24 The Sociology of Videogames

Eli Boulton and Colin Cremin

- This chapter offers a sociological account of videogames, a highly influential cultural form often overlooked by the discipline.
- First we cover the basic economic challenges facing the videogame industry and how it adapts to them.
- Videogames differ from other media forms such as film and literature. This is taken into account as we develop a theoretical map of the form.
- The relatively unique ways in which ideology and representation functions in videogames is explored through specific examples.
- We conclude with a discussion on the stigmatisation of videogame play and how the industry has responded to this.

Introduction

The history of videogames is a surprisingly long one. The first was created in 1958 at a US government nuclear research facility (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: 7—8). The technology at the time was far in advance of anything that could be marketed to ordinary consumers and the game was nothing more than a few odd blips on an oscilloscope to represent tennis rackets and a ball passing between them. It took another two decades before videogames became the lucrative mass-market phenomenon that we know today. We need to go back even further, though, to 1889 in fact, to discover the origins of the most dominant videogame company in the world today: the Kyoto-based company Nintendo, originally a playing card manufacturer (Wolf 2008: 113).

This chapter is about the videogame industry; it is about the form and content of videogames and the concerns people have about those who play them. We examine the industry and explore the videogame as a new media form. We conclude with an analysis of four of the most popular videogames of the current generation of consoles: *Call of Duty 4, Resident Evil 5, Grand Theft Auto 4* and *Wii Sports*. It will become clear in the course of this chapter why the culture of videogames is a suitable topic for sociological investigation.

Issues and themes in videogame sociology

It has been widely reported that in the United States the videogame industry is today worth more than Hollywood, in the region of US$50 billion (Reuters 2007). When we consider that just three companies (namely, Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo) virtually monopolise the console industry, then it is fair to say there is no other equivalent visual entertainment industry where ownership is so highly concentrated. This has far reaching implications on the form and content of videogames, their production, distribution, exchange and consumption.

Figure 24.1 The videogames industry: more powerful than Hollywood?

The reason the industry is now so highly concentrated can be traced back to the medium's earlier volatile commercial roots and the prohibitive costs in developing and manufacturing consoles and videogames for mass consumption. The first commercially available computer game, *Computer Space* (Nuttings Associates), was released in 1971, making the commercial videogame industry a mere 40 years old. Without tried and tested markets, videogame manufacturers took huge risks, often with disastrous results. Console manufacturers and the software developers came and went at an alarming rate. Even the largest videogame companies were prone to this. Atari, once the driving force of the videogame industry, now exists in name only. Sega pulled out of console

manufacturing business after their Dreamcast console flopped, due in part to fierce competition from the new kids on the block, Sony. Indeed, Sony only entered the videogame market after Nintendo backed out of a deal for Sony to manufacture a CD add-on to their Super Nintendo console. When this deal fell through, Nintendo stayed with a cartridge-based system for the N64 and Sony revamped the failed project to create their Playstation console, taking the lead with the first successful disc-based console. Had their handheld devices not been such a success, Nintendo may well have gone the same way as Sega and become a software-only company producing *Mario* games for Sony and Microsoft (see Wolf 2008).

Today Nintendo is the only dedicated videogame company that manufactures consoles, develops videogames and distributes them. Third-party development studios (those that are independent from the console manufacturer) first emerged when game designers became dissatisfied with the management of the game companies they worked for. For example, while the company Activision is presently known for owning the rights to lucrative franchises such as *Spyro* (Insomniac Games et al. 1996—present), *Guitar Hero* (Harmonix et al. 2005—present) and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward et al. 2003—present) the company began its history producing unauthorised games for the Atari 2600 console (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 13). Development studios are vital for the industry's stability as they effectively disperse the economic risk involved in producing videogames. Before their emergence such risk was concentrated into a single company such as Atari, producing both the consoles and the videogames to play on them.

One of the most famous examples of the hazards involved with such a business model can be demonstrated with the case of *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Atari 1982). In order to capitalise on the popularity of the accompanying Spielberg film, Atari reduced the game's development period to a mere five weeks in order to release it in time for the 1982 christmas shopping season (Montfort and Bogost 2009: 127). The poor quality of the game was compounded by the fact that Atari had produced more cartridges than there were consoles to play them on. The game was a massive commercial failure. Unsold units were buried in the Arizona desert. The debacle contributed to the 1983 North American videogame industry crash as it reduced consumer confidence in not only Atari, but the videogame medium in its entirety (Montfort and Bogost 2009: 76). It was Nintendo that helped revive the videogame industry with the release of their first home console 'the family computer' or Famicom (NES in the West) in 1983 (Wolf 2008: 115). Until Microsoft released the Xbox 27 years later, Japanese companies such as Nintendo, Sega and Sony dominated the console market in the West (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009: 15—18).

The economic risk involved in producing videogames lies mostly with the development studios. While console manufacturing companies do not have to worry too much about whether individual videogames of third party manufacturers sell or not, they do have to worry about maintaining a decent game library and keeping third party development studios happy with their lucrative franchises. It is common today for independent development studios to sign exclusivity rights with console manufacturers. This is what Microsoft did with Bungie Studios who produce the acclaimed *Halo* series (Bungie 2001—present). Bungie gets a guaranteed flow of income while Microsoft gets exclusive rights to the franchise and a cut of the profits on every game sold. Partly the reason that Nintendo is so successful is that they own the intellectual property rights to all their franchises including the *Mario* series, which has sold over 200 million games over the past 25 years (McLaughlin 2007), helping to consolidate their position in a volatile marketplace.

The possession of intellectual property rights to highly lucrative franchises is one of the biggest factors in Microsoft and Sony's successful entrance into the console market. While the general public tend only to remember historically successful consoles such as the Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES), there have been a myriad of failed game consoles released over the years that are now largely forgotten. Sony avoided the fate of earlier failed disc-based consoles such as the Panasonic 3DO and Philips CD-i by investing large sums of money in purchasing the rights to various acclaimed and hugely popular franchises such as Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix 1987—present) series of games. Fans of the *Final Fantasy* series had no choice other than to buy a Sony Playstation to get hold of the latest iteration. *Final Fantasy VII*, released for the Playstation console, sold over 9.8 million copies, becoming what is termed a 'system seller' (Guinness World Records 2008). These are games that people buy consoles for — *Halo* on the Xbox and *Mario* on Nintendo being prominent examples. Exclusive franchises are the lifeblood of the console and the reason why we might purchase an Xbox over a Wii.

In the face of commercial volatility game distributors seek to minimise the economic risk by opting for titles with a proven track record. This becomes more imperative as the cost of videogame production increases. *Gran Turismo 5* on the Playstation 3 took five years to produce, costing Polyphony Digital an estimated US$60 million (Humphries 2009). Due to the success of the *Gran Turismo* franchise, the developers had more leeway with their extravagant development times and costs as investors knew it would sell well. While it is entirely possible for a third-party development studio to assert independence and focus on developing an innovative design concept, this idealism tends to maximise risk. This has lead theorists such as Hassan (2008: 142—144) to assert that the videogame medium is inevitably corrupted by these commercial priorities, as they tend to diminish the possibility for original game concepts.

In the influential *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote about the standardisation of culture. We are sold what is effectively familiar to us; for example, the trailers for Hollywood films promise action, spectacle and edge-of-the-seat thrills. They tell us in advance what to expect and how our emotions will be affected. The 'real point will never be reached', Adorno and Horkheimer (1997: 139) wrote, 'the diner must always be satisfied with the menu'. This charge could equally be made about the videogame industry. *Call of Duty* sells because we already know what we are getting. There are minor variations contained in each iteration building on the same theme using the same game mechanic. By this reckoning videogames are crudely assembled mass-market products designed to maximise profit through whatever means seduces the consumer into buying them. The industry thrives on predictability and, in its mass market form, play becomes a commodity. On this basis, we must ask if videogames are simply disposable forms of entertainment or whether they deserve to be taken seriously not only for economic and social reasons but also for their cultural and artistic significance.

There are clearly differences in standards between videogames such as the critically acclaimed *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo EAD 2007) and the family-friendly but commercially panned game *Carnival Funfair Games* (Cat Daddy 2007), both on the Wii console (see Cremin, 2011). But according to which criteria should we judge the quality of a videogame, and how do videogames differ from other forms of media such as film or literature? This is one of the more contentious issues in the field of game studies. The medium's interactive nature complicates many of the standard arguments about narrative and representation. This distinctive interactive medium is to this day undertheorised, particularly in sociology. As Eskelinen (2001) notes, outside academia, people are usually excellent at making distinctions between stories and games, a distinction that is not so readily apparent to many academics who often view videogames as 'interactive narratives, procedural stories or remediated cinema'. The intersection of play and narrative is a contested issue; a divide between the *narratologists*, who view the videogame as a new form of narrative, and the *ludologists*, who view the videogame first and foremost as a game. It could thus be said that the videogames' relatively recent history has lead to volatility not only on the marketplace, but also in the corridors of universities.

Both camps inherit their theoretical backbone from a time before videogames existed. The narratologists draw mostly from traditional literary and film theory, while the ludologists draw primarily from the specific theories of Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (1962) on play and games in human societies. According to Huizinga, play is a free activity, segregated in space and time from everyday life. Caillois, drawing from Huizinga's findings but challenging many of his arguments, defines a relationship between play (paidia) and game (ludus). *Ludus* are the rules of the game and *paidia* the amount of space a player has to navigate

within those rules. While many theorists argue the two are separate, even the most paidia-dominant activity has some element of ludus. A child playing with a toy truck (paidia) is still playing by rules that dictate how a truck should operate (ludus), such as 'vroom vroom' sounds and so on. A videogame would not be a videogame without elements of both paidia and ludus. Without paidia it would cease to be playable and without ludus there would be no distinguishable content that would differentiate one videogame from another.

Whilst narratologists make useful observations, by overlooking the vital aspect of play their analyses are limited. As Eskelinen (2001) points out, while it is not enough for a reader to have only experienced ninety percent of a work of literature, it is not necessary for a player to experience the 'entirety' of a videogame. Indeed, the amount of possibilities and narrative paths a game can take would make such an endeavour rather tedious. The player has a more active role in *generating* meaning from the videogame than in more traditional forms of media. The fatal flaw of narratologist approaches, according to Kerr (2003: 20, 26), is that it '[transposes] theories from static texts to more dynamic texts', as the variability of videogames points 'to a multiplicity of possible meanings and experiences' that result from the player engaging with a videogame. Narrative is one possible 'meaning' that can be derived, but it can signify anything from committing a sequence of actions that decides whether, say, the protagonist's brother in *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000) lives or dies, to whether a player wins or loses in a game of *Tetris* (Alexei Pajitov 1984).

If the videogame genre thrives on interactivity, how does the sociologist address potential ideological issues that may arise from the medium? The term ideology is used in the social sciences to refer to a 'set of ideas and discourses that serve to structure and interpret the world' (Norgrove 2007: 357). There has been considerable debate in academia over how ideology is communicated to society at large, and the interactive nature of the videogame form complicates some more standard theoretical conclusions. While it could be argued that traditional 'static' mediums impose meaning, dictating plot developments and so on to the audience, videogames operate more on a generation of meaning through an active engagement with its audience, as videogame theorists such as Eskelinen (2001) and Wolf (2001) have observed. This calls into question what is generally known in cultural studies as the 'hypodermic model', in which ideological messages 'have a direct effect on their audience' (Morley 1992: 78), with no input from the audience themselves. There are numerous studies that have questioned this model and it would seem particularly inappropriate when applied to the videogame medium, as one of its biggest selling points is ostensibly the potential for this very 'input' that purely narrative-based mediums such as film and literature exclude.

A nuanced analysis of videogame form and content requires at least some consideration of the intersection of paidia and ludus. In traditional mediums it could be said that there is only one formal level where meaning can be extracted — such as what is being communicated directly to the audience in the page of a book or in the cinematic space of the screen. In contrast, Frasca (2003: 232) identifies three levels in the videogame form where meaning can be extracted through active engagement with the player. The first is the level of *narrative* and *representation*, superficial in the sense that 'two games may have exactly the same gameplay' but by the use of different signs 'can convey different meanings of what is happening' (Konzack 2002: 95). At the more substantial level of gameplay there are *manipulation rules* which allow for a 'possibility', such as the Karma system in the *Fable* series (Lionhead Studios 2004—2010) which allows the player to 'choose' to be good or evil while having no effect on the outcome of winning or losing the game. The rules of game completion lie purely within the realm of *goal rules*. All of these rules contain certain sets of ideological value-judgements. For example, the goal rules of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) communicate an imperative to carry out the aims of US militarism, and the manipulation rules in *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2004) are conveying a value-judgement of what counts as a 'good' or 'evil' activity. Theorists such as Ang (2006: 306) are largely correct when they state that narrative/representation and gameplay are 'complimentary' rather than 'antagonistic', always informing how the other operates. It is this basic theoretical position that guides us through our analysis of four of this generation's most popular console games.

Call of Duty 4 and ideology

Theorists such as Gelber (1999) have questioned Huizinga's notion that games are entirely segregated from the values of wider society, instead they are argued to be informed by and reproduce societal values. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward 2007) is arguably an example of this, a videogame that uncritically reproduces the *ideology* of US imperialism. As we have noted, videogame interactivity precludes an ideological analysis which merely focuses on a top-down *imposition* of meaning, although given the problems with this approach we should preclude it from other media too. Using the term *interpellation*, the French structuralist theorist Louis Althusser (1970) developed an influential theory of how ideology operates on an individual level, examining how people respond to and interact with ideology. This makes his ideas useful to apply to a videogame context.

Althusser claimed that people identify themselves in the images they see and the words they hear. For instance, we all have our favourite celebrities, pop stars and so on, and even identify with them by wearing similar clothes and buying t-

shirts with their names brandished on them. These are examples of what Althusser called 'interpellation'. An ideology 'speaks to us' every time we recognise ourselves in certain characters or identify with certain values represented in popular media or by the state, the family and other 'institutions' that he calls the generic *ideological state apparatus* (ISA). An authority — which can be anything from a policeman to an opinion in a newspaper — in a sense 'hails' or calls out to us. We could say that we are 'interpellated' by videogames when, for example, we identify with the protagonist or *avatar* we are controlling, the values they represent and the narrative we become a part of. By identifying with the protagonist in *Call of Duty 4* we 'recognise' ourselves in the world of *Call of Duty 4* as the character we play and the values he embodies. In this way we identify with the game world's delineations of good and evil. We identify with the ideology and are thereby interpellated by the American military through the conduit of the videogame form.

Revisiting the theoretical framework of manipulation and goal rules that Frasca (2003) outlined, it becomes clear how the game interpellates the player into an ideology of American militarism. No 'manipulation rule' allows for the possibility of joining the side of the anti-US forces. In the realm of 'goal rules', if you shoot too much 'friendly fire' in the direction of in-game referents of US soldiers and their UK allies, the player loses the game. When the game developers of *Medal of Honour* (2010) enacted a feature that allowed the Taliban to be 'playable' in multiplayer mode, the content had to be subsequently removed as a consequence of the media controversy it stirred (Goodrich 2010) There were no such objections with *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) which involved, among other things, enacting the assassination of the Cuban leader Fidel Castro and the slaughter of Vietnamese communists defending their country against the invading US forces.

The highly constrictive nature of videogames such as *Call of Duty* compels the player to identify with US military actions. For Rehak (2003), the spectator of a film 'identifies' with the actions and characters of the film, although there is no manipulable representation of the spectator on the screen. This is different in the gaming medium where the avatars or onscreen representations can be manipulated by the spectator/player. This has the effect of transforming the passive spectator into an active participant engaging with the action and story of the game. The implication is that someone can watch a film which supports US militarism but still disapprove of the violent actions occurring on-screen and choose to identify with the film's representations of anti-US resistance. In *Call of Duty 4*, however, we are forced to side with Americans in their 'war on terror' whether we approve of it or not. If we shoot down a US Chinook helicopter it is game over.

Resident Evil 5 and representation

Narratologists can often overestimate the importance of narrative in videogame analysis, however this area can still be interesting to study. The videogame is still in a developmental phase that has not yet reached the potential of representational complexity that its interactive nature affords. While there have been a few games lauded by game critics for utilising this potential, such as the highly philosophical narrative of *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm 2000) or the heavily psychoanalytic *Xenogears* (Square Enix 1998), many games remain 'simple kill-or-be-killed shooting scenarios' (Wolf 2001: 93—94), relying on simplistic themes borrowed from other media such as film and literature. As an example, the design and narratives of horror games generally operate on a simplistic moral duality between 'good' and 'evil' (Kryzwinska 2002: 3). Usually this passes unnoticed, but when game developers use real life representations to generate a story there are often unintended and sometimes unfortunate consequences. A case in point is Capcom's *Resident Evil 5* (2009).

This game attracted controversy for featuring a white protagonist who kills throngs of black zombies in a poverty-stricken African village. This conjures images of colonial genocide. However, not all videogame critics think the imagery of the game is problematic. As zombie enthusiast Jonathan Maberry (cited in Kelley 2010) stated, 'a zombie is a stand-in for anything we fear'. Zombies are the perfect blank canvas, the 'Other' on which societal anxieties can be projected — from anxieties of pandemic in the film *28 Days Later* (2002), to the fears of growing consumerist mediocrity in the film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

However, in the *Resident Evil* series there is a very particular way zombies are represented. As Krzywinska (2002: 3) notes, in the *Resident Evil* franchise the player's avatar 'has to restore balance to a world corrupted by evil forces that threaten humanity and rationality', with zombies as the 'manifestations of such forces' the player must defeat. Videogames utilise various culturally embedded symbols to convey the idea that the zombie is an irrational and inhuman 'Other'. For Edward Said, 'one of [the West's] deepest and most recurring images of the Other' as its 'contrasting idea or experience' has been the non-Western world (1978: 1—2). Whereas the West is often portrayed as civilised and rational, the East is often portrayed as barbaric and irrational, an opposition Said famously termed 'Orientalism'. These themes are especially apparent in many Western representations of Africa. As Achebe (1977: 788) puts it, Africa serves as the 'setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human … into which the wandering European enters at his peril'.

It could be argued that the *Resident Evil* franchise has been gradually accentuating the foreignness of their zombies to increase the player's anxiety.

The first three instalments were set in the archetypical urban American location of Raccoon City. By the fourth instalment the location had shifted from this Anglo-Saxon industrialised city to a Romantic agricultural village in Spain. The problem of making Africa the site of the enigmatic 'horrific Other' is that it plays to the same racial stereotypes that provokes racism. The African zombie becomes a legitimate target for elimination by a white Western protagonist that we control. Introducing a black female avatar as another protagonist is a cynical ploy to deflect criticism, but even here she is portrayed as distinctly Western due to her origin story and European facial features. In *Resident Evil 5* we are, essentially, playing a North American or European running around 'primitive' villages killing representations of Africans. The narrative of *Resident Evil 5* has much in common with *Call of Duty 4*. In both cases we know who the hero is and who deserves to be shot.

Grand Theft Auto 4 and deviance

Criticisms of the content of *Call of Duty 4* and *Resident Evil 5* are mostly restricted to the videogame community. The *Grand Theft Auto* franchise (Rockstar 1997—present) on the other hand has become one of the central focuses of controversy surrounding the violent content of videogames. It could be argued that the reason for this is that the *Grand Theft Auto* series foregrounds an explicitly different kind of violence than that of *Call of Duty 4* and *Resident Evil 5*. While the latter games depict violent acts that would generally be considered legitimate by wider society (such as suppressing social disturbances and maintaining the political status quo), *Grand Theft Auto* is about committing deviant and criminal violent acts in the consumerist heartlands of America.

We can approach this double standard through Stan Cohen's (1980: 9) conception of the 'moral panic'. A 'moral panic' occurs when a 'condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests', which society appears periodically subjected to. The videogame medium could be said to be one of the latest targets of such moral panics. This was demonstrated by a survey of news reports on videogames from the 1990s onwards which increasingly focused on the risks of playing videogames and their possible displacement of 'healthier' activities (Williams 2003). It was implied in these reports that videogames had a negative effect on socialisation, values and behaviour.

This is not, however, unique to the videogame medium. In the 1950s, there were fears that television viewers would become 'addicted' and early critics of the cinema feared that films were 'perverting' society (Squire 2002). There have even been moral panics surrounding the birth of the modern novel and the emergence of mass literacy (Aliaga-Buchenau 2003). With its depiction of

deviant violence, *Grand Theft Auto* is an easy target for Cohen's 'moral entrepreneurs' (for example, politicians, journalists, and judges) to attribute any number of social ills to. However, the conditions that these moral entrepreneurs often panic about are 'presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media' (Cohen 1980: 9). One can see this manifestation in the controversy surrounding the *Grand Theft Auto* series.

One of the best examples of this is one of the franchise's most criticised features — the ability to have sex with a prostitute and then murder her to get your in-game money back. While various media outlets have stated that this game encourages such behaviour, there is no actual rule that demands that you kill prostitutes in order to complete a game mission: it is merely within the realm of possibility. Unlike in *Call of Duty 4* where one has *no choice* but to kill an Arab, in *Grand Theft Auto 4* choosing *not* to kill a prostitute has no consequence on the outcome of the game.

While *Call of Duty 4* can be praised for its 'realism', it is entirely sanitary in its depiction of militarist violence. The game does not allow for any possibility to commit some of the more controversial military actions that have occurred in the 'war on terror' despite the 'realism' of such actions. There are no side-quests or mini-games where the goal would be to burn civilian villages, rape Afghani women or bomb wedding parties. This contrasts to the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise where the player can choose to commit actions that are morally dubious from the point of view of a player in the West who may think bombing an impoverished people is justified on 'humanitarian' grounds. The game rids itself of the problematic moral dualities present in *Resident Evil 5* and *Call of Duty 4*, therefore making the game not only more realistic but also giving the player a much richer narrative experience.

Unlike many games where the avatar is simply 'good' or 'evil', in *Grand Theft Auto 4* (Rockstar 2008) the avatar, like characters in more sophisticated movies, is morally ambiguous. Tracing this through the narrative context of *Grand Theft Auto 4*, the avatar Niko Bellic immigrated to America to pursue the 'American Dream' and instead of this dream coming true he gets caught up in an impoverished urban environment and violent criminal underworld. Players not only decide the amount of antisocial activities to commit, they also decide how to judge Niko: a victim of circumstance or a degenerate criminal? *Grand Theft Auto*'s convergence of both free-flowing gameplay and ambiguous morality could thus be seen as a sign of the videogame medium's potential for narrative complexity that many videogame theorists have yearned for.

Wii Sports and stigma

The image of videogames being a site of deviance has often converged with the image of videogames being an exclusive masculine pasttime. Videogames have widely been seen as a 'boys-only' phenomenon with the male characters predominantly occupying the role of playable protagonist. Typically, female characters have functioned as a damsel-in-distress or an object of sexual desire. By the late 1990s as many as eighty percent of all videogame players were male (Cassell and Jenkins 2000: 14). Even when the industry began to release videogames with strong female protagonists, most notably Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996), the designers had to balance the heroine's appeal to both female and male players. This was done by portraying Lara Croft as both a 'strong and independent' woman for female gamers as well as making her sexually attractive for the game's core male market by giving her extremely unrealistic body proportions (Cassell and Jenkins 2000: 35). However, the industry eventually began to produce games that could be marketed towards female consumers. Characterised by their highly gendered notions of what appeals to female players, these games often contain nurturing themes such as with *Nintendogs* (Nintendo EAD 2005) and *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo EAD 2001).

Buoyed by the success of these games, the industry began to resent the 'boys-only' perception that surrounded videogames, as it was seen as impacting negatively on their sales (see Juul 2009). The game industry began to identify games that fit the boys-only stereotype as being a part of the 'hardcore' market. This market has been defined by industry reports as being a commercially narrow one, comprising of a niche demographic of 18—35 year old males, comprising fewer than 15 percent of the total population. The opposing 'casual' market is much broader, and seen as being evenly divided between female and male players, with the potential market supposedly comprising of the entire population (Robbins and Wallace 2006: 9—11). In recognition of this, it is now increasing difficult for game designers to acquire funding for games that are seen as only appealing to 'hardcore' players (Juul 2009: 204).

Nintendo are renowned for producing videogames with bright colours, 'cute' characters and family-friendly themes. However, it was with the advent of the Nintendo DS with its touch screen control and the motion-sensitive Wii console that Nintendo were really able to capitalise on their experience of making videogames for a broad demographic. With the Wii motion-sensitive controller — which can be used to mimic real world gestures such as swinging a racket or shooting a rifle — Nintendo were able to market a videogame console that many people could instinctively play. They went on to accomplish what had eluded the game industry for years: the destigmatisation of the videogamer. With the aid of a massive advertising campaign, Nintendo successfully marketed their

console as healthy, social and gender-neutral. This is illustrated in both the gameplay characteristics and the advertising campaign of the videogame *Wii Sports* (Nintendo EAD 2006), which comes pre-packaged with the console.

Wii Sports exemplifies Nintendo's emphasis on an entirely different type of videogame space to its competitors, what Juul (2009) refers to as 'player space', the physical space in which the player is situated. This spatial shift was achieved through the aforementioned motion controller. The effect of this was to make videogames 'socially embeddable', bringing them closer to the dynamics of card and board games where much of the meaning is derived not from the actions on the screen but rather on how the players interact with each other (Juul 2009: 117).

The visual focus of *Wii Sports* advertisements are not on the events happening on the screen but rather the people enjoying the game with each other (Juul 2009: 117). In analysing such advertisements as a system of signs, it could be argued that *Wii Sports* advertisements contain explicit examples of what Roland Barthes (1967) termed 'connotative sign-systems'. The full meaning of *Wii Sports* advertisements can only be derived with reference to signs that are *excluded* from the imagery. In these advertisements the players are portrayed as healthy, social and 'normal'. This imagery excludes any signs that would evoke ideas of the stereotypical 'hardcore gamer', such as being unhealthy, antisocial and poorly presented. The advertisements communicate that players of *Wii Sports* are able to enjoy videogames whilst still having an active and healthy social life, thus the deviant stigma that has become associated with more 'hardcore' playing habits is avoided.

Conclusion: videogames as a new media form

Whilst there has been a lot of interesting and innovative material generated from the field of game studies, there is still a vast array of issues to be examined. Videogames are a relatively new media form, only entering the mass consumer market a scant 40 years ago. As the medium evolves with new 3D technologies and downloadable content, so too does the field of game studies. With its emphasis on the social dimensions of media forms, sociology can make a significant contribution to ongoing debates about the social impact of videogames and the pleasures we derive in playing them. Sociologists can provide a critical voice, whether exposing the racial or gender stereotypes of a videogame or defending them against moral backlashes. Videogames are not simply children's entertainment; they are a serious media form, distinct from other media such as cinema, and potentially as rich, rewarding and socially valuable.

We have seen many changes in the industry during its relatively short history. We have seen many innovations, some of which have transformed the way we interact with videogames. And as long as companies keep producing videogames of the quality of *Super Mario* (Nintendo EAD 1981—present), *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo EAD 1986—present), *Half-Life* (Valve 1998—present) or *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar Games 1997—present), there is every reason to keep playing them. When it comes to videogames, sociologists are still largely in uncharted theoretical territory. The next generation of sociologists — many of whom will have been brought up with videogames — can make up for this deficiency and contribute their own thoughts on and analysis to this exciting and evolving medium.

Further reading

Caillois R (1962) *Man, play and games.* London: Thames and Hudson.

Dyer-Witheford N and de Peuter G (2009) *Games of Empire: Global capitalism and video games.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Huizinga J (1955) *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture*. Boston: The Beacon Press.

Wolf M J and Perron B (eds) (2003) *The video game theory reader*. New York: Routledge.

Bibliography

Achebe C (1977) 'An image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"', *Massachusetts Review*, *18*(4): 782—94.

Adorno T and Horkheimer M (1997) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. London: Verso.

Aliaga-Buchenau A (2003) *The 'dangerous' potential of reading: Readers and the negotiation of power in nineteenth-century narratives*. New York: Routledge.

Althusser L (1970) 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses: Notes towards an investigation', *Marxist Internet Archive*, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm (accessed 1 December 2010).

Ang C S (2006) 'Rules, gameplay, and narratives in gideo games', *Simulation Gaming*, 37: 306—25.

Barthes R (1967) *Elements of semiology*. London: Cape.

Caillois R (1962) *Man, play and games.* London: Thames and Hudson.

Cassell J and Jenkins H (2000) 'Chess for girls? Feminism and computer games', in Cassell J and Jenkins H (eds) *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and computer games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Cohen S (1980) *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 2nd ed. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Cremin C (2011) 'The formal qualities of the videogame: An exploration of Super Mario Galaxy with Gilles Deleuze', *Games and Culture*.

Dyer-Witheford N and de Peuter G (2009) *Games of Empire: Global capitalism and video games.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Eskelinen M (2001) 'The gaming situation', *Game Studies*, July, http://gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/ (accessed 28 November 2010).

Frasca G (2003) 'Simulation versus narrative: Introduction to ludology', in Wolf M J and Perron B (eds) *The video game theory reader*. New York: Routledge.

Gelber S M (1999) *Hobbies: Leisure and the culture of work in America.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Goodrich G (2010) 'Multiplayer change', *Medal of Honor*, 1 October, http://www.medalofhonor.com/blog/2010/10/multiplayer-change (accessed 5 December 2010).

Guinness World Records (2008) *Guinness World Records gamer's edition.* New York: Time Home Entertainment Inc.

Hassan R (2008) *The information society.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Huizinga J (1955) *Homo Ludens: A study of the play element in culture.* Boston: The Beacon Press.

Humphries M (2009) 'Gran Turismo 5 cost $60 million to develop', 6 November, Geek.com, http://www.geek.com/articles/games/gran-turismo-5-cost-60-million-to-develop-2009116/ (accessed 13 January 2011).

Juul J (2009) *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Kelley R (2010) 'What we mean when we talk about zombies', 27 October, *Newsweek.com*, http://www.newsweek.com/blogs/pop-vox/2010/10/27/when-the-zombies-come-i-ll-be-ready.html (accessed 13 December 2010).

Kerr A (2006) *The business and culture of digital games: Gamework/gameplay.* London: Sage Publications.

Konzack L (2002) 'Computer game criticism: A method for computer game analysis', in Mäyrä F (ed.) *Proceedings of computer games and digital cultures conference*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Krzywinska T (2002) 'Hands-on horror', *Spectator* , 22(2): 12—23.

McLaughlin R (2007) 'IGN Presents the history of Super Mario Bros', 8 November, *IGN AU Edition*, http://au.games.ign.com/articles/833/833615p1.html (accessed 12 January 2010).

Montfort N and Bogost I (2009) *Racing the beam: The Atari video computer system.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Morley D (1992) *Television, audiences, and cultural studies.* New York: Routledge.

Norgrove A (2007) 'Informing: Media', in West-Newman C L, Matthewman S and Curtis B (eds) *Being sociological*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rehak B (2003) 'Playing at being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar', in Wolf M J and Perron B (eds) *The video game theory reader*. New York: Routledge.

Reuters (2007) 'Video-game sales overtaking music', *MSN Money*, 26 June, http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/Investing/Extra/VideoGameSalesOvertakin gMusic.aspx (accessed 5 December 2010).

Robbins B and Wallace M (2006) '2006 casual games white paper'*, International Game Developers Association*, http://archives.igda.org/casual/IGDA_CasualGames_Whitepaper_2006.pdf (accessed 6 December 2010).

Said E W (1978) *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage Books.

Squire K (2002) 'Cultural framing of computer/video games', *Game Studies*, July, http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/squire/ (accessed 14 December 2010).

Williams D (2003) 'The videogame lightning rod: Constructions of a new technology 1970—2000', *Information, Communication and Society, 6*(4), 523—30.

Wolf M J (2001) *The medium of the video game.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Wolf M J (2008) *The video game explosion.* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Videogames

Alexei Pajitov (1984) *Tetris*.

Atari (1982) *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*.

Bungie (2001—present) *Halo* series.

Capcom (1996—present) *Resident Evil* series.

Cat Daddy (2007) *Carnival Funfair Games*.

Core Design (1996) *Tomb Raider*.

Electronic Arts (2010) *Medal of Honour*.

Harmonix, Neversoft, Vicarious Visions (2005—present) *Guitar Hero* series.

Infinity Wards, Treyarch, Demonware, Sledgehammer Games, Amaze Entertainment, Rebellion Developments, n-Space (2003—present) *Call of Duty* series.

Insomniac Games, Digital Eclipse, Vicarious Visions, Eurocom, Amaze Entertainment, Krome Studios, Griptonite Games, Étranges Libellules, Tantalus Media (1996—present) *Spyro* series.

Ion Storm (2000) *Deus Ex*.

Lionhead Studios (2004—2010) *Fable* series.

Nintendo EAD (1981—present) *Mario* series.

Nintendo EAD (1986—present) *Legend of Zelda* series.

Nintendo EAD (2001) *Animal Crossing*.

Nintendo EAD (2005) *Nintendogs*.

Nintendo (2006) *Wii Sports*.

Nutting Associates (1971) *Computer Space*.

Rockstar Games (1997—present) *Grand Theft Auto* series.

Square Enix (1987—present) *Final Fantasy* series.

Square Enix (1998) *Xenogears*.

Valve (1998—present) *Half Life*.