2

Preparing for the Analysis

▶ INTRODUCTION

Before writing a single word, we need to do some groundwork. Playing the game is an obvious start; gathering any information about the game that may be relevant to our analysis is also an important part of our work. How we play and why are going to influence our understanding of the game, so we must be aware of how our preparation affects what we are going to write later. This chapter discusses the implications of playing a game to analyze it, and gives an overview of the different sources that can provide us with the information that will help us make better sense of the game.

The first step is to budget your time. You may be a busy student with a crammed schedule. How much time can you realistically spend on this paper? This is important because you will do your best work when you are not writing against the clock, which is what most people do (including some of your teachers). You should estimate how much time you will spend:

- playing;
- reading;

- writing;
- rewriting.

It is easy to spend too much time in the first two phases, because they are the most fun—we play, we learn. But we need to write too, better sooner than later. Taking the first step to write can be intimidating—the essay in our head sounds great in concept, but once we start putting words down on paper—or a word processor—then the limitations and issues of our writing become actual. Writer's block usually comes about when we get the feeling that we cannot live up to our original idea. One key to avoid spending too much time preparing, as a way to put off having to write, is to know that it is okay for the first draft to be bad, because we will revise it later. The best first draft is the one that is done and ready for re-writes. If there are other people available to read your work, take advantage of it. As a teacher, I find myself grading down papers just because the students wrote them in one sitting and they made silly mistakes or explain things in a hurry. So try to avoid writing your assignment at the last minute and make time for rewrites. I know well how hard it can be to find the time, but it is worth it in the long run—your work will be better, you will enjoy the process more, and you will feel a bit less stressed.

Our goal should be becoming an expert on the game. What *expert* means, however, is determined by what we want to achieve with our analysis. This means that expertise can be negotiable. Mastering the game can be a great way to learn a lot from it, since the best players also know their games very well. On the other hand, becoming an expert player requires dedication, and not everybody has the time, the inclination, or the talent to become a top-notch player. This is when other sources of information are critical to help us become experts; even if one is a professional player, paratexts will bolster our knowledge and we will do a better job. Becoming part of a game community will also help accessing the kind of knowledge and materials produced by that group of players. We may not need to be very good at the game either, particularly if we are analyzing how other people play or if we are interested in a concrete aspect of the game. As a rule of thumb, becoming an expert on a specific game involves learning everything you need to know to achieve the main goals of your analysis.

▶ YOUR ANALYSIS IS AS GOOD AS YOUR SOURCES

The Internet has changed the way in which we access information—it seems that all that we need to know is just a few mouse clicks away. Online journals and databases, as well as applications to manage scholarly references and documents, help us organize inordinate amounts of information. Moreover, when it comes to the study and writing of digital games, there are already several open-access peer-reviewed journals that are available online, such as *Game Studies*;[1] many of the sources listed throughout the book are only available in digital form.

Easy access, however, also means that there are many sources that are not as reliable and sound as academic and journalistic writing may require. Anyone can publish content online—which means there is also a lot of poorly documented and argued junk. (There is also bad writing in print, but it usually has to go through an editing process.) Learning to differentiate which are the most reliable sources for your writing is a basic skill that one develops over time. Here is a set of starters:

Print books are your friends. There is plenty of relevant work that has been published in paper format that is not accessible otherwise, whether it is on games or something else. As we will see in later sections, not all your sources have to be directly related to games—bringing in approaches and sources from other fields can be a way of enriching the study of games and finding new perspectives. If you are a university student, odds are that there is probably a team of librarians willing to guide you through the resources of your library. So go to the library and show your librarians some appreciation.

Editors and reviewers usually act as gatekeepers. One of the issues with online resources is that there is hardly ever an editor or someone in a similar role who performs a quality check, if not of the specific piece of writing, at least in selecting the writer for their good quality. Look for sites that are selective with their publications by having an editorial board, or a curator.

Just because a blogger is popular and has a lot of followers, it does not mean that they are an authority. Granted, there are plenty of intelligent and insightful writers whose arguments you can cite, counterargue, or

> refine. Their writing can be a useful document of popular opinion, for example, if you want to discuss how the game was received. But if they refer to data or are giving a factual account, try to find a primary source instead. For example, if you are talking about the popularity of a game, look for sales figures or diverse reviews; do not take some over-general statement from a blog. If you want to refer to a theory from film or literature, resort to an authoritative source, such as a scholarly work, rather than somebody's general musings.

Your sources can also serve as a source of inspiration to find a writing voice. Being critical of your sources can help you find what kind of writing you enjoy the most, so this attitude informs your own work and who you want to be as a writer. Is your aim to be a journalist who writes reviews that are on a par with some of the best film writing? Do you want to be a game scholar who writes close-readings of games like one would write of literary works? Are you a social scientist who wants to disseminate your findings to a large audience? The better your sources are, the better writer you can potentially become.

▶ PLAYING THE GAME CRITICALLY

The first step in writing a videogame analysis is not to write, but to play the game extensively. It may be tempting to start writing right away, particularly if you have played it before. Even if you have completed the game in the past, you should still revisit it, because playing a game for fun is different from playing it critically. Playing critically requires making a series of choices about how to play—since our choices may yield different information, we have to be methodical and aware of what we do while we play.

Before continuing, I must make a note. This chapter, and the book overall, focuses on the analysis of *digital* games. Non-digital games (card games, board games, playground games, etc.) pose a whole different set of problems. As we have discussed, games are a participatory medium and a performance activity; therefore, players are going to transform the text. A mother playing chess with her child will play a different game from that of two chess masters—the game may be the same but the context changes how it is played, including tweaks in the rules.[2]

Digital games also change depending on who is playing, but its digital components, where the computer provides a dynamic system whose behavior

is predictable, make it relatively easier to reproduce some of the play situations. It is quite hard to reproduce a session of board or card games, where each social situation is unique and gives way to different negotiations, while we may be able to replicate a play situation in some types of videogames, particularly in the case of single-player games. The methods to obtain information for the analysis, which is what this chapter discusses, are closer to anthropological research, specifically what we call *participant observation*, where the researcher is also part of the social group they are studying—this will be discussed in more detail below.

The special status of non-digital games does not mean that we cannot study board games, card games, playground games, escape the room events or live-action role-playing games (LARPs).[3] Many of the building blocks of the analysis described in the next chapters can be applied to understand non-digital games too. It is the set-up and the methods that are going to be different and more complex, so they will not be discussed here in as much depth.

What Does "Finished" Mean? Establishing how much one needs to play the game in order to obtain relevant information is one of the first early decisions to make. Writing deadlines loom quickly and our articles/homework/reviews need to be sent out and read by others.

It may be easy to determine when a game is finished for certain types of games, particularly in the case of narrative games, for example, when there is a set number of missions, or when the player gets to the end of the story. However, tackling our texts this way is similar to how one would tackle reading a novel or watching a film, forgetting the interactive and systemic aspects of our games. Games are meant to be replayed and revisited—one does not only play *Settlers of Catan* (1995) or *Bejeweled 2* (2004) once, because they are dynamic systems that we engage with and try to get better at, alone or with other people. Even in the case of narrative games, the contents are in constant expansion: for example, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) have an inordinate number of missions and periodical updates, as well as mini-games that we keep replaying. The interactions with other players, even if they are not designed, are also part of the game, and their participation can change how we play, from competing against other players to forgetting about the game and just hanging out, making friends in the virtual space.

Even in the case of games where the narrative marks that the game is at the end of a play-through, there may be different modes in which the game can

be completed. We can choose different levels of difficulty (*Bioshock* (2007)) or different characters to control in the game (*Dragon Age: Origins* (2009)). Some games are so expansive that it may require hundreds of hours to find all the missions and explore all the nooks and crannies, as is the case of *The Elder Scrolls* series (1994–2013). In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2013), the expansiveness of the world is also increased by using procedural content generation, where the missions are generated and will be different when you play again using the Radiant A.I. system.[4] As games grow in complication and content, it will become evident that we cannot play the game in all modes, and it is going to be impossible within the time allotted to write the analysis. Therefore, deciding what "finished" means is the first step to define your analytical methods. Is it finished when you get to the end of the game? After you play for a number of hours? After you have completed a set of missions?

Interactivity and Critical Distance In academic writing, we appeal to *critical distance* as a necessary method to engage in critical analysis. The concept is relatively vague and not well defined, and usually refers to how scholars set aside their feelings about their object of study to analyze it critically, looking for the core of the text in a methodical and well-argued way. On the other hand, it is practically impossible to leave out subjectivity from writing, since everyone has a point of view about their subject of the study. In the case of game analysis, achieving critical distance is problematic, since the writer/player is also participating in the game.

Becoming a writer/player affects critical distance, which is unavoidable. The player is an essential component of the game, although there are certain types of analyses that may eschew the player's experience completely. This would be the case when analyzing the visual design of a game exclusively, for example. It is also true that this type of analysis will probably fall outside of game studies, following the methods of another discipline, such as graphic design in the case just mentioned.

It is also easy to use oneself as reference for an "ideal player," even though we may not be. *Ideal* does not mean *optimal* player; rather, we look for an everyman of sorts, an abstract figure outside of cultural context and without preconceived ideas. This abstraction, although commonly used in literary studies or film criticism, is difficult to achieve. The sheer fact that we are tackling games systematically and critically sets us aside from most other players, so it is hard to consider ourselves average. Additionally, the better we get at playing a game, the rarer a player we become, since expert

players are a minority. By being good at a game, we tackle it from a privileged point of view.

The field of phenomenology, which studies human experience, has a method that can help us in this case, called *bracketing*.[5] According to this method, when we analyze the world based on our own experience, we reduce it to its essential elements, trying to eschew one's subjective preferences and tastes. This requires conscious self-examination and consideration of who one is as a player, and requires a lot of literacy. As basic practice, we have to consider what type of player we are, and acknowledge that our experience playing may be different from other people's.

One way to solve this issue of critical distance may be having someone else play the game for us, or watching videos of play-throughs and becoming observers of the game. This may work for certain types of analyses, especially if we focus on the player's behavior. But that is no excuse for not playing the game—we have to understand how the game works, how it positions the player, what types of thinking are involved in the game. Grabbing the controller or the mouse is still essential to gain insight on how the game works. Watching a video of an expert player does not make you into an expert yourself.

There is no solution to the problem of critical distance, since literature and film analyses also have similar issues. In videogames, the critic also becomes a participant in the object of study; it cannot be helped. In preparing for an analysis, we have to be aware of what type of player we are, how we are tackling the game, and how that may affect our perception of the game.

EXERCISE: WHAT TYPE OF PLAYER ARE YOU?

Since we must be aware of what type of player we are, here are some questions that you can ask yourself to figure out your player profile. This exercise will also help you realize that you may be a different type of player depending on the game or the context.

- What game genres do you like playing? (Feel free to add your own)
  - Non-digital games
  - Card games
  - Board games

(Continued)

(Continued)

    - Sports
    - Playground games
    - Digital games
    - Puzzle games
    - Adventure games
    - Role-playing games
    - Action-adventure games
    - Turn-based strategy games
    - Real-time strategy games
    - Racing games
    - Sports games
    - MOBA
    - Casual games
    - Free-to-Play games
    - Art games
    - Massively multiplayer online games
    - Massively multiplayer role-playing online games
    - First-person shooters
- What do you play for?
    - Problem-solving
    - Achievements
    - Socializing
    - Exploration
    - Learning
    - Finding the optimal strategy
    - Relaxation/stress management
    - Self-improvement
    - Curiosity
    - Thrill
    - Becoming someone else
    - Expressing yourself
- What platform(s) do you use to play games?
    - Non-digital games
    - PC
    - Console
    - Mobile
    - Virtual Reality Headset
- How many hours do you play?
    - Not at all, this is homework.
    - 1–5 hours a week
    - 5–10 hours a week
    - 10–15 hours a week
    - 20+ hours

Based on your responses, write your own profile as a player. What types of games do you know best? Which ones are you good at? Which games do you not really play? Why do you like the games you like? There will be games you do not care about; why is that? You may realize that you play different genres for different reasons, so your profile may need different sections depending on the genre. This exercise will help you make explicit your own biases, not only about games, but also about how others may play games if they are different from you.

▶ WALKTHROUGHS AND CHEATS

Playing skills are a further issue in becoming experts on our game. For certain kinds of analyses, we need to become skillful at the game, but we do not have the time or the prowess to do so. Skill may not be the hurdle on every occasion—puzzles, quests, and missions may require players to solve problems in a specific way that may not always be obvious. It is often the case that we may have a deadline looming up, meaning that we do not have enough time to figure things out on our own.

What cheating means depends on who is playing. Mia Consalvo, in her study of cheating in videogames,[6] found out that different players have different definitions of cheating. For some players, cheating is identified as getting any outside information to play the game (including advice from friends); for others, friendly advice, walkthroughs, and guides are okay, but cheat codes and changing the code are out of the question; for another set of players, cheating only takes place when playing against other players because it means breaching a social contract, as in the case of online games. Therefore, before starting to write, we must be aware of our own definition of cheating as we are playing the game. The key questions to ask ourselves are: Are we okay with cheating? If so, why?

There are ways in which we can get better at our games, which may be necessary to our analysis, but may also affect how we play. Most games for all platforms may allow different types of cheats, which alter the standard rules. These cheats can be devices to obtain infinite lives or health, jump to any level, unlock extra items, exploits that allow infinite resources, to name but a few. They are usually part of the game, either because they are tools that the game developers used to fine-tune it, or errors in the programming that

allow behaviors that were not designed by the developers. There may also be external devices to cheat, such as programs that are loaded along with the game. All these can change what would be the critical path, and may skew the results of what we want to obtain in the analysis. For example, it would not be very accurate to talk about the difficulty curve of a game if we have been using cheat codes all along.

Walkthroughs and strategy guides are another resource that can affect the experience of the player, since rather than figuring things out on our own, we get help from other players who have already mastered the game. This is particularly true in narrative games, where figuring out who to talk to or how to solve a puzzle is not a matter of skill, but problem-solving and thinking. Even after having played through on our own, these guides can help us learn about parts of the game we may have missed, for example, particularly if there are hidden quests or areas. Therefore, the status of these resources is somewhat ambiguous in game analysis. On the one hand, they provide us with an advantage that the everyman player may not be expected to have. On the other, they give us additional information that will help us know more about the game, and they are sources that provide us with valuable information, from expert players as well as from the developers themselves at times, as is the case of some game guides.

Outside information, in the form of guides, walkthroughs, or tips from other players, and devices to assist one's play, such as cheat codes, hacks, or game loaders, are all ways to expand what Consalvo calls *gaming capital*.[7] The term refers to the practices of players and how different preferences define different types of players. Gaming capital includes the types and amount of knowledge of players; therefore, by resorting to extra information and resources, we extend our gaming capital. As game analysts, our gaming capital defines us, so we have to consider how our gaming capital is set up and what kind of analysis it will help us produce.

In the specific context of analyzing a game, the implications of using cheat codes and walkthroughs are less ethical (playing fair) and more methodological (how do these games affect the way that we understand the game?). After all, different kinds of cheats can all be tools to help us play the game, but then we steer away from being a standard player or following the critical path. Since these are resources, they should be included as part of your methods, in case you decide to use them. More will be said about using one's

own experience as a reference in Chapter 4; for now, it should be noted that the circumstances of play, including cheats and walkthroughs, are part of the analytical methods used here.

▶ GATHERING INFORMATION ABOUT THE GAME

Traditionally, textual analysis in the humanities tends to limit itself to the information within the text—what is not included in the text is not part of the analysis, because the text should speak for itself.[8] This way of analyzing text may not be the most productive, since it overlooks the fact that we never approach a text in a void—we have previous knowledge and a socio-cultural background that frame how we understand the text. We cannot categorically affirm that all that there is to analyze is encapsulated in the text—if you try to read a text in a language you do not speak, you will not understand it, since we all need to bring our own linguistic knowledge to understand a message.

We can compare reading in a language you do not understand to the appreciation of abstract paintings, such as the color studies of Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollock's action painting, for example: if you are not familiar with the theories and practices of contemporary art, the concepts that inspired those paintings will be lost to you. We need to know more about the socio-cultural circumstances in which a work was produced, such as the techniques used, other works of art by the same artist, or contemporary works that the paintings may have been inspired by or were responding to, for example, how these paintings were received and how they figure in the history of art are also part of how we can appreciate them.

The same goes for games: every game alludes to a family or genre, and is developed within a media landscape; the games that we have played before inform how we play new ones.[9] In the same way that the techniques of painters may be important in certain types of art critique, knowing the technology that a game has been developed for is also important, because that gives us information about what the platform can afford to do. How a game has been received, in news pieces, reviews, academic criticism, tells us about its influence and how others have made sense of the game before us. Knowing about the context of a game is a way to become experts on it; in certain types of analysis, such as the historical analysis, it may be the one key knowledge you need, independently of your skills.

Thus the method of textual analysis I propose here includes the discussion of the context in which the game is created and played, incorporating methods from media and cultural studies into the analysis of games. According to this method, the writer should be familiar with the context of the game as well, because no cultural artifact is created in a void. As discussed in Chapter 1, every text is surrounded by other texts, starting with the box and manual of the game or the website we download the game from. Games also make references to other games, thrive on conventions inherited from a specific genre, or break off those conventions. For example, the game *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) featured a combat system that was quite novel at the time. The key to sword fighting is not being a skilled swordsman, but rather knowing the wittiest insults to fend off your opponent and make him lose his concentration. Thus fighting becomes a dialogue game, where the player has to choose which insult to use. These mechanics were reused in later games of the series (*The Curse of Monkey Island* (1997), *Escape from Monkey Island* (2000)), but have also been appropriated by later games, both as homage and as a way to revamp them. For example, the game *The Shivah* (2006) uses dialogue for two rabbis to fight against each other. Fighting is then a dialogic battle, where the trick is responding with questions, as a rabbi would do, to thwart the opponent.

The context is also necessary to understand how players may tackle the game, depending on where they come from: What does the game assume the player already knows? How does the context create specific expectations? How does the game tap into cultural assumptions or social conventions? For example, the game *Nintendo Land* (2012) for the WiiU includes short tutorials for every single game. These tutorials are meant to teach players how to use the controls, since it was a novel technology that used a tablet as a controller, along with the remote-like controllers already featured on the Wii. In the USA and Europe, this was the game the console came bundled with during its launch, because it is meant to introduce players to the new technology and its possibilities. Therefore, when analyzing *Nintendo Land*, it is important to take into account its status as a launch title, as well as being developed by the manufacturers of the console itself. The examples above have demonstrated how the context is also part of the game itself and should not be overlooked. In Chapter 3, we will see how a third of the building blocks of the analysis consists of elements related to the context.

When we look for the context of our game, one of the first things we want to find is what has been written about it, whether it is academic or

journalistic. An Internet search will probably be helpful in finding some information right away, but the top hits on the list may not be the most useful or insightful. Remember: you have to be selective about which sources you will use in your analysis. Reviews of mainstream games are abundant and Internet forums are full of opinionated posters, but how are they helping us understand the game better? Both of these resources give us a sense of how well or badly received the text may be, but the goal of our analysis is not regurgitating a general opinion as if popular perception is the only authoritative voice. Writing a game analysis where you are just repeating popular takes on a game will hardly provide any insight. You do not necessarily want to contradict everybody else; the goal is to articulate something that is new and helps us understand the game in a new light. The same caution in selecting our resources must go into who we choose to argue against: a clumsily written review or a misinformed writer who has only played the first 30 minutes of a 30-hour game are easy to counter, but you will prove yourself to be a better critic if you find better works to discuss. Therefore, make sure that your sources are at least as insightful as you may hope to be. Again, your analysis will be as good as your sources. (And remember to check your library too.)

If we find very few or no references about the game after an intensive search, we already have the basis for a preliminary argument: the game has been overlooked, so our thesis statement must articulate why the game is important and deserves our attention. In the case of games we can find a lot written about, your goal should be finding out what aspects of the game have been discussed before. Your analysis should find novel ways to discuss those aspects or, better still, find what has been overlooked and expand on it. Repeating what others have said will help you provide context, but your goal should be providing new insight on the game you are discussing.

A few keystrokes may call up an avalanche of links and references, so before becoming overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information at hand, remember that your goal is to be selective. For example, if you want to focus on the role of sound to create a narrative in a first-person shooter, walkthroughs or reviews may not be the most useful resource. Sound design is unfortunately often overlooked, so you probably want to look for specialized sources, such as academic papers on sound and narrative in other media, articles in trade magazines, or, if you are lucky, interviews with the sound designer, for example. A dearth of discussion on a specific aspect

gives you a clear prompt to look for writings on the general topic, or articles that may discuss a similar aspect in another game or medium for the sake of comparison.

One healthy habit when preparing research work is to keep track of your sources—it can be as basic as having a document where you list the books, articles, and links that are useful. There are also tools that are designed precisely to maintain a database of bibliographic references—these are particularly useful if you write papers often; if you are studying for a Masters or PhD, they are an essential tool. Having a database is useful because you do not have to find the sources every single time, and you keep all your references in the same place. There are many free tools to do reference management—the one I used for this book is Zotero,[10] but there are other options, both free and commercial, to help you keep track of your references, including URLs of resources or copies of the articles themselves as a .pdf file. Keeping good track of all your references is key when it comes to finishing off the analysis, as we will see in Chapter 7.

▶ OVERVIEW OF POSSIBLE RESOURCES

There are many sources that can help us know about our games and their context, as well as gaining insight on their contents. The following sections cover some of the possible resources you may want to examine to learn more about your game.

Game Box and Manual The most immediate resource that can provide us with important information about the game is the box and the manual. Apart from usually listing the release date and the instructions of the game, the box lets us know how the game was presented commercially; as we will see in Chapter 3, it can also provide us with ratings information, giving us a clue to what the potential audience of the game is. The images on a box also indicate the type of game the marketing department wants players to believe it is: if the *Call of Duty* series was marketed with cartoony characters and colorful landscapes, it would be trying to appeal to the wrong audience, since their core players seem to identify the games they look for with greyish blues and browns and pseudo-realistic computer graphics. Game covers can also change from country to country, so we can get some insight by comparing how the game was marketed in different countries, particularly if the cultural context of the game is relevant to our analysis.

For example, Figure 2.1 compares the covers of *Ico* in the USA (left) and in Japan (right). The US cover shows the protagonists explicitly, imitating a film poster, while the Japanese cover (used in the rest of the world) imitates Giorgio de Chirico's surrealist painting style and makes the landscape the protagonist. While the US box tries (poorly) to invoke its storytelling, the other cover invokes the wistful romantic tone that the derelict environments of the game create.

Although the current trend of game design is to include the instructions of how to play as a tutorial in the game itself, it is always worth having a look at the manual of the game. The manual will often include the list of people who made the game, which otherwise may only be accessible once you complete the game. Digital delivery of games is becoming more and more popular, so this information may not be physically available—in this case, finding the official website can provide us with the information about how the game was presented and delivered. Even in the case of web games which do not have any manuals, it is always worth looking for the original website where they were hosted, since that will likely provide basic contextual information.

Manuals are essential when studying early games, particularly in the case of home consoles and home computers, where some computer platforms

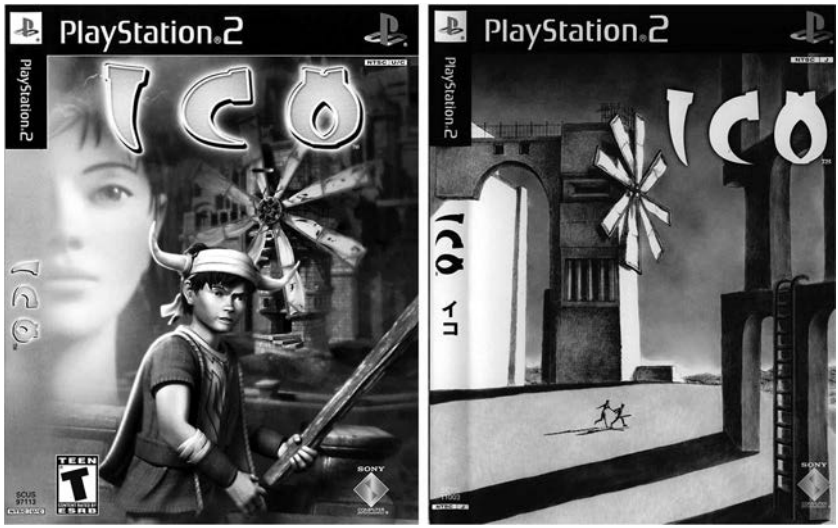

Figure 2.1 Comparison between the covers for the game *Ico* (2001)

used unusual keyboard mappings for the controls. For instance, the Sinclair Spectrum computers often mapped the direction controls for left and right to O and P and up and down to Q and A, a configuration that is not used in computer games nowadays. In the case of early arcade games, the cabinet is key to understanding the game, because their fictional world could only be represented in rough strokes, given the limited memory of their platform and low resolution of the visuals. With just a few kilobytes of RAM, there was not much room for elaborate cinematic cut-scenes. The game manual, the box, or the cabinet allowed developers to include the narrative premise, along with the descriptions of the controls of the game. For example, in the book *Rules of Play*, the discussion about game narratives starts with a quote from the manual of *Super Breakout* (1981), which talks about spaceships and force fields, whereas the visuals of the game portray a strange tennis match against a wall.[11] Using paratexts to expand the fictional worlds of the game was very common in many of the arcade, console, and home computer games of the 1980s, where cabinets, manuals, and boxes were both a marketing device and a place to provide more information about the game.

Game Reviews Reviews help us understand how a game was received at the time of release. After some time, it is also worth noting how game reviews may differ from the reception to the game, or from how the game is regarded a few years later. Some publications, such as the British magazine *Retro Gamer*, include "retro reviews" where they compare the reviews of a specific game at the time of release with how it would be reviewed at present. Although there are many reviews online, you should also look at print magazines, particularly for older games. *The Internet Archive* is an invaluable resource to find many of these magazines, coming from a variety of countries (see text box on p. 49).[12]

Academic Articles If your analysis is academic, it should be situated within the pre-existing literature and make references to relevant works that may have already dealt with the game at hand. Although the practice of game analysis is not as widespread as in other humanities fields, there probably are academic articles and theses that deal with the game that we are focusing on. There are articles and dissertations dealing with specific game genres, which may include references to your game, or games that are similar. Many of these works will be discussed throughout the book.

Press Releases and Advertisements In the same way that game boxes provide us with information about how the game is presented to

players, press releases and advertisements can tell us a lot about the perceived audience of the game (at least in terms of marketing). Different TV advertisements from different countries can tell us a lot about the context in which the game is released, and how it may vary from country to country. If the analysis focuses on the cultural context of the game, comparing different ads is not only fun, but can also be very productive. Print magazines can be a good source, since who the magazine is for already gives us an idea of who marketers think the audience is. We can also find many television advertisements online as well, which can be informative even if they are out of context of the channel and the programs that the ad may have been shown in. Internet ads, on the other hand, are going to be difficult to track unless you are analyzing a contemporary game.

Newspaper Articles Apart from game magazines, there can be mentions in the general press that may provide relevant information about the game we are analyzing. The sole mention of a videogame outside of the specialized press should immediately prompt the question of why it is being mentioned. At times the marketing departments of big publishers arrange for interviews and feature articles about their games in the general press, as part of their publicity campaign. In other cases, the game acquires certain relevance outside of gaming circles, which may not be intended by marketing (at least openly). The recurring controversies whenever a game of the *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997–2013) is released, for example, bring out some of the stereotypical perceptions about videogames. Often, articles in the non-specialized press demonstrate the cultural impact and relevance of games, and how they are (mis)understood outside of videogame circles.[13]

Developer Diaries and Talks One of the objections usually raised against traditional literary criticism is that it gives too much weight to the presupposed intentions of the author. In literary theory, New Criticism called this *intentional fallacy*, arguing that the intention cannot be proved by the text nor is it relevant.[14] (This concept will be referred to again in Chapter 3, which starts discussing context as an area of analysis.) All we should care about is what is in the text, which is all the evidence we need. However, this position also assumes that works are produced in a void, which is another fallacy. Games are cultural artifacts, and as such, they are the product of their time and socio-cultural context.

We are lucky enough to have a variety of resources to learn more about what the game developers were thinking as they made the game. Some games

actually document their process publicly, in the shape of blogs or developer videos. In a rare example of games with a wealth of information available, Jordan Mechner kept a diary while he was developing his two first games, *Karateka* and *Prince of Persia*, which he released first in fragments in his own blog and then published them in their entirety as books.[15]

There is also a growing number of special collections in specific libraries, where developers have donated their documents for others to study. For example, The Strong Museum in Rochester, NY, counts with the International Center for the History of Electronic Games, including Mechner's document collection, or the papers of Dani Bunten (designer of *M.U.L.E.* (1983)).[16] The University of Texas at Austin hosts collections of documents from some of the notable game developers who have worked in the city, such as Richard Garriott, creator of the *Ultima* series (1979–1999) or Warren Spector, producer of *Deus Ex* (2000) amongst many other titles.[17]

Developer interviews may also include some of the questions that we are seeking answers for. These resources also have to be taken with a pinch of salt—normally they are part of the marketing campaign, and usually cover some of the same points advertisements do.

The actual design documents or development files can provide us with invaluable insight about the process of production, although getting hold of them can be difficult. Not many of these documents are freely available, either online or in special collections in libraries. In the case of older games, at times the original code has been lost—at times because the storage technology has become obsolete or has degraded over time. For recent games, most commercial developers (particularly of AAA games) are overprotective of their development process, because they do not want to reveal much information.

Postmortems "Insight is 20/20 hindsight," or so the saying goes. Thus some of the resources that can allow us to learn more about the development process of a specific game are released after the game is finished, the so-called *postmortems*, which are relatively popular in industry publications and conferences. These analyses are written after the game has been released, and often after some time has passed. Some of the conclusions reached in these postmortems are the result of reflection over time, and although they retell how the developers recall the process, they are also less tainted with publicity in sight. *Game Developer Magazine*, now out of

circulation, has many of their issues available online; one of their recurring feature articles was game postmortems, which is the type of resource we are looking for.[18] The Game Developer's Conference hosts the so-called Classic Game Postmortems, where developers talk about their development process of games that are now held in high regard, such as *Alone in the Dark* (1992),[19] *Fallout* (1997),[20] or *Rez* (2001).[21] Most of them are available to watch online. Some of these postmortems, as well as interviews where developers reminisce about their work, are good sources, although the accounts should be taken with a pinch of salt—these accounts may be biased by romantic or disenchanted notions too, and they may or may not have marketing purposes behind them.

This list of possible resources can help you become an expert on your game, but you may not need to consult all of them for your analysis. The more you know about your game, the better prepared you will be to write. It is also too easy to spend a lot of time playing the game and checking resources, so select what kind of information will be the most useful for your game. The goal is to get around to writing, which is when the process becomes more challenging but also more rewarding.

Resorting to Pre-existing Theories to Understand Games Certain types of game analysis will resort to theories and frameworks, either to explain the game, or as an example that helps us understand those frameworks, as we will see in Chapter 6. The field of game studies is growing, but part of what we are doing right now is borrowing theories from other media to understand games better. Throughout the book, we will see how the key is using those theories as a tool to study games and generate new insights, maybe leading to new theories in return.

You should not feel limited by having to find works that are directly related to games. Although there is a significant body of work written about games, it is not very large if we compare it to other fields. So if you just look for game-related sources, you will bump up against a wall very soon. The key is that the study of games is eminently interdisciplinary, because it can be approached from a wonderful variety of points of view—this is the multiplicity and variety that this book is precisely addressing. So learn from other disciplines and see how they help you understand games in a novel way. Bernard Perron, for example, examines the different levels of signification in videogames based on his knowledge and previous work on horror film,[22] as Krzywinska does in her work on *Resident Evil* and

Undying.[23] James Paul Gee applied his understanding of literacy and sense-making to write a book on how videogames can teach things,[24] while T.L. Taylor approached the study of virtual worlds using methods borrowed from ethnography.[25] In my own case, my literary training and drama studies have helped me understand games as an activity related to other types of performance, such as theater, rituals, or sports.[26] In all these cases, the key is realizing that the application of the theory to games, and more specifically to digital games, is going to challenge the theories we use. It is very likely that there is not a complete correlation between the environment the theories were developed for and the study of games. And that is okay—the clash and the challenge are precisely where we can produce new knowledge.

▶ ACCESS TO THE GAME AND ACCOUNTING FOR YOUR SOURCES

When we write about a game, we need to provide precise information about the games that we have been playing, in the same way that we cite the people whose work and concepts we are using to support our argument. Remember—your paper is as good as your sources, so be sure to include detailed information about the game(s) that you are talking about. This information should go beyond the title and year—for example, there are myriad versions of *Pac-Man* (1980) for almost any digital platform you can think of. The platform and the developer are also essential in order to identify the specific version of the game that you are talking about.

It is most likely that you will be analyzing a game that you already have access to, because of your own choosing, or because hopefully your teacher has made sure the game is available. However, if you are the adventurous type, or want to do some game archeology and find games that are off the beaten path, you may come across some obstacles. In the case of older games, you may not have the original platform that it was developed for. It could also be the case that the platform was never released in your part of the world: the Amstrad personal computers were only distributed in Europe, while the MSX computer standard was only used in computers in Japan, Western Europe, and Brazil; the TRS-80 was only available in the USA. This means that, even if you got hold of the original platform, you may not be able to plug it in, because of different television standards and/or electrical voltage.

In the same way that books have different editions, that may include revisions, new introductions, critical essays, and comments, games can have different

versions depending on the platform, where the affordances of the technology may actually bring about fundamental changes to the game. The original version of the game is called in the industry the *reference build*, which is the one that is worked on first and then translated (*ported*, in industry jargon) to other platforms. Often the reference build is the version of the game that was released first; if a game is released for several platforms simultaneously, one would need a bit more research to know which one is the reference build—often developers will keep mum about that information, though.[27]

Digital games at times depend very heavily on their hardware, making it difficult to play even when we can technically run the code in the computer. For example, the Mattel Intellivision home console has a small keyboard controller whose configuration is essential to play certain games, which only computer keyboards with a numeric pad may be close to. In a more dramatic example, the Nintendo Zapper is a peripheral designed for the Nintendo Entertainment System, and some games are specially developed for it, *Duck Hunt* being the most famous example. This piece of hardware will only work on a CRT television, and not with current high definition televisions. So even though it technically runs on an emulator, *Duck Hunt* (1984) is only really playable as designed if you have the complete hardware set-up. As specialized hardware encouraging gestures and special set-ups keeps growing, as is the case of the Playstation Move, the Microsoft Kinect, the Nintendo WiiU, or VR headsets and wands, the challenges of running their games as years go by will increase, unless any of these hardware designs become a standard or a model that is handed down from platform to platform.

You may have to run the game in an emulator, that is, a program that behaves like a computer inside another computer. Emulators work as separate programs in a computer, or as an application on a mobile device; The Internet Archive also has a growing collection of older games that run in the computer browser (see box on p. 49). Continuing the comparisons with book editions, using an emulator is like using a facsimile of a work—a photographic copy of a book, manuscript, or print that replicates the visuals of the material source. In literature and history scholarship, at times we need original texts, such as a manuscript with the author's notes, or the original edition of a book where we can see how a specific word was printed, because that may provide different interpretations of the text—there are pieces of Shakespearean scholarship that discuss how a word is printed in different editions, for example. Those original documents may be difficult to access, and may only be available in a specific library where one needs special permission to read and manipulate those documents. In a similar way, we use

emulators when we cannot access the original game, but that also means that the game will be somewhat changed. (Archivists of board and card games should also start thinking about facsimiles, incidentally.) If we play an emulated version of *Kaboom* (1981), for instance, we will probably not be using the controllers that the game was designed for, the game paddles for the Atari VCS. As we have seen already, and will continue to discuss in the following chapters, the material circumstances in which we play the game are part of the experience; so an emulator counts as a different edition of the game. Figure 2.2 shows *Knight Lore* (1984), developed for the MSX, running on an emulator for OSX.

The controllers may not be the only problem. Continuing with the Atari VCS, one part of the hardware that is difficult to emulate is the Television Interface Adapter (TIA), the main computer chip that generated the image, sound, and read the input from the joysticks, which handled and generated data for CRT televisions.[28] CRT televisions generated images line by line at a specific rate, which is different from that of current computer monitors, so when we run those same games on an emulator, the images are going to

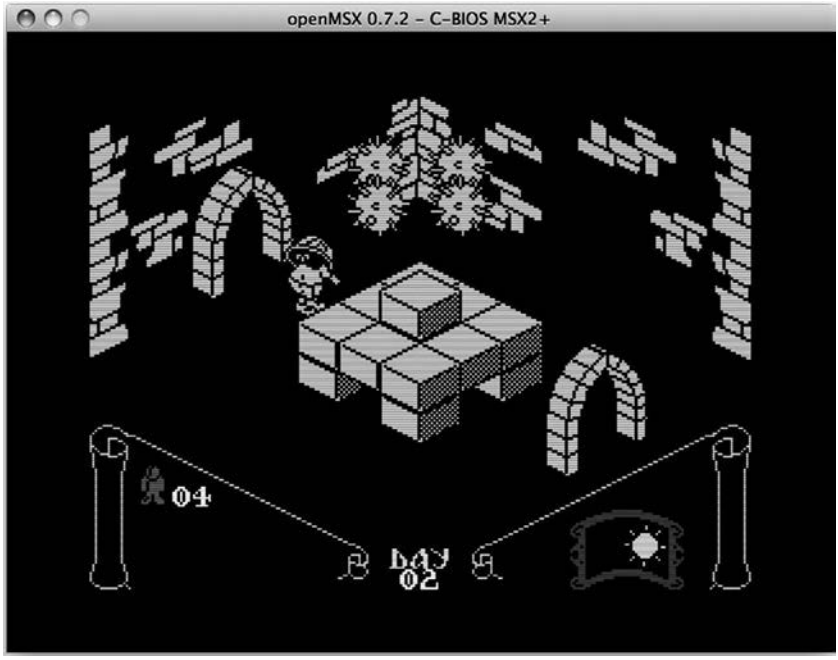

Figure 2.2 ***Knight Lore*** **(1984), developed for the MSX, running on an emulator for OSX**

flicker to the point that some games may be unplayable, such as *Pac-Man* (1980) or *Frostbite* (1983).

Ports are another way to play games when there is no other access to them. At times it cannot be helped: *Spacewar!* (1961), one of the earliest videogames in history, ran in PDP-1 computers that were not very common in their time; now they are even rarer, because there is only one in working condition running at the Computer History Museum in California.[29] The original code has been preserved, fortunately, and then retranslated to newer computers across the generations. It is unlikely that anybody writing about the game will play it in its original form, with its oscillator monitor transformed into a star field, or using the repurposed controllers, but at least we can get a sense of what the gameplay is. The material aspects of gameplay that we miss, we can reconstruct by looking at documentation.

In a way, a port is a translation of the game from one platform to another, extending the parallels between book editions and games. Unlike emulation, ports usually mean recoding the game, which usually changes some of its features, from screen resolution and colors to playing the music differently. For example, *Asteroids* (1979) in its original arcade version used a vector graphics monitor, which means the graphics were displayed with beautiful straight lines and glowing vertices, rather than the pixilated CRT image. In the Atari VCS port (1981), the ship and the asteroids became colorful splotches on the screen, which flickered a lot because the console could not support more than a few moving sprites on the screen. Figure 2.3 shows a comparison between the original version of *Pac-Man* (1981) and its Atari VCS port (1981).

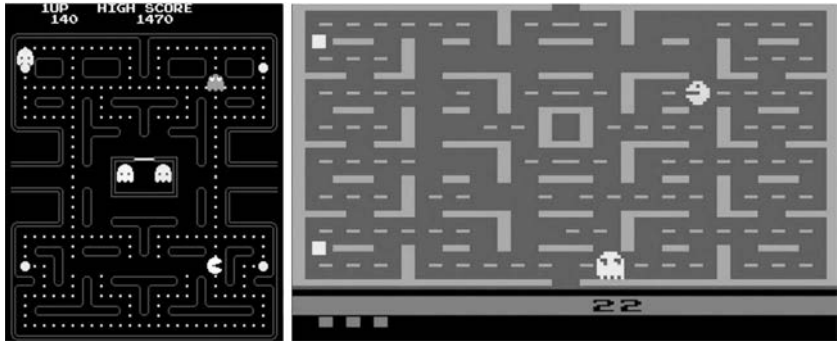

Figure 2.3 Comparison between the original version of *Pac-Man* (1981) and its Atari VCS port (1981)

Do not forget to account for the version of the game that you are analyzing, and do not take for granted having access to games—it may be more challenging than it seems. On the other hand, you should not give up on discussing a game just because it is technically difficult to run. As we have seen, there are different ways to get around that.

▶ SECONDARY SOURCES

Continuing with the issue of access, the technical issues can only be part of the problem. We may want to analyze a game that is an event, a be-there-or-be-square type of thing, a performance. Other times, it may be hard to get the game running, or get hold of the material. These games are important to discuss and document; they can also be part of our field of study. I mentioned Roland Barthes' essay on professional wrestling in Chapter 1;[30] we can find the equivalent of fleeting events in games too. Event games are important, since they relate to performance art. Alternate reality games, such as *The Beast* (2001), a tie-in of the movie *Artificial Intelligence* in the same year, or *I Love Bees* (2004), a game to promote another game, *Halo 2*, took place within a specific amount of time. Even though some of the websites or information are still available online at the time of writing, in order to play the actual game you had to be there. Another example of this type of event game is *GlitchHiker* (2012), a Global Game Jam game that became "extinct"—the game itself had a limited number of lives, and players had to keep playing to keep it alive. The moment the game had no more lives, the game was deleted from the server and could not be played any more.[31] If we have not been part of these event games, and yet we want to analyze them, the context becomes essential: videos, manuals, websites, descriptions. Theater scholars do this all the time—they may have seen a play a long time ago, so if they want to discuss it in a paper later on, they look for production photos, interview the people who took part in it, read reviews, watch video recordings. The goal is to reconstruct the event as much as possible, both to keep a record and to give a sense to the reader of what the game was like, on top of the given goals of generating insight on the object of study.

Even modern games are liable to becoming inaccessible overnight. *P.T.* (2014) is a short first-person horror game released as a free download in the Playstation Network. Those who completed the game realized it was a trailer for what would have been a new instalment of the *Silent Hill* series—the title stands for "playable teaser." When the game that *P.T.* was an introduction to

was canceled,[32] Konami—publisher of both – decided to also pull the teaser from the Playstation Network store, rendering it unavailable unless one had the data already downloaded in their console.[33] *P.T.* is a fascinating game at many levels—the player must traverse a corridor over and over again, looking at things and opening doors to invoke a terrifying ghost; some messages are written in different languages, which was intended as a device to have players all over the world to collaborate and solve the riddles in the game. But unless one has played it or has access to a Playstation 4 with a copy of the game in its hard drive, any analysis of the game needs to use secondary sources to learn about it. Fortunately, *P.T.* was extremely popular, so there are many let's play videos, reviews, as well as a myriad of webpages with interpretations and careful breakdowns of the game.[34] None of them are quite the same as playing the game first-hand, especially because it is a horror game, but it is possible to reconstruct the game in quite a bit of detail.

Although this situation is not ideal, and you should always play the game you are analyzing, reconstructing a game through its paratexts can be a legitimate method. If this is the case, where you do not get to play the game, you should still make a note of it in your analysis. This is valid academic practice, where we can mention that a quote is from another text instead of the original if we cannot gain access to the source.

A voice of warning: do not use paratexts as a way to avoid playing the game, in the same way that some lousy literary students use *Cliff's Notes* or your country's equivalent of summaries and comments that supplement a novel so they do not have to read it. If the game is available in some manner, play it. Reading Wikipedia does not turn you into an expert on any games either—it is the start, but not the end of your research.

THE INTERNET ARCHIVE

Although I warned you about using Internet sources above, it is also true that one of the most useful resources in my work every day is The Internet Archive www.archive.org. Founded in 1996, it is a non-profit digital library of internet sites as well as other cultural artifacts, which are digitized and made available online.[35] Its Open Library is a formidable collection, that includes films and books in the public domain, old-time radio programs, NASA images, and concerts of The Grateful Dead, amongst a myriad other documents and media artifacts.

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The Internet Archive is an invaluable resource for game studies in many ways, particularly if you study digital games. Here are some of the sections that can be the most useful when analyzing games:

- *The Wayback Machine* (https://archive.org/web/) allows access to pages that may not be available any more, such as fan pages, old versions of official websites, or older news sites, thus we can find primary sources and cite them as a webpage.
- *The Software Library* (https://archive.org/details/softwarelibrary) allows access to tens of thousands of software titles, including an impressive amount of old digital games which otherwise are very difficult to play, let alone run, unless you can access the hardware that runs them. What is more, the games are playable on your browser, so you can check them out immediately; many of them also have the file ready so you can run it in an emulator yourself.
- *Computer Game Manuals* (https://archive.org/details/gamemanuals) as its name indicates, collects game manuals from many games from the 1980s until the end of the 1990s. Manuals are part of the context of the game, as we saw above, and they are also very easy to misplace. Even if you get hold of an original copy of a game, the manual may not always be there. Manuals are also essential to play order games, such as the ones found at the Internet Archive's own Software Library, because the controls may be very different from the ones you may be used to.
- *The Computer Magazine Archives* (https://archive.org/details/computermagazines) includes general computing magazines, as well as game magazines in English as well as Spanish, Italian, German, Polish, Portuguese, and even Japanese. These magazines help us understand how a game was received at the time of release; we can even find walkthroughs and cheats that may not be available otherwise. The magazines are also fully searchable, so you can find mentions of a game or specific article quite fast.
- *Speed Runs* (https://archive.org/details/speed_runs) is a video collection of playthroughs of games the fastest way possible. They do not constitute a standard way of completing a game, but can give us insights on glitches and exploits, as well as how expert players may tackle the game.
- *The Machinima Archive* (https://archive.org/details/machinima) is an academic resource produced in collaboration with Stanford University to preserve the art form of machinima, which uses 3D game engines to produce films.

As with all your sources, you should always check the origins of the materials you find in the Internet Archive and pay attention to the metadata of each entry—the dates of the magazine, the version of the game, the edition of the game, or who uploaded the materials, amongst other things. Going through this archive with a critical eye can yield great results.

▶ PLAYER DATA

Certain types of analyses, geared toward the social sciences, study player behavior. Here the focus of the analysis shifts to the activity of play itself, rather than the game. The researcher can record play sessions or interview the players about their experiences, and then use that data, rather than the game, as the focus of the analysis. For larger-scale works, gathering and analyzing player data can be a way to complement the formal analysis of a game or types of games—for example, Jesper Juul in his study of casual games used interviews with players to complement his own insights on the genre.[36]

This book does not focus on player data gathering and analysis, but on the study of the game itself, taking the problematic stance of "ideal player" as its main guideline (similar to film or literary analyses).[37] However, the next section provides a short introduction to how to obtain player data from the ethnographic study of virtual worlds.

Preparing to Analyze Virtual Worlds The analysis of online virtual worlds is a case apart, but relevant enough to the study of games that it deserves a section here. The study of virtual worlds is so specialized that there is at least a separate handbook providing guidelines for it already.[38] According to Boellstorff et al., a virtual world is a multiuser virtual space, where players can navigate and explore and interact with the objects in it.[39] These worlds are online and therefore provide a shared social space where users can interact and communicate, using an avatar as their representation in it. For our purposes, the main difference with other types of digital games is that these are *persistent* worlds, that is, the user does not have to be there for the world to change and evolve. The study of virtual worlds is usually related to the social sciences, because the focus is more on studying the players and their social environment than the formal qualities of the game.

Virtual worlds may not necessarily be games—e.g., *Second Life* (2003–) is a virtual environment where there may be games, but that's not the point; *There* (2001–2010; 2012–) is also a virtual world where people meet and maybe create content for. They are usually thrown in with digital games because so many of them are games and the controls are based on them. The first online world, *MUD1* (1978), was conceived as a game.[40] There are many MMORPGs (*World of Warcraft* (2004–), *EVE Online* (2003–)), or

puzzle games (*Puzzle Pirates* (2003–)) that gather thousands of players day to day; virtual reality (VR) is also facilitating a growing number of online communities, such as *AltspaceVR* (2015–).

The preparations to study a virtual world are somewhat more extensive and even more self-conscious than the ones this chapter has covered so far. If in any game analysis we have to be aware of what type of player we are, how we present and conduct ourselves in a virtual world has the potential to affect our research, since it will make users/players respond to us socially. Amongst the factors that we have to take into account, Boellstorff et al. list the following factors as essential to be taken into consideration before we start studying a virtual world:[41]

- *Equipment used*: virtual worlds tend to be computer-based, although console-based virtual worlds are starting to become more common. That means that the equipment we enter the virtual world with is going to condition how we experience it and, more importantly, how we communicate with others. A slow computer or connection may be the cause of lag in our communications in the world, and therefore not let us keep up with other players, for example.

- *Learning how to play the game*: the process of becoming an expert in the game should start with reading the instructions in order to be able to get around and interact with people, as before. There will be specialized commands and strategies that we can learn by interacting with the members of the virtual world, and that may be part of what we want to study.

- *Selecting a subcommunity*: virtual worlds can be expansive and large, therefore we have to select which aspects of it we are going to study. It can start with being aware of different servers and subcommunities, as well as playing modes (e.g., player vs. player or player vs. environment).

- *Committing to a schedule*: because virtual worlds are persistent, when we analyze a virtual world we have to keep up with key events of the community that we are studying. That means that there may be scheduling issues that may affect our real life; this involves a level of commitment that is not as common to other types of game analysis.

I will talk more about this in Chapter 6, which will discuss more specifically how these data become the basis to analyze game communities.

The version of the text we access is something that we must note in the humanities, but in the case of games, it becomes even more important, given that the material circumstances in which we play the game may change not only the experience, but also affect the audio-visual representation as well as the design. Chapter 7 gives a brief account of how to account for your sources in your final work.

▶ THE PROBLEM WITH SPOILERS

Culturally, we have become accustomed to privilege the personal experience of media. Alfred Hitchcock managed to create a buzz around his movie *Psycho* in 1960 because he wanted to create expectation, as well as surprising the audience when the protagonist gets killed midway through the movie. Did I spoil that for you? Probably not, since the scene where she dies is one of the most iconic moments in film history. At the time, it was pretty shocking because it went against the audience's expectations.

The experiential aspects of a game are essential in order to understand it, so at times there is a reluctance to spoil the experience for others. At times, a twist or surprise is the only thing that will keep the game going. For example, Brenda Romero's board game *Train* (2009) is presented as a minimalist train game where players compete to bring passengers from one station to another— the meaning of the game changes completely when the destination of the train is revealed to be one of the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. The game counts on people not knowing the twist before starting to play, so having spoiled the game for you now, you will play it differently if you ever have the chance to. The thing is, in order to communicate what is remarkable about the game, I needed to explain how the information that gets revealed changes how the game is played—usually players stop the game once they realize the role that the game is putting them into.

In its worse incarnation, the resistance to spoil a game may derive from an extreme personal attachment to games, where some people find it impossible to put any distance between the game as the text being analyzed and themselves. Whether to spoil the game or not is a fine line to tread—the rule of thumb is to think of what the goals of your analysis are. If you are trying to get other people to play the game, as would be the case of a review, you probably do not want to give away its secrets. Other times, it is precisely by revealing the twist of a game that we can make clear why it is important.

That is the goal of Brendan Keogh's *Killing Is Harmless*, for example, when talking about *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), where he writes a book-long close reading of the game to provide an in-depth interpretation of its themes.[42] Game critic Joel Goodwin sets out to spoil *Cart Life* (2012) for his readers because that's when he can make clear what makes it truly remarkable;[43] in contrast, Chris Dahlen, talking about the same game, tries to not spoil it to pique the interest of the readers and to get them to play this independent game.[44] We will discuss both articles in Chapter 6.

In the case of humanistic writing, it seems that the no-spoilers policy goes against the writing tradition of the field, because the assumption is that the reader is familiar with the text/game, and if not, the writing has to provide enough information to understand it. Spoiling the game is part of being able to discuss it in depth, so it is important to be able to talk about it without constraints, and not spoiling your readers' experience should not be one of them. It is fine to warn the reader early on that you are not going to withhold information—it seems to have become part of the etiquette of writing about games. But if you find yourself resistant to revealing the secrets of your game, you may be letting your emotional attachment to playing games get in the way of your understanding them. Incidentally, I get games spoiled by reading my students' analyses every semester, so spoilers are part of the job of being a game scholar.

▶ THE READINESS IS ALL

Getting ready to write the analysis is the fun part. You are learning, exploring, and playing games! It is fun even if you do not really like the game you have to play. (It can happen, believe me.) The good news is that you will learn from games you hate as well—some of the games that I had to play for my research made me really frustrated, and yet they have turned out to be really useful for examples throughout my career, including this book.

Learn how to budget your time, though. It is easy to get lost in the exploration and information gathering, because it feels rewarding, while actually starting to write can give you a bit of vertigo. Chapter 3 provides a breakdown of some of the building blocks of the analysis, so you can identify which ones are the most relevant or interesting to what you want to write.

WALKTHROUGH ON HOW TO PREPARE TO ANALYZE A GAME

This is a step-by-step description of how to set up and gather information about your game. Throughout the process, be sure to take notes, either summarizing key ideas, or jotting down your own impressions. It will make it easier to start writing and prevent writer's block later on.

Step 1: Gathering Basic Contextual Info

- Get a copy of the game, preferably original, since it will provide you with info (box, manual) even if it is an online version.
- If the copy of the game does not have a manual/box, find them online if they exist.
- Find ads for the game (commercial, print ads, official website) as well as reviews (both at the time of release and contemporary if it is an older game).

Step 2: Learn How to Play the Game

- Read the game manual/go through the tutorial.
- Get familiar with the controls.
- Find the difficulty level that you are comfortable with or that you may be interested in playing.
- Explore the different game modes; decide which one you will focus on.
- Decide what it means to finish the game, and what it means to cheat.
- Why is the game interesting? What parts of the game should you be focusing on?

Step 3: Play the Game

- Play to however much you need to finish the game, or, if you are studying players, watch somebody playing it.
- Always take notes of your gameplay.
- You are not writing a walkthrough (those are readily available, both commercially and by volunteers/fans).
- Take notes of whatever is relevant to your analysis (read the following chapters to decide the building blocks):
  - surprising aspects of the interaction;
  - assumptions made by the game (e.g., in the representation, in the design);
  - frustrations/things that are broken;
  - recurring patterns (in the design, themes, etc.);
  - relationships with the context;

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(Continued)

- elements of the design that may appeal to the audience;
- what the game is about based on the mechanics (vs. what it says on the box).

- If you are doing a historical analysis, find elements that may point to its socio-historical context, such as references to the real world made through characters, writing, or audio-visual representation.

After playing the game, you should have a sizeable amount of information to start writing. Chapter 3 provides a breakdown of how that information can be classified and identified as different building blocks—it may also provide you with pointers to types of information that you may need to write your analysis and that you may not usually pay attention to.

▶ NOTES

1 *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* is an open-access journal available online, and a great resource for academic work on games. Available at: www.gamestudies.org (accessed January 18, 2018).

2 As an example of one method to study non-digital games, see Mackay, Daniel. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2001). The author uses his own group of role-players to inform his theoretical approach.

3 An example of collected works on live-action role-playing games is Stenros, Jaako, and Markus Montola, eds. *Nordic Larp*. 1st edn (Stockholm: Fëa Livia, 2010). There is also the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, whose articles deal with both table-top and digital role-playing. Available at: http://ijrp.subcultures.nl/ (accessed January 18, 2018).

4 "Radiant A.I." Elder Scrolls. Available at: http://elderscrolls.wikia.com/wiki/Radiant_A.I. (accessed January 18, 2018).

5 Van Manen, Max. *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 187.

6 See Consalvo, Mia. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 83–105.

7 Ibid., pp. 3–5.

8 This approach has been inherited from the New Criticism movement in the mid-twentieth century, where the main method was close reading, and the analysis focused on self-referentiality within the text. See Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996),

pp. 38–46, for an overview of this literary theory movement. Chapter 6 discusses close reading as a method to analyze games, but always within context.

9 For a detailed discussion of this last point, see Juul, Jesper. *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), pp. 66–78.

10 More information on the tool is available at: www.zotero.org/ (accessed June 1, 2018).

11 Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), p. 377.

12 The Internet Archive: The Computer Magazine Archives. Available at: https://archive.org/details/computermagazines (accessed January 18, 2018).

13 As an example of how mainstream journalism has treated videogames in a misinformed way in the past, see Dutton, Nathan, Mia Consalvo, and Todd Harper. "Digital Pitchforks and Virtual Torches: Fan Responses to the Mass Effect News Debacle." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17, no. 3 (August 1, 2011): 287–305.

14 The intentional fallacy was one of the arguments in favor of reading the texts separately from its context, so rather than trying to guess what the author meant, critics looked for meaning in the text itself. The problem with New Criticism, however, is that they also tended to read the text as having a single reading that spoke for itself, without contemplating that different readers may have different interpretations. For a more detailed discussion on intentional fallacy, the issues that New Criticism had with authorial intention, and a critique on that stance, see Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, pp. 38–46.

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16 "International Center for the History of Electronic Games," January 27, 2014. Available at: www.museumofplay.org/about/icheg (accessed January 18, 2018).

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