Game studies has long been historically marginalized within media studies. Yet in light of the gaming industry’s huge leaps forward in design quality, and, more importantly, the economic and textual convergences of film and television with gaming, it is increasingly imperative that media scholars pay close attention to games. Many films and television programs include a game as part of their text, a growing number of storytellers are thinking and creating across media, and many media corporations are trying their best to expand revenues by wedding gaming with film and television. This In Focus is about this process of convergence.

Convergence has inspired considerable excitement both from producers who see the potential for a revolution in storytelling methods and scope and from audiences seeking to renegotiate their relationship with the media industries. Convergence has also been cause for considerable concern for those who see the potential for the media industries to capitalize on it, thwarting competition and rewriting laws and business models to gain yet more control over the audience-consumer. These combined hopes and worries for convergence illustrate one of its key qualities: convergence produces more than just the sum of its parts.

Convergence is, to use a gaming metaphor, like that most clichéd move of videogames, the “double jump.” This action often comes when one’s avatar must leap from one moving platform to another. The player must wait until the perfect moment to perform not just a jump, but a “double jump,” wherein the avatar begins a new jump while at the peak of its first jump. The double jump strikes me as an apt metaphor for understanding what happens to the text—as economic, aesthetic, and participatory unit—as it attempts to move from media platform to media platform. Convergence is not movement as usual—it is a special move that requires something special of text, industry, and audience, and a move that engages its own laws of physics.

This collection examines a series of double jumps by examining moments of convergence between videogames, role-playing games,
film, and television. Between them, the essays study the history of gaming/film/television convergence (Ruggill), as well as its aesthetics and visual style (Brooker, Weise and Jenkins), consumption ethics (Stein), audience engagements (Stein, Tosca), and business models (Consalvo), further situating these alongside issues of gender and generation (Stein), global media flows (Consalvo), performance and parody (Tosca), and affective mechanics (Weise and Jenkins). It is my hope that readers will catch several glimpses of the intricate augmentations of text that occur during these moments of convergence. Just as watching a game can sometimes fill the spectator with the urge to play for him- or herself, perhaps these pieces will encourage more scholars to perform double jumps between film, television, and gaming studies.


Convergence: Always Already, Already

by JUDD ETHAN RUGGILL

In some ways, the timing for this colloquy on film, television, and computer game convergence is perfect.1 There are now Internet television talk shows recorded live from the dangerous and mercurial front lines of online game worlds;2 computer games in which the objective is not only to build and run a movie studio but actually to shoot films which can then be distributed and screened online;3

1 I prefer the term computer game to the more common video game because it signals a fundamental quality of the medium: computation. All computer games use some kind of electronic circuitry to “compute” and then respond to player actions. Video game, by contrast, emphasizes visualization, and there are many computer games that use no form of visual representation at all (e.g., games for the blind and visually impaired).


live machinima performances (films shot using computer games and game engines) recorded at film festivals and subsequently aired as infotainment on national cable networks;⁴ and even virtual “homes” in which consumers can set up and watch appointment television, show movies to friends, and play collaborative and competitive computer games.⁵ There are also mergers, acquisitions, and consolidations of the highest order,⁶ multimedia franchises with tentacular narratives (and the sales plans to go with them) that wind through all manner of moving- and static-image media,⁷ multi-platform marketing and promotional campaigns driven by alternative reality games and their own distinctive forms of convergence,⁸ and the headlong rush of colleges and universities to get in on the action. Indeed, it almost takes a contrarian’s audacity these days to speak about convergence with anything less than exuberance. The flowing together of film, television, and computer games seems to have entranced even the most reluctant digital media consumers with the promise of new ways of seeing, studying, and interacting.

The confluence of film, television, and computer games is nothing new, of course. These media have been converging in one way or another since the early part of the twentieth century. Think of the intricate and intimate relationship between the U.S. film and television industries (a relationship that began before network radio),⁹ the fact that the first concrete imagining of the computer game medium was as a substratum of television,¹⁰ or that game developers have long licensed both film and television programs as source material,¹¹ for example. The truth is, convergence—“convergences” is probably more accurate because of the manifold syntheses and hybridizations in play—is one of (if not) the defining qualities of the U.S. mass media over the past century. Such a history makes this colloquy actually somewhat late in coming.

In the interest of trying to reconcile the paradox of perfect timing and awkward tardiness this In Focus feature embodies, I want to annotate a few key nodes in the history of film, television, and computer game convergence. The idea is to help contextualize the proliferating phenomena the other contributors take up, as well as to evoke a sense of what convergence may really mean. I also want to suggest that while the process of convergence often appears smooth, even inexorable, it tends to be “glacial” instead—irregular, with (often simultaneous) surges and retreats.

¹¹ Some early examples include The Electric Company Math Fun (Mattel Electronics, 1979), The Prisoner (EduWare, 1980), Tron (Bally Midway, 1982), and E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (Atari, 1982). Though the computer game medium dates from the 1940s, it was not commercialized until 1972.
Film and Television. Convergence of the film and television industries began in the early 1920s before television was even invented, let alone industrialized. As Michele Hilmes notes in her thoroughgoing account, by the time commercial television appeared in the 1940s as an outgrowth of radio, Hollywood and broadcasters had been sharing talent, technology, aesthetics, and business practices for decades. This mutually constitutive and synergistic relationship was simply extended to television, and intensified in the process. Not only did network television effectively become the “vault of Hollywood” in short order, but it also became a proving ground for the sorts of large-scale convergences and conglomeration that today seem commonplace (e.g., the 1953 United Paramount Theaters/ABC merger, the transmedia branding of Disney in the mid-1950s, and so on). Today’s story of film and television convergence is thus almost ahistorical; convergence existed in both principle and practice before its possibility, before television itself. The confl ux of film and television has been a relationship of fits and starts, of strife as well as synthesis. In other words, these media have long been both mutually constitutive and competitive: “Hollywood has functioned since the early 1920s as broadcasting’s alter ego, its main rival and contributor, the only other force uniﬁed and powerful enough to present a viable alternative deﬁnition to the uses made of the medium by established broadcast interests, yet a necessary contributor to broadcasting’s growth and success.”

Television and Computer Games. The history of television and computer game convergence has a similarly preordained yet strangely irregular terrain, with the game medium materializing in the late 1940s as a byproduct of commercial television research and then mostly lying dormant until the 1970s. The ﬁrst computer game, Goldsmith and Mann’s “Cathode-ray tube amusement device” (1948), was patented by one of the major institutional players in the evolution of television in the United States, the Alan B. DuMont Laboratories. Importantly, DuMont was more than just an avid and inveterate developer of television and television-related technologies; the company was also a pioneering broadcaster, at one point establishing a network of over two hundred afﬁliated stations. In effect, the “Cathode-ray tube amusement device” was conceived within a research context expressly geared toward the proﬁtable and industrial application of television as a technology and a service. Goldsmith,
in fact, had been the director of research at DuMont since 1936, and thus one of the major forces in the formation of the company’s vision of television. As a result, his game’s raison d’être was inescapably and overdeterminedly televisual. It was always already convergent with the economic, aesthetic, and ideological structures of television, structures Goldsmith himself had helped forge.  

In contrast to the coming together of film and television, which despite its ebbs and flows was always in process to some extent, television and computer game convergence was more inertial. For whatever reason—whether it was too radical, too expensive, too boring, proprietary, or just plain incompatible with the nascent television industry—Goldsmith and Mann’s invention (and with it the articulation of television and computer games) languished in the U.S. Patent Office. Few computer games were developed by anyone (let alone anyone tied to commercial television) in the years that followed, and the games that were created were mostly demonstrations of industrial-grade computers and computation. Whereas the “Cathode-ray tube amusement device” had been intrinsically televisual, its successors were decidedly not so. They were instead conceived and implemented quite outside the auspices of television, trickling out over the next two decades from academic and scientific institutions such as Cambridge University, Brookhaven National Laboratory, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was not until the 1970s and the release of the Magnavox Odyssey (1972), RCA Studio II (1977), and Magnavox Odyssey (1978) that the television/computer game connection was revivified.

Changes in the conditions for convergence abetted the renewal: television had by this time become well established as an economic, technological, and cultural force; the price for the small-scale computer processors needed to make games go was declining rapidly; there was distinct interest by Magnavox, RCA, and other television electronics stalwarts in ferreting out new revenue streams; and multi-industrial conglomeration (à la Charles Bluhdorn’s Gulf+Western) was fast turning into the watchword of the day. As a result, the new television/computer game connection was much more robust than the original. In fact, Fairchild Camera and Instrument, Mattel, Coleco, and Zircon used the connection as a branding strategy, releasing a spate of television-themed consoles such as the Channel F (Fairchild Camera and Instrument, 1977), Intellivision (Mattel, 1980), ColecoVision (Coleco, 1982), and Channel F System II (Zircon, 1982). Computer games had become a way to sell televisions, and vice versa.

17 In yet another layer of convergence, Paramount owned a major stake in DuMont for a time, beginning in 1938. Computer games, it seems, were likely always already convergent with film, as well.

18 As Hilmes notes, many of the distinctions historically drawn between the film and television industries are artificial: “In part, these distinctions are maintained as negotiating tools, much as the concept of live TV worked for the networks in the 1950s, or the public service mandate of radio worked for advertisers in the 1930s” (200). They are arguably quite different in form and degree from their perception.

19 NIM (1951), for example, was built for the Festival of Britain by military electronics supplier Ferranti.

20 Post-Goldsmith/Mann computer games include: OXO (Alexander Douglas, Cambridge University, 1952); Tennis for Two (William Higinbotham, Brookhaven National Laboratory, 1958); and Spacewar! (Stephen Russell, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1962).

21 For more on these consoles as well as a detailed history of game technology in the United States, see Leonard Herman, Phoenix: The Fall and Rise of Videogames, 3rd ed. (Springfield, NJ: Rolenta, 2001).
Film and Computer Games. Film and computer game convergence has a genesis similar to television and computer game convergence, beginning with clear promise then lapsing into dormancy. The details of the story are well worn in the many (and multiplying) popular histories of computer games: the rapid growth and concretization of the computer game industry in the early 1970s caught Hollywood’s attention, and in 1976 film giant Warner Communications purchased Atari for the then princely sum of $28 million. By 1983, Twentieth Century Fox, Disney, Universal, Paramount, Lucasfilm, and others were licensing, publishing, and/or developing computer games, as well as folding game-based themes and imagery into film products such as Tron (1982) and WarGames (1983). Once again, though, these nascent, percolating convergences abated quickly: between 1982 and 1983, the computer game industry collapsed, as did Hollywood’s enthusiasm for the medium.

The much more interesting and profound convergent moment for these media came a decade later when Congress convened joint hearings to explore the possibility of legislating a computer game rating system. The various idiosyncratic systems that had existed prior to the hearings (e.g., Nintendo’s “Seal of Quality”) did not offer executives, politicians, and consumers the same kind of security that an industry-wide content classification system could. There was simply no officially sanctioned way to gauge games developed by different companies or for different consoles against one another or against common decency standards as there was for film (i.e., the Motion Picture Association of America/National Association of Theater Owners/Classification and Rating Administration [MPAA/NATO/CARA] system). The issue ultimately came to a head because of a kind of aesthetic convergence: computer game audiovisual quality had evolved to the point where it was capable of looking and sounding more or less “cinematic”; games could display full-motion, live-action video with human stars and multi-channel, high-quality audio. Developers such as Midway and Sega partnered this proximate realism with gritty content, resulting in games whose graphic violence and mature themes connoted R-rated films more than computer games to parents and politicians, many of whom still viewed games as child’s play. Though Congress was presented with different rating schemata over the course of the hearings, the senators clearly and vociferously preferred the one modeled directly after the


23 Examples of early Hollywood-licensed or -produced games include Alien (Twentieth Century Fox, 1982), Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back (Parker Brothers, 1982), Raiders of the Lost Ark (Atari, 1982), Halloween (Wizard Video Games, 1983), and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Wizard Video Games, 1983).

24 United States Senate, Subcommittee on Juvenile Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary and the Subcommittee on Regulation and Government Information of the Committee on Governmental Affairs, Joint Hearings Examining the Need to Establish Rating Standards for Electronic Video Games and Other Media, 103rd Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1995).

25 Well-known examples of these games include Mortal Kombat (Midway, 1992), Night Trap (Sega, 1992), and Lethal Enforcers (Konami, 1992). Night Trap is especially famous for starring actress Dana Plato (of Diff’rent Strokes fame).
MPAA/NATO/CARA system, the International Digital Software Association/Entertainment Software Rating Board (IDSA/ESRB) proposal. The IDSA/ESRB proposal was not only based on a system that had proven capable of assuaging both parental and industrial concerns, but it also made games less alien in the sense that the medium could be practically understood in terms of the audiovisual and ideological evaluative criteria of film.\textsuperscript{26} As a result, the interstices between the media narrowed, facilitating the cross-pollination of storytelling techniques, production practices, technology, and business development.

Conclusion. While there are many other noteworthy nodes in the history of film, television, and computer game convergence (e.g., the development of the telefilm style; Ralph Baer’s difficulty in finding a corporate backer for his “brown box” prototype; the move from cartridge- and tape-based storage media to optical formats; native DVD functionality in computer game consoles; the proliferation of broadband-enabled audiovisual devices), all tell variations of the same story outlined by the examples above. Briefly, the main points of that story are:

Convergence is kinetic. Though it can appear fixed and isolated, it is always dynamically changing in relationship to its environment. Consequently, convergences can appear suddenly or manifest slowly over decades.

Convergence is synergistic. It is more than simply an industrial, economic, aesthetic, political, technological, and/or ideological concourse. It is the magnification of forces, meanings, and ideas that happens as a result of this flowing together (e.g., computer game consoles and televisions being used to sell one another).

Convergence is primal. It has always been a precondition for media development, shaping innovation and evolution in terms of persistent principles in industrial, economic, political, and social ways of meaning making (e.g., the formation of a game rating system).

Together, these qualities point to some of the structuring forces and trajectories at play in the confluence of film, television, and computer games. They also function as both welcoming and warning signs: recalling that convergence is kinetic, synergistic, and primal can go a long way toward provoking deep inquiry into the phenomenon while at the same time tempering the unbridled (and often uncritical) enthusiasm new convergences frequently produce.

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\textsuperscript{26} For a detailed discussion of the MPAA/NATO/CARA system and how it interfaced with these concerns, see Kevin S. Sandler, \textit{The Naked Truth: Why Hollywood Doesn’t Make X-Rated Movies} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).
Short Controlled Bursts: Affect and Aliens

by Matthew Weise and Henry Jenkins

“This is an emotional moment for all of us?”
Carter Blake, Aliens (James Cameron, 1986)

The 2005 announcement that filmmaker Steven Spielberg had signed a contract with Electronic Arts to develop three games sparked yet another round in an ongoing debate about games and affect. As Spielberg had earlier explained, “I think the real indicator [of the game medium’s artistic success] will be when somebody confesses that they cried at level 17.”

Many film critics saw Spielberg’s recruitment as Hollywood coming to rescue its fledgling digital counterpart: the director of screen melodramas was being hired to teach the games industry how enriching character and storytelling could achieve greater emotional impact than games currently on the market. Industry insiders, by contrast, argued that games had already achieved plenty of emotional impact by deploying their own techniques and exploiting their own distinctive properties as a medium.

In this essay, we hope to develop a more sophisticated account for the affective dynamics at work in cinema and games through a systematic comparison of James Cameron’s Aliens and the 2001 game Aliens Versus Predator 2 (Monolith, 2001). Alongside Lord of the Rings (Peter Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003) and Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982), Aliens is probably the film which has most directly influenced the visual and genre conventions of mainstream American games—both explicitly through games adapted from the film franchise and implicitly through games which mimic it. Aliens Versus Predator 2 for PC was a sequel to an earlier Aliens Versus Predator PC game by Rebellion (1999), which itself was a reworking of the original first-person Aliens Versus Predator videogame (also by Rebellion) made for the ill-fated Atari Jaguar home console in 1994. During the same span of time, there were many other videogame incarnations of the Aliens Versus Predator IP, ranging from beat ‘em up arcade games to real-time strategy games. The first-person games, however, most directly re-create the atmosphere and situations

of Cameron’s film, “putting you in the film” in an immediate, immersive sense. While the game is not pure, mixing together the Aliens and Predator franchises several years before they would cross over on the screen, Aliens Versus Predator 2 remains the most compelling and faithful of many attempts to create a game based on Aliens.

Cameron’s Aliens. Cameron’s original film set a high standard for affective intensity: an action film that certainly makes us cry and otherwise has its way with our emotions. Cameron’s particular gift as an action film director has been to create a complex set of interrelationships between his characters, firmly establishing the emotional stakes in every sequence, and thus combing character actions and reactions in such a way that we never lose track of what the events mean for the people involved. Long before Titanic (1997), Cameron wove the melodramatic imagination into the DNA of the action genre.

Consider, for example, the spectacular sequence of events which unfold as the Colonial space marines attempt to rescue what they believe to be a group of colonists being trapped by the aliens, and in the process have their first sustained confrontation with the creatures. On the surface, it is easy to imagine how this sequence could inspire a game level: there’s a clearly defined mission that hinges on the importance of using the right tools, thinking through problems, and maintaining firm discipline. Much of the drama centers on the failure of the high-tech gadgets to protect the marines from danger. The static, flickering images on their viewscreen constantly remind us of the vulnerability of the technology linking the men in the field with those in command, making it impossible for either group to fully understand what’s occurring. The characters must be stripped of their most effective weapons because of the risk that they may rupture the cooling system and set off an explosion within the nuclear reactor. The alien’s acid-like blood proves to be as destructive as their flamethrowers, allowing the monsters to do harm even after they are killed. Some of the dialogue—for example, Dietrich’s observation that “maybe they don’t show up on infra-red at all?”—conveys basic exposition of the kind that would inform a player of the potentials and limits of their devices, but it always matters who says it and why. Often, action sequences emphasize improvisation, with characters adopting tactics not in the training manual, as when the civilian Ripley rams the transport through walls to rescue the trapped marines or when she slams on the brakes, flings the alien off the windshield, and then drives over it. Such choices tell us as much about her character as about the situation she confronts.

Cameron spends the first third of the film establishing the personalities, motives, friendships, rivalries, and flaws of each of the more than a dozen characters involved in the sequence. Now, he can exploit those attachments. A simple action, such as the decision to collect the ammo from the Marines, may play itself out across a series of reactions, ranging from Frost’s “What the hell are we supposed to use, man, harsh language?” to Vasquez and Drake’s unstated conspiracy to defy the orders. A seemingly throw-away detail, such as Vasquez handing Drake a round of ammo, may lay the foundation for a much more intense emotional turning point, when Drake gets splattered by alien blood and must be abandoned for dead, with Hicks pushing Vasquez into the transport as she fiercely fights to protect her fallen comrade. “Forget him, he’s gone.” Moments later, Vasquez’s “we don’t leave our people behind” provides a military rationale for her outburst, but a series of earlier exchanged glances established
a potential friendship or even romance between Vasquez and Drake. Ripley’s maternalism emerges when she slows down long enough to buckle in Newt before driving the transport into the battle zone, while Newt shows that she still does not fully trust the newcomers, when she unbuckles herself and hides on the floor.

For each character, the action sequence represents an emotional turning point. Some like Frost or Apone have been established only to be killed for a quick emotional pay-off. Hudson moves from snarky backtalk (joking about the “dry heat” of the steamy planet) to hysteria, while Hicks shows a quiet integrity and courage under fire that will win Ripley’s trust. Cameron frames the scene around a constant struggle over command. From the start, the troops respect the seasoned Apone much more than the academy-trained Gorman, and the early action in the sequence shows just how unfit Gorman is for his responsibilities. The pragmatic Ripley, the scheming Blake, and even the child Newt have their own interests in the unfolding events. As the scene continues, these tensions will escalate as Gorman proves unable to control events or even to explain the logic of his decisions, melting down completely following Apone’s death. Ripley has a superior understanding and greater emotional control over the situation. She finally must push Gorman aside, grabbing the wheel of the vehicle as she seeks to get the soldiers out of harm’s way. Later, we see her defer to Hicks as the ranking officer as she engages in another power struggle with Carter over whether to leave the planet and destroy the colony from space.

The director shapes our emotional response through his careful control over the hierarchy of knowledge, revealing and withholding information to maximize its impact. Cameron’s use of first-person camera to relay the optical perspective of characters, coupled with his use of Ripley, Newt, Gorman, and Blake as observers, watching the action from a distance, means that there’s a layering of perspectives. For example, one series of shots is shown through Apone’s head-mounted camera, overlaid with Dietrich’s concerned voiceover, as a female colonist is being ripped apart by a gut-bursting alien, while Ripley, back at the vehicle, watches with dread and horror. Our identification is thus dispersed, and yet intensified, as we are made to care about these characters and their fates. At other points, Cameron reveals information, such as shots of aliens slithering along the ceiling, unknown to all of the characters, thus further intensifying the suspense.

Monolith’s Aliens Versus Predator 2. What might at first look like a simple scene to translate into a game proves much more challenging under closer examination. Cameron’s choices in Aliens always push forward character development and always have emotional consequences. A player is apt to make much more pragmatic choices, designed to maximize success and minimize risk, and in the process, she may have a much less emotionally intense or narratively rewarding experience. But game designers have other resources for intensifying our emotional experience, typically restricting point of view and immersing us in the action.

Aliens Versus Predator 2 offers players a chance to see how they would hold up under the pressure of an alien attack. The game allows users three different modes of play: Marine, Alien, or Predator. The Marine mode is the only one we will discuss here, since choosing this mode basically transforms the game into Aliens. The opening cinematic of Marine Mode shows a military vessel identical to the one from Aliens.
approaching a planet, LV-201, to investigate a lost Wayland-Yutani Corporation research facility. The look of these places—of the exterior and interior of the ship, of the marine uniforms and equipment, and of the colony architecture—all duplicates what is seen in the film.

Right from the beginning Aliens Versus Predator 2 puts players in situations we recall from Cameron’s film, gives them these characters’ tools and equipment, and bids them good luck. That is the promise of a procedural adaptation, to be given the opportunity to answer the question all great horror films beg: What would I do if I were in that situation? As cinemagoers, we all have the protection of the fourth wall, which allows us to imagine our choice-making ability as superior to characters on-screen. What a good procedural adaptation like Aliens Versus Predator 2 does is shatter that security by forcing us to face those choices ourselves. When there’s a close match, the player feels a synthesis between memories of the film and the possibility space of the game.

The possibility space of Aliens Versus Predator 2 is derived most directly from the moment-to-moment experience, seen repeatedly in the film, of being a marine trapped in close corridors with aliens. This may sound like a generic scenario from many videogames, but its uniqueness comes from the specific player tools, enemy behavior, and level design derived from Cameron’s film. There is the motion-tracker, which constantly emits a pulse showing any moving object within a certain radius. There is the M41A pulse rifle, the standard-issue weapon featured prominently in the film, which is a combination machine gun and grenade launcher. There is the smart gun, the colossal heavy machine gun shown in the film, which features an automatic targeting system. There is the flamethrower, used in the film to scare off aliens, kill them, or create light in dark passages. There is the shoulder lamp, which functions as a personal, hands-free flashlight for each marine in the film. There is the infra-red visor, an eyepiece attached to each marine’s helmet which lets them see in the dark. And finally there is the hacking device, a small tool used to rewire electronic panels, which in the film allows the marines to gain access to locked doors. The player must use these tools as intelligently as—and in most cases more intelligently than—the characters do in the film in order to survive.

Almost immediately, Aliens Versus Predator 2 places the player in a corridor, in the dark, with nothing but a pulse rifle, motion tracker, and her wits to save her. Here, the player is alone, having been separated from the rest of the marines by a cave-in. However, as the player advances through the complex, she hears crackling radio reports of her buddies being attacked. We learn that the marines are being massacred elsewhere, while the player has to face a similar situation alone.

As in the film, the player will have to battle her way down corridors that are long and badly lit, and almost always break at a T intersection, meaning that something could come from either side at the end. Again and again, the player finds herself staring down these T intersections, while keeping one eye on the motion tracker, and training the reticule of the pulse rifle at the edges of each far corner. These are the moments where players perhaps inevitably think back to the film, to how the people in this situation died because they didn’t keep their cool. It seems there’s no way that an alien, no matter how agile, could close the long distance of the corridor before the player could shoot it. Suddenly the moment of truth arrives, via a small—yet terrifying—blip on the motion tracker. A moment later, there is a distant screech, and a shadow leaps across the end of
the corridor. The alien moves so fast that the player jumps, squeezing off several rounds and totally missing. The motion tracker blips again, and suddenly the shadow is back. The player fires but the alien is too quick. Close to panic, the player holds the fire button, trying to follow the alien, the muzzle flash lighting up the corridor. The attacker jumps on the walls, in the zig-zag pattern, back and forth, closing the distance with terrifying speed. The player waves the pulse rifle wildly, barely grazing the creature. In a flash, the monster fills the screen. An instant later, it’s “game over, man.”

_Aliens Versus Predator 2_, like any game, is a learning experience. The player must learn to make the smart decisions that the surviving characters in the film make. The first and most important thing to learn is not to hold down the fire button. The aliens move so fast that it is much more effective to aim, without firing, and only open fire briefly when there is a clear shot. In the film, right before the second big alien attack, Hicks reminds his team to use “short controlled bursts.” In the film, those who heed this advice live. Those who ignore it, like Private Hudson, meet a grisly end. The rules that govern the film world and the rules that govern the game world are the same. This is the difference between a proper procedural adaptation and merely skinning the look of a fictional IP over existing game conventions.

It isn’t just Hicks’s marksmanship advice that crosses over. Aliens, as any fan knows, bleed acid so potent that it can melt steel. In the film, more than one marine is done in by the acid shower that accompanies killing an alien at close range. Even when players manage to master the art of downing aliens, they can never do so closer than one meter, else they will melt. Monolith made sure that alien blood splashes uncontrollably upon death, making each death a hazard that needs to be avoided. Good players hop over the acid puddles created by a successful massacre. Mastering the motion tracker is also key, since good players will need to be able to distinguish between aliens and distractions, like automatic doors closing. The most important thing about the motion tracker is to remember that it only reads the space in front of the player character, a detail which is accurate to the film. In the film, Cameron often cuts to close-ups of the motion tracker, showing it at least once rotate 360 degrees with aliens closing in on all sides. Astute fans will remember that these shots are accompanied by a shot of Private Hudson holding the tracker and swiveling his body around. Forgetting this detail can lead to many deaths, since players will be convinced they are safe because of a clean signal, only to have their intestines ripped out from behind. In short, players must know how to use all the tools from _Aliens_, and how to avoid misusing them, to survive. Once the player has mastered most of these tools, she has become, in essence, a good colonial marine. These are the people who really can claim, without hubris, that they would be able to do the smart thing in that situation which previously we were only allowed to watch.

**Conclusion.** We might describe the affective mechanics of the film version as para-social, depending on the capacity of unrestricted narration to give us access to the diverse characters’ thoughts and emotions and thus enabling viewers to understand the consequences of the depicted events for them individually and as a group. The affective mechanics of the game might better be described as ego-centric, restricted to what can be known and experienced by a single character who can count on nobody
else to come to his or her assistance. What happens happens to us. We are immersed fully in the action; our choices determine the outcome. The filmmaker shapes our emotion through his attention to detail, using every action as a lens into the character’s psychology. Because this situation is open-ended, the game designers shape our affective experience through procedural design, through the properties they program into our weapons, the potentials they design into the spaces, and the logic that delimits our options. When these devices are deployed effectively, they can yield a satisfying emotional experience; they can make us cry, experience fear, shock, and horror, or feel exhilaration depending on the choices we make and their outcomes. The gamemakers may not control our emotions, but they nevertheless provide the resources needed for an intense affective experience. Too often, film buffs focus on what games can’t do emotionally rather than trying to understand the medium’s own potentials.

So will Spielberg make us cry on Level 17? Only if he is as good at designing games as he is at directing movies.

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Playing Dress-Up: Digital Fashion and Gamic Extensions of Televisual Experience in Gossip Girl’s Second Life

by Louisa Stein

“T here’s a party every night on the Upper East Side, if you know where to look.” Thus intones the female voiceover accompanying a promotional short for the much-hyped Second Life extension of The CW’s new teen TV drama, Gossip Girl. Based on a series of books created by teen-centric multimedia
corporation Alloy Entertainment, *Gossip Girl* features the everyday travails of wealthy Manhattan teenagers. In partnership with Millions of Us, a virtual world agency with clients from HBO to Budweiser, The CW has created a virtual playground that invites *Gossip Girl* viewers to cast themselves in the glamorous social sphere of the television program. Participants in the virtual Upper East Side enter the online world-building game *Second Life* at an intersection of previously established values, emanating from the traditions of teen TV programming and the consumerist cultures surrounding it, from histories of fan participation, and from the larger context of *Second Life*. Participants coming to *Gossip Girl’s Second Life* neighborhood via The CW web portal learn their way around a very specific subsection of *Second Life*, one that offers people-watching at “The Park,” exclusive parties at upscale bars, and shopping at Helen Bernel’s (a virtual version of the iconic department store Henri Bendel’s). Participants new to *Second Life* may explore other neighborhoods as well, or they may choose to stay in the virtual Upper East Side, settling their avatar into the verisimilitude of spaces only previously imagined. Indeed, as I write, my avatar lounges on the digital couch in the extravagant sitting room of one Upper East Side bad-boy, Chuck Bass.

The unfolding *Gossip Girl Second Life* experience (hereafter GGSL) offers the opportunity to explore how TV fans engage with official videogame extensions of their favored programming. *Gossip Girl* is developing a vibrant and creative fandom across its various transmedia branches, in spaces both officially affiliated and unaffiliated with The CW. Even in its infancy, the official GGSL neighborhood shows the promise of a compelling form of social networking, an experience of digital media based on social play with fashion, in the spirit of the social power play of *Gossip Girl* itself. *Gossip Girl* features a matriarchy, ruled by leads Blair Waldorf and Serena van der Woodsen, where the central teen characters model a dynamic mix of fashion, power, and self-exploration, albeit within the fantasy life of private-school privilege. Intentionally or unintentionally, fans bring these gendered power politics to bear in their engagement with GGSL, and GGSL encourages such culturally loaded play. In this era of corporate co-optation of grassroots experience, GGSL brings together the cultural weights and gendered assumptions of teen TV fandom, corporatized teen culture, and popular culture at large, as it provides and proscribes specific modes of fannish play and authorship.

Reaching the Girls Who Play Online. Although *Gossip Girl*’s ratings are barely mediocre, The CW would like its advertisers and viewers to believe that *Gossip Girl* is the hot new thing among savvy young viewers, who are streaming it online or downloading it through torrents. Highlighting its target demographic’s perceived interest in new media, The CW has harnessed *Second Life* to engage viewers in an extensive transmedia experience. However, this transmedia gaming experience differs from those connected to *The Matrix* or *Lost* (as described by Henry Jenkins and Jason Mittell) in key ways, most especially in terms of its gender address.¹ Like the successful series of books that

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precede it, the televisual version of *Gossip Girl* is directed primarily at an audience of teen girls and young women. *Gossip Girl’s* use of *Second Life* represents new directions in media marketing at young women. Through an emphasis on social networking, social play, identity play, and fashion, GGSL emulates assumed female fan modes of engagement with games specifically and media in general.

While the specifics may be new, the transmedia product of *Gossip Girl* takes its place within a multifaceted history of media cultures directed at young females, including books, TV shows, and more recently video games. *Gossip Girl*’s corporate lineage locates it directly in this history; the novel concept was created by Alloy Entertainment, producer of the highly successful *Sweet Valley High* series. Current press contributes to hype about *Gossip Girl*’s fashion marketing innovations. The *New York Times* argues that while *Gossip Girl* “is not the first show to collect revenues from product tie-ins,” it “probably is the first to have been conceived, in part, as a fashion marketing vehicle.” Coverage like this in the *New York Times* and *New York magazine* and on countless blogs brings visibility to the click-through web extensions that allow audience members to buy the clothes featured on the show. Stores like Forever 21 look like wardrobe storage for the program, as they offer more cheaply priced facsimiles of the designer clothes worn by the queens of the fictional Constance Billard School for Girls. Star Ed Westwick (Chuck Bass) is even rumored to be launching his own fashion line, prompting one blogger to proclaim that “instead of ripping out magazine pictures and taking them into stores to emulate your favorite GG character . . . you can just buy it from your favorite character in the first place.”

But of course, this type of fashion product affiliation with teen TV has a significant history as well, as in the cases of *Dawson’s Creek*, *Roswell*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Veronica Mars*. To this history of fashion/style/lifestyle marketing integrated with teen TV, we can add the lineage of videogames marketed towards young women. Videogame scholars and prominent practitioners have interrogated industry assumptions that echo traditional gendering of toys and play. Videogames directed at women are often figured by the industry as dollhouse or sandbox games, focusing on fashion,

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world building, or the domestic—“slow” play games that emphasize contemplative, social exploration.9 GGSL extends the implications of these game-shaping assumptions exponentially, as it attempts to reach a primarily female audience with a world-building game in which most of the world is already built. GGSL offers gameplay that is equal parts digital dress-up and social networking. Furthermore, GGSL draws on a recent history in which the Internet has been (re)framed as a space for gendered consumerism, with females entreated to go online and experience the web primarily as a space for shopping.10 GGSL converges not only multiple media, but multiple strategies of reaching women and teen girls across media, and thus multiple histories and traditions of female engagement, shaped as they have been by gendered notions of how girls use media.

As we look at what fans do with GGSL, we also can’t ignore the heritage of female fans engaging with media and creating alternate networks. Just as the work of Sadie Plant reveals the centrality of women to the technological development of new media, we would do well to highlight predominant female fannish traditions that guide player experience and, perhaps, designer marketing choices as well.11 Diverse fannish traditions and contemporary cultures inform the current formations of fan engagement with GGSL. This synthesis is to a degree by corporate design, as Alloy and The CW join the ranks of industry producers taking cues from fans, co-opting fannish tradition and learning from successful fan communities. Gossip Girl’s virtual Upper East Side builds on fannish engagement with fashion and aesthetics as self-expression, together with technological use and participation in social networking as marks of identity; fan communities for Veronica Mars and Roswell, for example, have similarly emphasized engagement with characters and storyworld through consumption of fashion.12 Building on such traditions of fan engagement, GGSL invites viewers to enter the Gossip Girl world and take on the mantle of an inhabitant of the Upper East Side, where they dress themselves to fit into the elite word of Manhattan private school–goers. Once virtually dressed for the part, players can attend parties, map out the social and geographic landscape, and explore the minute details of the living spaces of their favorite characters.

Second Life is far from the first videogame that fans have used to insert themselves into (or wrest control of) the spaces and narratives of their favorite storyworlds. Both prior to and concurrent with the development of Second Life, fans have, under their own impetus, turned to videogames to enact their vision of storyworlds. Fans have, for example, harnessed The Sims (Maxis, 2007), Final Cut Pro (Apple Inc., 2008), YouTube.com, and LiveJournal.com to share still and machinima (moving image) narratives based on their favorite films, television programs, and books. Capitalizing on the

12 Gillan, “Fashion Sleuths.”
tools on offer, fans use videogames to highlight preferred fannish imaginings, such as domestic stories of characters settling down to raise children. Fans of everything from Harry Potter to Big Brother use games such as The Sims to visualize and enact fannish stories, and to engage with performances of (character) self through fashion and design aesthetics.

**Gossip Girl as Nexus for Social Networking Power.** Fashion is a central point of congregation among the swelling communities of Gossip Girl fandom, and, unsurprisingly, the virtual clothing of avatars in GGSL plays a central role in one’s experience of the virtual Upper East Side. Stylish virtual clothes are vital commodities in GGSL, purchased via time and experience, and wielded in social situations as a badge of status that allows networking. The newbie outfit of a nondescript pair of jeans and a plain shirt must be quickly shed, as soon as one of the moderators provides a suitably fashionable substitution: a swingy A-line skirt, new skin tone, and anime-inflected hairdo, for example. Moderators freely hand out clothing to newcomers, but, as the introductory machinima instructs, “why should a girl stop there?” Scattered throughout the virtual Upper East Side lie boutiques, embedded within iconic areas of consumerism with slight virtual adjustments (Bernel’s rather than Bendel’s). The clothing in these stores is created and sold by other users of Second Life. Most sellers offer free gifts as well as clothing available for purchase (using Linden dollars, the basis for the larger SL economy). While a player in GGSL could spend money on clothes, for the most part participation in the basics of the fashion universe of Gossip Girl costs nothing upfront. Of course, this participation assumes access to a good enough computer, a fast enough internet connection, and time to play in GGSL, not to mention the contract of having entered the countable participation in The CW’s marketing scheme that is GGSL.

Indeed, there’s one more key element in what your avatar “wears” in Gossip Girl’s Second Life: technology. Just as your avatar dons clothing chosen from boutiques or given by a moderator, your avatar wears technological access to social networking like an accessory. Your avatar can wear a hat, or a pseudo-BlackBerry, which gives you knowledge of who else is participating and access to submit gossip to the group. In this way, virtual representation of technological access and social networking merges with virtual representation of self via fashion, all of which together map out the experience of the Gossip Girl fan, at least as imagined by The CW. The GGSL interface constructs the BlackBerry as a site of social gossip, a playful hierarchy, where fans can post gossip about other fans, emulating the gossip-entrenched social structure featured in the series.

It’s not surprising that representation of the technologies of social networking would be key to GGSL, for they play a central narrative role in the television program on which it is based. In the televisual incarnation of Gossip Girl, social and technological networks disseminate power to the masses of nameless teens. Through the abundant tools at their fingertips (BlackBerries, phones, etc.), the students at Constance Billard connect via the hub of the character Gossip Girl, a heard but never seen female

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blogger whose blog entries narrate each episode. Teens send tips and photos to Gossip Girl, who in turn shares them with the full network of tapped-in teens. Her blog entries follow the ins and outs of the popular high school cliques. The program seems to posit that, through this combination of technology and female social networking, congregations of disempowered wealthy youth can (supposedly) unseat the teen royalty with word and image, staging coups that both overturn and reify the structures of adolescent, capitalist, and gendered power.

The program’s narrative use of technology as social power inevitably embeds gendered implications, as does GGSL’s rendering of the BlackBerry as central accessory. At a crucial moment in Gossip Girl’s first season, resident rebel Chuck writes to Gossip Girl about his sexual involvement with teen society queen Blair. Gossip Girl in turn shares this information with all of the connected teens of New York City society, who punish Blair through social tactics of exclusion and gossip. Thus Chuck wields the power of Gossip Girl and the social networks she commands to take down his former lover. Can we read this plot twist and the drama that cascades from it as an instance of male power usurping female labor and female networks? Can one draw a parallel between this moment and The CW’s cooptation of Second Life?

The parallel seems ripe, but is in fact too simple, as it overlooks the complexity of the Gossip Girl text and of fan engagement; for Chuck himself is the site of play with perversity and desire on the part of female viewers, a nexus for desiring female fans. Chuck is hardly a bastion of heteronormative masculinity, as he cavorts through Manhattan in hot-pink trench coats and ascots. More than the unseen figure of Gossip Girl, Chuck has been a gathering point of Gossip Girl fandom, a center of communities and networking hubs, key to the most popular pairings for fan fiction, be they slash (same sex) or het (opposite sex). Thus, to a degree at least, it is the fangirls and the traditions of fandom that they bring with them that wield Chuck, in many cases precisely because he bends social (and specifically gender) norms.

The Gossip Girl Second Life project may remain only a niche experience, drawing a narrow subset of players—active Gossip Girl fans with technological access and sufficient comfort to explore Second Life. However, it serves as a valuable site for inquiry into the shifting terrain of audience agency, as the industry experiments with the commercial possibilities of convergence, and media users experiment with the new possibilities of engagement being offered to them. Gender plays a key role in this process, as already gendered communities and behaviors intersect, at times conflict, and inform one another. Just as we can’t dismiss the figure of Chuck as simply a usurper of female power, neither can we dismiss GGSL as a clumsy attempt to commodify Second Life in the service of the Gossip Girl marketing machine. An understanding of GGSL as co-optation of fan modes of engagement belies the complexity of the fan experience, and a dismissal of Gossip Girl’s orchestrated fandom as insidious consumerism bypasses the dynamic, lived media cultures that, while steeped in consumerism, are far more than the sum of their parts.

Epilogue. I want to close with a current development in Second Life in general and in GGSL in particular. Second Life offers players the opportunity to make their own machinima television programs. These programs are heralded as “live” and aesthetically
appear as a mix of early talk shows and current entertainment news programming. While the content of these programs appears ideologically and aesthetically traditional, rooted strongly in preceding mainstream norms, the very fact that *Second Life* offers the tools for one to make these programs potentially gives limited agency, at least, to the *Second Life* players as they turn television producers. GGSL has recently announced a contest for Upper East Side participants specifically to create their own television programs. What will fan-authored, industry-proscribed, and videogame-enabled television programs look like, who will watch them, and how will they influence the original televisual program that inspired them? Stay tuned to your nearest virtual world to find out.

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**Camera-Eye, CG-Eye: Videogames and the "Cinematic"**

by Will Brooker

I used to be good at games. I was good at the only *Space Invaders* machine in South London, in 1979. I was the first kid to have a ZX Spectrum in my school, in 1982. I published in the national games magazine *Crash* when I was seventeen. But since the age of eighteen and my first degree, I’ve concentrated on cinema. So this article comes from a film studies perspective; I’ve relied on game experts for many of my examples. Because I’m no longer good enough at games, I haven’t been able to play through to witness most of these scenes first-hand. I’ve had to watch them at a secondary remove, as records of other people’s achievement. That is, I’ve had to watch game scenes as films.

Of course, one of the reasons I focused on cinema is that you couldn’t study games academically in 1988. You couldn’t even take a degree solely in cinema: my degree was unusually progressive, offering fifty percent film and a token module in television. Since then, film studies has become higher status, moderately established, and respectable—on the middle-rung of the ladder between the academic study of television, games, and comics at one end, and literature at the other. By extension, complaints about the careless adaptation of *Doom*
(Andrej Bartkowiak, 2003) and Daredevil (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003) may rage across discussion boards but rarely make it beyond fan communities, whereas issues about the adaptation of Austen or Atonement (Joe Wright, 2007) from their original literary texts are debated in broadsheet newspapers.

The “Videogame” Film. Because fidelity to the original is of low priority when porting from games to cinema, direct adaptations of videogames—with rare exceptions—have little in common with the aesthetics and conventions of the source material, and resemble the game primarily only in mise-en-scène and costume design. Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (Simon West, 2001), for instance, ignores the opportunity to re-create the player’s experience by having Lara “seen to die, even if only on one occasion, and then to be able to restart a sequence, game-style, for another attempt.” Its occasional references to the game-world constitute “insubstantial nods . . . rather than anything central to the structure or form of the film.”

However, a more general conception of the “videogame-style film” can be established from references to diverse movies that incorporate game conventions while not adapting a specific game. On a broad aesthetic level, the term “video game” is used to connote spectacular, showy displays of effects at the expense of subtext and character, as in: Tony Scott’s bravura digital camerawork in Déjà Vu (2006); the spectacle that overwhmels ideas in I, Robot (Alex Proyas, 2004); The Matrix’s emotionless, uninvolving stunts (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999); the exhibition bouts between CGI monsters in King Kong (Peter Jackson, 2005); and the dense, detailed, but artificial action sequences of George Lucas’s Star Wars prequels (1999, 2002, 2005). More directly, critics and fans have identified specific videogame memes in films, such as the progression through levels, power-ups, and signature moves in Ong-Bak (Prachya Pinkaew, 2003), the “get all weapons” cheat code in The Matrix, and the platform-jumping in Attack of the Clones (George Lucas, 2002) droid factory. These are regarded as playful, knowing quotations and in-jokes along the lines of the Lara Croft “nods” or, in the latter case, as cynical cross-marketing through the placement of a scene that was immediately adapted to PlayStation and Xbox.

Finally, “videogame” style in films suggests a certain form of narrative, based on the cycles of character-death and reset. Charles Ramirez Berg traces the “Tarantino effect” in recent cinema to the influence of postmodern resistance to master narratives, of hypertext links, and of videogames, which “repeatedly take players back to the same situations.” 9 Similarly, Jeff Gordinier identifies the “PlayStation Generation” of twenty-first-century-filmmakers, who “mess with narrative in new ways [. . .] mess with time, with space, with the laws of physics and the structure of story” and “bring to their movies the cut-and-paste sensibility of video games and the internet.” 10 This is the reading of videogame conventions that leads Warren Buckland to identify “videogame logic” in Luc Besson’s (1995) *The Fifth Element*’s “serialised repetition,” including a “feedback loop” and “space warp,” 11 and prompts Margit Grieb and Kate Stables to discuss *Run Lola Run* (Tom Tykwer, 1999) and *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) respectively as game-style cinema because of their looping mini-narratives and re-telling of the same story with variations, like repeated attempts at the same level. 12 Like Berg and Gordinier, Grieb’s discussion of *Run Lola Run* links the repetition and non-linearity that structure the film’s narrative not just to games but to other forms of digital media—“websites, hypertext stories, interactive CD-ROMs.” 13

The implications of this overlap between cinema and games are mixed: on one hand, importing videogame conventions suggests a fast-and-loose, “cut-and-paste” resistance to traditional narrative rules, with overtones of rebellious youth (Berg describes “playing with narration” as “cool and fun,” and refers to Tarantino’s “wild” techniques). On the other hand, videogame aesthetics are associated with empty spectacle and cynical attempts at cross-platform marketing, both of which are presumed to take precedence over character and traditional storytelling. Common to both readings is a sense of digital novelty and technological innovation, whether in the bold slicing and reworking of story like a word-processed document, the web-style clicking through branching narratives, or the flashy showcasing of state-of-the-art effects.

The deliberate association with a lower-status form like videogames brings a movie down to a trashier, edgier, funkier level; it sacrifices any claims to serious art (unless it also carries the exotic kudos of “foreign” cinema, such as anime) but it gains a hip attitude. *Crank* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2006), reviewed in *Film Journal International* as “among the most mindless action films ever made, but . . . a helluva video game,” is a prime example of this trade-off. 14 The movie refers explicitly to gaming

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10 Jeff Gordinier, cited in Kimberly A. Owczarski, “The Internet and Contemporary Entertainment: Rethinking the Role of the Film Text,” *Journal of Film and Video* 59, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 3; see also Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 119.
12 Margit Grieb, “*Run Lara Run,*” in *King and Krzywinska,* *ScreenPlay,* 161; Kate Stables, “*Run Lara Run,*” *Sight and Sound* 11, no. 8 (August 2001): 19.
13 Grieb, “*Run Lara Run,*” 165.
conventions and history, both superficially (screens from the 1980 arcade game *Berzerk* and a pastiche of the PC game-emulator MAME) and on the level of storytelling. Its plot is made up of fast-paced missions with a single goal; its visual perspective switches from ground-level chase to Google Earth map views. Its aesthetic is *Grand Theft Auto*, and it makes the debt clear with visual nods to GTA’s producers, Rockstar Games. The film was written off by one reviewer as “the latest stab by Hollywood to cash in on the violent video game craze,” and, tellingly, slated for its similarity to “any recent output by Tony Scott.”

The movie’s teen-punk response to criticism, in turn, is built into its opening credits, in the form of a high-score table: “FUG,” “YOU,” “ASS,” “HOL.”

### The “Cinematic” Game.

The connotations of the “cinematic” in videogaming are very different. King and Krzywinska identify an assumption within the industry that “more cinematic equals ‘better’ . . . a judgement accepted by many reviewers.” Cinema, as they recognize, has greater cultural prestige and a “standing higher in our dominant cultural hierarchies . . . a factor that adds to its potential appeal to the games industry.”

Mark J. P. Wolf’s taxonomy of on- and off-screen space in games is based on the same implicit approach of elevating the study of gaming through a comparison with film theory and cinematic form—just as theories of authorship, borrowed from literature, dignified popular cinema in the 1950s and 60s. Wolf finds a parallel between the scrolling of *Defender* (Williams Electronics, 1982) and the panning in Edwin S. Porter’s *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) and Cecil Hepworth’s *A Day with the Gypsies* (1906), while D. W. Griffith’s cuts between adjacent spaces match the cuts between neighboring rooms in Atari’s *Adventure* (1978).

If these overlaps between the evolution of spatial storytelling in early (1900s) cinema and early (1970s) gaming were the result of technological limitations—in both cases, a static “camera”—by the mid-90s the process had become one of deliberate emulation. As Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter note, since the advent of the PC CD-Rom and the CD-driven PlayStation, both offering increased storage capacity, game designers of the late 1990s worked towards the holy grail of “interactive movies”—“movies,” in this case, implying mainstream Hollywood.

Games from the mid-90s onwards attempted to incorporate this “cinematic” sense in a range of ways. Full-motion video, with real actors and sets (such as the casting of Mark Hamill and Malcolm McDowell in *Wing Commander III* [Origin, 1994]) proved to be a fad, phased out and replaced by pre-rendered, CGI sequences created on a more powerful computer than the games console itself. Ironically, this incorporation of high-quality, “filmic” visuals tended to disrupt the player’s immersion in the diegesis, breaking the flow between cut-scene and

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17 Ibid., 7.


gameplay. Cut-scenes therefore improved, paradoxically, by becoming less smooth and polished; bridging scenes were increasingly generated “in-engine,” created on the fly by the console, with no discrepancy in visual quality; and *Half-Life* (Valve, 2000) introduced a radical shift by keeping all exposition within the game-space, avoiding the shift between “playing” and “viewing.”

Capcom’s *Resident Evil* games of 1997–1999 fit Wolf’s theory of a parallel evolution between cinematic and game grammar by forcing the player to work within fixed camera angles, linked through the conventions of classical continuity editing. However, as King and Krzywinska note, “predetermined framing of this kind acts like that of a film . . . at the expense of player freedom,” and this fixed camera positioning is, like full-motion video, rare in contemporary gaming.

Twenty-first-century games continue to incorporate cinematic (and televisual) motifs—most obviously in their title sequences and credits and the use of “letterboxing” (appropriating TV’s mediation of cinema) to signify a cut-scene but also through in-game pastiche: the “bullet time” of *Max Payne*, inspired by John Woo through *The Matrix*, the *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) simulation in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (EA, 2002), and the slow-motion stunt replays in *GTA: San Andreas* (Rockstar, 2004), which recall a range of sources from *Bullitt* (Peter Yates, 1968) to *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991). The “realism” these games aspire to is a mediated truth—the experience not of being at war, but being in a war film. Similarly, King and Krzywinska recognize that within sports simulations, the “primary point of reference is television coverage of the sport, rather than the experience of the sport itself.” That games continue to simulate mediated experience is underscored by the way they digitally recreate the view through a camera lens, rather than the human eye: the golf game *Links 2004* (Microsoft, 2003), like the strategy war game *Ground Control* (Sierra, 2000) and the SF combat of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Microsoft, 2001), incorporates the analogue oddity of lens flare; Max Payne experiences drug hallucination through a fish-eye lens, while *GTA: Vice City* (Rockstar, 2002) signifies rain through droplets on a glass surface, even when the player is outside a car. Similarly, *American McGee’s Alice* (EA, 2000) and *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (Konami, 2004) employ simulations of flickering, scratched celluloid as part of their horror repertoire.

**The Videogame Camera-Eye and the Cinematic Avant-Garde.** Overall, however, the trajectory within games of the current decade has been away from a slavish emulation of the cinematic and towards the evolution of visual storytelling techniques

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21 Howells, “Watching a Game,” 120.
25 Ibid., 102–103.
that establish a unique mode, distinct from cinema—or more precisely, distinct from mainstream Hollywood. The experiments in “interactive movies” have demonstrated an unworkable tension between the cinematic (in terms of continuity editing and conventional film grammar) and the playable. Full-motion video cut-scenes break the player out of immersion in the diegesis, arguably like inter-titles in early films. Fixed camera angles restrict player movement and freedom, leading to an “on-rails” experience like a theme-park ride, rather than a convincing simulation. As Wee Liang Tong and Marcus Cheng Chye Tan conclude in their chapter on narrative space across the two forms, while many games “have intentionally mimicked and even attempted to out-do movies,” what has emerged is “a distinctive mode of visualisation. . . . [games are] unlike movies because they lack defining cinematic cues.” Above all, it is “the employment of a free-ranging camera that breaks the rules of conventional cinema.”

Again, the key term is conventional cinema.

Videogaming is currently dominated by two key camera positions, those of the Third-Person Shooter (TPS) and the First-Person Shooter (FPS). While, as noted, games are still dedicated to reproducing the visual effects of an analogue lens, these two key camera modes are very different from the camera-eye, and the associated editing, of mainstream cinema. The FPS point of view is generally assumed to have originated with Wolfenstein 3D (id, 1992), though it has precursors in the arcade game Battlezone (Atari, 1980) and the ZX81 3D Monster Maze (New Generation, 1982). Wolfenstein led to Doom (id, 1993), which led to Quake (id, 1996); these and further variants refined the details, texture, and lighting of the game environment, but retained the fundamental premise that the game “camera” represents the player’s point of view. The TPS point of view can be traced to Super Mario 64 (Nintendo, 1996), where it appears as a literal flying-eye camera, independent of the Mario avatar; the mode evolved through Tomb Raider (Eidos, 1996) and became the dominant POV in Rockstar’s Grand Theft Auto when the series went 3D in 2001. In contrast to the FPS, this virtual camera “corresponds to no actual pair of eyes in the gameworld. The point of view from which we see Lara Croft is constantly moving, swooping, creeping up behind her and giddily soaring above, even diving below the putative floor level.”

Neither of these modes is conventionally “cinematic.” We see a POV similar to the FPS in horror and science fiction, putting us in the position of the “Other”—the Terminator’s digital scans of a barroom, or the Predator’s infra-red vision. We witness Murphy’s transformation to RoboCop through his helpless eyes (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) as we share Jean-Dominique Buby’s locked-down vision in The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (Julian Schnabel, 2007). Similarly, cinema invites us to share a character’s enhanced vision through binoculars (see Star Wars: A New Hope [Lucas, 1977]) or a zoom lens (Rear Window [Alfred Hitchcock, 1954]). Of course, the first-person POV shot is part of conventional film grammar—but it is a small part, a shot sparingly used. A sequence in an FPS game, from start until death, is a continuous point-of-view shot, and a technique so rare in cinema that its uses can be quickly listed: most obviously,
the unsuccessful experiment of the first-person film noir, *The Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery, 1947), and the scenes where we jack into a character’s cerebral cortex in *Strange Days* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1995). *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), which may seem to come closest to feature-length FPS, differ in that their point of view is explicitly a camera, which shakes, blurs, can be set down and passed from one character to another—quite distinct from the smooth, steady view of gaming, where the virtual “camera” is not held separate from the body, but embedded behind the eyes. (Tellingly, the television comedy *Peep Show* (Jesse Armstrong et al., 2003 onward) is shot from precisely this point of view, for its unnerving, uncanny effect.) The movie adaptation of *Doom* incorporated a first-person sequence as a novelty, another token nod to the source material, but switched back to conventional continuity editing for the majority of the film.

Where do we see the fluid, soaring, unbroken TPS camera in cinema? Again, the occasions stand out as remarkable. Orson Welles choreographed a swooping crane shot for the opening of *Touch of Evil* (1958); more recently, *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) and *Atonement* (Joe Wright, 2007) faked lengthy, mobile shots with a combination of camera rigs and CGI. As with the FPS, the most notable aspect of the third-person POV in games is (after its mobility) its lack of cuts: a technique that aligns it not with conventional Hollywood, but with Hitchcock’s playful experiment in *Rope* (1948), with Greenaway’s long tracking shots, with Tarkovsky’s lengthy takes, with the unblinking stare at violence in *Irreversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *Hidden* (Michael Haneke, 2005); with rarities like *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000) and *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002).

The dominant camera of videogames, then, is far closer to that of *art cinema* than to mainstream Hollywood. The videogame’s vision of “reality” is Bazinian, not Eisensteinian. Its virtual camera starts, records what happens without turning away, and cuts only at the end. While “videogame cinema,” as discussed above, seems to imply an aesthetic of cut-and-paste and flashy, funky superficiality, the FPS and TPS modes actually look nothing like a Tony Scott movie. As cinema, the videogame would be not youthful rebellion, but the mature challenge of the avant-garde.

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Thanks to the gaming forum of Barbelith.com, and Hit-Reset.co.uk.
In contrast to the other pieces in this In Focus feature, this essay deals with media convergence in players’ heads, and with how the cross-media cultural encyclopedia of tabletop roleplayers is put to active use in their performances.

Tabletop roleplaying games are a hybrid entertainment form, part games part storytelling, mixing popular culture interests such as fantasy literature and wargames. Tabletop roleplaying games are a hybrid entertainment form, part games part storytelling, mixing popular culture interests such as fantasy literature and wargames. They have therefore always been highly intertextual and convergent, at the beginning directly inspired by sword and sorcery literary worlds, and later expanding upon media universes drawn from film, television, comics, or computer games. Role playing means performance without a script, where players rely on basic character descriptions to behave and speak in appropriate ways as they go along in their adventures. This kind of on-the-fly collective storytelling is highly demanding and requires that players are knowledgeable of the setting, genres, and themes evoked in each particular game so that their utterances and actions will make sense and be productive in story-advancement terms. Imitation, quotation, parody, and other forms of meta-textuality are common strategies to fill the storytelling gaps. Since the narrative occurs largely in participants’ heads, any reference to an external diegetic world will help give shape to their imagination and steer it in the right direction. Many roleplayers also receive significant pleasure from recognizing fellow players’ quotes and from performing the right roles.

Roleplaying games are advocated by players, game designers, and academics as “active” entertainment, as opposed to the “passive” consumption of stories. This is often explicit in the game rulebooks themselves. But this doesn’t mean that roleplaying as an art form is cut off


2 For example, the Vampire rulebook states: “People are bringing stories home, making the ancient myths and legends a more substantial part of their lives. Storytelling on a personal level, rather than on the big screen or on TV, has become increasingly a part of our culture. That is what this game is all about, not stories that will be told to you, but stories that you will tell yourself.” Mark Rein-Hagen, Vampire: The Masquerade (White Wolf, 1991), 20.
from the rest of the cultural system. On the contrary, roleplaying performance is heavily influenced by other media, as all commentators who have seriously dealt with the genre have noted. In this essay I want to go beyond the usual assumption that other media influence manifests itself exclusively through quotations in roleplaying games. I suggest that parody can have a transformative power, both on the stories and the players themselves, as it can facilitate serious social satire.

**Our Game: What a Wonderful War!** This discussion draws on the empirical material collected by myself and Anders Tychsen in a 2003 investigation, “The Production of Narratives in Role Playing Games,” where our aim was to understand how narratives are collectively produced on-the-fly in a roleplaying session in order to gain insight that could be exported to the design of multiplayer computer games. We recorded four roleplaying sessions with four different five-player teams and game masters. We transcribed the videos and conducted interviews with the players both before and after the games. One of the interesting results was that the same rather linear scenario could be played/told in surprisingly different ways, which raises questions about the steering of creativity and the stimulation of player fantasy. But another interesting (and perhaps contradictory) observation was of the similarity of the parodic activity in all sessions, even the ones with different results. Participants roleplayed in very much the same way, and I was surprised at how strong archetypes are and how they guide roleplaying performance.

The scenario we observed is called *What a Wonderful War* and is based on the *Traveller* science fiction game system. It was written by Sven Münther (a player fan) for a roleplaying convention (con) in Copenhagen in 2003. This means that it is a self-contained scenario that has to be playable within a short time (four to five hours). In terms of structure and content, con scenarios cannot rely on the accumulated playing experience afforded by a campaign, where the same players meet regularly and get to know both the fantasy world and each others’ characters so well that the game master can use this knowledge to enrich the storytelling experience. In a con scenario, players will most likely not know each other, and might not be familiar with the setting, so that instead of building a story that requires precise knowledge of a fictional world, con scenarios rely on more general genre conventions.

In *What a Wonderful War* the players are a motley crew of civilians sent as observers to a war against Fulzan, a planet populated with evil aliens which menace the world of Ria Acme (the players’ world). The government (“Development Party”) wishes to obtain more popular support for the war and dispel any doubts as to its fairness and necessity. The five playing characters are: Quain Wells, stupid journalist who will do anything to be famous; Dick Fallow, a vote-hungry politician for the opposition “Welfare Party”; Peter Batgie, cameraman, unethical journalist; Lieutenant Flemmings, military leader in charge of the group; Jessica Touff, mascot of Bonnie Cola (official sponsor of the war). The scenario is rather linear, made up of a series of “missions” where the civilian team directly experience different aspects of the war (a recognition

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3 See for example Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 73–84; or Fine, *Shared Fantasy*.

4 The original scenario material as well as all the empirical material is in Danish. All translations are mine.
mission, an assault to a bunker, etc.). But it is at the same time open, because the game master can alter the number and/or order of the missions, and each mission contains a clue indicating that there is something strange going on. The players keep on getting missions until they eventually discover the truth about the war. In reality, they are not in Fulzan as they think, but in Sirius, a peaceful planet populated with humans and rich with minerals that the government wants to exploit. The army combat suits have a computer-controlled display in their helmets that transforms everything to look like the inhospitable Fulzan, also turning the Sirius humans into ugly Fulzan aliens whom soldiers have no problems exterminating.

Münther acknowledges in the written scenario materials that his story is directly inspired by an old computer game called *Quantum Gate* (HyperBole, 1993), which provides him with the idea of the science fiction government conspiracy carried out through technological manipulation and propaganda. This points to several topical and stereotypical themes that have been abundantly exploited in cinema and television: the soldier who discovers his cause is unfair, the government conspiracy where individuals are used as pawns, the ruthlessness of political propaganda, and the peaceful “others” falsely constructed as dangerous and in need of extermination. The general message is one of distrusting simple explanations, because reality is much more complex than is immediately apparent. The scenario description offers parallels with our contemporary reality, as President Buisson, Jr., continues a war that was initiated by his father against some aliens (for whom religion is important) that possess valuable resources. The critique of U.S. and Western politics, international capitalism, and Western news coverage is no less devastating for being humorous.

The serious subtext is communicated through parody (which deals with fictional norms), which gives way to satire (which deals with social norms). As Linda Hutcheon notes in her famous study of parody, both forms are typically confused because they often appear together and both use irony as their main discursive mode. The abundant use of ironic distance has become omnipresent in the art of our time, perhaps, as she suggests, because of the “loss of that earlier humanist faith in cultural continuity and stability.” The critical distancing of irony doesn’t necessarily imply that the author wants to “destroy” the text it quotes. As Hutcheon also notes, the target of contemporary parody is often “not the parodied text at all,” but the intention is to make social satire. This is obvious in the text of our scenario, which contains plenty of parodic quotations and puns: from the twisted Louis Armstrong–like title, to the silly names of the characters, to the recommendation of using Astérix or Blackadder as models for a certain non-playing character, to a Shakespeare quotation. However, these texts

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5 In this game, the player is a military doctor sent on a mission to an alien world in order to acquire a rare mineral. His interaction with the alien world is through a display that falsifies the information so that the hostile aliens he battles are in fact a peaceful race of humanoids.

6 I take the distinction from Wes D. Gehring, *Parody as Film Genre: Never Give a Saga an Even Break* (London: Greenwood, 1999), 5.


9 Ibid., 51.
are not criticized, but “canonized,” since they are required if the players are to fully enjoy the story. As Dan Harries has noted, parody oscillates between closeness and distance. This distance and duplicity paves the road for satire, because the canon of current popular culture contains not only fiction works, but also ideas and opinions about our globalized mediated world. As an example, the scenario often dwells on the cumbersome use and computer problems of the soldiers’ equipment, powered by a software company called “MacroHard.”

The scenario’s main vehicle for parody and satire is thus mediation as a theme: the images of the war are pre-edited even for the soldiers participating directly, and later for the “viewers,” as the civilian team mission is to document. It is computers and television remediated.

**Player Parodic Activity.** How, though, do the players receive the parodic material and how do they develop it in their own performances? If we, like Harries, think of parody as “a discursive mode which more clearly aims at the functions of parody rather than any specific content or thematic,” we can find parody at two levels: a lexical one of direct quotations, and a syntactical one of frames/schemata.

The first level of direct quotations is rich in all playing sessions, as when, complete with Freddie Mercury melody, a player sings, “I am Fallow, Dick Fallow. Or, I throw bombs like there was no tomorrow.” There is a canon made up of science fiction and fantasy films and literature, television series (especially British), comics, Japanese popular culture, computer games, songs, and so on. While Mackay characterizes intertextual allusions as digressions from actual roleplay, I observed that they are integrated both in the dialogue and the handling, moving the action forward. They are also one of the elements that other players enjoy most, as was obvious in their reception of the comments, and they were described as pleasurable in the after-game interviews. Players use quotations to perform their characters and make them a bit less flat. Appropriating the infamous Indian reference, the statement “The only good Fulzan is a dead Fulzan,” for instance, elicited laughter from all, and has a much stronger effect than saying, “I am in favor of this war,” as the player ironically and consciously placed his character in the problematic side of polemical othering and race questions.

It is not possible to make a full list of quotations in the reduced space of this article, but it is important to show how they work. Quotations not only provoke laughter and encourage character development, but also transform the players from parodists to satirists, just like the scenario text itself. Here is a direct reference to current (2003) US international politics mixed with a wink to *Casablanca*:

(The cameraman and the politician are planning some takes for the next day)

PB: You could have the role of the heroic victim in combat.

DF: Exactly, I think this is the beginning of a great collaboration. Mr Bagtie. Yes, the axis of evil . . . (with a dreamy stare as if he saw the headlines)

11 Ibid., 7.
12 Mackay, *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game*, 75.
It is not only about being funny or showing off: this reference has the powerful effect of pairing the reference to the corrupt policeman of *Casablanca* with the rhetoric of President Bush’s “War on Terror” and on Iraq.

A higher level of parody would be apparent in the schemata that guide player behavior and that are manifest in the development of the sessions and sometimes explicitly in the post-game interviews. By schemata, I mean longer strips of behavior that follow a few specific conventions. Most or all characters talk and act according to the different schemata. They are:

- War films, especially *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997).
  
  LF: *GREAT, RECRUIT, THERE IS A FUTURE FOR YOU . . . IN THE GRAVE-YARD!!* I am now going to teach you something. I am your lieutenant! You haven’t got the right to ask any questions. You can ask questions IF you ever become lieutenants yourselves! (snorts)

- Political spin, as exemplified by the *Yes, Minister* series (BBC 2, 1982–1988).
  
  DF: *Well, our party, the Welfare Party, is everything that the Development Party isn’t. That shouldn’t be understood as if we are against this war, quite the contrary, absolutely, in any case.*

- Contemporary television rhetoric: news coverage and advertisement
  
  QW: *Look at this my dear spectators! We are back to where the action is. Over there is the enemy!* (screams at camera while he himself shoots at the enemy with his laser gun)
  
  B: *I just want to dedicate this kill to our sponsor, Bonnie Cola, the best drink in the universe.*

Curiously, the four player teams used the same three main schemata even though none of them was explicit in the handouts they received. Players inspired each other in the use of the schemata, complimenting each others’ performances in the post-game interviews and enjoying themselves immensely, as with this exchange of the two journalists:

[A character who they thought was dying survives against all odds.]

  QW: *That’s a pity, now that we had recorded a goodbye clip . . .* (disappointed)
  
  PB: *Well, he can always die later.*

The schemata push players in certain directions, the three main ones being very much in agreement with the scenario’s spirit. But sometimes the wrong schema can slow the action down. For example one of the teams overplayed the “first-person-shooter frag-craze” schema, which made them insensitive to the clues about the war being a government conspiracy and too preoccupied with killing as many Fulzanners as possible. In the end they couldn’t “solve” the story. But the three other teams internalized the parodic-satiric ethos of the scenario, and made it theirs, which made them successful in dealing with its duplicity. The ironic distance and the clues of the three main schemata pointing to government lies, media manipulation, and propaganda raised their suspicions and led them to uncovering “the truth about the war.”

We can wonder whether the character descriptions the players received steered them too much towards the three schemata, but they all left room for interpretation.

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13 This is of course an indication not only of the strength of the canon but also the cultural homogeneity of our players (young Danes between 18 and 35).

14 In one of the interviews a player describes this as “making active links to the others.”
Also, an interesting issue came up in the post-game interviews, where some players declared that they had experienced trouble with reconciling their and their characters’ interests. The constant parody led them to be skeptical, but they didn’t feel it would be true to their flat characters to discover the truth too early. They therefore dragged the story on until they felt it was appropriate. In a way, their creative parodying took them further than their characters would go.

**Significance and Possibility for Subversion.** So, in the case of this scenario, a high degree of cross-media parody is not only entertaining, but it also improves the conditions for story advancement and roleplaying success. The team with the most parodic behavior is the one that performed best (understood as finding out the truth more quickly), and I argue that the reason was their engagement with a discursive mode that encourages duplicity and spawns social satire. This is obviously closely related to this kind of humorous “scenario with a twist,” and it would probably not be especially helpful in a tragic *Vampire* scenario. Still, these results suggest that cross-media quoting (of texts and schemata) will play an important role in any kind of roleplaying scenario, even though the specific strategies will vary with each genre. What is important here is that incorporating other media into roleplaying is never a matter of mere decoration, because it has consequences on the performance of the players and the success of both their storytelling and their playing. Of course, it remains to be seen whether such parody and satire could find as easy a home in a less political, fantasy scenario.

A perhaps more controversial question is to what extent this kind of parodic activity transforms the players themselves. While it is clear that their pleasure goes beyond quotation-recognition and escapism, it is not quite so easy to see them as subverting the social order. However, I would like to argue that in their movement from parodists to satirists, there exists an emancipatory possibility as players “question the legitimacy of established norms” and they exercise the idea that “no normative system is absolutely stable and immutable,” neither textual nor social. Media convergence here is expressed through the humorous performance of the schemata of our time, from television to cinema to popular literature and music. Players’ laughter is not detached and cynical, but rather includes them and their whole system of beliefs, the texts they love and the world they inhabit, much like the medieval laughter advocated by Bakhtin. And if there is carnival, there is hope.

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15 There could be some doubt regarding whether this team was made of the best/most clever roleplayers, but all four teams were homogeneous in the experience of their players. Several of them actually complained in the post-game interviews of having to “waste their time” investigating when roleplaying was so much more fun, indicating that roleplaying and investigation are often perceived as opposites.


For contemporary media scholars, convergence means more than technologies or content coming together in one box. It instead alludes to the convergence of content across media platforms, and the joining together of media producers and consumers in the production and negotiation of that content—through user-generated content, greater feedback mechanisms for consumers, or fan-driven media campaigns. Yet apart from a sidebar mentioning the importance that both Western and Japanese fans have played in the global popularity of Japanese anime, most examples that Henry Jenkins cites in Convergence Culture, and the majority of work done by other media scholars, focuses on Western media products and companies.

This essay addresses that omission and advocates further investigation regarding the Japanese game industry by studying three companies successful in developing and publishing games, along with a range of other activities. Those companies are Bandai Namco, Square Enix, and Konami. I chose these three for several reasons. First, all released annual reports for 2007, which formed the starting point of analysis. Second, the companies have had long histories and have all weathered multiple console releases, as well as evolving cultural, technological, social, and political developments. None of the three are principally console manufacturers, like Sony and Nintendo. Those companies would make comparisons more difficult, as hardware and software production are different undertakings. And finally, I chose companies that acted as both developers and publishers and who had diversified holdings. Not all Japanese videogame companies are this diverse in their ownership and business strategies; it is exactly their diversity that makes these three companies particularly interesting and important.

This essay investigates how these companies are negotiating the “convergence culture” that Jenkins writes about. Next, it examines how

2 Jenkins, Convergence Culture, 156–161.
3 Other contenders considered, and to be expanded on in a future edition of this paper, include Capcom, Sega, Koei, and Atlus.
they are responding to a problem unique to Japan—the graying of the nation. Lastly, it questions how globalization plays a role in Japanese game business strategies.

First, however, let me give a brief description of each company. The oldest is Bandai Namco. Bandai began in the 1950s producing various toys, mostly metallic cars. It created the Sailor Moon and Power Rangers brands, released Tamagotchi in 1996, and in 2005 acquired Namco. Namco started out producing mechanical rocking horses, later acquiring the Japanese division of Atari and entering the coin-operated game market. In 1980 Namco released the global blockbuster Pac-Man, and in 1993 the company merged with Aladdin’s Castle Inc., to become the world’s largest arcade company. Bandai Namco now comprises business units that include game development, arcades, toys and toy-related products, spa facilities, tourist hotels, online services, anime production, and restaurants.


The final company, Square Enix, is the product of another merger, in 2003, of two Japanese developer/publisher stalwarts best known for their Final Fantasy (1987–2008) and Dragon Quest (1986–2008) series. Enix was founded in 1975, while Square began operations in 1986. Square Enix continues to release games in the Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest series, along with developing games for emerging markets in China and Korea. In 2005, Square Enix acquired Taito Corporation, which started operating in 1953 as a manufacturer of small vending machines. Taito went on to expand its arcade business, developing the global hit Space Invaders in 1978. Square Enix segments its business into numerous areas, including offline games, online games, mobile phone content, publications, and amusements.

Convergence Culture Meets Japan’s Media Mix. Jenkins writes how content moves across platforms, as well as how media consumers interact with content, identifying sites of negotiation where convergence occurs. One site transforms media franchises from a central text with derivative works related to it to, instead, places where “each media manifestation makes a distinct but interrelated contribution to the

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4 For more on the history of these companies, see Bandai’s official history at http://www.bandai.co.jp/e/corporate/history.html and a wikipedia entry profiling the company at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bandai (accessed October 10, 2008).


7 Jenkins, “The Cultural Logic.”
unfolding of a narrative universe.” If thought about as a continuum, universes range from encapsulating a strong “center-periphery” model to systems that are much less centralized.

The “center-periphery” model was first widely exploited in the West with the success of George Lucas’s Star Wars series in the 1970s and 1980s. Although most often credited with creating a market for media-related consumables and collectibles, Star Wars also helped establish the idea of a media universe, creating opportunities for further consumption, but also for providing new pieces of the Star Wars story (as well as adaptations) through novels, comics, and videogames. During that time, most of what was released was created by professional storytellers (or designers) rather than by fans of the series, a situation that would change quickly.

Western media corporations have mostly continued to follow a “center-periphery” paradigm, claiming a particular canon for some universe, either through films (Star Wars), books (Tolkien and Middle Earth), or a television series (Star Trek). In contrast, the background that companies such as Bandai Namco and Konami have in toys and amusements sets up a different form of engagement with the world of cross-media and cross-product promotion; unlike in the American model, here central characters or a theme or world are created, then gradually filled in by various media products, none of which may take center stage. Bandai’s Gundam character line, for example, began in 1979 as part of an anime series, followed by a toy series in 1980, a series of movies starting the next year, and continuing with new toy lines, anime (TV) productions, films, and videogames. Importantly, these are all key components of the Gundam universe, with no one piece being the center. Such assemblages constitute what Ito terms a “media mix” which includes games “as one component of a broader media ecology that includes anime, manga, trading card games, toys, and character merchandise.”

Bandai Namco stresses such linkages, calling them synergies, which “integrate character merchandising with technical development capabilities and a location network.” That synergy includes the networked arcade game Mobile Suit Gundam: Senjo-no-Kizuna (2007)—which sixteen people can play concurrently—and the 2006 construction of the theme park “Namco Wonder Park Hero’s Base.” In similar ways, Square Enix draws from elements of its business to expand the Final Fantasy universe, which has never featured a core text or storyline, but instead creates features and elements that make each iteration of Final Fantasy feel familiar (including the appearance of specific animal races such as the chicken-like chocobos, a character named Cid, crystals, and a common currency). Currently Square Enix takes the Final Fantasy universe and uses films to tell some stories (“Advent Children”), games to tell more (including games such

8 Jenkins, “The Cultural Logic,” 40.
9 More recent franchises such as the Harry Potter books have entered a playing field where readers-turned-fans have also become active producers in the Potterverse. The fan site HarryPotterfanfiction.com, for example, boasts over 50,000 stories and podcasts created by fans, and receives over 40 million hits per month.
10 Perhaps the best-known example would be Sanrio’s Hello Kitty, which started life in 1974 simply as a brand, with content waiting to flesh out the form.
as *Crisis Core* [2007], which steps outside the numbered franchise and tells a story of a character from *Final Fantasy VII* [1997]), and other products or services to keep the universe expanding. Other elements include the MMOG, *Final Fantasy XI* (2002), mobile phone games such as *Dirge of Cerberus: Lost Episode* (2006), collectibles, music CDs, and mp3’s from the games.

**The Graying of Japan.** Top sellers in places like the United States and Europe draw from developers and publishers spread around the globe. One European Top 20 list, for example, includes games from Nintendo, Konami, Activision, EA, Ubisoft, and Sega. In contrast, Japan remains insular in its appetite for game titles. Charts listing the top one hundred games sold in Japan in 2005 show the first non-Japanese game listed being the #70 title *Ratchet & Clank 4* produced by Insomniac Games in California. In 2007, the first non-Japanese entry was Rockstar Games’ *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* at #35, selling slightly more than 400,000 copies. To compare, the top seller in 2007 was *Wii Sports* (Nintendo), which sold almost two million units, and #2 was *Monster Hunter Freedom 2* (Capcom) for the PSP with almost 1.5 million units, suggesting that Western games have a rough time gaining entry or popularity in the Japanese market. Because of those historical tendencies, Japanese game companies have found a ready market at home, with little fear of outside competition.

However, even if game and related product sales in Japan are favorable (as they have been for Konami), and even if Japanese game companies have had a near monopoly on game sales in Japan itself, convergence and a turn to global audiences are becoming necessities not options. Much has been made of the declining birth rate in Japan—the “graying of Japan”—with two annual reports specifically concerned with the aging of the Japanese market as a “risk factor.” In this context, the possibilities of convergence help to shore up a games market that has started to contract due to the shifting demographics of Japanese society. This challenge in part drives the creation of game-related products such as Square’s 2001 film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (Hironobu Sakaguchi and Motonori Kakakibara), to spur potential interest beyond the traditional core of young boys and men. A converged media culture has added more revenue flows, as Japanese game companies have placed greater emphasis on going global with their media mix—something that they have been doing for years with varied degrees of success—as another key way of managing the declining local market.

**Going Global with a Converged Culture.** The media mix or convergence culture which Japanese companies have been developing has of necessity made its way to Western markets, often beginning through unofficial channels. Jenkins explains that “western youth is asserting its identity through its consumption of Japanese anime and

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manga [. . .] A new pop cosmopolitanism is being promoted by corporate interests both in Asia and in the West.”

Scholars have begun to map this trend, pointing to how anime fans see the material as more complex and thought-provoking than most Western media, as well as how “all things Japan” come to be seen as “cool” in the West. That trend has historical roots which span at least 150 years, with similar fads or interest in “all things Japanese” influencing the Impressionists in Europe, and other intellectuals and middle class citizens as time passed, as Susan Napier has noted. Games (and their related products) appear to be another piece of that Japanese cultural “cool,” on which the media industry capitalizes.

Steady calls for globalization of a media mix in annual corporate reports may seem puzzling, since games from Japan have been an integral part of the history of the game industry since Nintendo revitalized the US market in the mid-1980s. From that time, Japanese game developers, publishers, and console manufacturers have gone from dominating output to, at minimum, assuming a central role in the industry’s continuing development. Yet financial documents reveal another view of Japanese companies. While Bandai Namco, Square Enix, and Konami all have global operations, percentages of income and sales gained from abroad are rather meager. Across the three, the Japanese market accounts for three-quarters or more of sales and revenue. The remaining income is gathered from North America, Europe, and Asia. (“Asia” here refers to a select few countries—China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea—and is a minor player.) It is easy to see why Japanese companies are so nervous about their shrinking domestic market: it represents the vast majority of their sales. Consequently, Japanese companies are desperately seeking to diversify, and do so in ways that go beyond a few internationally known blockbuster titles or series. Even if revenues are comparatively small, the global operations of Japanese game companies have been key to the development of the industry generally, as Japanese games and firms have contributed much in the way of cultural (if not economic) influence on the global games industry.

Yet now, those companies desire to broaden their markets, expand operations, or more carefully develop opportunities for international sales. Konami talks of “bolstering overseas business development,” while Bandai Namco states that one of their “key business strategies . . . is strengthening overseas businesses.” Square Enix reports that overseas sales from games such as Kingdom Hearts II (2005) and Final Fantasy XII (2006) “contributed substantially to earnings and profits.” Bandai Namco also realized gains from abroad, which “supported domestic operations,” which had seen a decline

16 Susan Napier, From Impressionism to Anime: Japan as Fantasy and Fan Cult in the Mind of the West (New York: Palgrave, 2007).
19 Konami, 15; Bandai Namco, 9.
in sales and profits in the past year.\footnote{21} In the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese companies produced a disproportionate share of software and hardware sold globally, meaning that even poorly localized games could sell well. Early game fans derided the translation and localization efforts of those games, which often featured badly broken English. Yet the development of a more competitive global market with more companies and genres of games that might be regionally appropriate has changed the parameters for competition. Japanese companies must now be more diligent in how they pursue overseas markets, carefully developing or adapting selected media products that (re)deploy successful product universes.

Thus Konami will have employees in North America, Europe, and Asia “create, produce and offer products and services targeting local markets . . . [and] each local operating base will [also] build a system that will enable the global rollout of certain products and services.”\footnote{22} Echoing interests in convergence, Konami sees opportunities both for global successes like Metal Gear, as well as the creation of content tied to particular regions and interests, that is, not simply Japanese content repackaged for sale elsewhere.

Bandai Namco is moving their strategy beyond localization of Japanese products and the development of overseas content: “Instead of development that is based on the framework of ‘products for Japan’ and ‘products for overseas’ we will emphasize cooperation between Japan and overseas bases and implement worldwide development from the planning stage.”\footnote{23} What this might mean is the development of content that in its raw form might draw from common themes, characters, or universes, but is then localized or “culturalized” to respond best to the interests of a variety of markets. Perhaps this indicates the formation of another layer or level to convergence. In addition to a fictional media universe drawing from a theme or character to create a diversity of content across multiple media platforms, convergence might entail that process working across regions and markets as well, carefully adapted not only for a technical platform, but for particular communities or nation states. Convergence just gained another order of complexity.

Conclusions. This essay has applied the concept of convergence to a slice of the Japanese game industry, to see how they are adapting to new demands. Japanese companies like Bandai Namco or Konami have a broadly diversified set of business segments, managing businesses that would seem to have nothing to do with games or even amusements. Yet at the same time, they have certain segments, such as toys and arcades, which help them create greater synergies or convergences across media forms as well as fictional universes. Japanese game companies operate primarily in domestic markets, where they dominate, and are now trying to diversify their revenue streams through more skillful use of their media mixes, and through the (re)capture of global markets, which have become much more demanding in terms of quality of content and familiarity of products. It can be done. Many Western individuals claim to love

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{21} Bandai Namco, 9.
\bibitem{22} Konami, 16.
\bibitem{23} Bandai Namco, 14.
\end{thebibliography}
anime for its complex themes and lack of simplistic endings, suggesting that there is still interest in Japanese products abroad, in games, in anime, and in many other related artifacts. Yet how wide that market may be is an open question. Japanese game companies will need to consider such questions and challenges as they move forward with plans for greater expansion. They have moved beyond the creation of basic product lines to more sophisticated and inter-related products, as well as from the export of crudely localized products to more carefully “culturalized” ones. They are also questioning whether one-way exports are the answer, or if simply setting up offices abroad and having them make “local” games and artifacts is the right approach. For now, they continue to struggle with the logics of convergence, in a constantly changing global media universe.

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