. And as analysts prognosticate, caught up in the concerns of the moment, they may easily miss the lessons of the past. So while I welcome and am excited by new ways of engaging new media, I'd like us to ponder some history as well. Let's maintain the urges and excitements of the moment but be aware of the problems they may conceal or erase. And let's include key political questions.

There was concern about public "stimulation of the passions" by popular romances and plays (the "liturgy of the devil") in 16th- and 17th-century Western Europe. Typography was thought to disrupt ecclesiastical authority via a trilogy of crimes: "heresy, sedition, or immorality." At the same time, there was hope that this represented both aesthetic and political innovation—new pleasures and new access. When books began to proliferate across Western Europe in the mid-18th century, people frequently skim-read, generating anxious critiques that a plenitude of text was producing a simplistic level of comprehension that lacked profundity and erudition—the downside of the *Leserevolution* that displaced the continuing study of a few important hermeneutic texts with chaotic, permissive practices of reading (Briggs & Burke, 2003).

In their modern form, such preoccupations derive from the emergent social sciences of the 19th century, which sought to understand and control "the crowd" in a suddenly urbanized and educated Western Europe that threatened a long-feared "ochlocracy" of "the worthless mob" (Pufendorf, 2000, p. 144). Elite theorists from both right and left, notably Vilfredo Pareto (1976), Gaetano Mosca (1939), Gustave Le Bon (1899), and Robert Michels (1899/1915), argued that newly literate publics were vulnerable to manipulation by demagogues. The notion of the suddenly enfranchised being bamboozled by the unscrupulously fluent has recurred throughout the modern period.

By the early 20th century, academic experts had decreed media audiences to be passive consumers (Butsch, 2000) thanks to the missions of literary criticism (distinguishing the cultivated from others) and psychology (distinguishing the socially competent from others). Opera, Shakespeare, and romance fiction were all censored for their immodest impact on the young (Heins, 2002). Since that time, tests of beauty and truth continue to find popular culture wanting. Social concerns about new technologies have led to a primary emphasis on the number and conduct of audiences to audiovisual entertainment: where they came from, how many there were, and what they did as a consequence of being present. Such tendencies moved into high gear with the Payne Fund Studies of the 1930s, which inaugurated mass social science panic about young people at the cinema (Blumer, 1933; Blumer & Hauser, 1933; Dale, 1933; Forman, 1933; May & Shuttleworth, 1933; Mitchell, 1929). These pioneering scholars boldly set out to gauge viewers' "galvanic skin response" (Wartella, 1996, p. 173). That example has led to seven more decades of obsessive attempts to correlate consumption of popular culture with antisocial conduct. Audiences are conceived as empirical entities that can be known via research instruments derived from sociology, demography, psychology, communication studies, and marketing. Such concerns are

coupled with a secondary concentration on content: What were audiences watching when they . . . . And so texts too are conceived as empirical entities that can be known via research instruments derived from the same disciplines. As Bob Dylan (2004) put it, recalling the 1960s in Greenwich Village, “Sociologists were saying that TV had deadly intentions and was destroying the minds and imaginations of the young—that their attention span was being dragged down” (p. 55). The other dominant site of knowledge was the “psychology professor, a good performer, but originality not his long suit” (p. 67).

These worries draw on academic, religious, governmental, and familial iconophobia and the sense that sizeable sectors of society lie beyond the control of the state and the ruling class and may be led astray. Put bluntly, new communication and cultural technologies and genres offer forms of mastery that threaten, however peripherally, the established order. Each new one has brought with it concerns about supposedly unprecedented and unholy new risks that (often unwittingly) reference earlier panics: silent then sound film during the 1920s, radio in the 1930s, comic books from the 1940s and 1950s, pop music and television of the 1950s and 1960s, satanic rock during the 1970s and 1980s, video cassette recorders in the 1980s, and rap music, video games, and the Internet since the 1990s (Kline, 1993; Mazzarella, 2003).

Whenever new communications and cultural technologies emerge, young people in particular are identified as both pioneers and victims, simultaneously endowed by manufacturers and critics with immense power and immense vulnerability. This was true of 1920s “Radio Boys,” seeking out signals from afar, and 1990s “Girl-Power” avatars, seeking out subjectivities from afar. They are held to be the first to know and the last to understand the media—the grand paradox of youth. The satirical paper *The Onion* cleverly criticized these interdependent phenomena of panic and commodification via a faux 2005 study of the impact on U.S. youth of seeing Janet Jackson’s breast in a Super Bowl broadcast the year before (“U.S. Children,” 2005). The process continues, with Senator Hillary Clinton announcing that games are “stealing the innocence of our children” (quoted in “Chasing the Dream,” 2005, p. 53) and communications and psychology faculty duly lining up at the trough of research funds made available in response.

Of course, for some 1960s mass society theorists, and many of us in cultural studies, these communication and cultural technologies represent the apex of modernity. Far from being supremely alienating, they stand for the expansion of civil society, the first moment in history when central political and commercial organs and agendas become receptive to and part of the popular classes. The population became part of the social rather than excluded from the means and politics of political-economic calculation. Clearly, the number of people classed as outsiders diminished in popular culture, along with the lessening of authority, the promulgation of individual rights and respect, and the development of intensely interpersonal, large-scale human interaction (Hartley, 1998; Shils, 1966).

But have we gone too far in celebrating this inclusiveness? Virginia Postrel, then editor of the libertarian *Reason* magazine and later a *New York Times* economics journalist, wrote a 1999 op-ed piece for *The Wall Street Journal* in which she described

cultural studies as “deeply threatening to traditional leftist views of commerce” because its notions of active consumption are close to the sovereign consumer beloved of the right: “The cultural-studies mavens are betraying the leftist cause, lending support to the corporate enemy and even training graduate students who wind up doing market research.” Consumption seemed to be the key to this mantra—with production discounted, labor forgotten, the consumer sovereign, and government there to protect that sovereign. As Postrel (2003) proudly put it, “We citizens of the future don’t wear conformist jumpsuits, live in utilitarian high-rises, or get our food in pills” (pp. 4-5). “We” expect individually tailored, boutique capitalism.

But the charge toward a popularly available array of stylistic choices and forms of social participation is accompanied by a shift from building and acknowledging a national popular to technologizing and privatizing it. For once all classes have been incorporated into society, the problems and promises they bring with them must be governed by technical forms of knowledge and systems of commodification (Martín-Barbero, 2003). There needs to be some consideration of material inequality at the heart of our deliberations. If we look around at how progressive formations have emerged in media and cultural studies, we can get some guidance. For instance, there are political-economy, queer, disabled, feminist, multicultural, and postcolonialist interest groups and plenary sessions at many annual conferences of professional bodies dedicated to studying the media,<sup>1</sup> and similar tendencies are evident among journals.<sup>2</sup>

So in addition to the inevitable research tendencies that are already evident in the gaming world—the binary of moral panics versus enthusiastic celebrations—what alternative directions could emerge from the lessons of past and present? I think we need a combination of political economy, textual analysis, and ethnography if we are to make gaming studies into a major player in the public sphere of popular criticism, state and private policy creation, social movement critique, and labor organization. That will allow us to consider who makes the games, who profits from them, how they target audiences, what the games look like, what they are like to play, and how they fit in with social life.

My own priority is to push for political economy because it seems to have received insufficient attention from game studies so far. Consider these emergent issues. Coca-Cola is diverting money from its TV advertising budget to place products in computer games and generate advergaming for people to play during brief respites from work. They cost US\$50,000, as opposed to US\$500,000 for a spot on television. Many people throw their hands in the air in horror at this product placement—others welcome it. On the more positive front, consider Food Force, the advergaming developed by the World Food Programme to highlight global hunger (“And Now,” 2005). And of course, product placement is far from new. Novels of the 18th century were laden with commercial messages for example (Briggs & Burke, 2003). The problem today is that games may be understood as distinct from overt advertising copy when they are not. In the context of wasteful U.S. consumption, this is a trend that the left must watch. And we are also seeing a new trend of creepy Christianity in the gaming world as products are developed that peddle ideologies of superstition and institutions such as the Chris-

tian Game Developers Conference emerge (Gaudiosi, 2005). In the context of the Christian right in U.S. politics, this too must be watched by the left.

And most important, there is the question of the environment and labor. The Political Economy Research Institute's 2004 *Misfortune 100: Top Corporate Air Polluters in the United States* has media owners at numbers 1, 3, 16, 22, and 39. The relevant multinational corporations have denied responsibility for the postconsumption histories of their dangerous products. The few recycling programs that corporations sponsor in the United States rely on customers paying them to take away these poisonous goods. The Environmental Protection Agency remains stoically silent on the topic, and the United States has used the World Trade Organization to counter efforts at diminishing pollution from this equipment. Fortunately, the combination of European market power and the crucial Restriction of Hazardous Substances legislation planned for 2006, plus other mandates already in place, means that even U.S. firms specializing in hazardous computer parts must now adhere to strict safety standards in their components, if not their work practices ("Europe's Rules," 2005; "First Time," 2005).

But how are such products created? In northern China, 16-year-old girls leave villages to work in effectively indentured compounds run by Japanese, Taiwanese, and U.S. businesses in the south to build computers used for games. At the other end of the cycle, preteen Chinese girls pick away without protection at discarded First World computers full of leaded glass to find precious metals, then dump the remains in landfills. The metals are sold to recyclers, who do not use landfills or labor in the First World because of environmental and industrial legislation contra the destruction to soil, water, and workers that are caused by the dozens of poisonous chemicals and gases in these dangerous machines. More than 130,000 personal computers a day are thrown out, leading to millions of pounds of toxic waste. We all recall that millions of cartridges of Atari's game adaptation of *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* were buried in a New Mexico landfill, broken up by a heavy roller, and covered in concrete to consign them to history. Today, Sony's PlayStation consoles are illegal in many countries (not the United States) because of the deadly levels of cadmium contained in their cables (Basel Action Network, 2004; Basel Action Network & Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, 2002; "Electronics," 2005; "Give Us," 2005; Pellow & Park, 2002; Reygadas, 2002; Wallach & Woodall/Public Citizen, 2004).

This brief set of topics suggests a very important agenda. We have the chance to build a way of knowing about games that draws on two powerful legacies—the world of progressive media and cultural studies and the world of games enthusiasm. Let's borrow from the best that they offer rather than unconsciously re-create the predictable binary of moral panics versus naïve excitement. We must engage with the questions posed by *The Economist* ("Chasing the Dream," 2005) with which I began, if we are to make a public mark and contribute to existing debate. But we need to go far beyond them to contribute to the public interest. Follow the money, follow the labor.

## Notes

1. The International Association for Media and Communication Research, the International Communication Association, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the National Communication Association, the Canadian Communication Association, the Canadian Association of Media Education Organizations, the UK Association for Media Communication and Cultural Studies, EPTIC—Economía Política de las Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación, the American Communication Association, the International Institute of Communications, the International Association for Media History, the African Council for Communication Education, the Baltic Association for Investigating the Communications Media, the Chinese Communication Association, the Caribbean Association for the Study of Communication, NORDICOM, the American Studies Association, the Popular Culture Association, the British Universities Film and Video Council, the Society for Visual Anthropology, the University Film and Video Association, the Broadcast Education Association, the European Institute for Communication and Culture, the International Visual Sociology Association, Asociación Boliviana de Investigadores de la Comunicación, Screen Studies, Console-ing Passions, and Visible Evidence.

2. *Revista Electrónica Internacional de Economía Política de las Tecnologías de la Información y de la Comunicación*; *Asian Media*; *Comunicaçao e Sociedade*; *Communications*; *Javnost/The Public*; *Skrien*, *Television Quarterly*; *Mediekultur*; *Diálogos de la Comunicación*; *Communication Review*; *Comunicación*; *Media Development*; *Massekultur & Medier*; *Cuadernos de Nación*; *Communication Research*; *Journal of Communication*; *Intermedios*; *Entertainment Law Review*; *Entertainment and Sports Law Journal*; *Critical Studies in Media and Communication*; *Emergences*; *Velvet Light Trap*; *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*; *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*; *InterMedia*; *Gazette*; *Cultural Studies*; *Journal of Communication Inquiry*; *Journal of Popular Film and Television*; *Media Culture & Society*; *European Journal of Communication*; *camera obscura*; *Comunicación y Sociedad*; *Critical Arts*; *Canadian Journal of Communication*; *NORDICOM Review of Nordic Research on Media and Communication*; *Journal of International Communication*; *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*; *Asian Journal of Communication*; *Journal of Popular Culture*; *Convergence*; *Continuum*; *International Journal of Cultural Studies*; *Social Semiotics*; *Latin American Cultural Studies*; *Journal of Cultural Economics*; *Journal of Media Economics*; *Cinema Journal*; *Journal of Film and Video*; *Media Asia*; *Intercom*; *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*; *Screen*; *Journal of Media Practice*; *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*; *European Journal of Cultural Studies*; *Asian Journal of Communication*; *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*; *Zigurat: Carrera de Ciencias de la Comunicación*; *New Media & Society*; *Mass Communication Review*; *Feminist Media Studies*; *Media International Australia*; *Visual Anthropology*; *KEIO Communication Review*; *Africa Media Review*; *Visual Anthropology Review*; *Media Law and Practice*; *Media Perspektiven*; *Media Studies Journal*; *Intermedia*; *Perfiles Latinoamericanos*; *Réseaux*; *Media History*; *Howard Journal of Communication*; *Women's Studies in Communication*; *Quarterly Journal of Speech*; *Communication Theory*; *M/C-A Journal of Media and Culture*; *Particip@tions*; *Journalism History*; *Electronic Journal of Communication*; *International Journal of Communication*; *International Journal of Communications Law and Policy*; *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*; *Journalism Studies*; *Flow*; *Comunicaçao & Política*; *Journalism*; and *Visual Sociology*. Also see Film and Television Studies home page (<http://www.webct.com/film>), Industry Central (<http://industrycentral.net>), Independent Media Center (<http://indymedia.org>), Corporate Watch (<http://www.corpwatch.org>), Media Conference (<http://www.mediaconference.com>), Media Whores (<http://www.mediawhores.com>), Blackwell Cultural Theory Resource Centre (<http://www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/cultural/>), Media Channel (<http://www.mediachannel.org>), Television Archive (<http://televisionarchive.org>), Media Rights (<http://mediarights.org>), Media Democracy (<http://www.mediademocracy.org>), Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (<http://www.fair.org/>), Television History (<http://www.tvhistory.tv/>), The Media History Project (<http://mediahistory.umn.edu>), Academia de la ciencias y las artes de televisión (<http://academiatv.es/>), African Media Online (<http://www.africamediaonline.com/>), Media Matters (<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/mediamatters.htm>), Center for Research on the Effects of Television (<http://www.ithaca.edu/cretv/>),

European Audiovisual Observatory ([http://www.obs.coe.int/about/oea/org/text\\_instit.html](http://www.obs.coe.int/about/oea/org/text_instit.html)), War and Media Network (<http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/warandmedia/>), and Free Speech TV (<http://freespeech.org>).

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