Fiction Denial and the Liberation of Games

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This paper was written in June 2013 and submitted for Game Studies. It was rejected after two years in peer review. I have downgraded it to a 'working paper', de-anonymised it, made minor amendments, and present it here as a limited edition ab extra submission to DiGRA 2015. This cannot be considered a DiGRA publication. The publisher is therefore University of Bolton. The suggested reference for this paper is as follows:


ABSTRACT
Since its inception, the field of game studies has pursued an attitude of exceptionalism that treats the videogame as a unique form that must be approached differently from the ways other media are studied. This stance is parallel to the exceptionalism towards humanity that continued to treat animals and humans as radically distinct concepts until the late twentieth century. By examining different aspects of videogame exceptionalism, particularly the fiction denial that considers the rules of games to be radically more important than their representational elements, an argument is advanced that videogame exceptionalism is distorting our understanding of both videogames and other forms of play and narrative. It is further argued that it is misleading to talk of the difference between videogames and other creative media without saying which genres are being compared within each medium. There is therefore a need for a 'game liberation' that will cease to treat the history and genealogy of videogames as constrained solely to digital artefacts – rather, a complete understanding of videogames requires an appreciation for their connectivity with the other forms of play and fiction that both predate it, and that continue to exchange conventions with it.

Keywords: exceptionalism, videogames, representation, fiction, rules, tabletop games, narrative media, fiction denial, Juul's Trench, game liberation

Short Description: Fiction denial claims that rules are more important than representation in videogames, and is an archetypal form of exceptionalism that treats videogames as radically distinct from other media. However, it is misleading to talk of the difference between videogames and other media without saying which genres are being compared within each medium.
THE EXCEPTIONALISM OF HUMANITY
In 1978, the British philosopher Mary Midgley wrote her first book, *Beast and Man*, which attempted to liberate the discussion of humanity from the exceptionalism that at that point was commonplace. While other intellectuals were still focused upon those qualities that were purported to mark humans as different from other species, Midgley inverted this attitude and stressed the *continuity* between humanity and other animals. Gradually, Midgley's argument grew in persuasiveness and became supplemented by similar arguments by other philosophers such as Peter Singer (e.g. 1975) until eventually the exceptionalism that would treat humans as entirely disconnected from other forms of animal life came to be viewed as parochial and antiquated. Part of Midgley's argument rests upon the misleading practice of presuming that it was meaningful to talk of “the difference between man and animal” (Midgley, 1978, p. 335) as if this could be deemed to refer to a unified conceptual distinction. She observes that when making comparisons or distinctions between humanity and other animals, it is vitally important to know *which animal* is under consideration:

Primates do not have big cooperative enterprises, nor therefore the loyalty, fidelity and developed skills that go with them. Nor do they have fixed homes and families. But the hunting carnivores do. And neither apes nor wolves have anything like the human length of life, nor therefore the same chance of accumulating wisdom and of deepening relationships. But elephants do. And no mammal really shares the strong visual interest that is so important both to our social life and to our art, nor perhaps needs to work as hard as we do to rear our young. But birds do. This is why it is vacuous to talk of “the difference between man and animal” without saying which animal (Midgley, 1978, p. 335).

In game studies, this same problem of exceptionalism appears in the consistent attempts to treat videogames as if they were an utterly distinctive medium, either incapable of adequate comparison with other forms or sufficiently different as to warrant strong ontological claims regarding their uniqueness. It is the purpose of this paper to argue that just as animals required a period of ‘animal liberation’ to secure the idea that other animals were indeed continuous with humanity and thus had to be treated with greater respect, so game studies needs a period of ‘game liberation’ to develop the idea that videogames are *no more unique than any other medium*, and that they are indeed contiguous in numerous significant ways to narrative media such as film, television, novels and comics, and other forms of play such as board games, sports and children's games of make-believe, all of which deserve greater respect than game studies currently affords to them.

To paraphrase Midgley's remarks, quoted above, novels do not have explicit choices that affect the unfolding of their narrative content. Nor do they provide their participants with any significant form of agency. But tabletop roleplaying games do. And neither novels nor tabletop roleplaying games involve the skilled operation of an interface device, nor therefore the potential for aesthetic expression through the form of control. But pinball tables do. And no other form of game produces richly interpretable audio-visual experiences capable of immersing participants in fictional worlds via their imagination. But movies do. This is why it is misleading to talk of the difference between videogames and other creative media without saying *which genres* are being compared within each medium.

JUUL’S TRENCH
In order to liberate games from videogame exceptionalism, it is necessary to examine some of the claims that have been used to assert the distinction of videogames from
other media. One of these issues dates back to the dawn of game studies – or at least, to the first issue of this journal, *Game Studies*, where Jesper Juul draws a seminal line in the sand between games and stories (Juul, 2001). The core of Juul's argument in that paper is that narrative media (such as novels, movies and comics) occur in the past and are thus fixed in their content, while videogames happen as you are playing and thus take place in the present. At the time, it was arguably necessary to make distinctions such as this in order to prevent game studies from being colonised by neighbouring disciplines like narratology that might have silenced the emerging voice of videogame scholars. However, this has long since ceased to be a valid concern.

The argument Juul advances in this particular paper is not as plausible as it first seems. Any form of stage play that participates with the audience or environment (passion plays, for instance, or British pantomime) occurs just as much in the present as any videogame. Furthermore, both games and stories are constructed, scaffolded, or designed before they are experienced – the player of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Bungie, 2001) can no more prevent the ringworld from being destroyed than the reader of *Ringworld* (Niven, 1970) can prevent the spaceship from crashing. It should also be noted that Juul's additional concerns about the problems entailed in translating books and films to games are mirrored by the problems translating games of any given form into games of another – including between different videogame genres. Again, the attempt to promote an exceptionalism of videogames runs up against the problems of treating all other media (in this case, all other narrative media) as a unified phenomena. Clearer distinctions are needed to clarify both the difference and the continuity between videogames and narrative media.

What could be called *Juul's Trench* represents an effective defensive measure, an attempt to institute something akin to the *kaikin* policy of Edo-period Japan that radically separated Japanese culture from the perceived threat of outside influence, and particularly from Christian missionaries which the Tokugawa shogunate viewed as a threat to their power (Laver, 2011). Just as Edo-period Japan was not entirely isolated – the Japanese continued to trade with Dutch, Chinese, Ainu and Korean merchants under strictly enforced conditions – so Juul's Trench failed to entirely isolate videogames from other media. Commercial videogames continued to import representational conventions from films, albeit with some adaptation (e.g. Wei and Calvert, 2013), as well as exporting their own conventions back into films (Brooker, 2009), and similar relationships can be traced between videogames and tabletop games, especially roleplaying games (Bateman, 2011).

Yet inside the trench, game scholars maintained their exceptionalism and continued to treat videogames as radically distinct, even if Juul gradually retreated from his initial formulation as "too strong" (Juul, 2013). Juul's Trench stands not just for the specifics of Juul's argument concerning the temporality of videogames, but for its ultimate premise – that videogames must be treated as unique artefacts if they are to be properly understood. Regardless of which aspect of videogames is asserted as the locus of their ontological disconnection from narrative media, I shall refer to the resultant divide as Juul's Trench, and argue that it has become too problematic to be maintained.

**FICTION DENIAL**

While Juul's Trench was geared towards preventing invasion by other academic disciplines, it is also emblematic of the ideological exclusion of the importance of fiction and representation for games as objects of study. I use the term 'fiction' here in the sense used by Kendall L. Walton (1990), as a synonym for 'representation' that stresses the imaginative consequences of a specific representational element regardless of its medium or genre of origin. The downplaying of the importance of fiction for
understanding games and play is a key aspect of the videogame exceptionalism this paper challenges. This *fiction denial* is neatly epitomized by another influential member of the formative game studies community, namely Espen Aarseth, when he picks up the baton from Juul:

As the Danish theorist and game designer Jesper Juul has pointed out... games are eminently themeable: you can play chess with some rocks in the mud, or with pieces that look like the Simpson family rather than kings and queens. It would still be the same game. The "royal" theme of the traditional pieces is all but irrelevant to our understanding of chess. Likewise, the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently... When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it (Aarseth, 2004).

I have no reason to doubt the veracity of Aarseth's remarks about Lara Croft's body, but it is far from clear that this is a fact about either *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) or its players – it appears, rather, to be a fact about Espen Aarseth. On the basis of my case studies of players, I cannot agree that the appearance of any given character model is "irrelevant" to all players. A waif-like Lara Croft implies a very different role to an obese Lara, and a robotic or lagomorphic Lara implies something different again. For players who actively engage in roleplay – and this is a significant proportion of videogame players (Bateman and Boon, 2006) – representation always matters. Speaking for myself, I am frequently more engaged in this kind of play within the fictional worlds of videogames than what the ideal player might be expected to undertake – a situation which would fit comfortably under what Aarseth has praised as *transgressive play* (Aarseth, 2007).

As can be seen from the above quote, fiction denial entails an ontological claim that it is the game mechanics, the rules, that are the real part of the game, as is also claimed by Juul (2005). To give an additional example, Graeme Kirkpatrick approvingly cites the above Aarseth quotation (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 132) and refers to Juul's work (Juul, 2006, p. 135) to note that "it is common for gamers to lose all interest in the fiction projected by the game’s interface and to switch their focus onto the rules" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 27). Kirkpatrick suggests that while representation occurs in videogames, and it is "necessary" to discuss videogame fiction, it occurs in a "curiously muted way that has few cultural precedents" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 160). According to Kirkpatrick, a necessary stage of the player's engagement with the game is the backgrounding of the fiction, which entails "a move away from concern with the fictional world as a setting" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 69).

While I concede that what Kirkpatrick provides is a valid description of certain forms of videogame play, it is once again only a description of the play experiences of a certain kind of *player*. It is also not unique to videogames, since similar concerns are apparent with tabletop games, particularly contemporary 'hobby games'. Furthermore, for those players who do fully engage with the fiction of a videogame this 'seeing through' to the rules must be judged an aesthetic flaw since it breaks with what is conventionally termed immersion (Murray, 1998). From this perspective, it is not that the player 'sees through' the fiction, but the rules 'ear through' the world. Only an ironic ghost train rider wants to see the gears – or perhaps someone who makes or studies ghost trains, and wants to understand how they are put together.

We should therefore be wary of jumping from the premise '(some) players of (some) videogames see through the fiction to the rules' to the conclusion 'the rules are real and important while the fiction is incidental'. This judgement not only depends upon what
sense of ‘real’ is being used, it depends upon the psychology of the player in question. To suggest that for players of World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004) it is solely the effective statistics of weaponry and armour that determine the criteria for their selection would be to wilfully ignore key social and aesthetic aspects of the play of this game as it is experienced by many of its players. To suggest that for players of Animal Crossing (HAL Laboratory, 2001) the only relevant aspect of their chosen furnishings is the price would be to entirely misunderstand both the game and its players.

THE TYRANNY OF PROCEDURES

The archetypal form of fiction denial described above lies in the concept, defined by Aarseth and espoused as aesthetically important by Kirkpatrick, that rules are the true substrate of games while fiction is a mere interchangeable wrapping of minimal importance, or (equivalently) that function trumps representation. Chess is the same game no matter what shape the pieces, therefore setting and theme do not matter, they are incidental (Aarseth, 2004). It is the rules that are the true essence of a game. This attitude, although stridently stated at times, is usually offset by a grudgingly reluctant acknowledgement that the fiction of a game serves some minimum purpose, perhaps merely as a carrot to entice players to engage with the game in the first place. Kirkpatrick, for instance, maintains his fiction denial even while acknowledging that: ...(if we are not interested in our character and what is happening to them then we will not be interested in playing the game and if we do not continue to take an interest in the unfolding of the game’s storyline (however thin it is) then we will not really be able to play because the things we are doing (manipulating objects, creating changes on screen and listening to sounds) will not mean anything to us (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 159).

A more sophisticated form of fiction denial occurs within the school of thought known as proceduralism, the point of origin for which Miguel Sicart locates in Janet Murray's (1998) suggestion that "digital games are unique, among other things, because of their procedural nature" (Sicart, 2011). While reluctant to single out a specific academic as the locus of the movement, Sicart nonetheless focuses his attention primarily upon Ian Bogost on account of the "popularity and influence of Bogost's work, both in academia and in the games industry" (ibid).

Sicart recognises the importance of Bogost's theories of procedural rhetoric, highlighting the "elegance and complexity" of the approach and calling it "a landmark of game studies" (ibid) – but he also cautions that we not accept the proceduralist's logic prematurely. Following that logic entails that the meaning of a game is implicit to its rules and, furthermore, that the behaviour of players is specified primarily by the design of its rules. It follows, therefore, that "the meaning of the game, and of play, evolves from the way the game has been created and not how it is played; not to mention when and where it is played, and by whom" (ibid).

It is a simple matter to confirm Sicart's claims against the proceduralists – consider this one illustrative quote from Bogost:

The rules do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the meaning of the game. That is to say, the gestures, experiences, and interactions a game’s rules allow (and disallow) make up the game’s significance. Video games represent processes in the material world—war, urban planning, sports, and so forth—and create new possibility spaces for exploring those topics. That representation is composed of the rules themselves. We encounter the meaning
of games by exploring their possibility spaces. And we explore their possibility spaces through play (Bogost, 2008).

In one respect, this attitude is a vast improvement over the fiction denial of 'seeing through' epitomized by Aarseth and Kirkpatrick, since it recognizes that videogames are indeed representational and affords importance to that representation. But rather than situating this in the fictional content of games, proceduralism continues to operate within Juul's Trench and places the representational importance entirely within the rules: "The representation is composed of the rules themselves" (ibid). This is a far more sophisticated kind of fiction denial, one that acknowledges the importance of fiction but still claims the exceptionalism of videogames by asserting that this medium is not dependent upon conventional techniques of depiction or narration but instead offers an entirely unique kind of procedural representation entirely contained within the rules of the game.

But this claim cannot go through, since the meaning of any given rule could not possibly reside purely in the mechanical description of its rules. On the contrary, the representational aspects of rules must necessarily entail both function and fiction — if they did not, the rules would solely describe logical and mathematical relations; they would be capable of representing solely in the way that mathematics is itself a form of representation — a representation of cardinality (Yablo, 2002). For the rules of a videogame to represent "war, urban planning, sports, and so forth" the representation cannot be "composed of the rules themselves" as Bogost (2008) claims, at least not alone. Rules and fiction must work together, as I have argued elsewhere (2011).

Sicart provides a specific counter-example to the rhetorical claims of procedural rhetoric. Pointing to Jason Rohrer's artgame Passage (Rohrer, 2008), Sicart observes that the creator of this game "explicitly claims that the game has many interpretations for different players" but still provides an author statement that necessarily frames that interpretation. As Sicart then challenges: "If rules contain the meaning, what is the need for an author statement?" (Sicart, 2011). Just as I argued previously that Aarseth's fiction denial fails to take into account the diversity of player experience, so Sicart takes the experience of play as contradicting the strong claims of the proceduralist school by suggesting that play is an act of appropriation of the game by players” (ibid) — which once again connects with Aarseth's notion of transgressive play (Aarseth, 2007).

The proceduralist argument seen from Sicart's perspective becomes tyrannous, because it is the game designer who is the sole arbiter of the meaning of a game — they (allegedly) inscribe a videogame with inviolable meaning by the design of its rules and procedures. Against this, Sicart offers play as "personal, individual, and communitarian, played with others, for others, in an intensely, deeply personal way" (Sicart, 2011) — and on this point I am in agreement with him. But the imagined autocracy of procedures is also a form of fiction denial, and an attempt to enforce the videogame exceptionalism this paper asks us to both question and resist.

**DANCING WITH OUR HANDS**

Perhaps the most fascinating manifestation of fiction denial occurs with the aesthetic theory of Graeme Kirkpatrick. As already discussed, Kirkpatrick aligns behind the early game studies scholars in "asserting the novelty of the video game as an object of study and the importance of this newness to understanding its distinctive place within contemporary culture" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 1). He begins his book of videogame aesthetics, therefore, by asserting exceptionalism. However, he does not rely upon other scholars to make his case, and in fact develops an utterly unique account of the aesthetic elements of videogame play based upon aesthetic theories from Immanuel Kant (1790).
and Theodor Adorno (1984). The sophistication of Adorno's account is beyond the scope of this paper, and Kirkpatrick's use of his ideas is wonderfully original, particular in its comparison between the experience of videogame players and the medium of dance.

Viewing the locus of the videogame player experience as situated in their interaction with the controller, Kirkpatrick states: "To fully experience the form in a game we have to draw it out by playing well and we do this with our hands" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 100). He thus downplays the importance of representation in favour of performance, following his thesis that the aesthetic experience of digital game play occurs in the mastery of the specific actions the player implements with the interface device, even going as far as to remark that “a generation of young men have grown up dancing with their hands” (ibid, p. 154).

Already we can see that Kirkpatrick's aesthetic form theory of videogames has moved far beyond the simplistic concerns of fiction denial he also endorses – no-one I have read thus far writes as eloquently about the experience of the player of videogames such as fighting games, or those action games that demand of their players an intense commitment and concentration in order to overcome their challenges. But here Kirkpatrick's account becomes schizophrenic, since he claims to be offering an aesthetic theory of videogames, but provides a description that accords solely with those kinds of games that demand this highly specific kind of performance, which is primarily those descended from the lineage of the arcade.

The exceptionalism in Kirkpatrick's form theory is unfortunate because in the first place it fails to adequately describe the aesthetic experience of all genres of videogames. There is no 'dancing with our hands' when we are playing a non-reaction based puzzle game such as Bejeweled (PopCap, 2001), or a tactical turn-based game like Disgaea: Hour of Darkness (Nippon Ichi, 2003), or a point-and-click adventure such as Discworld Noir (Perfect Entertainment, 1999). Indeed, if we try to understand the aesthetic experience of these genres of game by following the player's hands we will be deeply confused as to where the merits might lie in the spidery scribbles of an idly meandering mouse.

Additionally, Kirkpatrick’s form theory is regrettably narrow in its focus because it is perfectly suited to the understanding of other kinds of play that are not videogames. Electro-mechanical games such as pinball tables or Sega's Periscope (1966) and Duck Hunt (1969) are not only a clear and direct influence for the early arcade videogames that followed them, but Kirkpatrick’s aesthetic theory would be just as suited for application to these machines as contemporary videogames! The irony here is that Kirkpatrick has created something of fundamental importance to understanding the aesthetic experience of certain forms of game, but misleadingly restricts its application to videogames as a blanket category by unnecessarily accepting the exceptionalism of the early game studies scholars.

This returns the discussion to my paraphrasing of Midgley: it is misleading to talk of the difference between videogames and other creative media without specifying which genres we are referring to – in the case of Kirkpatrick’s form theory, the genres of videogames that are to be included, and the genres of other kinds of play that the theory equally applies to. Once again, there is a pressing need for 'game liberation' to resituate videogames as continuous with other media, including those games that predate them and that are deserving of the respect of those who study games and play.
RECONCILIATION WITH FICTION

Having allied with the early game studies scholars in asserting videogame exceptionalism as "the necessary starting point for a serious understanding of video games", Kirkpatrick goes on to insist that "aesthetic theory rather than a rapprochement with fictionality" is the methodological next step for the discipline (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 50). In other words, following both Aarseth and Juul, Kirkpatrick insists in the maintenance of Juul's Trench and the extension of our self-imposed isolationism I have compared to the Japanese policy of kaikin. But if I am correct that Kirkpatrick's theory is an aesthetic theory of some kinds of games – and not even just some kinds of videogames – it is an open question whether expanding the aesthetic theories that apply to games would require a continual state of hostility towards the aesthetics of other forms of fiction.

In Imaginary Games, I took Walton's make-believe theory of representation and adapted it for games of all kinds (Bateman, 2011). My purpose in this work is parallel to that of this paper – to argue against exceptionalism, and to position videogames as part of a wider continuum of play activities that includes tabletop games, narrative media such as novels and movies, and children's games of make-believe. Following Walton, I argue that representative art (including board games and videogames) can be understood as contiguous with, but more sophisticated than, these ad hoc games of youthful imagination. I stop short of providing a complete aesthetic theory, however, comparing this book to Kant's Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals (Kant, 1785) as exploring foundational considerations that mark a direction for future exploration. But the path that I traces is precisely what Kirkpatrick decries as "rapprochement with fictionality" (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 50) – an abandonment of Juul's Trench in order that the aesthetic relationship between function and representation in games, narrative media, and other play activities can be more clearly recognised.

What fiction denial hides is the intimate connection between fiction and rules I espoused in Imaginary Games, and particularly the way the content of the fiction implies rules, and thus wedding the wrong kind of rules and fiction together creates an aesthetically displeasing game. My account builds upon some of Juul's ideas (i.e. Juul, 2005, see Bateman, 2011, pp. 11-14, p. 62), but it is resolutely in opposition to Juul's Trench and any ontology that would elevate the importance of rules in relation to fiction.

Following this approach, it is prudent to recognise that if fiction denial were viable in a context that was valid beyond the preferences of certain players, an interface designed for a tank could become anything. This is what Aarseth specifically argues in the context of Chess, after all. But this argument is clearly fallacious: the dual-stick tank controls of Battlezone (Atari, 1980) are suitable for controlling tanks and sci-fi or fantasy variations on the key of tank. Despite the implication of Aarseth's claim that you could 'reskin' a first-person shooter (FPS) to be anything at all, game developers who attempt to do so are always constrained to fictional worlds in which wielding and firing a gun or a gun-substitute (a magic wand, fire breath) are central experiences.

One way to break through fiction denial is to explore the functional and representation implications of the props in a game. This term 'prop', originating in Walton's make-believe theory (1990), refers to anything with representational implications, but in Imaginary Games I draw out the way that props also have functional consequences (even in supposedly non-interactive media such as film). By foregrounding the imaginary world, bringing the fiction into focus, and identifying the props, it is then possible to judge how the rules support or undermine their usage. As a matter of fact, this kind of thinking was already central to the way games are designed, and has been for over a century. The FPS is the game form that emerges from the juxtaposition of
the gun and the first-person camera – and refinements aside, its design follows naturally from these elements. The (fictional) qualities of a gun dictates the rules that can align with it, and thus with the players’ imagination. It is not the rules that are inviolable but the fiction: no matter what rules you make, you cannot change the nature of a gun without it ceasing to be a gun.

**THE SCHOLAR DOTH PROTEST TOO MUCH, METHINKS**

I have already highlighted how fiction denial prevents Kirkpatrick from fully appreciating the scope and application of his innovative form theory of interface aesthetics, but it is prudent to show that similar blind spots occur with the other game studies scholars this paper has singled out for attention. In doing so, I hope to make clear that Aarseth, Juul and so forth are not ‘the enemy’ – they have all contributed immeasurably to our understanding of the play of videogames. But their own prejudices, while perhaps useful in focusing their own thought, are being picked up by subsequent academics (such as Kirkpatrick) and canonised as essential to game studies. This is the exceptionalism I am arguing against. The clearest sign that this is a genuine problem is that Juul’s Trench continues to limit the thought of game scholars to videogames, even when other related media have enormous relevance to their study.

In the case of Aarseth, despite his protestations in his influential 2004 paper, he is unable to hide his roots as a narratologist and thus his genuine appreciation for the ways that videogames create fiction in a manner parallel to other narrative media, while simultaneously exploring new ground. In the aforementioned paper on transgressive play, Aarseth presents personal anecdotal experiences from the play of *Oblivion* (Bethesda, 2006) that are inseparable from an appreciation of fiction:

> At one time of playing, I was exploring the hills northwest of the central city, when I came across two foresters of the imperial army who were engaged in a bow and arrow duel, to the death. They simply kept firing, no explanation given, until one of them was killed. I have no idea what could have caused this animosity, and I had no way to find out. There was no indication that this was a scripted event, and probably some small coincidence, such as one of them hitting the other by mistake while trying to kill a wild animal, had caused the fight to break out, but who knows (Aarseth, 2007, pp. 132-133).

Except for the brief recognition that this could have been a "scripted event", and thus a functional aspect of this games’ rules, Aarseth's appreciation of this event is clearly rooted in fiction – and not just in the wider representative sense, but in the specific sense of narrative and story. Of course, Juul’s ‘Trench allows for these present-tense stories emerging from play – but in sharing his sense of wonder at the personal narrative emerging from the play of *Oblivion*, Aarseth is impossibly distant from his claims that he ‘sees through and past’ the fiction to the underlying rules (Aarseth, 2004). Of course he does not! He is a videogame player as well as an insightful scholar of games. If he could not appreciate the fiction, he could not possibly appreciate videogames.

It is slightly harder to demonstrate the same kind of excessive protestation with Juul, but in his discussion of games without goals or with optional goals (Juul, 2007) he is in a similar space to Kirkpatrick in restricting his insights too narrowly to videogames alone. Although this paper does draw against non-digital play in his discussion of the volleyball/tennis variant *foursquare*, Juul nonetheless seems to hide behind his own moat when he concludes:

> Games without enforced goals will not replace the classic goal-oriented game, but they open for a wide range of new player experiences as seen in the two
quite similar games of Sims 2 and Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. This is the new style in video games, and an illustration of how contemporary video games are severing the ties to their historical roots in the arcade game, becoming something new and unique, open and expressive (Juul, 2007).

But like Kirkpatrick, Juul's sense of the history and genealogy of games is too narrow – it is focussed solely on those things that would fall under the conventional usage of the term 'videogame'. His analysis of open and expressive games draws the wrong lineage when it traces videogames back to the arcade – the roots of this style of play come to contemporary videogames not from coin operated machines but from the seminal tabletop roleplaying game Dungeons and Dragons (Gygax and Arneson, 1974), whose influence can be clearly recognized in both of the games Juul cites (Bateman, 2011). In the case of GTA, the lineage can be traced via explicitly stated influences: Grand Theft Auto from Elite (Braben and Bell, 1984), Elite from Space Opera (Simbaslist et al., 1980) and Traveller (Miller, 1977), and hence to D&D itself. Thus it was not so much a case of "severing the ties to their historical roots in the arcade game" so much as slowly developing the technical power to implement in software what was previously possible only at the tabletop.

Lastly, the more sophisticated fiction denial of the proceduralists can take on a different slant by examining the motives behind Bogost's systematic investigation of the parallels between the functionality of both traditional narrative media and videogames in Unit Operations (Bogost, 2006). This work compares Walter Benjamin's motif to the computational procedures of videogames in an effort to provide methods for criticism applicable to "any medium – poetic, literary, cinematic, computational" (Bogost, 2006, p. ix).

Sicart judges this book as a point of origin for proceduralism (Sicart, 2011), which is a justifiable claim, and by being focussed on function to the exclusion of representation it does represent a form of fiction denial, as traced previously. However, Bogost concern is clearly and specifically to connect videogames to other media, including narrative media. As such, Bogost's unit operations may be a form of fiction denial, but they are also a denial of the relevance of Juul's Trench – in the approach to criticism offered by Bogost, there is no way to enforce a divide between stories and games. Indeed, Bogost specifically argues that techniques exist that level the critical playing field in this regard, admittedly techniques dependent upon a form of fiction denial.

Thus although each of these game studies scholars supports the dominant policy of videogame exceptionalism in at least some of their work, each also pushes back against a specific aspect of it. Aarseth provides the paradigm case of fiction denial, but then offers accounts of the narrative experience of play that clearly engage with the representation. Juul offers theories of goal-optional play that allegedly break the link with the arcade, but that strongly demonstrate the genealogical connectivity of videogames to tabletop roleplaying games. Bogost provides a sophisticated, functionally-focused kind of fiction denial that simultaneously strides boldly across Juul's Trench, showing the connectivity between games and traditional narrative media such as novels and film. If there is a coherent argument for maintaining this exceptionalist attitude towards videogames, it is not supported by the work of those scholars responsible for establishing it!

**GAME LIBERATION**

Videogames are a fascinating medium, but our attempts to understand them all too frequently flounder against the problem that the landscape of digital game artefacts is radically diverse. Specific videogame genres frequently align functionally or
aesthetically with different media to a greater extent than they do different genres of videogame. The text adventure is best understood in comparison to both novels and tabletop roleplaying games. The strategy game is inseparable from the games of Avalon Hill that established key tenets of the form long before digital versions arrived (Bateman, 2011). The action-oriented blockbuster videogame has more in common with movies than it does either of these videogame genres. We fool ourselves if we think 1958 is of particular importance to videogames because of Tennis for Two (Higinbotham, 1958) rather than Avalon Hill's Tactics II (Roberts, 1958), or that the appearance of the former is a more significant event for commercial videogames than the publication of The Lord of the Rings four years earlier (Tolkien, 1954-5).

If videogame exceptionalism was initially necessary for the foundation of game studies, it is now a hindrance to its clarity of vision. Just as the exceptionalism of humanity distorted our understanding of animals and prevented them from earning even a minimal degree of respect, so the exceptionalism of videogames distorts our understanding of play and games, and simultaneously denies the necessary respect due to other media – especially tabletop games and narrative media – in affecting and influencing the historical and genealogical development of videogames. Hence the urgent need for a 'game liberation' that will fill in Juul's Trench, end the digital kaikin, and admit that we never stopped trading ideas with other media and the disciplines that study those other media.

The benefits of ending this intellectual embargo are potentially limitless. Already, scholars such as Britta Neitzel (2002) and Jan-Noël Thon (2009) are gainfully crossing the lines between narratology and videogames, expanding ways of thinking about perspective and points-of-view; Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2012) is combining ideas from Aarseth with concepts originating in poetry to gainful effect; while Bogost (2006), Kirkpatrick (2011) and myself (2011) are all demonstrating the merits of applying philosophical theories intended for other purposes to videogames and other forms of play. The liberation of games is already happening – it is only the official story of exceptionalism that lingers, fooling us into thinking that the way that videogames are special is radically different from the way that theatre, movies, novels, comics, poetry, board games and tabletop role-playing games are all special. Every medium, every genre, is unique and fascinating, and our understanding of them all can only be enhanced by recognising not only the differences but also the similarities between them.

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