

## Position Paper for Game Studies and the Academy Panel

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Game studies is a young field still struggling to find a place for itself in academia. But we game scholars should set our sights beyond simply trying to fit in as the junior members of the media studies family. The key insights of our field offer an opportunity not only to make sense of games, but also to rethink the paradigms of media and cultural studies as a whole.

A good place to start is with the concept of *play*. Play is one of the key terms in game studies, and seems to offer a sharp contrast between games and other media. We tend to assume that games require active participation, whereas other media require only a passive audience: you *watch* TV and movies, but you *play* games. However, upon further examination, this distinction breaks down. In its broadest terms, we can describe play as any time we lower the stakes on reality to create the safe space to experiment in the pretend world of imagination. In this sense, the concept of play can expand in all directions. On one hand, to the extent all social encounters are performances, we can describe everyday life as a kind of constant process of play. On the other hand, even solitary activities such as watching film or television allow us to dive into imaginary worlds where we can try out different subject positions and social realities.

Rethinking media spectatorship as a form of play offers several promising avenues for us to reexamine some of the commonplaces of contemporary media theory, such as the following:

- Interactivity. Play transcends debates over how “passive” or “active” spectators are. The model of play takes for granted that all forms of media engagement are inherently interactive, and that meaning is only produced through the imaginative participation of the viewer.
- Intertextuality. Play takes for granted the fluidity of multiple media forms. We may transition from watching a movie, to acting it out in front of friends, to re-enacting it in video games, to dreaming about it. These may be different forms of media consumption, but they are all aspects of the same circuit of play, imaginatively reworking the raw materials of story and character.
- Aesthetics. Play sidesteps questions of artistic quality, replacing them with questions of usefulness for the imagination, or, simply, fun.
- Realism. Play recognizes that however great the verisimilitude of a text, its ultimate role is to be transformed in the imagination of the viewer.
- Learning. Play is inherently impractical; that’s why it’s not work. But at the same time, play is a dry run on reality. It makes sense that in freelance economy increasingly reliant on life-long learning that not only children but adults find continued value in the challenges of play.

We might further ask what other game studies concepts could be valuably applied to media studies. For example, how might it transform our understanding of film structure to see it as just one example of what gamers call “mechanics”—rules designed to structure interactions and

frame outcomes? How might it transform our sense of media history to think of chess and Monopoly as the peers of great works of film and literature?

As an institutional matter, it's unlikely that game studies has a chance of transforming the paradigms of traditional media studies anytime soon. But as an intellectual exercise, this rethinking encourages game studies scholars to recognize ourselves as central to the discourse of media studies, rather than peripheral. As gaming takes on greater prominence in the twenty-first century media landscape, these speculative questions will invariably become more and more relevant.