

# Game Studies

JOOST RAESSENS

*Utrecht University, Netherlands*

Game studies is a dynamic interdisciplinary field of academic study and research that traditionally focuses on digital games and play, in a wide variety of social and cultural contexts. As Zagal (2010) claimed, game studies theory and research seek to understand digital games as artifacts in and of themselves, in their design and development, their effects on people, and their meaning and context. Although game studies has traditionally been concerned with digital games, it increasingly uses its theoretical perspective and concepts (e.g., game, play, and playfulness) to interpret society and culture at large. This not only offers new opportunities for the study of human communication and interaction but also challenges the core identity of game studies.

## Game research

Contemporary (digital) game studies emerged in the early years of the 21st century. Three periods can be distinguished in the history of game studies. The first period is the so-called prehistory of game studies, made possible by the development of the first digital games in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These first commercial digital games elicited two sorts of reactions: They were either considered trivial and low forms of commercial entertainment, neither harmful nor helpful; or they were being discussed, mostly in a predictable way, in public forums, in relation to media effects assumed to be harmful (addictive or violent) or helpful (educational). It took until the early 1980s to address these and other questions in a proper, evaluative manner—when the first scholarly papers, conferences, and dissertations were published. During the same period the first dedicated digital game magazines appeared. In the 1990s the first academic books were published, including introductory overviews of the new field, histories of digital games, and introductions from disciplines and fields such as psychology, performance studies, educational sciences, narratology, and gender studies. Throughout this period game studies was not an independent discipline or field, but various aspects of digital games were studied within existing fields and departments, from only loosely connected disciplinary perspectives.

The early years of the 21st century can be considered a decisive moment in game studies. In his editorial for *Game Studies*, the first issue of the first academic, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to digital game studies, Espen Aarseth (2001) claimed that digital games as a form of computer-mediated communication had fundamentally unique formal aspects and could not be reduced to a variation of cinema or literature. Attempts

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by both film studies and literary studies to absorb digital games would continue, he argued, until digital game studies established itself as an independent academic discipline or field. In this second period, game studies gradually became a distinct discipline or field, with digital games as its object of study, with its own unified organization of knowledge—conceptual, theoretical, and methodological (see, e.g., Lankoski & Björk, 2015)—and with its own scholarly community. This development manifested itself in game-focused journals (*Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*), associations (Digital Games Research Association, DiGRA; International Communication Association's Game Studies Division), conferences (Foundations of Digital Games; the Philosophy of Computer Games Conference), and the establishment of game studies programs in institutes of higher education (Zagal, 2010).

Taking into account the defining formal aspects of digital games (rules, structures), game studies combines this focus with (1) the player's interaction with the game and with other players and (2) the social, cultural, and political contexts that make up the gaming experience (e.g., Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). This understanding would not have been possible without theoretical, analytical, and methodological influences from a wide variety of disciplines. These influences, however, were not considered meaningful; they were even thought to be counterproductive, unless they were helpful in understanding the object of study—digital games—*on its own terms*. Because certain aspects of games—for example narrative, audiovisual representations, and fiction—were already being studied by disciplines such as literary studies and film studies, game studies had to show that only certain facets of games were being paid heed to in those disciplines and that the core of games—their formal aspect—was hardly addressed. In other words, to legitimize its existence as an independent discipline or field, game studies had to develop a theory or an ontology of (the gameness of) games that exhibited the specificity of digital games (e.g., Juul, 2005).

We are currently in the midst of a third period. The study of digital games is no longer driven mainly by scholars who try to understand them through previously existing media, as in the first period, nor does game studies claim to be a predominantly formalist approach, as proposed by ludologists in the second period. Still focusing on the medium specificity of digital games, game studies nowadays involves interdisciplinary approaches that merge fields like cultural studies and postcolonial studies, philosophy, communication studies, social sciences, design research, and computer science, depending on the research question at hand. Because game studies crystallized internationally into an established academic interdisciplinary field, game scholars no longer worry so much about the *colonizing* attempts discussed above, from disciplines like film studies and literary studies. Interdisciplinary dialogue and multiple methodologies are prominent characteristics of this third phase of game studies (e.g., Mäyrä, 2009).

## Digital games and play

The 1960s were not only the period when the first digital games appeared. They were also the period when the word *ludic* (playful) became popular. The term denotes not only games, but also nongame playful activities and behaviors as well as a more broadly

playful state of mind. Games, play, and playfulness increasingly saturate other social and cultural practices, in terms of both content and use. This development has been conceptualized as the *ludification of culture* (Raessens, 2014), as *gamification* (Fuchs, Fizek, Ruffino, & Schrape, 2014), and as the *gameful or play(ful) world* (Walz & Deterding, 2014). This process enables game scholars to use the concepts of game, play, and playfulness as a tool for the analysis of contemporary digital media practices, communication technologies, and digital culture itself.

Considering culture playful is certainly no recent phenomenon. For philosophers such as Schiller, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Marcuse, Gadamer, Deleuze, Guattari, and Derrida—most of whom are considered as precursors or representatives of postmodern thought—and play theorists like Huizinga, Caillois, Sutton-Smith, and Suits, it is *Homo ludens*, the human being as player, that takes up most attention. In addition to philosophy, the social and behavioral sciences, law, economics, governance, the natural and life sciences (particularly medicine and neuroscience), the geosciences, and the full breadth of the humanities have in recent years testified to an ever growing interest, not only in digital games but also in the notion of play.

Strikingly, some time in the past the conceptual framework of play elicited little systematic research into media and communication studies. Two developments at the end of the last century changed this. First, we have been witnessing changes in communication and entertainment media themselves, for example in the areas of film (playful film narratives, puzzle films), television (playful second-screen apps, complex serial narratives), and digital media (games, apps, playful texting and tweeting, or the playful construction of identities via social media). These changes made it desirable to investigate the conceptual framework of play. Second, the way in which game studies and media and communication studies relate to each other changed. That relation has gone through three broad stages. In the beginning, game studies emphatically sought a position outside of media and communication studies, clearly searching for an identity of its own. In the second stage, game studies and media and communication studies opened up to each other, exploring their interrelations. In the current third stage, the theoretical perspective and key concepts of game studies have become integrated into media and communication studies. Play is increasingly seen as a tool for analyzing the media experience and as a central notion in understanding media culture.

## The identity of game studies

Game studies as an interdisciplinary field is not defined by a single object or by a single disciplinary approach. Its diversity can make it difficult to discern the project and the identity of game studies. At first sight, the common ground for game studies seems clear: It is the study of digital games, player interaction, and their cultural context. But the community of game scholars encompasses a broad range of topics and methods. Different kinds of digital games are played on different platforms, by different kinds of players, and in different social and cultural contexts—such as the interactive entertainment industry and the field of serious or persuasive gaming. This situation becomes more complex when the concepts of game, play, and playfulness are used not only within

game studies, in order to understand digital games, the game experience, and the lusory attitude of the player, but also as separate analytical categories. Although digital games have become a global media industry and are the culturally and economically dominant manifestation of play (Wolf, 2015), according to Sicart (2014) they are only one part of an ecology of playthings and play contexts—next to apps, toys, playgrounds, sports, board games, gambling, playful media cultures, and playful means of communication.

To build the future of game studies, the community of game scholars is addressing two issues. First, there is an effort to ensure that the interdisciplinarity of game studies has a solid disciplinary basis. Only then is the field able to make productive connections with a very broad spectrum of disciplines and game-related phenomena (such as play and playfulness). Second, a strategy called *strategic essentialism* is being used and defended by game scholars as a way of building up and preserving a certain identity of their own. While differences exist between game scholars about the objects of their study, about ways of studying these objects, and about the question whether game studies is, or needs to be, a field or a discipline, it is seen as advantageous to temporarily *essentialize* game studies by focusing on digital games and game studies as a discipline of its own, and to strengthen its disciplinary self-perception by doing so.

The importance of digital games, play, and playfulness in contemporary culture is being referred to as the *ludification* of culture. The question remains whether this is an ontological or an epistemological concept. Some scholars believe that it is an ontological concept that refers to a new phase of history—a ludic turn in culture and society: our world is characterized so much by play that we can deem it a gameful or play(ful) world. Other researchers use the term in an epistemological way, that is, as a heuristic tool designed to shed new light on contemporary media culture. In this approach, ludification is a lens for examining new objects and for studying them in a particular way—a ludic turn in media and communication theory.

SEE ALSO: Computer-Mediated Communication; Entertainment; Literary Studies; Postmodernism; Sociology of Culture

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**Joost Raessens** holds the chair of media theory at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. He was the conference chair of the first Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference, “Level Up,” in Utrecht (2003; [www.digra2003.org](http://www.digra2003.org)), and is on the editorial board of *Games and Culture*. Raessens’s current research concerns the ludification of culture, focusing in particular on playful identities, persuasive gaming, and the ludic turn in media theory. Raessens is co-director of the Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play ([www.gamesandplay.nl](http://www.gamesandplay.nl)) and the Utrecht Center for Game Research ([www.gameresearch.nl](http://www.gameresearch.nl)), both located in the Netherlands.