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# Doubly Real: Game Studies and Literary Anthropology; or, Why We Play Games

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Game studies today abounds in strategies of distinction that usually take two different but related forms.<sup>1</sup> We could label the first of these 'formalist' because it emphasizes the distinctive formal characteristics of games in general and video games in particular. One example of that first kind of strategy of distinction would be Alexander R. Galloway's (2006, p. 2) assertion that

Video games are actions. Consider the formal differences between video games and other media: indeed, one *takes* a photograph, one *acts* in a film. But these actions transpire before or during the fabrication of the work, a work that ultimately assumes the form of a physical object (print). With video games, the work itself is material action. One *plays* a game. And the software *runs*. The operator and the machine play the video game together, step by step, move by move.

We could label the second strategy of distinction 'disciplinary' because it strives to defend the still emergent discipline of game studies from colonization by more established disciplines, in particular sociology, film studies, and literary studies. In his editorial for the first issue of *Game Studies*, Espen J. Aarseth (2001, par. 8) combines this second strategy of distinction with the first: "Games are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again. And again, until computer game studies emerges as a clearly self-sustained academic field."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the two strategies of distinction - formalist and disciplinary - are closely related, and Aarseth's call to arms illustrates one possible type of relation between the two. In many cases, it is the researchers' awareness of formal (and experiential) differences between games and other cultural artifacts and social activities that prompts them to stage a critique of attempts by other disciplines to appropriate the study of games. In those cases, game studies scholars argue that the theoretical frameworks of those other disciplines were honed in the study of cultural artifacts different from games and that they are, for that reason, inadequate to describe games and the gaming situation.

The famous (or infamous) ludology vs. narratology debate emerged out of such considerations. One of the good things that came out of that debate was that it made it harder for researchers to superimpose theories and concepts from disciplines other than game studies--most notably literary studies--onto the study of games. In other words, the ludology vs. narratology debate forced game studies scholars to think harder about what, precisely, distinguishes their own objects of analysis--games in general and video games in particular--from other cultural products and processes. Thus, it led to more theoretically refined and differentiated research, and this is surely

a good thing. In these cases, then, strategies of distinction resulted in more distinguished scholarship.

However, in some of the more fiery denunciations of especially literary theory in contemporary game studies, I suspect that the two strategies of distinction I have outlined are related inversely. There, the researchers' aim seems to be less to understand their objects of analysis better than to stake out claims on the scientific marketplace--an activity that has, as my metaphor already implies, a crucial economic dimension to it. In these cases, the formalist argument--that games are different and for that reason require a theoretical framework that does justice to that differentness--takes second place and in some cases serves as a mere cover for a fairly shameless promotion of one's own fledgling discipline. Here, it seems to me, the desired payoff of strategies of distinction--note again my economic metaphor--is less more distinguished scholarship than a combination of the cultural, social, and economic capital Pierre Bourdieu (1984) analyzed with such precision in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

Admittedly, some of the most prominent members of the game studies community have realized that disciplinary strategies of distinction have their limitations. For instance, in his article "Ludologists Love Stories, Too: Notes from a Debate that Never Took Place," Gonzalo Frasca (2003, par. 47) points out some of the major misconceptions that have fueled the ludology vs. narratology debate. There, he explains that

it is understandable that, because of the early stages of our field, such misconceptions have arisen. This is why I sincerely hope that this article will serve to point out some of the common problems that prevent researchers from understanding each other when talking about games and stories. The real issue here is not if games are narratives or not, but if we can really expand our knowledge on games by taking whichever route we follow. So far, I am convinced that we should privilege other forms of representing reality, such as simulation, which are more coherent with the characteristics of games. But, of course, that idea is open to debate.

Frasca here acknowledges that part of the quest for distinction within game studies is of a disciplinary nature: an emergent discipline has to distinguish its own research framework from that of more established disciplines. And even though Frasca clearly states that he himself does not favor a narratologist approach to games, the general tone of his article is conciliatory: the analysis of games as stories does have its place in Frasca's understanding of game studies, even if that place is not a privileged one.

And yet, there are two problems with Frasca's essay. Firstly, Frasca's own argument jars with the subtitle of his article. "Notes from a Debate that Never Took Place" seems to suggest that the very distinction between ludologist and narratologist approaches to games is moot. That's fair enough, but that's not his argument. Frasca in fact upholds and cements the distinction in the process of arguing that both approaches have a right to exist. Secondly and more importantly, if Frasca (2003) observes that "Ludologists Love Stories, Too," I wish to point out that his appeasing gesture seriously threatens to distort the concerns of literary theorists in ways that make their reflections on human sense-making indeed seem of very limited use to game studies scholars.

If we truly want to know in what respects game studies can profit from literary theory without jeopardizing the strategies of distinction a still emergent field such as game studies needs to position itself vis-à-vis dominant theoretical paradigms, we need to be aware of two things. First, narratologists make up only a fraction of the literary-theoretical community. And the narratologists most often cited by game studies scholars usually practice a structuralist version of narratology that has come under sustained critical scrutiny since the late 1960s. Second, not all literary scholars are concerned with narrative. Of course, they often study narrative texts such as novels and short stories, but they also study plays, poems, and other texts that are not primarily narrative in nature. More importantly, even when they do study narrative texts, literary scholars are not always interested in the forms and functions of stories.

For all those reasons, then, Frasca's conceptualization of the co-existence of ludologist and narratologist approaches to games has its limitations.<sup>3</sup> My own take on the relationship between literary theory and game studies is closer to Ian Bogost's (2006a, p. 42) call for "comparative video game criticism," a cross-disciplinary approach that is located at the intersection of "comparative [literary] criticism and video game software development." Bogost got his academic training in philosophy and comparative literature, and his own variety of video game criticism could be seen as one instance of the (perhaps colonizing) extension of literary studies to cover artifacts other than literary texts in the wake of the linguistic turn and cultural studies. But I believe that it makes more sense to see Bogost's work as a truly new cross-disciplinary endeavor that draws as much inspiration from his other lines of work--game design and publishing--as it does from literary studies. His important books *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (2006b) and *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007) are very good examples of what comparative video game criticism can be and, in my humble opinion, might want to aspire to. They may, moreover, provide crucial intellectual input to the emerging field of software studies.<sup>4</sup>

I am very well aware that, as a literary scholar who has some experience with gaming and almost nonexistent programming skills, I cannot claim to contribute significantly to Bogost's variety of comparative video game criticism. What I can do is present one specific approach within literary theory that can make a significant contribution to what Bogost postulates as some of the major goals of comparative video game criticism. In a programmatic article published in *Games and Culture*, Bogost (2006a, p. 45) defines those goals thus:

Instead of focusing on how games work, I suggest that we turn to what they do--how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity [...]. Such a comparative video game criticism would focus principally on the expressive capacity of games and true to its grounding in the humanities, would seek to understand how video games reveal what it means to be human. [...] Functionalist questions about video games--what they are or how they function--are not invalid or even uninteresting. But equally or dare I say, more important ones exist: What do video games do, what happens when players interact with them, and how do they relate to, participate in, extend, and revise the cultural expression at work in other cultural artifacts?

The German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser may well be the one literary theorist whose work has most to contribute to Bogost's project. Iser is not unknown among

game studies scholars. In his seminal book *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Espen J. Aarseth (1997) refers to Iser's work as one influential model of literary communication that does not help explain the specific forms and functions of nonlinear, multicursal computer games. More specifically, Aarseth argues that Iser's notion of *Leerstellen* (blanks) cannot account for the kinds of openings cybertexts offer their users.

I do have some sympathy for Aarseth's position, even though Bogost's (2007, p. 43) claim that "the ontological position of a videogame (or simulation, or procedural system) resides in the gap between rule-based representation and player subjectivity" has very close affinities with Iser's phenomenological description of the reading experience. But the point I want to make is a different one. Important as they are, Iser's contributions to what has rather carelessly been labeled either 'reader-response criticism' or 'reception theory'--his phenomenology of the reading process and, as part of that larger inquiry, his reflections on the indeterminacy of literary texts and his work on the implied reader--do not constitute his most pertinent contribution to comparative video game criticism.<sup>5</sup>

Iser's later work on literary anthropology is a much more promising avenue of exploration for ludologists. In his article "Feigning in Fiction" (1985), in the last three articles of his essay collection *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1989), and in his book *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (1993; German original published in 1991), Iser develops what is arguably the most sustained theory of fictionality available today. While honed in the study of literary texts, Iser's theory can tell us much about the cultural work of fiction in a variety of media without leveling the distinctions between different cultural practices. As such, his later work does not provide yet another reading of computer games as stories but invites the game studies community to reconsider some of its central concepts, in particular 'play,' 'simulation,' 'fiction,' and 'immersion.' Even more importantly, Iser's literary anthropology probes *why* human beings need fictions and thus invites us to ask what Bogost asks himself about games: "how they inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity" and how they "reveal what it means to be human." Finally, by focusing on literary *experience*--a concern that energizes all of his work--Iser allows us to ask questions concerning one of the four essential properties of digital artifacts identified by Janet H. Murray (1997) and widely agreed upon: their participatory nature.<sup>6</sup> Let us have a closer look at Iser's literary anthropology.

In the third and final phase of his work, Iser builds on his earlier reflections on the reading process to seek an answer to the question of why human beings need fiction. And this is why he labels his later work 'literary anthropology': he discusses fiction as a fundamental human need. While Iser remains interested in literature and focuses on literary fictions, his reflections are, with appropriate modifications, also applicable to other media that bring forth fictional worlds.

Iser starts from the assumption that fictional texts do not mirror or represent reality. Instead, they create a fictional reality of their own. This may be obvious in the case of science fiction, which in many cases constructs a reality radically different from our own, but for Iser, this is true for all fiction. Writers do not simply mirror the world we already know; they create new worlds with houses that do not exist that are inhabited

by people that do not exist. And for Iser, the central question is how the fictional reality we encounter as we read literary texts relates to our own, empirical reality.

In the process of exploring that relationship, Iser abandons the traditional way of relating reality and fiction. While that traditional model opposes fiction to reality, Iser's own model consists of three parts rather than two: the fictive, the imaginary, and the real. In that triadic model, the imaginary corresponds to the formless, diffuse, and uncontrollable world of the imagination. As such, it is "a featureless and inactive potential" (1993, p. xvii) that must be activated and concretized by human beings. The real encompasses the empirical world we live in, which includes our experience of that world: "*real* should be understood as referring to the empirical world, which is a 'given' for the literary text and generally provides the text's multiple fields of reference. These may be thought systems, social systems, and world pictures as well as other texts with their own specific organization or interpretation of reality" (1993, p. 305n.2). The fictive is the most complex of the three notions and deserves a closer look.

First and most importantly, the fictive is synonymous with neither 'fiction' nor with literary works. As Iser explains in his essay "Representation: A Performative Act": "fictionalizing acts [...] do not refer to an ontological given, but to an operation, and therefore cannot be identical to what they produce" (1989d, p. 236-37). The fictive, then, "is not the work itself but is what makes the world possible" (1993, p. 225); it consists of a series of fictionalizing acts that bring forth literary texts in the act of reading, and which draw both on the imaginary and on fragments of the real. What the fictive does is mediate between and connect the real and the imaginary. On the one hand, it transforms the diffuse and uncontrollable imaginary into the concrete form of a literary text. Thus, the fictive concretizes the imaginary; it "compels the imaginary to take on a form while at the same time acting as the medium for its manifestation" (1993, p. 230). Moreover, the fictive concretizes the imaginary in a specific way: it "liberates it from all directly pragmatic links" (1989, p. 278), thus opening up a space of free play. On the other hand, the fictive also relates to the real in so far as it allows us to irrealize ourselves as we step into the shoes of an imaginary character and take walks in fictional woods. Iser (1993, p. 3-4) describes the interplay of the three constituents of his model thus:

Just as the fictionalizing act [the fictive] outstrips the determinacy of the real, so it provides the imaginary with the determinacy that it would not otherwise possess. [...] Reproduced reality is made to point to a 'reality' beyond itself, while the imaginary is lured into form. [...] [T]he act of fictionalizing is of paramount importance: it crosses the boundaries both of what it organizes (external reality) and of what it converts into a gestalt (the diffuseness of the imaginary). It leads the real to the imaginary and the imaginary to the real, and it thus conditions the extent to which a given world is to be transcoded, a nongiven world is to be conceived, and the reshuffled worlds are to be made accessible to the reader's experience.

Iser takes account of the fact that, in reading literary texts, we identify with literary characters and project ourselves into fictional worlds. And this allows us to experience, in our minds, both different, alternative ways of living and the *relationships* obtaining between those other ways of living and our own since, in reading, "we are both ourselves and someone else" (1989d, p. 244). Thus, the fictive

does not take us out of our everyday reality, but it allows us to experience two realities at the same time: that of the fictional world and that of our empirical world. To enter a fictional world, then, is not to escape from our own world but to experience living in two worlds at the same time.

And yet, Iser hastens to add, not all fictions are literary. Some fictions--such as national mythologies, a child's imaginary friend or lies--are not literary. How can we distinguish between literary and other fictions? Literary fictions, Iser argues, distinguish themselves from so-called 'concord-fictions' in that they signal their own fictionality.<sup>7</sup> In other words, literary fictions reveal themselves as something constructed and staged. And by way of their fictionality signals, literary fictions establish a communicative situation between text and reader which we call the fictional pact. The fictional pact invites readers to suspend their natural judgments of statements about the real world. Thus, we can on one level believe that what we read is real while knowing, on another level, that we are dealing 'only' with fiction. The British romanticist Samuel Coleridge (1969, p. 6) speaks of the reader's "willing suspension of disbelief" in this context. In doing this, Coleridge formulates one particularly influential version of the fictional pact.

Now by signaling their own fictionality, literary texts bracket the world they present by an as-if and reveal their own playful, imaginary nature. And literary texts invite us to abandon ourselves to playing, in our minds, different roles in that world. In doing this, we accept the fictional world as *if* it were real. In the process, we irrealize ourselves as we become, in our minds, someone else--a literary character--even as we remain ourselves. And so, by identifying with literary characters, and by inserting ourselves into fictional worlds, we can imagine ourselves as different from who we are in our everyday lives. Reading literature, then, allows us vicariously to explore alternative ways of living our lives, which in turn is an activity that invites us to reflect on the lives we really live. For that reason, Iser (1989e, p. 268) points out, the fictive is "a means of overstepping the given, which is bound to cause a transformation of what is." Thus, our walks in the fictional woods, be it those of literature or computer games, may well have the power to effect the kinds of social transformations Bogost (2007, p. ix) postulates for what he calls persuasive games: to "disrupt and change fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world, leading to potentially significant long-term social change." In fact, if we take Iser's work on fiction as a departure point, we may speculate that the transformative potential of video games is not restricted to persuasive games as defined by Bogost but inheres in all kinds of games. As Iser (1989d, p. 239) puts it with respect to literary works,

the bracketed world of the novel is not only to be seen as if it were a world, but it is also to be seen as a world that does not exist empirically. Consequently there will be a continual oscillation between the bracketed world and that from which it has been separated. The former therefore becomes a medium for revealing what has remained concealed in the empirical world, and whatever may be the relation between the two, it is the 'As If' world that brings about the interplay between them.

For Iser, the most fundamental truth about fictions is that they are anthropologically necessary strategies of compensation. We need them because we experience both a desire fully to understand the world and ourselves and remain aware that we can never fully achieve that understanding. Now rather than offering explanations or

giving answers, literary fictions suspend the conflict between our desire to understand the world in its totality and the knowledge that we can never achieve such an understanding. And they do that by allowing us to playfully model alternative possibilities of being and living. Fiction thus allows us to transcend ourselves by letting us experience possibilities of living life that we cannot experience in our everyday lives, simply because our lives are limited by social obligations and by the decisions we have to make as to who we want to be and how we lead our lives: "human beings [...] can never be fully present to themselves, because at any one stage they possess themselves only in the possibility realized, and that is what they are not: one limited possibility of themselves" (1993, p. 236). Fiction allows us, in other words, to take the paths not chosen; it enables us to experience ourselves as more than who we are at any given moment in our lives.

And yet, fiction can never fully compensate for our human experience of lack. All it can do is allow us to playfully undermine the limitations of our existence. In Iser's (1989d, p. 245; 1989e, p. 280) words, "literature [...] stages what is inaccessible, thus compensating for the impossibility of knowing what it is to be;" it allows us "anxiety-free access to the inaccessible." The worlds of as-if provided by fictions, then, allow us to subvert the fact that we cannot always be all we want to be. Fictions allow us to become fuller human beings; they "are inventions enabling humankind to extend itself" (1989e, p. 265).<sup>8</sup> Thus, the main function of literature is not, as the Western tradition since Aristotle has it, mimesis of what exists but the staging of that which does not exist (yet).<sup>9</sup> Iser (1989e, p. 282) asks, "Why have we created this mode of staging, and why has it accompanied us throughout our history?" And he replies: "The answer must certainly be the desire, not to repeat what is, but to gain access to what we otherwise cannot have."

What can all of this teach us about games and gaming? First, as a theory of fiction, Iser's later work has much to tell us about the ontological status of what Roger Caillois has identified as one of the defining elements of games: make-believe. In Caillois' (2001, p. 10) words, games are "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life." Games, in other words, create fictional worlds; and gaming allows us not only to enter that world but also to participate in its construction. Now Espen Aarseth is certainly correct in pointing out that, in the case of cybertexts such as computer games, the user's freedom to co-construct the fictional world and influence the actions that take place in it is greater than it is for readers of traditional literary texts (whatever 'traditional' may be taken to imply here). Aarseth (1997, p. 4) makes his point starkly when he writes that

A reader, however strongly engaged in the unfolding of a narrative, is powerless. Like a spectator at a soccer game, he may speculate, conjecture, extrapolate, even shout abuse, but he is not a player. Like a passenger on a train, he can study and interpret the shifting landscape, he may rest his eyes wherever he pleases, even release the emergency brake and step off, but he is not free to move the tracks in a different direction. He cannot have the player's pleasure of influence: 'Let's see what happens when I do *this*.' The reader's pleasure is the pleasure of the voyeur. Safe, but impotent.

Granted, video games are more interactive than novels since "they require," as Bogost (2007, p. 45) also points out, "user action to complete their procedural representations." But what, precisely, is so dangerous about playing computer games



as opposed to reading literature eludes me. More importantly, one could also turn the tables on Aarseth. If computer games give players more freedom in co-constructing the story that is told, their stunningly realist visuals also deny their users the freedom to imagine for themselves what the fictional world looks like. This kind of objection to predominantly visual media is nothing new, and it helps explain why we are often unhappy with cinematic adaptations of our favorite novels. After all, what is most important, both in reading literary texts and in playing computer games, is not what appears on the page or on the screen but what happens in our minds. Moreover, several game studies scholars have suggested that the freedom Aarseth speaks of is illusory and that the true bases for interactivity in (good) game design are in fact 'illusory agency' and 'meaningless choice' (Cheng 2007; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2007; Harrell and Zhu 2009).

An anthropological analysis of fiction such as Iser's allows us to ask questions concerning agency and cognitive processing that are crucially important because, again in Iser's (1989d, p. 243) words, both literary and algorithmic representation

can only unfold itself in the recipient's mind, and it is through his [or her] active imaginings alone that the intangible can become an image. [...] The aesthetic semblance can only take on its form by way of the recipient's ideational, performative activity, and so representation can only come to full fruition in the recipient's imagination; it is the recipient's performance that endows the semblance with its sense of reality.

Iser's reflections on the active role of the reader in the reading process are of much use to game studies since they allow us to specify what we mean when we say that video games are interactive and participatory. Importantly, Iser configures the recipient's performance--an activity that calls upon the reader's agency to such an extent that 'recipient' becomes a problematic term--in terms of play.

And indeed, Iser's reflections on play as a cognitively significant experience of *freedom* constitute his second major contribution to the study of games. Iser's understanding of the play activity is consonant with Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's (2003, p. 304) definition of 'play' as "free movement within a more rigid structure" as well as John Fiske's (1987, p. 230) analogy between texts and games as constructions of "ordered worlds within which the players/readers can experience the pleasures of both freedom and control."<sup>10</sup> Iser also draws on earlier reflections on play, including Johan Huizinga's (1955, p. 28) conceptualization of play as "a voluntary activity or occupation" that is "accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" as well as Friedrich von Schiller's (2005, p. 107) contention that "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays*"--though Iser (1989a, p. 200-02) sharply distances himself from the opposition Schiller posits between literature and reality. Iser (1989d, p. 245; 1993, p. xiv) writes that "knowledge of what man is can only come about in the form of play" and adds that this is so because the fictive "free[s]" the imaginary "from immediate pragmatic needs." Fiction is a realm of free play because it is a world that is bracketed by the fictional pact of the *as if*.

since [the referential world contained in the text] is fictional, it automatically invokes a convention-governed contract between author and reader indicating

that the textual world is to be viewed not as reality but as if it *were* reality. And so whatever is repeated in the text is not meant to denote the world, but merely a world enacted. This may well repeat an identifiable reality, but it contains one all-important difference: what happens within it is relieved of the consequences inherent in the real world referred to. Hence in disclosing itself, fictionality signalizes that everything is only to be taken as *if* it were what it seems to be, to be taken--in other words--as play. (1989b, p. 251).

In this understanding of literary experience as play, meaning is a mere supplement, a sort of side effect of playing that emerges when free play ends: "The 'supplement' as the meaning of the text is generated through play, and so there is no meaning prior to play" (1989b, p. 252). At first sight, this seems quite an astonishing argumentative move for a thinker with a background in hermeneutics, a school of theory whose concerns have often been identified with the pursuit of meaning. Play, however, was already for Hans-Georg Gadamer a fundamentally important human activity without which understanding cannot take place. Iser (1989b, p. 259) is, then, fully in line with the hermeneutic tradition when he argues that the production of meaning is only one of the ways in which playing can be ended:

the play of the text can be ended in various ways, one of which is in terms of semantics. In this case what is paramount is our need for understanding and our urge to appropriate the experiences given to us. This might even indicate a defense mechanism operating within ourselves, as the search for meaning may be our means of warding off the unfamiliar.

Another way in which we may play the text is by obtaining experience. Then we open ourselves up to the unfamiliar and are prepared to let our own values be influenced or even changed by it.

A third mode of play is that of pleasure. Then we give precedence to the enjoyment derived from an unusual exercise of our faculties which enables us to become present to ourselves. Each of these options represents a tendency according to which the play of the text can be acted out.

What this passage illustrates particularly well is Iser's sustained interest in not only the nature but also the *functions* of play. And this functional focus also characterizes his third major contribution to the study of games: his reflections on the functions of simulations. From a functionalist perspective, the question of whether a given algorithmic simulation is authentic or realistic is of little interest since simulations *create* new worlds rather than representing already existing ones.<sup>11</sup> Just as literary fictions, algorithmic fictions "giv[e] presence to what otherwise is unavailable" (1993, p. xi). What is crucial from an anthropological point of view is how we relate our experiences within the simulated world to our experiences of the world we normally live in. The simulated worlds of computer games allow us to transcend ourselves as we become someone--or something--else for the duration of the gaming experience even as we remain ourselves. And that self-transcendence may have important repercussions on the lives we lead outside the gaming situation. Crucially for video game studies, Iser's reflections on the relationships obtaining between simulated and empirical realities do not conceive of those relationships in the behaviorist terms of direct effects theories--which may have been discredited within media theory but still inform public debates on first-person shooters and other violent games. Moreover, apart from providing a much-needed corrective to stimulus-response models of

media influence, they also challenge equally simplistic assertions that all gamers do is 'have some fun.' In playing computer games, we experience alternative ways of being that may well have profound effects on our ways of being outside the gaming situation. But those effects are, Iser reminds us, neither direct nor predictable.

Iser's reflections on the anthropological *necessity* of play provide yet another, fourth avenue of exploration for game studies scholars. As I have pointed out, Iser draws on earlier theorizations of play by Huizinga and Caillois, both of whom share Iser's anthropological interests and have been quite influential within game studies. Like Huizinga and Caillois, Iser conceptualizes play less as a series of actions human beings perform than as a cognitive activity that may have important cognitive repercussions. What Iser can add to this anthropological strain within game studies is the insight that the experience of immersion in computer gaming consists not in a complete losing of oneself within the simulated world but in a continual oscillation between that world and the world we think we already know.<sup>12</sup> In focusing on that oscillation, Iser distances himself from Huizinga and Caillois as well as Schiller,<sup>13</sup> who all tend to conceptualize play as a complete opting out of empirical reality:

The one who plays chess, prisoner's base, polo, or baccara, by the very fact of complying with their respective rules, is separated from real life. (Caillois, 2001, p. 8)

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. [...] It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (Huizinga, 1955, p. 13)

By and large, game studies scholars subscribe to what I call the 'separation hypothesis' concerning reality and fiction. Take Jesper Juul's (2005, p. 164) discussion of Caillois in *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* as one case in point: "Caillois [...] point[s] to an interesting similarity between rules and fiction in that both contain an element of separation from the rest of the world. Rules separate the games from the rest of the world by carving out an area where the rules apply; fiction projects a world different from the real world. The space of a game is *part of* the world in which it is played, but the space of a fiction is *outside* the world from which it is created."<sup>14</sup>

Now as far as computer games are concerned, it may be true that in a state of almost complete immersion, we do not experience the oscillation Iser speaks of, but it is always there, quite simply because the experiences we have already made before we enter the simulated world of a computer game will underlie and condition our experience of that simulated world--and vice versa. Playing games transports players into "a condition in which they can simultaneously step out of and be themselves" (Iser, 1993, p. xv). From a game studies perspective, it is, I believe, important to insist on the presence of this doubling of worlds and ontological oscillation in the gaming situation, not least because it challenges facile dismissals of the gaming experience as escape. Iser's conceptualization of the relationships between fictional and empirical realities in terms of oscillation and doubling allows us to gain a more precise understanding of what actually happens in player's minds as they manipulate

game controllers. In playing games, we do not enter what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003, p. 95) call a "*magic circle*," i.e., "a special place in time and space" that "is enclosed and separate from the real world." Instead, we enter a space *between* two worlds. Put differently, the gaming experience is not, as Jesper Juul claims, half-real; it is *doubly real*.

Juul is one of the two researchers who have grappled most extensively with the question of the ontological status of computer-generated fictional worlds (arguably, the other would be Markku Eskelinen). Still, Iser's reflections on fiction throw the limitations of Juul's approach into relief and thus provide a fifth important input to game studies. At the beginning of *Half-Real*, Juul (2005, p. 3) explains that

*Half-Real* refers to the fact that video games are two different things at the same time: video games are *real* in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world, and a video game is a set of rules as well as a fictional world.

As we read on, we learn that in order to arrive at this characterization of the gaming experience, Juul had to revise his earlier contention that fictional worlds are unimportant for games as well as for game studies. He writes that "[t]his idea that the representation of a game is irrelevant appears to have a constant allure, but it also breaks down upon further scrutiny" (2005, p. 13). Two things are noteworthy about this sentence. First, similar to Frasca's observation that "Ludologists Love Stories, Too," it does not do away with the binary distinction it sets out to challenge. All it does is argue that games are made up of both rule-based and fictional elements as well as their interplay. Second, Juul here equates fiction with "the representation of a game." Now the term 'representation' suggests that what is at stake in fiction is a repetition or imitation of something that was already present; hence 're-presentation.' Later on in his book, Juul (2005, p. 172) repeats different versions of that argument, for example when he speaks of computer games' "*stylized simulations*" as "*adaptations* of elements of the real world." Juul's understanding of fiction ties in with the traditional understanding of fiction as mimesis, which has dominated Western reflections on art since Aristotle. Iser tells us that this may well be the wrong way of thinking about fiction. Reminding us that the term 'fiction' derives from the Latin verb  *fingere*, which means "to form, shape" (Klein, 1966), Iser points out that 'fiction' is a much more active process than its equation with mimesis or representation suggests. Fiction does not imitate the world: it shapes, forms, fashions or invents a new, fictional world with objects and people in it that do not exist in empirical reality. Fiction, then, is not a mirroring of the world we already know. Instead, it is a staging and invention of a new world, which emerges out of an interplay between the projections of the text and the reader's imagination.<sup>15</sup> Iser's theorization of that interplay not only checks facile dismissals of algorithmic fiction as mere ornament but also helps us clarify both the ontological and phenomenological status of fictional worlds. Moreover, it makes us think again about Eskelinen's (2001, par. 10) claim that "the dominant user function in literature, theatre and film is interpretative, but in games it is the configurative one."

And indeed, returning to Juul's argument with our sight sharpened by Iser, we discover conceptualizations of fiction that do not equate it with representation and are rather close to Iser's. Toward the beginning of his fourth chapter, which is entitled "Fiction," Juul (2005, p. 121) writes: "Games project fictional worlds through a variety of different means, but the fictional worlds are imagined by the player, and the player fills in any gaps in the fictional world."<sup>16</sup> This doubleness of projection and imagination not only ties in with both Iser's emphasis on the processual nature of fiction and Eskelinen's postulation of two 'scriptonic events' in the gaming situation,<sup>17</sup> but to my mind also describes the gaming situation much more accurately than any resort to theories of mimesis. Equally importantly, if we take that understanding of fiction seriously, the infelicitous dichotomy between game rules on the one hand and fictional worlds on the other--which underlies Juul's argument in *Half-Real* even though he discusses their multiple interconnections extensively--evaporates.<sup>18</sup> After all, not only the action of computer games and the rules that constrain them but also the fictional worlds they project are ultimately based on algorithmic rules. And to come into being, both require the player's physical as well as cognitive exertion. Both the action of the games and its fictional worlds are, in other words, virtual until they are given concrete form by the player's ideation.

A sixth major contribution Iser's work can make to game studies concerns his challenge to the fiction-reality dichotomy. While tying in with earlier reflections on the anthropological necessity of play by Huizinga and Caillois as well as Bogost's (2007, p. 42) understanding of play as "the possibility space created by processes themselves," Iser's triadic model of the fictive, the imaginary, and the real prevents us from setting up any facile oppositions between reality and fiction.

Seventh and finally, Iser's theorization of fiction reminds us that the concepts game studies scholars focus on to distinguish games and gaming from literature and reading--in particular 'play,' 'simulation,' 'fiction,' and 'immersion'--might, after all, not be all that unknown to literary scholars.

For all those reasons, then, it pays to take another look at the work of Wolfgang Iser. His theory of fiction does not provide yet another framework for reading games as stories but challenges game studies scholars to rethink a number of their key concepts. And in doing so, it helps us move beyond purely formalist approaches to games to ask what may well be the two most important questions: why do we play games and what does playing do for us? Finally, Iser's work invites us to ask whether the *disciplinary* rhetoric of distinction that much game studies scholarship still employs has outlived its usefulness, serving less as an effective defense mechanism than as an obstacle to cross-disciplinary fertilization on the way to a comparative video game criticism.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Andreas Jahn-Sudmann for gently but insistently prodding to bring out the media theorist in me. Thanks are also due to the members of the research colloquium at the Department of English of the University of Basel; they have given me much food for thought. Further thanks go to *Eludamos* reviewer C, who has provided useful advice.
- <sup>2</sup> See also Markku Eskelinen's (2001) essay "The Gaming Situation," which was published in the same issue of *Game Studies* as Aarseth's editorial and makes very similar gestures of disciplinary distinction. Eskelinen (2001, pars. 1-2) writes, "[I]f and when games and especially computer games are studied and theorized they are almost without exception colonised from the fields of literary, theatre, drama and film studies. Games are seen as interactive narratives, procedural stories or remediated cinema. On top of everything else, such definitions, despite being successful in terms of influence or funding, are conceptually weak and ill-grounded, as they are usually derived from a very limited knowledge of mere mainstream drama or outdated literary theory, or both. [...] [I]n what follows I'll try to make some sense of what I call the gaming situation by trying to pinpoint or at least locate the most crucial and elementary qualities that set it apart from dramatic and narrative situations."
- <sup>3</sup> I have chosen my words carefully here: "co-existence" suggests that narratology and ludology exist side by side rather than in a state of mutual fertilization.
- <sup>4</sup> On software studies, which strives to direct our attention to the 'software layer' that crucially informs a great number of our daily activities--from Google



searches to driving--see Matthew Fuller's (2008) *Software Studies: A Lexicon* and watch out for publications in the MIT Press Software Studies book series.

- <sup>5</sup> In the first footnote of a brilliant article that surveys Iser's oeuvre, his erstwhile student Winfried Fluck (2000, p. 201n.1) explains why 'reception aesthetics' is a more accurate label for Iser's intellectual project: "in the following argument, the term 'reception aesthetics' is used to refer exclusively to a theory of aesthetic experience and does not include theories of the history of reception. A simple solution to the terminological problem would be to use the term 'reader-response criticism.' However, I consider the term unnecessarily reductive and therefore unfortunate, because Iser's theory is, above all, an aesthetic theory. Its goal is to clarify the character of aesthetic experience and not 'responses' of the reader." Later on in the essay, Fluck (2000, p. 189) elaborates on what he and Iser mean by 'aesthetic experience': "It is one of the most misunderstood aspects of reception aesthetics that it is not a theory of meaning but of aesthetic experience. Consequently, Iser is not talking about the level of meaning but about the act of text processing in which everything that is non-identical has to be referred to that which it negates or complements in order to be able to construe it as an object. The reader is not discovered because he has been neglected so far, but because he is the agent who is needed to realize the potential of literature to provide an aesthetic experience. This potential does not arise from the semantic level but from a complex set of interactions."
- <sup>6</sup> The other three are procedurality, spatiality, and encyclopedic scope. Murray (1997, p. 74) states that "Procedural environments are appealing to us not just because they exhibit rule-generated behavior but because we can induce the behavior. They are responsive to our input. Just as the primary representational property of the movie camera and projector is the photographic rendering of action over time, the primary representational property of the computer is the codified rendering of responsive behaviors. This is what is most often meant when we say that computers are *interactive*. We mean they create an environment that is both procedural and participatory."
- <sup>7</sup> Iser (1985, p. 88) takes the term 'concord-fictions' from Frank Kermode: "Kermode calls these objects 'concord fictions', because in establishing links between the given and the unfathomable, they endow the given with meaning by incorporating it into a totality of their own making."
- <sup>8</sup> Iser does not draw explicitly on Marshall McLuhan at this point of his argument, but he does so elsewhere, and his argument concerning the anthropological function of fiction is, of course, reminiscent of and fully compatible with McLuhan's (2001, p. 7) famous definition of 'medium' as "any extension of ourselves."
- <sup>9</sup> See the epilog of *The Fictive and the Imaginary* for an extended discussion of Aristotle's as well as Plato's legacy to Western theories of art (Iser, 1993, p. 281-96).

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- <sup>10</sup> See Andreas Jahn-Sudmann's (2007, p. 168-74) "Spiel-Filme und das post-klassische (Hollywood-)Kino: Zwei Paradigmen" for a discussion of the play characteristics of digital games and films that intelligently engages with Fiske's understanding of play from a game studies perspective.
- <sup>11</sup> See also Jean Baudrillard's essay "The Precession of Simulacra," in which he establishes a sharp opposition between (third-order) simulation and representation.
- <sup>12</sup> This presents one way out of what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003, 450-51) have called 'the immersive fallacy'--a notion they define as follows: "The immersive fallacy is the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality. According to the immersive fallacy, this reality is so complete that ideally the frame falls away so that the player truly believes that he or she is part of an imaginary world."
- <sup>13</sup> About Schiller, Iser (1989a, p. 200-02) writes: "Schiller [...] saw the aim [of play] as being not cognition but training for freedom. For him the play-drive (*Spieltrieb*) provided a precise balance between the striving for form and for content, which in terms of art gives rise to a realm of *der schöne Schein*, 'beautiful semblance'--a realm that lies beyond the borders of the real. It is exactly this division--at the time heralded as a new humanistic ideal--from which a great many of the troubles began to ensue. [...] Art not only freed itself from its traditional links with Nature, but it also set itself up in opposition to reality, since reality did not contain the freedom that was only possible by means of education through Art. And so, instead of Art and Nature complementing one another, they settled into opposing positions of Appearance and Reality, their paths so divergent that they could never come together again. Where Art ruled, reality was overstepped; and so the nineteenth-century concept of Art is that of 'beautiful semblance' contrasted with prosaic reality. [...] Now, even if Art as beautiful semblance embodies a reality of its own, this in turn remains dependent on the given prosaic reality that it must transcend in order to set man free. This is the defect inherent in the humanistic concept, for Art draws its determination from what it sets out to remove. In other words, not only is it dependent on something outside itself, but it is also the very negation of this 'something' that helps bring about the basic characteristic of Art as beautiful semblance. This paradox lies at the heart of an Art that has become autonomous. Its pervasiveness becomes clear from such traditional descriptions of Art as beautiful appearance, magic, transfiguration, illusion, and so forth, all of which show how impossible it is for an autonomous Art to break free from the reality it is supposed to annihilate. Evidently autonomous Art is not a transcendence of reality so much as a flight from it."
- <sup>14</sup> Markku Eskelinen (2001, par. 25), however, qualifies the separation hypothesis when he notes that games can be understood as in "every way closed or separated from the rest of the world" but adds that "there are alternatives to this: causal, spatial, temporal and functional connections could well exceed the confines of a game. The dynamic dimension could then be understood as containing various violations of this default separateness of games."

- <sup>15</sup> Note that Iser's theorization of fictionality goes against the grain of Roger Caillois's (2001, p. 19 et passim) famous characterization of one type of game, simulation or make-believe, as *mimicry*. From the point of view of literary anthropology, simulation and make-believe are precisely not a form of mimicry or imitation of what is already given but a staging of a new world. See also Iser's (1993, p. 258-73) discussion of Caillois in *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. Moreover, like Juul's distinction between 'real rules' and 'fictional worlds,' Caillois's (2001, p. 9) sharp distinction between games that are ruled and games that are make-believe ("games are not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled or make-believe," which is also critiqued by Juul (2005, p. 13), also makes little sense.
- <sup>16</sup> Note also that there are other passages in Juul's book that gesture toward an understanding of the gaming experience that is rather close to Iser's understanding of the reading experience. For instance, when he writes that "[a]s a player, you are 'yourself' and a character in the game world," Juul (2005, p. 142) acknowledges the doubling at work without, however, pursuing the implications of that doubling any further.
- <sup>17</sup> In "The Gaming Situation," Eskelinen (2001, par. 9) writes, "In discussing computer games we should take into account the unique dual materiality of cybernetic sign production (see Aarseth 1997, 40), and the resulting difference between strings of signs as they exist in the game (textonic game elements) and strings of signs as they are presented to the player (scriptonic game elements). It may well be that events in computer games should be described in three interplaying registers. In addition to textonic events, there are two kinds of scriptonic events: prefabricated and completed. The former are events presented to the player, and the latter the combination of the former and the player's actions."
- <sup>18</sup> See Juul (2005, p. 195-96) for a concise summing up of the multiple relations he posits between game rules and fiction.