
Introduction to the Games Learning & Society (GLS) Conference Special Issue

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In 2005, we held the first Games, Learning & Society (GLS) Conference in Madison, Wisconsin. Our goal was to start a conversation about the potential and importance of games and game culture for contemporary society and learning. It was a remarkable success, and the conference was quickly established as an annual event. For 3 years now, the GLS Conference has been the space for academics, industry leaders, educators, and policy makers to meet and to engage, not just in industry building but in serious discussion about the current state of the field: where we ought to be headed and what impact games can and ought to have on culture and society. Our collective efforts to make games and learning a serious topic on the intellectual and social agenda have paid off.

As part of this success, we have begun to move beyond mere plausibility arguments and are poised to start asking more focused and empirically driven research questions. This is no easy task and will require—at least if we hope to ask the right questions and not the wrong ones—both sustained interdisciplinary conversation and collaboration *and* novel methodologies or, at least, novel application of existing methods and approaches. We are studying a new phenomenon, not just more of the same. Not just “more interactive” television. Not just hyperlinked textbooks. And not just informal classrooms that happen to be “more fun.” And studying something new, studying something on its own terms, sometimes requires getting a bit innovative methodologically.

And so it is with great pleasure that I introduce the special issue of *Games and Culture* based on the now-annual GLS Conference. This issue represents only a small selection of the game scholars and designers who, through their willingness to forgo turf wars about whose paradigm or whose specific methods are “best” and engage in fruitful dialogue and a whole lot of intellectual openness, have helped make our event such a yearly success. Yet together, these articles demonstrate the depth and range of topics and methodologies we consider central to this burgeoning field. Davidson’s “Well Played” provides a close reading of the platform adventure game *Prince of Persia* that teases out the complex ways in which game play and narrative intertwine to provide a fulfilling game experience. In contrast, DeVane and Squire’s “The Meaning of Race and Violence in *Grand Theft Auto*” analyzes how youths make sense

of this controversial game title not as some decontextualized text but rather as a complex semiotic system or “field of meaning” that players interpret via their own cultural models and lived experiences. Gee’s “Video Games and Embodiment” offers a theoretical argument, much like Davidson’s article, but here, for games as a metaphor for human cognition itself, one that illustrates the situated and embodied nature of thinking and problem solving he terms the *projective stance*. In their article “Fantasy Baseball,” Halverson and Halverson also examine player practices—here, the layered practices of fantasy sports fans. Using the notion of competitive fandom, they interpret how the fantasy game rules mediate players’ relationship to the sport games as traditionally played. Like DeVane and Squire, Simkins and Steinkuehler build on rich interview data to make a case for the complex ways in which players make sense of the games they play. In “Critical Ethical Reasoning and Role-Play,” the authors examine how role-playing gamers engage in critical, ethical reasoning skills and the key game play elements that support such reasoning. Finally, in “Making Computer Games and Design Thinking,” Hayes and Games provide us our only literature review in this issue. Here, the authors review existing game design curricula and software to find that the majority emphasize game design as a point of entrée into computer programming with little or no emphasis on game design in its own right.

As this collection demonstrates, good questions, questions of genuine depth, lend themselves to analyses from multiple perspectives. And that multidisciplinary perspectivity is crucially important when trying to build a new field and not just perpetuate a traditional one.