# *So you're a gambling researcher who wants to study video games?*

# 5 tips for tackling the field

**Mark R Johnson**

Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Digital Cultures, Department of Media & Communications, University of Sydney

# Gambling scholars and games

- What are the intersections between gambling and gaming?
  - Esports betting
  - Loot boxes
  - Other microtransactions
  - Skin gambling
  - Live streaming gambling

- Is gaming addiction a real thing?

- Can gaming lead into gambling?

- These are all important questions

# My own work

Submit an article    Journal homepage

Enter keywords, authors, D

Articles

## Gambling engagement mechanisms in Twitch live streaming

Brett Abarbanel ✉ & Mark R. Johnson

Download citation   https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2020.1766097   Check for updates

---

## The 'gambling turn' in digital game monetization

**Authors:** Johnson, Mark R. [1] ; Brock, Tom [2] ;

< previous article    view table of contents    next article >

| Abstract | References | Citations | Supplementary Data | Suggestions |

This article examines how 'gambling' secured a central economic and cultural position in the development of modern digital games. We first trace how developers have monetized 'games' and 'play', from slot machines to PC, console and mobile platforms, before considering the recent controversy over 'loot boxes' as an emblematic case study of the ongoing gamblification of digital play. We argue that (1) the rising costs of development and marketing for 'blockbuster' games, (2) an overcrowded marketplace and (3) significant shifts in the corporate culture of the games industry are creating cultural conditions which legitimize gambling as a form of digital game production and consumption. This is evidenced in developers' capacity to innovate around legal challenges and player demand for further customization and rewards. What emerges is a question about the future direction of game development and the impact of a logic of money, rather than play, which now underwrites it.

---

## Journal of Consumer Culture

Journal Home    Browse Journal ⌄    Journal Info ⌄    Stay Connected ⌄    **Submit Paper**

### The gamblification of digital games

Tom Brock, Mark Johnson

Article information ⌄

**Keywords**

Gaming, gambling, digital games, digital consumption, microtransactions, loot boxes

# The Problem



- "Esports is a new phenomenon" (2019!!)

- "There are three genres of game – shooting games, racing games, and puzzle games"

- "Esports is a new sport separate from digital gaming"

- "Games are a source of addiction"

- "Call of Duty is a game that lots of people play"

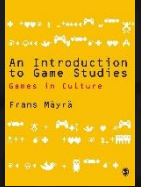- All in **top-ranked, high-IF journals**

# The Problem

- "Film is a new phenomenon" (2019?)

- "There are three genres of film – action, romance, and mystery"

- "Watching films at home is a new trend completely disconnected from films"

- "Films are a source of addiction"

- "Star Wars is a film that lots of people watch"

- **<u>Such statements would be absurd!</u>**

# The Problem

- ## I'm not picking on any individual!

- ### This is a systemic, field-wide problem.

- ### But it *can* be addressed.

# The solution(s)?

- Engage with game studies

- Be exact with terminology

- Recognize what digital games are

- Work with games scholars

- Play some games!

# Engage with game studies

# Game studies

- Games research is split into two halves – game studies, and research in computer science

- The latter doesn't really concern us (AI, graphics, algorithms, etc) but the former does

- For decades *game studies* has been studying games, players, game developers, game communities, cultures, play experiences, game mechanics, narratives, settings, game monetization, children's play, adult play, game controversies, game content, and more

- Hundreds of books, thousands upon thousands of papers, dedicated (and big!) conferences

# Game studies

- *New Media and Society*

- *Information Communication and Society*

- *Computers in Human Behaviour*

- *Television and New Media*

- *Convergence*

- *Games and Culture*

- *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*

- *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*

- *Game Studies*

- *MIT Press, U of Minnesota Press, NYU Press, Bloomsbury Academic, Routledge…*
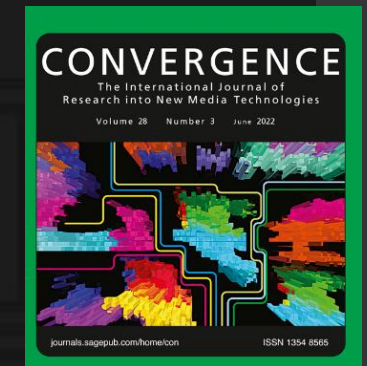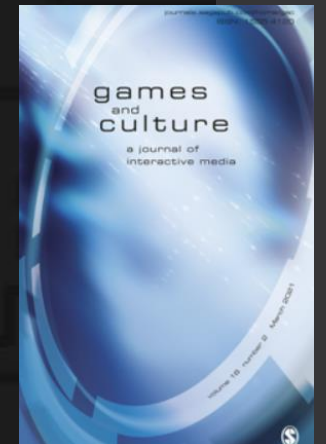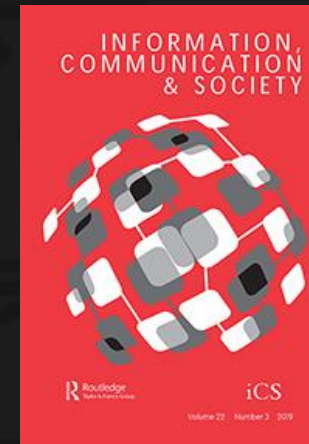
# Be exact with terminology

# Game terminology

- Poor use of gaming terminology has become a tell-tale sign of these problematic papers

- For instance, there is a big difference between games and game series

- "Call of Duty" the *series* not "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2" the *game*

- And do actually name games correctly! There is no game called "Super Mario"…

- Game genres have seen hundreds of publications and research projects yet I've never seen even one of these cited???

# Game terminology

- Esports is a contested term but one with clear agreement – find some games scholars who have defined it!

- Game addiction is *contested* and it is not established this even exists

- And remember, digital games are not strange alien things to be treated like bizarre artefacts played by peculiar people

- Games are mainstream!

- *The games sector is now worth roughly the same as film, and music, combined*

- We expect to see expert knowledge in any research addressing film or music – why not when addressing games?

# Recognise what digital games are



INDEPENDENT
GAMES FESTIVAL

# What are digital games?

# What are digital games?

# What are digital games?

# What are digital games?



- **Art**
  - Games are a creative media form, currently enjoying a renaissance in creativity, diverse voices, and artistic expression

- Community
  - Games bring people together, form lasting social bonds, deep friendships – even sometimes marriages!

- Careers
  - Games are a site of *production* of careers as well as hobbies – making games, reviewing games, content round games

- **Pathology or productivity?** Of course gaming – like any activity – can be detrimental if done to extremes, but this single lens is woefully narrow

# Work with games scholars

**An Introduction to Game Studies**

Games in Culture

Frans Mäyrä
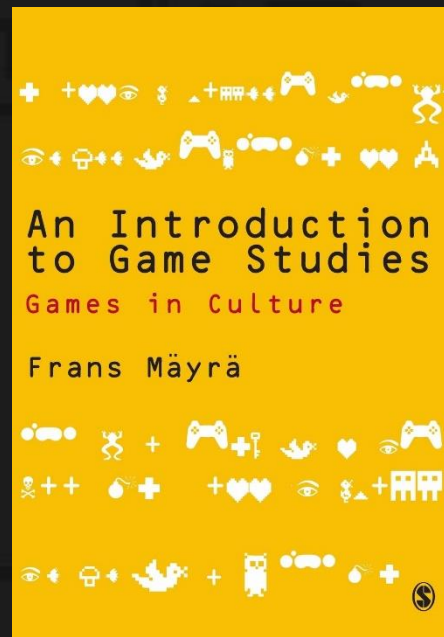
# Collaborative work

- The most cutting-edge work in the gaming-gambling intersection is being done by people working between these two fields

- Many games scholars – myself included – are keen and excited to work on gambling-related topics…

- …precisely because they *are* becoming increasingly important to gaming
  - Loot boxes, skin betting, Twitch gambling, esports betting, microtransactions, etc

- Games scholars bring the gaming expertise into research projects in these areas

# Collaborative work

- Reach out to games scholars!

- I'm happy to point people in the direction of games researchers with relevant interests if you want to send me an email / DM

- Look in departments of media research, communications, internet research, etc

- And, if you're worried about pragmatics: journals publishing games research have high impact factors and funding bodies are keen to support games research

# What should I play?

- Most people wouldn't try to study cinema without watching films; so before studying games, we need to play some!

- Or ideally... a lot?

- **Thousands** of games are released each year
  - Ranging from huge blockbusters...
  - ...to niche "indie" or art games

- But don't be overwhelmed!

- You don't need to play as many as a game studies scholar would, but this is vital for learning the field
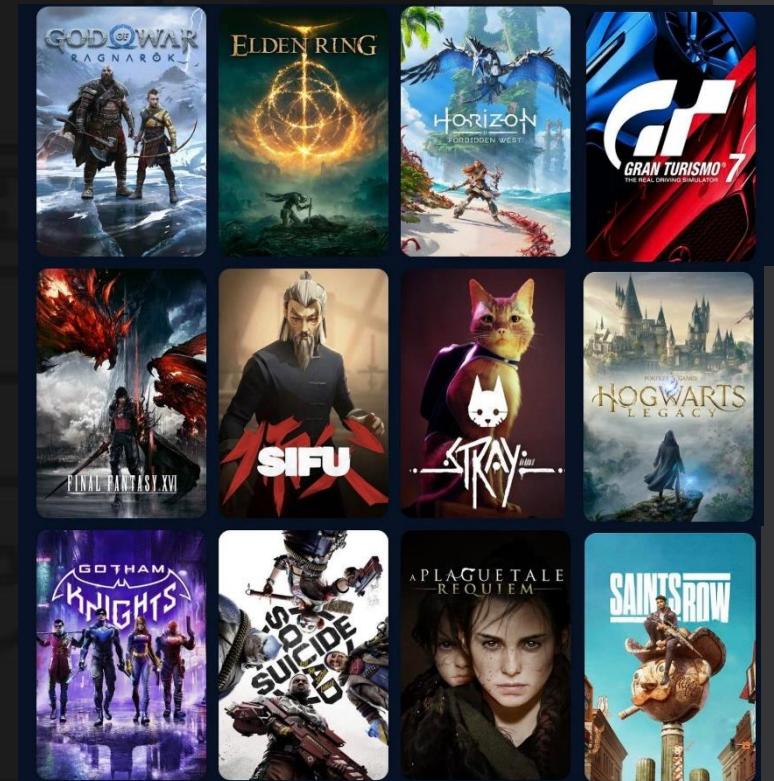
# Good games to try (strategy)



*Stellaris*
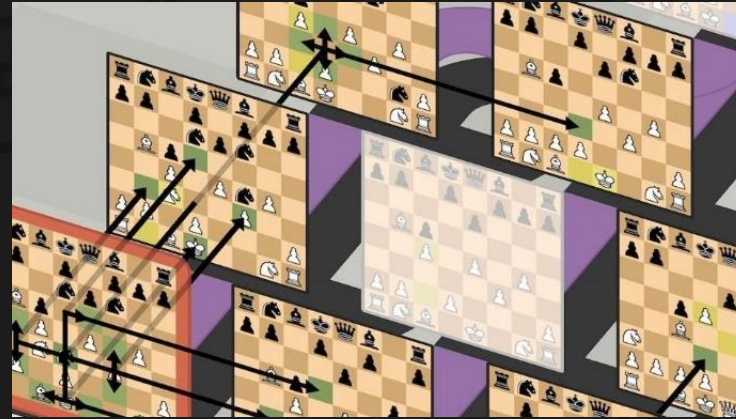


*5D Chess with Multiverse Time Travel*



*Age of Empires II*



*Slay the Spire*

# Good games to try (narrative)
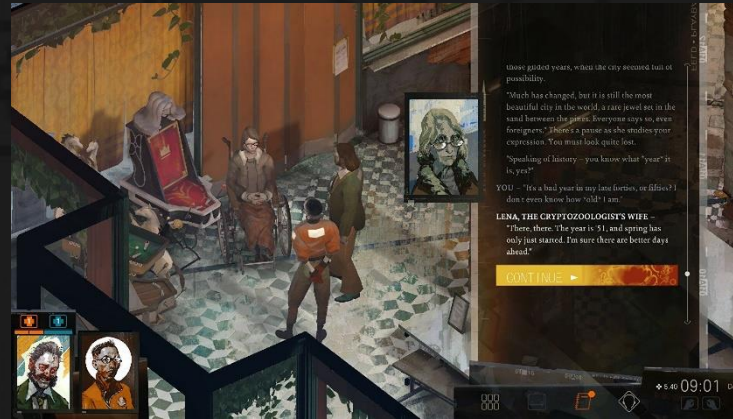

Kentucky Route Zero


Before Your Eyes


Gone Home


Firewatch

# Good games to try (experimental)


*Manifold Garden*


*Disco Elysium*


*Papers Please*


*The Curious Expedition*

# Good games for newcomers

- Not just will these be fun, interesting, challenging, and potentially even deeply moving…

- …but they will also build expertise and knowledge of digital games that can only help with good scholarship!

- Games not just loot boxes; games are not just Fortnite; and games are not just sites of possible addiction (if they even are).

# Conclusions

- If digital games research sounds interesting, that's awesome! But *please* learn about them first!

- There are *decades* of research on digital games out there to be found and used!

- **Unlike gambling, games are a creative art form, and that complicates matters.**

# Thanks for listening!
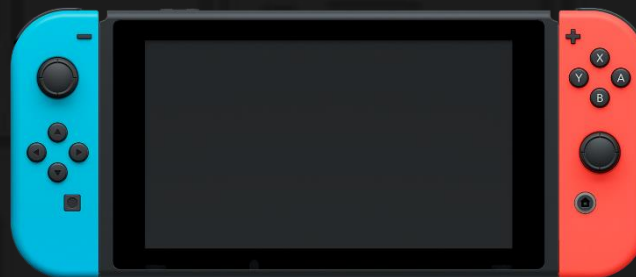
@mrj_games

mark.r.johnson@sydney.edu.au