Videogame as Media Practice: An Exploration of the Intersections Between Play and Audiovisual Culture
Antoni Roig, Gemma San Cornelio, Elisenda Ardèvol, Pau Alsina and Ruth Pagès

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Abstract / Our aim in this article is to explore videogames as new media practices, not in isolation but as part of broader media transformations related to the development of current digital technologies. Videogames are the product of a hybridization process between audiovisual media forms and game cultures, rapidly gaining popularity among kids and the elderly population. The experience of audiovisual consumption and aesthetic pleasure is enhanced by interactive and game amusement components not found in previous audiovisual genres such as cinema or TV. In fact, videogames situate ‘play’ at the core of the audiovisual experience, introducing innovative changes in audiovisual production and reception patterns. Our proposal is that videogames introduce a new relationship between subject and representation that goes far beyond the ‘spectatorship’ position, pointing to a playful relationship with images that may be useful for understanding new forms of media practices. Videogames, thus, as a new media practice, can be seen as an exponent of greater change not only regarding how media are produced and consumed, but also in the way leisure is organized and in the role of play in our everyday life.

Key Words / everyday life / media practices / new media / play / production / videogames

Videogames and New Media Practices

Our aim in this article is to explore videogames as new media practices, not just in an isolated way but also as part of broader media transformations related to the development of current digital technologies. Our proposal is that videogames introduce a new relationship between subject and representation that goes far beyond the ‘spectatorship’ position, pointing to a playful relationship with images that may be useful to understand new forms of media practices. Whereas many authors have approached videogames as cybernetic, aesthetic or narrative systems, we will argue that through the study of videogames as media practice it is possible to obtain a better understanding of this and other new media practices. Although we will delve into this question in the concluding section, our starting position is that a subject-oriented perspective within a theory of
practice framework will allow for an examination of how play introduces innovative changes in the way media is consumed and experienced, thus providing a clearer insight into the way gaming affects our daily activities, including the lives of those who do not play games or participate in new media practices (Boellstorff, 2006: 33).

One of the most important transformations favoured by ‘new media’ technologies lies in the blurring process between traditional spheres of production and consumption. No more can we think of audiovisual media consumers merely as ‘viewers’ or ‘receivers’. Even if we refer to active spectatorship, the act of viewing cannot satisfactorily describe what consumers do with new media. As an example, we can cite the video remixing practices attached to any popular video hit in sites like YouTube: users add new soundtracks, new edits, subtitles, graphic effects or even new recordings, which sometimes end up being even more valued than the original clip. This is why different scholars have tried to describe these practices as ‘productive’ and this new media subject position in hybrid terms. Thus, Dan Harries defines ‘viewsing’ as ‘the experiencing of media in a manner that effectively integrates the activities of both viewing and using . . . ‘Viewers’ are the new ‘connected consumers’ who find entertainment pleasure in the multi-tasking activities being promoted through their computer and television screens’ (Harries, 2002: 172).

Although this term takes into account emerging and more active forms of media consumption, it still makes direct reference to a traditionally defined concept of reception. In other words, this ‘active’ conception of reception is still attached to a ‘reader’ subject position of media ‘texts’.

As Lana Rakow states, although research into media use has to be considered as a giant leap forward in the history of media studies, asking questions related to what people do with media as an act of ‘reading’ cannot take us ‘beyond a model of communication in which institutions speak while citizens listen’ (Rakow, 1999: 6). P.D. Marshall suggests that new media implies a change in the spectrum of what defines production and what defines consumption. They are cultural forms that have expanded the capacity for the viewer/user to produce. Thus, ‘as the industry grapples with this new paradigm through copyright and intellectual property debates, new media users continue to encroach on appropriating and making their cultural forms their own’ (Marshall, 2004: 8–11). This is what Marshall defines as the cultural production thesis, characterized by a ‘writerly approach’ to the study of new media, that is, more focused on the engagement in practices of cultural production instead of the traditional ‘readerly approach’ (Marshall, 2004: 11). Marshall recognizes that it is difficult to find a single metaphor or neologism which can describe the qualities of these new subjectivities, as they are not precise enough to ‘identify the spectrum of involvement that is possible with new media’ (Marshall, 2004: 26–7). He argues that while ‘browser’ may be considered as an adequate term in order to refer to distracted uses of new media, ‘player’ becomes a particularly relevant term as it acknowledges an intensity of experience related to a deep engagement and dedicated use of new media. This dedicated use of media and these new ‘playful’ subjectivities involve media consumption as well as productive practices in different ways.

There is indeed a remarkable theoretical trend towards the use of the notion of practice in media studies, driven by the interest in what people are doing (or could be doing) in relation to media, rather than the traditional approaches concerned with either what media (texts, technologies or industrial structures) are doing to people or what
people ‘do with’ media as active receivers (see Rakow, 1999). Some of the main contributions to contemporary practice theory, like the ones made by Theodor Schatzki (1996, 2001), Adam Reckwitz (2002), Karin Knorr Cetina, (2001) or Ann Swidler (2001), have been fruitfully adapted to the study of consumption (Alan Warde, 2005) and media (Nick Couldry, 2004; Elisabeth Bird, forthcoming). For Nick Couldry (2004), theorizing media as an open set of practices related to or oriented towards media implies a change of paradigm in media studies inasmuch as it decentres media research from the analysis of text content or the study of production structures, relating media studies to theories of action and to the sociology of knowledge. Couldry draws on Shatzki’s conception of practice which includes an array of actions that are linked by certain understandings, but also by being governed by common rules and by shared emotions, ends, projects and beliefs (Couldry, 2004: 8). However, Couldry’s conception of ‘media practices’ implies only what people do ‘in relation’ to ‘the media’ outlets, that is, he understands that people are engaged in different ways and purposes with media products made by cultural industries or institutions, but he does not take into account that what people are actually ‘doing’ with media also involves media production, thus actively contributing to the everyday (new) media landscape, as we have argued elsewhere (see Ardevol et al., 2009). Although power may still be unequally distributed, there are emerging playful subjects engaged in media production practices in different ways and for different reasons: for political activism, fun, celebrity, or even for the pleasure of playing with ‘the media’ system itself. Thus, we could reformulate the question ‘what types of things do people do in relation to media?’ in terms of ‘in what media practices are people involved?’ Alongside media reception practices, we can follow productive practices through popular video-sharing sites as Youtube or Blip.tv, production-oriented online services as Mogulus or Ustream or open-source cinema projects, but also there are productive practices related to videogames such as modding and machinima.

Considering videogames as a media practice, thus, would imply not only attending to videogame consumption (or the practice of playing games), but also to how the gaming practice is related to other media practices and how it is socially organized.

Videogames and the (Industrial) Cross-Media Logic

As the empowerment of the user and the production activity come to the fore in new media studies, we want to highlight the notion of ‘player’, and, by extension, the act of play as a key feature of new media, a feature traditionally circumscribed exclusively to childhood and sports. In fact, we can trace important interconnections between the history of media and the history of play throughout the 20th century, even if its relation has been largely unacknowledged. As Marshall points out, play has gone through a process of commodification since

*toy making had been industrialized with mass-produced objects. The mass production of toys, which could be produced much more cheaply than handcrafted versions, was closely aligned to the origins of sophisticated marketing and promotional strategies to give meaning to these new toys . . . In a broader sense, toys were connected to other products and other cultural commodities to provide a wider range of interactions and forms of play . . . This patterning of play became the way in which toy companies could further commodify the experience of childhood. (Marshall, 2002: 72)*
For Marshall, at the beginning of the 21st century, culture industries are providing elaborate patterns of play across media forms, in order to keep the audience, viewer or player, within a system of entertainment choices. This is what Marshall names the new intertextual commodity. This interconnected matrix is constituted by intricate cross-linkages of cultural forms and can be regarded as the industrial response to the empowerment of consumers (Marshall, 2002: 69). The sophistication of these cross-media connections is best exemplified when they give rise to multi-channel storytelling. Here we find that each element in the matrix is part of a narrative, which can be consumed in different ways. In most of the cases, each element is self-contained in order to allow for an autonomous experience, such as in The Matrix franchise (‘transmedia storytelling’). Christy Dena labels as ‘transfiction’ another approach where a single story is conceived to be experienced through different media. That is the case of The Beast game, born as a marketing device for the film Artificial Intelligence (Steven Spielberg, 2001), and which required ‘gamers to traverse websites, work out puzzles, hack codes, receive faxes and SMS, find clues in posters, make phone calls and so on’ (Dena, 2004: 2). This mixture of digital devices transforms mundane tools into ‘playable tools’ enhancing the experience of play to everyday life, linking videogames to other media products and commodities.

Henry Jenkins explains this kind of industrial strategy as an outcome of the tension and the transition that shapes the current media environment (Jenkins, 2004: 34). In describing what he terms as ‘the cultural logic of media convergence’, he states that ‘[c]onvergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process . . . Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and to interact with other users’ (Jenkins, 2004: 37). Jenkins’ conclusions lead to the inevitability of a negotiation between producers and consumers in different areas, while Marshall visualizes an intricate ‘dance of control and chaos’ where the industries try to contain and service the desires of the ‘audience’ while the audience itself ventures into unserviced and uncommercial areas of cultural activity (Marshall, 2002: 74). It is clear that videogames are a central element in this connected matrix, just as it becomes essential that the qualities of play must permeate the set of the interconnected commodities. Moreover, it also can be stated that this playfulness fuels a heterogeneous set of new media practices, from the production of fan movies to mobile messaging, blogging, open source projects, file sharing or the ever-growing popularity of video-sharing and publishing sites.

‘We’re All Players’

The quotation in this section heading is Silverstone’s statement, which summarizes his idea that play is a powerful way to explore media experience and suggests that play is a core activity of daily life. For him ‘there are many ways in which we can see media as being sites for play, both in their texts and in the responses that those texts engender. And not just in the endless thud of the computer game’ (Silverstone, 1999: 59–60). We play with and through media and there is a pleasure in it. But, to what extent is the pleasure of watching TV similar or different from playing a videogame or self-producing a fiction film for distributing it over the internet? Are pleasures of watching a film transformed by the experience of interacting with a videogame or is the videogame experience transformed by the pleasures of modifying its software to create new features?
Are there new media pleasures? A recent and compelling contribution to the significance of play in new media studies is Kücklich and Fellow's *Play and Playability as Key Concepts in New Media Studies* (2004). They state that videogames have become a paradigm of new media studies and that the theories of play allow us to gain a renewed insight into the new media landscape. The authors propose a crucial distinction between *games* as regulated systems that configure a pattern of play and a *playful subjectivity*, which allows for a negotiation about the rules and outcomes of games. Furthermore, they suggest that a theory of playability, which is broadly understood as the quality that identifies the margin of freedom for the player, should be able to contribute to the elucidation of how the interaction between users, texts and technologies shape media practices.

Acknowledging the permeability of the ‘magic circle’ (Huizinga, 1938) and the pleasure derived from the act of crossing its borders (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003), the authors consider that new media promote ‘mixed realities’ through play, which can be understood as ‘practices that create a cross-over between the real world and an imaginary or fictional world’ (Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 29).

... And Practitioners

Although Kücklich and Fellow seem to stand for a conceptualization of play and games as systems as opposed to everyday practices (see for instance their discussion on Caillois, 1962: 25), we consider that there is not a strict boundary between play and everyday practices and that it is precisely through the theories of practice that it is possible to account for the transformative potential of play. In other words, if there is a boundary between play and everyday life, it is a consequence of the framing practices of a ‘game’. According to Schatzki, there are three main elements in any practice, which can be described – in simplified form – as *understandings* related to the practices, explicit *rules* (or procedures) of the practice and *motivations* (objectives, emotions, goals, beliefs, moods, engagement) linked to the practice (see Schatzki, 1996: 89; Reckwitz, 2002: 250; Warde, 2005: 134). Drawing again from Schatzki, two main types of practices can be distinguished: *dispersed practices*, that is, simple practices scattered across social life which are characterized as sets of doings and sayings oriented mainly by its understandings (like, for example, asking, answering or greeting) and *integrative practices*, more complex and which constitute fields of social life (like cooking, business or education) (see Schatzki, 1996: 103). We shall argue here that ‘play’ is a dispersed practice that is reoriented and transformed as well as taking a part in the integrative practice of ‘game’. The transformative potential of play is thus related to its pervasiveness as a dispersed practice that can be rearranged and combined in multiple ways giving birth to cultural innovations.

As Alan Warde (2005) suggests, one of the main contributions of the notion of practice is that it inherently combines a capacity to account for both reproduction and innovation:

At any given point in time a practice has a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives. Such formal and informal codifications govern conduct within that practice, though often without much reflection or conscious awareness on the part of the bearers. This has the potential for the reproduction of that practice ... Theories of practice emphasize processes like habituation, routine, practical consciousness, tacit knowledge, tradition, and so forth ... However, practices also
contain the seeds of constant change. They are dynamic by virtue of their own internal logic of operation, as people in myriad situations adapt, improvise and experiment. (Warde, 2005: 140–1)

Thus, the dynamic of playful practices stands for ‘playing by the rules’ as much as for ‘playing with the rules’.

Play is permeating media practices in many ways. For example, authors, such as Matt Hills (2002) or Henry Jenkins (2004, 2006) have argued that play is also at the core of fan activity, be it through the remix, extension or remake of popular texts and universes (as in fanfiction or in fan movies) or through the performance of favourite characters (as in cosplay). As Hills suggests, ‘it is important to view fans as players in the sense that they become immersed in non-competitive and affective play; this playful attitude can explain fans’ creative engagement and emotional attachment’ (Hills, 2002: 112). It is essential to take into account that the permeability of play in media culture makes the coexistence of different subjectivities inevitable: from the traditional audience subjectivity to that of the ‘viewser’, the player, the browser, the surfer or the lurker. In fact, this interchangeability of subject positions in media marks some obvious affinities with the practices of play, suggesting the idea of ‘playful identities’ (Raessens, 2006). Raessens argues in his work, The Ludification of Culture, that we are going through a shifting process from narrative to ludic self-construction. Videogames are not only defining the subject as a ‘player’, but also allow us to construct a ludic self-identity, that is, to think about our identities as playful. The question is then ‘to what extent and in what ways computer games are currently transforming our understanding of as well as the actual construction of personal and cultural identities’ (Raessens, 2006: 53).

We will focus on specific new media practices (Manovich, 2001; Jenkins, 2004), in which users are at the same time part of the new media system and agents of appropriation and change. But in what ways are new media playful practices significant to characterize ‘new media’ in relation to ‘old media’? As Kerr et al. suggest, while in mass media communication systems we can suppose that meanings are created when a reader engages with a text, applying her or his subjective categories to it – corresponding to Stuart Hall’s two-tier model of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1973) – in new media, especially in videogames, we can identify a third tier between encoding and decoding, namely the physical manifestation of the user’s individual choices . . . The specific pleasures of new media can be identified more easily with regard to subject experiences that traditional text does not allow for. (Kerr et al., 2003: 9)

In videogames, aesthetic pleasure is enhanced by interactive and play amusement components not found in previous audiovisual forms such as the cinema and TV. In videogames, ‘play’ is situated at the centre of the audiovisual and kinetic experience, introducing innovative change in audiovisual production and reception patterns. We can easily find different ways in which old media ‘remediate’ games, as in digital animation, special visual effects and non-linear narrative structures (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 47–8). But more interestingly, there are more and more new media practices imbued by this playful subjectivity, that can be traced in blogging, in fan fiction productions, as well as, of course, in game modding practices (see Sotamaa, 2004). A very meaningful example of that is ‘machinima’. Machinima are – usually short – animation clips generated from a computer using the virtual 3D environment of a videogame, which are produced by
manipulating its game engine. In this way, a machinima work becomes an audiovisual piece narrated from the space of the game, representing the convergence between ludic practices and audiovisual narratives (Jones 2006: 271).

In a nutshell, videogames introduce a ‘playful’ subject position in our relation with media, for example, transforming the established ‘spectatorship’ relation with audiovisual products to a more interactive engagement with media, which reflects the playfulness present in new media practices.

The Pleasures of Play: From Chaos to Control

It would be difficult to find a more compelling metaphor relating pleasure – in its sheer complexity – and games than Salen and Zimmerman’s definition of game design as the ‘sculpting of desire’ (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 340). As they state, ‘Pleasure is, perhaps, the experience most intrinsic to games’ (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 330). Although it goes well beyond the scope and purposes of this article to carry out a comprehensive analysis of play theories and its applications to videogames studies, we would like to trace some of the main issues that play theories have been dealing with, especially pleasure as the essential condition for engagement in gameplay. The purpose here is to point out some of the pleasures derived from playing with games, as identified by different authors that may be applicable to other new media forms.

Whereas the study of digital games and videogames is now considered as an emergent discipline, the cultural role of games in the 20th-century culture has been sadly neglected. Fortunately, this understatement has allowed for a theorization of games on its own terms, drawing especially from the theory of play, as shaped by seminal works such as Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens (1938), Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith’s The Study of Games (1971) or Roger Callois’ Man, Play and Games (1962). It is also important to take into account that even early contributions to the theory of play stressed the relationship between play and communication. This is the case, for instance, of Gregory Bateson’s A Theory of Play and Fantasy (1955) or William Stephenson’s The Play Theory of Mass Communication (1967).

As we have already stated, a key issue in the theories of play is the relationship between play and daily life. Huizinga refers to ‘the magic circle’ as a metaphor to explain the separate temporal and spatial spheres of play, relating it to the ritual and in opposition to everyday life. But while influential early works like Huizinga situate play in the side of ritual and cultural drama (Turner, 1986), later contributions such as Roger Silverstone’s Why Study the Media? (1999), consider play as a ‘core activity of everyday life’ and something that is at once separated from ordinary reality and at the same time an important part of our social life. Fiske (1987) and other scholars, for example, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) take a step forward, emphasizing the pleasure of crossing the ‘magic circle’ and calling attention to its borders, as is the case with games that explore the boundaries between game space and ‘real life’, or between players and non-players (Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 19). The assimilation of play with fantasy leads to explain the crossing borders of play in new media practices as creating a kind of ‘alternative reality’, which McGonigal dubs as ‘unfiction’ (see Dena, 2004: 2) or to the notion of ‘mixed realities’, understood as ‘practices that create a cross-over between the real world and an imaginary or fictional world’ (Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 29). What is at stake,
from a practice theory perspective, is that ‘play’ – as a disperse practice – can meta-
operate over the cultural framing practices that define ‘the real world’ and that define
the confines of a game, and that this experience can be troublesome or pleasurable.

On the other hand, Fiske notes the pleasures that may emanate from the fruitful
opposition between freedom and control. Thus, the source of the pleasure of games
would lie at the interplay between game rules and the margin of movement they allow
their players, a pleasure which constitutes the quality of openness, essential to
videogames and new media alike. For Fiske, ‘games and texts construct ordered worlds
within which the players/readers can experience the pleasures of both freedom and
control: in particular, for our purposes, playing the text involves the freedom of making
and controlling meanings’ (Fiske, 1987: 228). For Fiske, play oscillates between freedom
and control in a continuum similar to Callois’ concepts of paidia (involving fun,
improvisation and fantasy) and ludus (involving constraints, arbitrary rules and effort).
The pleasure of breaking the rules lies in exposing their arbitrariness, so ‘the pleasures
of play derive directly from the players’ ability to exert control over rules, roles and
representations’ (Fiske, 1987: 236).

In this respect, the control over representations is closely related to the notion of
embodiment, which can be considered another source of pleasure. Embodiment goes
beyond voyeuristic pleasure (in the third person) and vicarious identification (first person)
with representations. Although we can frequently experience in a videogame the
‘jumping’ from a first person view to a third person view (Murphy, 2004: 227), it should
be noted that embodiment is what differentiates videogames from other media. As
Bukatman suggests, games represent ‘the most complete symbiosis currently available
between human and computer – a fusion of goals, options and perspectives –
(Bukatman, 1993: 196). For Lathi this is possible through the embodiment of the experience
of computer playing, and, therefore, establishing a complex relationship between
corporeal experience (the body) and our subjectivity (Lahti, 2003: 158). For instance,
videogames based on horror films favour embodiment because they provoke fear
sensations in the players, who, at the same time identify more easily with the charac-
ters (Carr et al., 2006: 3). On the other hand, there are other elements which support
identification through immersion and participation; following Aarseth, the player char-
acter uniqueness, the player representation integrated in the game world, and the
player’s level of influence, are all crucial in the process of identification and representa-
tion in videogames (Aarseth, 1998: 6). In some way our pleasurable engagement with
the game world is based on the centrality of the body in two senses: the corporeal
identification and the representational presence of the body. (Lahti, 2003: 165). What
is remarkable here is that the sensorial experience is accomplished by performativ
representations, that is, the control that the player has over the ‘represented’ self. As
Lahti states: ‘this delirium of virtual mobility, sensory feedback and the incorporation of
the player into a larger system thus tie the body into a cybernetic loop with the
computer, where its affective thrills can spill over into the player’s space’ (Lahti, 2003:
163). In this sense it can be stated that one of the main pleasures of games is based
on blurring the distinction between the player we become and the character we
construct through our gameplay. For this reason it can be also stated that actually we
experience walking, jumping, flying, shooting, kicking or racing, when we are actually
clicking the mouse or tapping the controller (two of the most typical actions we do
when playing a videogame). New generation consoles like Wii enhance this pleasure by involving the body at the core of the gameplay.

It is important at this point to bear in mind the distinction between, ‘play’ as a strand of human activity – a dispersed practice – and ‘game’, as its specific incarnation in the form of a ‘system in which players engage in an artificial conflict defined by rules that results in a quantifiable outcome’ (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 96) for us, the integrative practice of a game. Thus, as Juul observes, ‘playing’ does not mean necessarily ‘playing a game’ (that is, ‘gaming’). Consequently, the pleasures that ‘play’ and ‘game’ provide are conditioned by this very definition. For instance, in the context of a game, Jesper Juul approaches rules in the sense of enabling action, as opposed to restriction:

Since play is normally assumed to be a free-form activity devoid of constraints, it appears illogical that we would choose to limit our options by playing games with fixed rules. Why be limited when we can be free? The answer to this is basically that games provide context for actions . . . The rules of a game add meaning and enable actions by setting up differences between potential moves and events. (Juul, 2005: 18–19)

In the same vein, Newman (2004: 21) follows Carsten Jessen (1995) in his observation that working out – deducing and at the same time overcoming – the rules of a videogame can be its major challenge and fascination.

Drawing from Juul’s theories, Kücklich and Fellow make an important observation that summarizes the ambiguities between freedom and control, and the relation between the world of play and ‘real life’, while also tracing a clear distinction between ‘playing the game’ and the ‘game’ itself:

(n)egotiations about . . . game rules and outcomes . . . cannot take place within the game itself, but are part of the sphere of play. Playing with, rather than by the rules is not part of the game, but of the playful behaviour that surrounds games. In the same way, real-life consequences of games must be attributed to the way they are played, rather than the games themselves. In other words: play mediates between games and the real world. (Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 19)

At this point it may be of interest to note again some parallels between gameplay and fan activity. In Henry Jenkins’ work Textual Poachers (1992), he describes the relationship between fans and media corporations as ‘an ongoing struggle for possession of the text and for control over its meanings’ (Jenkins, 1992: 24). In this way, it would not be preposterous to think of popular films as sets of rules and fans as players. Thus, fan fiction, considered as fan activity turned into textual form (Sotamaa, 2004: 14) could be seen as a process of negotiation of rules and outcomes in the sphere of play. At the same time, the notion of playability can be applied to film production, since the productive practices made by fans expand the constitutive pleasures of the film experience to the sphere of the game.

**Videogames: (Re)playability, Systems and Practices**

The study of videogames raises a complex question regarding the specificity of these games in relation to audiovisual narrative media, which are geared towards representation. Gonzalo Frasca identifies simulation as the key differentiation factor. As he defines it,
to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviours of the original system. The key term here is ‘behaviour’. Simulation does not simply retain or represent the behaviours. This model reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions. (Frasca, 2003: 3)

The set of conditions that allow simulation can be considered quite close to the notion of playability.

In order to understand videogames from the perspective of play, it is essential to deal with the related concept of playability or gameplay, which depends as much on design and implementation as on managing the player’s expectations. Salen and Zimmerman’s or Juul’s notion of playability is more like an aspect of games-in-themselves (a formal design property) while Kücklich and Fellow’s concept of playability is more subject-oriented, especially in relation to the rules that define the meaning of action for the players. But both have to do with issues of balancing the relation between the software code and the player’s options. Consequently, playability depends on the balance between the challenges of the game and the abilities of the player, and also on encouraging the player to immerse him/herself in the fictional world of the game, to the extent that ‘any disturbance of this basic illusion is bound to decrease the playability of the game’ (Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 22). Closely connected to playability we find replayability, which is frequently at the heart of the hot debates between ‘narratologists’ and ‘ludologists’. Although it would exceed the purpose of this article to study this controversy in depth, Ernest Adams’s statement regarding the relationship between replayability and narrative is particularly significant. He suggests the potential of ‘creating games that are not played for the plot, but rather for the way the story is told, for the telling rather than the tale’ (Adams quoted in Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 24). Failure to take this consideration into account is probably the main problem with many videogames based on movies, as is readily evident in Diane Carr’s analysis of Enter the Matrix (see Carr, 2004).

Torben Grodal points out repetition as a source of pleasure in digital games: ‘somehow repetitive (reversible) activities are felt as less serious, less “real” than . . . irreversible processes’ (Grodal quoted by Kücklich and Fellow, 2004: 25). This is an interesting observation regarding movie adaptations of games, as movies are not literally ‘playable’. But, as we have already discussed, fan film remakes can be considered from a perspective of ‘playability’ in as much as these practices imply ‘playing’ with the movie universe while keeping to the conventions of the source texts.

On the other hand, some contemporary films themselves can be in some way ‘replayable’ as they can introduce elements of repetition, such as in Run Lola Run (Tom Twyker, 1997) or other game-films like eXistenZ (David Cronenberg, 1999), Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2001) or Mulholland Drive (David Lynch, 2001). Interestingly enough, this is not the case with the movie adaptations of games. Returning to Grodal, he describes repetition as the central point in the process of engagement in the game. For him, ‘[t]he aesthetic of repetition is based on the sequence: first unfamiliarity and challenge, then mastery and finally automation’. We must understand automation as ‘desensitization by habituation’ (Grodal quoted in Marshall, 2004: 70).

The notion of playability is a key feature of approach to videogames as cybernetic systems. From a cultural point of view, this cybernetic dimension is of particular importance in order to take into account the tight structure of games and new media systems and, consequently, as an example of the limited options – and limited worldviews –
available for players (Marshall, 2004: 69): as Manovich rightly observes, the ‘user is asked to follow the mental trajectory of a new media designer’ (Manovich, 2001: 74). But it has also been underlined the fact that even inside these complex systems, there is a space for negotiation of meanings, as it is made clear by gamer-made alterations, modifications or customizations. The Sims series or The Movies are among the main examples of how to use games as a medium for producing and distributing narrative features, thus closing the circle between games and films in new media practices.

Our proposal is that these kinds of new media practice provide a more open concept of playability, which allows an approach to technological devices – such as mobile phones – as playable devices to some extent: tightly designed but admitting unexpected use. This way, playability remains open to appropriation processes by media users, even if they have, by definition, a limited range of choices.

Finally, it is important to deal briefly with the notion of performance, which is considered one of the new media pleasures that is more deeply connected to play, together with immersion and control, as proposed by Kerr et al. (2004). As the authors point out, there are multiple levels of performance, amongst which we would like to emphasize two: performance as the pleasure of assuming and experimenting an alternative identity – as it is self-evident in the case of the avatars configured by players in videogames but also by users of different kind of social environments, from online chats to Second Life virtual world – and performance as execution or fulfilment of a task, which involves a competitive element, since the performance of a player is usually aimed at surpassing that of their peers – as it happens in multiplayer online games, but also in subtler ways at Second Life. Both levels of performance constitute an essential ingredient in the playful quality of many new media practices, even in those cases where we cannot speak strictly of ‘game environments’, as in the case of MySpace, YouTube or Second Life itself. There are some additional and interesting bordering cases like the displacement of machinima practices from game environments to dedicated community-based tools like Moviestorm; it may be argued whether the gameness quality is lost in this kind of environment, even though its practices can still be described in terms of playability, immersion, control and performance.

From Videogames to Playful Media Practices

As it has been extensively argued, the notions of play and playfulness constitute key concepts regarding new media. This argument has been developed through videogame theoretical approaches intersected with new media theories. This seemingly heterodox approach has allowed us to pay special attention to the notions of pleasure and playability as features applicable to other new media practices. Furthermore, the structural aspects that videogames share with other media regarding their industrial context of production also reveal that videogames should not be conceptualized as an isolated issue, but as part of a broader context of media.

In this sense, practice theories have provided us with a general framework that allows us to examine how play is a dispersed practice as a part of the integrative practices present in videogames and other new media forms. Going somewhat further, we have demonstrated that the integrative playful practices of videogames have also transformed the ways we understand audiovisual narratives, introducing innovative practices in the
spheres of producing and consuming films. Even more, a practice approach is also useful for understanding the cross-over of videogames and other new media forms, such as Second Life virtual world, but also playful practices developed by users in sites such as YouTube (see Ardèvol et al., forthcoming) or Flickr, designed by their creators as a never-ending game (see Vayreda and Estalella, 2007).

At this point, understanding videogames in the framework of practice and media theories has some relevant implications: first, it allows locating videogames in the context of other practices related to the cultural industries and media consumption. As commodities, videogames are related to other commodities and audiovisual forms (Marshall’s intertextual commodity – 2002). Second, it also allows understanding them as a specific media practice that is defined in leisure time, and that is characterized by hybridizing audiovisual representational practices and game cultures. Finally, Videogame as a media practice should be understood, this way, as a part of broader social practices, that is, socially organized and meaningful for social actors (players and non players).

As we have been suggesting throughout the article, from a theoretical point of view ‘games’ are ‘integrative’ practices as defined by Schatzki (cited by Warde, 2005: 135) who compares them to farming, cooking or business practices, which include some kind of specialized understanding, explicit rules and teleoaffective structures. Furthermore, Ann Swidler introduces some essential issues regarding practice organization and hierarchy, defining what she calls anchoring practices as those practices that express the constitutive rules of a social activity; these anchoring practices, consequently, would govern – at least in some ways – other practices. In this sense, it could be said that a videogame constitutes an anchoring practice that organizes meanings, rules and pleasures and that orients how the play practice will be integrated and transformed (Swidler, 2001).

In addition, Knorr Cetina refers to some ‘knowledge oriented practices’ or ‘creative practices’, that supersede the identification between practices and the ‘ordinary’ and are mainly based on pleasure and affection (Knorr Cetina, 2001: 175–6). This is a very important point as it covers a whole different family of practices involved with creative activities, ranging from science to media and gaming, where stages of dissociation between object and subject take place, as it is usual in the unfolding of the gaming experience or, in general, in our interaction with a media object. We consider that it is essential to take into account Knorr Cetina’s complementary observations about practices related to symbolic objects in order to try to better understand what people do (and say they do), or even could be doing in relation to media.

In our social hierarchy of practices, videogaming seems to be in a lower position regarding other more ‘serious’ ones, but as Warde argues, from a consumption perspective, ‘no matter where a practice fits in a hierarchy of social prestige, there are internal goods to be derived from it for individual practitioners’ (Warde, 2005: 148). Videogames, as games in general, are still socially evaluated as non-productive, notwithstanding the amount of money and enterprises they mobilize. This lack of legitimation also ignores that game practitioners are engaged in two fundamental social practices: first, they are constructing communities through play, with internal goals and identity values, and second, they have a social role in the production and reproduction of symbolic worlds. Thus, videogames must be taken seriously. As Mihai Coman has stated for mass media (2006: 19), they are not a simple channel through which cultural symbols circulate, they
are part of the very cultural system. Videogames, as traditional games, are cultural forms that generate our own sense of reality and fiction. As playful practices, they are at the centre of the social construction of what is real (and non-real) as any other rituals, cultural dramas or narratives.

Finally, to study media as practice implies paying attention to what people do with media, what people say about media and about media experience, and to follow related media practices across a whole range of situations and contexts (Couldry, 2004). This would mean, that empirically, we must analyse public observable activities instead of searching for meanings ‘in the text’ or in the videogame as an object itself.

We definitely agree with Tom Boellstorff in the fact that understanding the interrelation between media and games and how it shapes current cultural practices represents an open line of research (Boellstorff, 2006: 33). We have explored these relationships from a general scope, through taking videogames as the main object of study; in any case, as we have pointed out, there are other particular cases of transformations of media use to be studied from the point of view of practices. We believe that this line of research might be significant not only to game studies but also to media studies in general, especially those focused on new media, with which videogames are closely related.

Notes

1 We must differentiate between the notion of practice as praxis – that is, the whole of human action opposed to theory – and praktik, understood as

   a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (Reckwitz, 2002: 249)

which is the meaning we will use as a starting point.

2 Term referring to game modifications and extensions made by gamers.

3 Term referring to the performances of impersonators of anime or manga characters, with particular attention to costumes and characterization.

4 Moviestorm (http://www.moviestorm.co.uk/ [accessed September 2008]) is a piece of software to create films in a 3D animation environment. These films could be defined as ‘machimina-like’, since the program reproduces the same visual effect as a film produced with the search engine of a videogame such as 'The Movies'. This software is being improved through updates of its free base pack and its expanding library.

References


**Antoni Roig** is a lecturer in Media Studies at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). His lines of research are participatory culture and digital filmmaking.

**Address** Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Rambla Poble Nou 156, 08018 Barcelona (Spain). [email: aroigt@uoc.edu]

**Gemma San Cornelio** is a lecturer in Media Studies at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). She is researching visual culture and media art.

**Address** Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Rambla Poble Nou 156, 08018 Barcelona (Spain). [e-mail: gsan_cornelio@uoc.edu]

**Elisenda Ardèvol** is a senior lecturer in Social Anthropology at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). Research lines: media anthropology and visual ethnography.

**Address** Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Av. Tibidabo 39, 08035 Barcelona (Spain). [email: eardevol@uoc.edu]

**Pau Alsina** is a lecturer in Philosophy of Culture at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). Research lines are media philosophy and media art.

**Address** Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Av. Tibidabo 39, 08035 Barcelona (Spain). [email: palsinag@uoc.edu]

**Ruth Pagès** is a researcher in digital art institutionalization and visual culture at the Internet Interdisciplinary Institute (IN3).

**Address** IN3 (Universitat Oberta de Catalunya), Av. Canal Olímpic s/n, Parc Mediterrani de la Tecnologia, 08060 Castelldefels (Spain). [email: rpagesp@uoc.edu]