

Video Games and Citizenship

Jeroen Bourgonjon  
*Ghent University*

Ronald Soetaert  
*Ghent University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

Recommended Citation

Bourgonjon, Jeroen; and Soetaert, Ronald. "Video Games and Citizenship." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.3 (2013): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2245>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2245)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 15 Issue 3 (September 2013) Article 8**  
**Jeroen Bourgonjon and Ronald Soetaert,**  
**"Video Games and Citizenship"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/8>>

---

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.3 (2013)***  
Thematic Issue ***Literacy and Society, Culture, Media, and Education.***  
**Ed. Kris Rutten and Geert Vandermeersche**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss3/>>

---

**Abstract:** In their article "Video Games and Citizenship" Jeroen Bourgonjon and Ronald Soetaert argue that digitization problematizes and broadens our perspective on culture and popular media, and that this has important ramifications for our understanding of citizenship. Bourgonjon and Soetaert respond to the call of Gert Biesta for the contextualized study of young people's practices by exploring a particular aspect of digitization that affects young people, namely video games. They explore the new social spaces which emerge in video game culture and how these spaces relate to community building and citizenship. Bourgonjon and Soetaert also examine whether these social spaces can be a source for different types of capital (Bourdieu) and reflect on the ethical dimensions of video gaming.

## Jeroen BOURGONJON and Ronald SOETAERT

### Video Games and Citizenship

Digitization has caused major economic, social, political, and cultural changes (e.g., Castells) and is changing the landscape of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek). Such major transformations imply that traditional conceptualizations of culture, literacy, and citizenship are no longer self-evident. Margaret Mead once argued that in complex societies where the world is changing profoundly, children often have to initiate previous generations in new ways of thinking and acting. Young people are more flexible: they can make new technologies on their own without having to deal with obstructive prejudices and attitudes (see De Kerckhove). In this article, we focus on a specific practice that is exemplary for the digital era and is often related to youth culture: playing video games. On the one hand, we are confronted with a new digital medium, on the other hand play can be considered as part of universal human behavior. Different perspectives about the interpretation of play in society coexist. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith demonstrates that these perspectives often concentrate on pleasure, fantasy and imagination, and on development and learning, but also that "the search for a definition at this time is a search only for metaphors that can act as a rhetoric for what might ultimately become adequate scientific processual accounts" (218).

In a similar way, Ken McAllister does not provide a clear definition of video games, but identifies five major issues in the social context: video games as 1) mass culture, 2) mass media, 3) psychophysiological force, 4) economic force, and 5) institutional force. Therefore, what constitutes the very definition of video games becomes a "site of struggle" (28). Until now, the public and scholarly debate has often stressed the negative effects of playing video games, such as addiction (see, e.g., Hsu, Wen, Mu; Salguero and Moran) and health issues (Marshall, Biddle, Gorely, Cameron, Murdey). We present a more nuanced perspective by focusing on social potentials: there is recurring pattern by those who are raised with literature who complain about film, those who are with film complain about television, and those who are raised with television complain about the computer (see, e.g., Rutten and Soetaert). This polarizing and scapegoating debate prevents a discussion about the relationship between different media and the social world. Nostalgia will not help us in a world that is changing rapidly. Hence our nuanced approach to video games, inspired by the thought that today's youth does not differ significantly from other youngsters in other times: they use media for pleasure and distraction, but also to explore the world, to create their own space in that world, and to search for meaning (see, e.g., Bennett, Maton, Kervin).

Recent scholarship makes us aware that an interaction exists between the characteristics of new media and broader technological, social, and economic evolutions in our society. Under the influence of our "network society," namely globalization, digitization, and a new economy (Castells), our understanding of culture is broadened. In daily use, culture has become a catchall buzzword (see Soetaert). Individual and social conflicts are described in terms of culture: differences in dress codes and eating habits, but also differences in religion and between generations, and even wars are interpreted as cultural conflicts. In their search for meaning and guidance, people turn to (products of) culture. At the same time, the traditional dominant perspective on culture as "the best that has been thought and said" (Arnold 5) is contested. For the founders of cultural studies at the Birmingham School the concept needed to be broadened and democratized in order to include the experience of all classes in society. Thus, the traditional binary opposition between high (elitist) and low (popular) culture is challenged by those arguing that popular culture functions as a powerful "teaching machine" (Giroux 6) that provides opportunities for reflection, the acquisition of deep level knowledge, and identity formation (Johnson). This changing perspective on culture and popular media has important ramifications for our understanding of citizenship. In the tradition of political theory, citizenship research initially examined the democratic potential of popular culture by comparing online communication to a number of formal requirements for deliberation in the tradition of Jürgen Habermas. However, it was felt that this type of research focused too narrowly on political discussion, thereby ignoring how popular culture may support identity formation, empathy, and engagement. Therefore, it was suggested by some that the notion of deliberation should be broadened to include other forms of communication, such as rhetoric and narrative (Young). Others even took it one step further, for example Peter Dahlgren who proposes a cultural turn in citizenship research and stresses the importance of cultural theory, cultural studies, and popular culture for "seeing citizenship not just in formal terms but also in regard to meaning, practices, communication and identities" (267).

From a historical perspective, this call for examining the link between media, identity formation, and community building is not new. The discussion dates back to Aristotle for whom the merits of

drama fosters civic virtues. Today — in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* and *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* — Martha Nussbaum argues that involvement with literature can improve civic capacities, especially through narrative imagination. Other scholars such as Kenneth Burke, Wayne C. Booth, and Richard Rorty postulated similar claims about the functions of literature. Burke's work is relevant in particular because he describes literature as symbolic "equipment for living" precisely because "creative works offer answers that are "strategic" and "stylized" in response to specific situations; that the creative work operates on its readers by strategies, primarily a strategy that sizes up situations, names structures, and "contains an attitude towards" the world described" (Sloan 68). In an age of mass media and digitization, the question is increasingly raised whether this "tool function" of literature is perhaps no longer unique. Especially considering the function of literature in creating, problematizing, and thematizing citizenship, the question comes up whether other media and art forms can also fulfill this role of symbolic equipment. In order to answer this question, it is also important to consider what is understood by citizenship. The argumentation that citizenship cannot be described as a constant and unequivocal construct, but something that comes into existence through social and political deliberation and discussion is relevant here (Biesta; Bennett; Bennett, Wells, Rank). In his book *Learning Democracy in School and Society*, Gert Biesta claims that "young people learn at least as much about democracy and citizenship from their participation in the range of different practices that make up their lives, as they learn from that which is officially prescribed and formally taught" (14) and he posits that these practices can be situated both in the personal and in the broader cultural, social, political, and economic domains which affect young people's lives. We answer Biesta's call for the contextualized study of young people's practices by exploring a particular aspect of digitization which affects young people, namely video games.

Inspired by the notion that other media such as literature have been attributed with civic qualities on the one hand and that young people learn about citizenship from their own practices on the other we try to answer the following questions: how is our understanding of citizenship affected by video gaming and do video games too possess intrinsic civic qualities? Our study thus contributes to a small but growing body of work in which the effects of games on young people's civic behavior are examined (e.g., Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgi, Evans, Vitak <[http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2008/PIP\\_Teens\\_Games\\_and\\_Civics\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2008/PIP_Teens_Games_and_Civics_Report_FINAL.pdf)>) and how video games can be developed to support divergent types of citizenship (e.g., Raphael, Bachen, Lynn, Baldwin-Philippi, McKee). It aligns with the research of Dmitri Williams, who suggests in "Why Game Studies Now? Gamers Don't Bowl Alone" that video gaming can be considered both an activity and a space where the practices of young people can be analyzed. Indeed, video games represent an interesting case of what is happening owing to rapid advances in new media. After all, political socialization theory names media as one of the most important influences on how young people learn civic skills and engage in civic activities beside family and school (see, e.g., Lin, Cheong, Kim, Jung). Game studies can thus provide insight in the impact of the new modes of community building.

We first address the questions of what kind of new spaces emerge through video game culture and how these spaces relate to community building and citizenship. While video game culture may be a recent phenomenon, the study of newly emerging civic practices and settings can be embedded in an ongoing conversation about citizenship. Often, the debate is grounded in nostalgia and conservatism. In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg draws attention to "third places" such as neighborhood taverns and community houses where people meet and converse informally and playfully outside their family and work environments. He believes that these third places constitute "the heart of a community's social vitality" and "the grassroots of democracy," but he expresses his concern about these third places because they are diminishing (42). Robert Putnam elaborates on this concern noticing that the deterioration of informed and interconnected citizenship is happening at the same time as the rise of new media. As people are spending more and more time on their computers — for example playing video games — rather than meeting each other in real life Putnam believes that a society of isolated individuals is cultivated. Although Putnam's work can be criticized on the basis of definition and generalization issues (see Skoric and Kwan), his ideas raise important questions: is the noticeable change in civic engagement indeed caused by new media? What happens when social networks and communities are transformed into virtual spaces (see Williams, Dmitri "Why Game Studies")? Can online communities — such as those that emerge around video games — also function as new and alternative third places (see Steinkuehler and Williams)? Is it plausible that online social gathering could revitalize political participation (see Skoric, Ying, Ng)? And given that the social aspect is a crucial motivator for playing games, what does it mean for our conceptions of citizenship and civic

education when game communities are increasingly becoming popular and are taking up an important place in young people's lives (see Frostling-Henningsson; Griffiths, Davies, Chappell; López-Varela Azcárate and Tötösy de Zepetnek)?

However, before the above questions can be answered, it is important to examine the community ideal more closely because there has been substantial criticism on the ideological conceptualization that is central in the tradition of Oldenburg and Putnam. First, the idea of community as a source of security and stability is challenged by Marie Louise Pratt, who introduces the concept of the "contact zone" to refer to the tumultuous interaction between culturally diverse individuals with unbalanced power relations. Second, Benedict Anderson and James Paul Gee problematize the idea of community membership. Anderson points out that membership is often based on symbolic imagination and not just on observable practices and local proximity. Specifically in the case of new media, Gee describes the networks surrounding video games as spaces of affinity suggesting that people bond primarily based on interest, if at all, to each other. Gee believes that an all too strong focus on community in general and the notion of membership in particular is likely to exclude certain people and practices from the scope of research.

What happens when people gather temporarily because of their shared interest for video games? To answer this question, Marcus Schulzke ("How Games") refers to the theories of Alexis de Tocqueville and claims that the virtual networks originating in video games affect social stability and democratic governance for four reasons: 1) Virtual worlds and multiplayer games are useful tools to teach "self-interest rightly understood" (Tocqueville 78): to be successful in games, players have to overcome individual differences and work as a team. While each player may have different motivations, they have to understand that they need to link their private desires to those of others in order to resolve the complex problems they face. This resembles Tocqueville's liberal solution to the dilemma of individual autonomy versus social integration that democracies have always struggled with, 2) By bringing people together so they can overcome challenges which are unsolvable individually, games increase the self-efficacy. This offers individuals a perspective how they can overcome the difficulty of being but a single voice in debating a system with distributed power, 3) Given the lack of overt messages in games supporting a single ideology, Schulzke further postulates that games can protect individuals from the tyranny of the majority, and 4) video games promote meritocratic norms, as achievements become an inherent part of players' online biographies. Schulzke concludes that these qualities of video games render them "an effective supplement, although not a replacement, to traditional associational life in an age of increasing fragmentation" (354).

A similar conclusion is reached by Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams. They show that video games fit the definition of third places rather neatly: massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) provide a safe environment where gamers can come and go as they please. Everyone is welcome and is provided the same opportunities regardless of their real life status. Often, the mood is light and playful and gamers enjoy each other's company. And although video games might not meet Oldenburg's criterion of "low profile" because they are situated in extraordinary environments such as large castles, dark forests, or sometimes even outer space, what their architecture and atmosphere lacks in coziness they make up for in the homely feel created by the presence of fellow players. Steinkuehler and Williams therefore conclude that the pessimistic claims about video games are likely misinformed and that video games have the potential for functioning as new and alternative third places. Steinkuehler and Williams do not just evaluate video game environments against the criteria for third places set by Oldenburg: they also examine whether video games can perhaps stimulate the acquisition of social capital. When in *Bowling Alone* Putnam expresses his concerns about the disappearance of traditional third places, he adds that this will have a detrimental effect on the social capital that is built up at the community level. Specifically, Putnam makes a distinction between two types of social capital which co-exist and reinforce each other: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the ability to fall back on strong and intense, small networks with people who are much alike based on their age, gender, and ethnicity. Bridging social capital is acquired through the formation of large, but weak networks in which people hold a variety of often conflicting worldviews. Putnam argues that the disappearance of the traditional third places will cause a decline in bonding social capital, which in turn would lead to the demise of bridging social capital as well. However, Steinkuehler and Williams problematize Putnam's argumentation: when gamers perform tasks together, go on quests with strangers and accomplish missions, all in the virtual world, they come into contact with people who often share distinctive social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, they are introduced into a variety of worldviews. In other words, while playing video games may not lead to the acquisition of bonding social capital, the game environment has the potential of stimulating the formation of bridging social capital.

The work of Steinkuehler and Williams has inspired many follow up studies on video games and social capital (e.g., Huvila, Holmberg, Ek, Widén-Wulff; Kobayashi; Skoric and Kwan; Trepte, Reinecke, Juechems; Zhong). However, the acquisition of social capital is but one element in a larger system which can be used to study the structure and functioning of the social world. In "The Forms of Capital" Pierre Bourdieu suggests that the social world can only be understood when all types of capital, and in addition the conversion mechanisms which allow the transformation from one type of capital into another, are taken into consideration. Following Bourdieu, Thomas Malaby proposes that game worlds should be studied not only as to how they connect people (social capital), but also how they function as environments in which market value is generated (economic capital) and because they affect what cultural groups consider meaningful nonfinancial competencies, credentials, and artifacts (cultural capital). Only when the different types of capital which emerge because of video games are mapped out, will research be able to provide a clear and holistic impression of the impact of gaming on socially constructed concepts such as citizenship.

As far as economic capital is concerned, scholars in game studies address the features and characteristics of the commodities and currencies that emerge in virtual worlds (e.g., Castronova; Fetscherin, Latteman, Lang; Malaby). Edward Castronova, for example, reveals important differences between real and virtual economies: because virtual games are not restricted by the physical laws of the real world, only the rules of the game and its architecture can affect the virtual economies and thus a number of economic laws are turned upside down. From the perspective of market regulation, virtual economies can be manipulated directly and costless by the game developers. Further, Castronova suggests that it may even be a good idea to control the prices of commodities in the virtual world despite the agreement by economists that this should be avoided in the real world. From a perspective on labor, it is remarkable that gamers perceive the repetitive tasks they have to perform more positive than how employees perceive their jobs in the real world. In addition, it appears that growth is no longer the main goal given that the accumulation of too much virtual wealth can harm the enjoyment of the player because the game is no longer considered challenging. In these similarities and differences between offline and online economies, Castronova finds an additional reason for game studies as it can provide us with a much clearer perspective on "the true nature of human motivation and well-being, and their true relationship to objects in the immediate physical world" (<<http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/castronova/>>). However, yet again we are left with more questions than answers (see Malaby 152): what will the impact be on traditional economies when — just like in video games — commodities are produced mainly virtually, cost-free, and quasi effortless? How will the architecture and rules of virtual worlds affect these processes? How is market value determined when virtual commodities can be duplicated for free? And how will collective trust in virtual currency be established in the absence of features of cash transactions and institutions that underwrite virtual currency?

Next to social and economic capital, a third important type of capital through which the social world can be studied, is Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital because his notion could prove to be important for facilitating a more holistic discussion about the impact of gaming on citizenship as a social construct. Cultural capital refers to competencies in/of codes, values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes which individuals acquire through their upbringing, education, and encounters with different cultural groups and their artifacts. Considering the ideas of Aristotle, Burke, Booth, Rorty, and Nussbaum, the questions come up as to whether players acquire similar cultural capital during play and how these competencies relate to citizenship. Sid Meyer described playing video games as making a series of interesting choices and many contemporary games confront players with moral dilemmas. Players are more or less free to react to these choices, but the games decide what happens on the screen. According to Miguel Sicart, "digital games are ethical technologies, capable of embodying values and projecting them into the user experience" (101). Thus, games may be used to train certain ethical and moral attitudes and skills. But do gamers really explore the outcome of all possible choices and paths they have to face in video games? The answer is complex. When Andrew Weaver and Nicky Lewis explored players' ethical behavior in *Fallout 3*, they found that the majority of the players make moral decisions in games as if they would in real life: most players avoid making antisocial choices and only a minority experiments with immoral and anti-social decisions. Their response to the in-game feedback is twofold. On the one hand, these players report feelings of guilt and remorse, while on the other they are clearly enjoying the game as much as their peers.

Precisely because video games force us to reflect on our decisions without compromising our enjoyment, video games are often described as safe environments in which players can experiment with different reactions to ethical and moral issues and dilemmas. According to David Simkins and Steinkuehler, games can be "a particularly fruitful environment for the development of critical, ethical

reasoning skills" which they consider as "a core component in developing a citizenry capable of fully participating in a cosmopolitan, democratic society" (333). In their study, they asked role-players to recount engaging ethical situations. As a result, they could identify the key elements in games that provide opportunities to develop ethical reasoning skills: 1) players have the ability to cause changes to the game world, 2) the characters in these games often comment on the choices made by the players, 3) the social context frames the ethical decisions as meaningful, and 4) the players are both allowed and encouraged to play out their characters as they see fit. These four intertwining and overlapping characteristics of video games create an atmosphere in which ethical and moral reasoning skills can be trained. Simkins and Steinkuehler conclude that role-play in video games has great potential "not only to foster greater empathy, tolerance, and understanding for others but to help us critically reflect on who we want to be for others and how we have both power and responsibility in all of the roles we inhabit in our lives" (352). Central to the argumentation is that video games not just allow the players to take on a specific role in a meaningful context, but that games also immerse them in complex systems that express ideas "procedurally." The notion of procedurality was coined by Janet Murray to describe how software is always based on algorithms and rules. In contrast with traditional authors, software engineers do not write texts and images directly, but develop algorithms and rules which generate multiple instances of these representations. Or, as Gonzalo Frasca argues, software engineers do not represent a specific event, but a set of potential events. Similarly, Ian Bogost suggests using procedurality as a tool for analyzing cultural artifacts: "As cultural critics, we can interrogate literature, art, film, and daily life for the underlying processes they expose" ("Playing Politics" <<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1617/1532>>). Bogost acknowledges that any medium can be deemed procedural, however he also emphasizes that video games excel at "the practice of using processes persuasively" (*Persuasive Games* 28-29). According to Bogost, video games confront the players with the consequences of their actions, thus stimulating them to reflect on the underlying rule system: playing video games can be considered training in procedural literacy.

In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* Gee explores how video games relate to contemporary research in the literacy studies. Although his work has been misread by many as a plea for using games in the classroom, Gee's goal is to illustrate the ideas of the New London Group by suggesting multiple perspectives on the concept of literacy. The New London Group argues that it does no longer suffice to equip young people with the skill of reading and writing (traditional, narrowly defined literacy), when our modern society requires them to participate in a variety of practices and discourses. A successful life in the twenty-first century requires multiple skill sets which are adapted to the many different contexts people experience. Gee argues that video games — unlike traditional schooling — offer meaningful and authentic contexts to practice these skills: they teach players how to think and act like real world professionals. Elizabeth Bagley and David Shaffer tested this hypothesis in an experiment in which young people took on the roles of urban city planners and found that this type of "epistemic reasoning" stimulates civic thinking: the players in the experiment learned how to "identify and address the many civic, economic, and environmental challenges in an increasingly complex, and increasingly urban, world" (111). Because the game introduced the students into the discourse of professional city planners, it helped them to participate in the ongoing debate and deliberation.

Scholars in game studies analyzed the potential for deliberation in and surrounding video games by focusing on the rule negotiations among players. While we agree with Ryan Moeller, Bruce Esplin, and Steven Conway that "the point of computer gameplay, to a large degree, is to discover a game's ethical dimension by testing the limits of the rules established by the game" (<[http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller\\_esplin\\_conway](http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller_esplin_conway)>), we suggest that video games may legitimize or even promote an attitude that is known as "gaming the system." Driven by personal goals, players are on a constant search for ways to manipulate the hard coded and a priori postulated game rules. However, gameplay does not happen in a vacuum but in a socially constructed environment (Consalvo). Gamers therefore also have to justify their actions towards a broader gaming community (Moeller, Esplin, Conway <[http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller\\_esplin\\_conway](http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller_esplin_conway)>). In fact, in many game environments, players invent "soft rules" in order to interpret, appropriate, and regulate the game rules embedded in the software. According to T.L. Taylor ("Negotiating Play"), rule negotiation can even be considered a consistent feature of multiplayer gaming. In an environment where the indicators for success are established collaboratively, learning how to decode and beat the game rules is therefore not enough to be successful, players also need to decode and familiarize with the social environment surrounding the game.

These rule negotiations can take place in the living room when friends are playing together on a console (see Jakobsson), but they are more easily traceable on game-related forums where players converse with fellow clan or guild members, opponents or just people who like the same games (see Vlieghe, Bourgonjon, Rutten, Soetaert). A typical function of these discussions is to counter the detrimental effects of the "gaming the system attitude" within a multiplayer environment (Consalvo 85), although many gamers also grasp the opportunity to get into contact with the game developers by expressing their own ideas about the game, offering advice, and asking questions about balance issues in the game rules (see Taylor <<http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09291.03274.pdf>>). By stimulating gamers to participate in these offline and online discussions with people who often hold confronting perspectives, games thus teach players "how to interact within clearly defined, rule-based environments" (Moeller, Esplin, Conway <[http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller\\_esplin\\_conway](http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller_esplin_conway)>), which can be considered both a preparation for participation in the ongoing democratic debate (from the perspective that games are a moratorium outside real life) and an outing of democratic participation (from the perspective that games are an important aspect of real life).

With regard to the ethical and reflective dimension of citizenship, video games appear to fulfill similar functions as traditional media such as theater or literature: 1) they cultivate the practical wisdom to react to specific situations, much like Aristotle described the functionality of theater (see Schulzke <<http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/schulzke>>), 2) because of their procedural nature, their potential for ethical reflection, and dramatic rehearsal of various competing possible lines of action — as postulated by John Dewey — we argue that games can also be described as symbolic equipment for living by Burke (see also Bourgonjon; Rutten and Soetaert; Voorhees), and 3) the discussions by Simkins and Steinkuehler show that certain video games may even contribute to our narrative imagination defined by Nussbaum as "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story" (*Not for Profit* 95-96). Gee argues that "Video games are a technology that allows us to deal with other people's stories as if they had been handed to us. They allow us to tell stories of how we fared and who we were when we were in their shoes. They allow us to probe virtual worlds with different responses than our own 'reality'" ("Stories" 357). As a result, players are learning valuable lessons about culturally accepted ideas about citizenship and morality and new literacies which help them to participate in the ongoing debate and everyday practices that make up the foundation for our democracy. However, if video games are to be taking serious for their civic potential, research should become attentive to the underlying social mechanisms, the implicit power mechanisms, and new forms of governmentality. David Nieborg and Joke Hermes notice that "important questions about the effects of the concentration of capital, such as limiting access to the means of production, the appropriation of intellectual property, free labour and diversity in content, are left largely unanalysed and unquestioned" (140-41). They therefore express the need for "a more holistic or historically-informed view, which unveils the balance of power between producers and players themselves" (Nieborg and Hermes 140). Such a critical perspective can be found in the work of Julian Kücklich who argues that synthetic worlds expose the mercantile roots of citizenship and that the ideology of play masks that many game activities can be considered unpaid biopolitical labor, but also that precisely these economic activities are what shapes the social fabric in the virtual world. This sets the preconditions for precarious forms of governmentality. This critical perspective is also reflected in the work of Sal Humphreys who exposes four main sites where governance and control in video games can be identified: 1) in the code and rules, 2) in the practices of community management and customer service, 3) in the player-to-player communication and self-government practices of players, and 4) in the legal constraints of the game.

In addition, we should be attentive not to confuse potential with actual practices. From this perspective, it is important to note that research has shown that not all players deeply engage with the explicit and implicit messages in and around the games; some players rather display "critical apathy" (Teurling 359) and a "naïve understanding" of video games (Zagal 24). Therefore, although the shift towards the virtual has been celebrated for being empowering and stimulating democracy, at the same time remarks have been made regarding the need for media education to realize its full potential (see Apperley). Within these media education programs, the central issue should be learning to read video games not as an isolated form of entertainment, but as a cultural artifact that contributes to and shapes the broader — social, economic, and cultural — debates (see Bourgonjon, Rutten, Soetaert; Kahne, Lee, Feezell). Only in this way will video games impact on players to become "citizen critics" (Smudde 94) who are "expert in the study of human relations and the ways people make sense of and affect change in the world through symbolic action" (Burke, "Linguistic" 281).

Note: Research for "Video Games and Citizenship" was funded by the Research Foundation Flanders and Onderwijs Bewijs Nederland (2012).

### Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
- Apperley, Tom. "Citizenship and Consumption: Convergence Culture, Transmedia Narratives, and the Digital Divide." *Proceedings of the 4th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment, Melbourne*, 3-5 December 2007. Ed. Larissa Hjorth and Esther Milne. Melbourne: ACM, 2007. 1-4.
- Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. 1869. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Bagley, Elizabeth, and David Shaffer. "Promoting Civic Thinking through Epistemic Game Play." *Discoveries in Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations: New Interdisciplinary Applications*. Ed. Richard Ferdig. Hershey: IGI Global, 2011. 111-27.
- Bennett, Lance. "Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age." *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth*. Ed. Lance Bennett. Cambridge: MIT P, 2008. 1-24.
- Bennett, Lance, Chris Wells, and Allison Rank. "Young Citizens and Civic Learning: Two Paradigms of Citizenship in the Digital Age." *Citizenship Studies* 13.2 (2009): 105-20.
- Bennett, Sue, Karl Maton, and Lisa Kervin. "The 'Digital Natives' Debate: A Critical Review of the Evidence." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 39.5 (2008): 775-86.
- Bey, Hakim. *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1991.
- Biesta, Gert. *Learning Democracy in School and Society: Education, Lifelong Learning and the Politics of Citizenship*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011.
- Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2007.
- Bogost, Ian. "Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism, and Advocacy." *First Monday* 7 (2006): <<http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1617/1532>>.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California UP, 1988.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital." *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*. Ed. John Richardson. New York: Greenwood P, 1986. 46-58.
- Bourgonjon, Jeroen. "Video Games as Equipment for Living." *Digital Humanities and the Study of Intermediality in Comparative Cultural Studies*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. West Lafayette: Purdue Scholarly Publishing Services, 2013. 88-99.
- Bourgonjon, Jeroen, Kris Rutten, and Ronald Soetaert. "From Counter-Strike to Counter-Statement: Using Burke's Pentad as a Tool for Analysing Video Games." *Digital Creativity* 22.2 (2011): 91-102.
- Burke, Kenneth. "Linguistic Approach to Problems of Education." *Modern Philosophies and Education*. Ed. Nelson B. Henry. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955. 259-303.
- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Castronova, Edward. "On Virtual Economies." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 3.2 (2003): <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/castronova/>>.
- Consalvo, Mia. *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. Cambridge: MIT P, 2007.
- Dahlgren, Peter. *Media and Political Engagement*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.
- De Kerckhove, Derrick. *The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality*. Toronto: Somerville House Publishing, 1995.
- Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: McMillan, 1916.
- Fetscherin, Marc, Christoph Lattemann, and Guido Lang. "Virtual Worlds Research: A Conceptual Primer." *Journal of Electronic Commerce Research* 9.3 (2008): 192-94.
- Frasca, Gonzalo. *Videogames of the Oppressed*. M.A. Thesis. Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology, 2003.
- Frostling-Henningsson, Maria. "First-Person Shooter Games as a Way of Connecting to People. 'Brothers in Blood'." *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 12.5 (2009): 557-62.
- Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Gee, James Paul. "Semiotic Social Spaces and Affinity Spaces." *Beyond Communities of Practice*. Ed. David Barton and Karin Tusting. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005. 214-32.
- Gee, James Paul. "Stories, Probes, and Games." *Narrative Inquiry* 21.2 (2011): 353-57.
- Gee, James Paul. "Why Game Studies Now? Video Games: A New Art Form." *Games and Culture* 1.1 (2006): 58-61.
- Giroux, Henry. *Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Griffiths, Mark, Mark Davies, and Darren Chappell. "Demographic Factors and Playing Variables in Online Computer Gaming." *Cyberpsychology & Behavior* 7.4 (2004): 479-87.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT P, 1989.
- Hsu, Shang Hwa, Ming-Hui Wen, and Muh-Cherng Wu. "Exploring User Experiences as Predictors of MMORPG Addiction." *Computers & Education* 53.2 (2009): 990-9.
- Humphreys, Sal. "Ruling the Virtual World: Governance in Massively Multiplayer Online Games." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11.2 (2008): 149-71.
- Huvila, Isto, Kim Holmberg, Stefan Ek, and Gunilla Widén-Wulff. "Social Capital in Second Life." *Online Information Review* 34.2 (2010): 295-316.

- Jakobsson, Mikael. "Playing with the Rules: Social and Cultural Aspects of Game Rules in a Console Game Club." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference: Situated Play*. Ed. Baba Akira. Tokyo: DiGRA, 2007. 386-92.
- Johnson, Steven. *Everything Bad Is Good For You: Why Popular Culture Is Making Us Smarter*. New York: Riverhead, 2005.
- Kahne, Joseph, Nam-Jin Lee, and Jessica Feezell. "Digital Media Literacy Education and Online Civic and Political Participation." *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 1-24.
- Kobayashi, Tetsuro. "Bridging Social Capital in Online Communities: Heterogeneity and Social Tolerance of Online Game Players in Japan." *Human Communication Research* 36 (2010): 546-69.
- Kücklich, Julian. "Virtual Worlds and Their Discontents: Precarious Sovereignty, Governmentality, and the Ideology of Play." *Games and Culture* 4.4 (2009): 340-52.
- Lenhart, Amanda, Joseph Kahne, Ellen Middaugh, Alexandra Macgi, Chris Evans, and Jessica Vitak. "Teens, Video Games, and Civics." *pewinternet.org* (2008): <[http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2008/PIP\\_Teens\\_Games\\_and\\_Civics\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2008/PIP_Teens_Games_and_Civics_Report_FINAL.pdf)>.
- Lin, Wan-Ying, Pauline Cheong, Yong-Chan Kim, and Joo-Young Jung. "Becoming Citizens: Youths' Civic Uses of New Media in Five Digital Cities in East Asia." *Journal of Adolescent Research* 25.6 (2010): 839-57.
- López-Varela Azcárate, Asunción, and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. "Towards Intermediality in Contemporary Cultural Practices and Education." *La intermedialidad / Intermediality*. Ed. Freda Chapple. Special Issue *Cultura, Lenguaje y Representación / Culture, Language and Representation* 6 (2008): 65-82.
- Malaby, Thomas. "Parlaying Value: Capital in and Beyond Virtual Worlds." *Games and Culture* 1.2 (2006): 141-62.
- Marshall, Simon J., Stuart Biddle, Rish Gorely, Noel Cameron, Ian Murdey. "Relationships Between Media Use, Body Fatness and Physical Activity in Children and Youth: A Meta-Analysis." *International Journal of Obesity* 28.10 (2004): 1238-46.
- McAllister, Ken. *Game Work: Language, Power, and Computer Game Culture*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2004.
- Moeller, Ryan, Bruce Esplin, and Steven Conway. "Cheesers, Pullers, and Glitchers: The Rhetoric of Sportsmanship and the Discourse of Online Sports Gamers." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 9.2 (2009): <[http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller\\_esplin\\_conway](http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/moeller_esplin_conway)>.
- Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1998.
- New London Group. "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60-92.
- Nieborg, David, and Joke Hermes. "What is Game Studies Anyway?" *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 11.2 (2008): 131-147.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010.
- Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You Through the Day*. New York: Marlowe & Company, 1997.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 91 (1991): 33-40.
- Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Raphael, Chad, Christine Bachen, Kathleen Lynn, Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, and Kristen McKee. "Games for Civic Learning: A Conceptual Framework and Agenda for Research and Design." *Games and Culture* 5.2 (2010): 199-235.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Rutten, Kris, and Ronald Soetaert. "Epiloog: Het Lezen van de Subcultuur" ("Epilogue: The Reading of Subculture"). *Talkie Walkie*. Ed. Ladda vzw. Gent: Acco, 2006. 144-57.
- Salguero, Ricardo A. Tejeiro, and Rosa M. Bersabé Morán. "Measuring Problem Video Game Playing in Adolescents." *Addiction* 97.12 (2002): 1601-6.
- Schulzke, Marcus. "How Games Support Associational Life: Using Tocqueville to Understand the Connection." *Games and Culture* 6.4 (2010): 354-72.
- Schulzke, Marcus. "Moral Decision Making in Fallout." *Game Studies: the International Journal of Computer Game Research* 9.2 (2009): <<http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/schulzke>>.
- Sicart, Miguel. "Digital Games as Ethical Technologies." *The Philosophy of Computer Games: Philosophy of Engineering and Technology*. Ed. John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim, and Tarjei Mandt Larsen. New York: Springer, 2012. 101-24.
- Skoric, Marco, and Grace Chi En Kwan. "Platforms for Mediated Sociability and Online Social Capital: The Role of Facebook and Massively Multiplayer Online Games." *Asian Journal of Communication* 21.5 (2011): 467-84.
- Skoric, Marco, Deborah Ying, and Ying Ng. "Bowling Online, Not Alone: Online Social Capital and Political Participation in Singapore." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 (2009): 414-33.
- Simkins, David, and Constance Steinkuehler. "Critical Ethical Reasoning and Role-Play." *Games and Culture* 3.3-4 (2008): 333-55.
- Sloane, Sarah. *Digital Fictions: Storytelling in a Material World*. New York: Ablex, 2000.
- Smudde, Peter. "The Education of Citizen Critics: The Consubstantiality of Burke's Philosophy and Constructivist Pedagogy." *Humanistic Critique of Education: Teaching and Learning as Symbolic Action*. Ed. Peter Smudde. West Lafayette: Parlor P, 2010.
- Soetaert, Ronald. *De Cultuur van het Lezen* (The Culture of Reading). Den Haag: Nederlandse Taalunie, 2006.
- Steinkuehler, Constance, and Dmitri Williams. "Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as Third Places." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11.4 (2006): 885-909.
- Sutton-Smith, Brian. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997.

- Taylor, T.L. "Negotiating Play: The Process of Rule Construction in Professional Computer Gaming." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*. London: Brunel U, 2009 <<http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09291.03274.pdf>>.
- Teurling, Jan. "Media Literacy and the Challenges of Contemporary Media Culture: On Savvy Viewers and Critical Apathy." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 13.3 (2010): 359-73.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011.
- Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, ed. *Digital Humanities and the Study of Intermediality in Comparative Cultural Studies*. West Lafayette: Purdue Scholarly Publishing Services, 2013.
- Trepte, Sabine, Leonard Reinecke, and Keno Juechems. "The Social Side of Gaming: How Playing Online Computer Games Creates Online and Offline Social Support." *Computers in Human Behavior* 28.3 (2012): 832-39.
- Vlieghe, Joachim, Jeroen Bourgonjon, Kris Rutten, and Ronald Soetaert. "What Happens off the Field? Proposing a Rhetorical Approach of the Affinity Spaces Surrounding Games." *Proceedings of the 5th European Conference on Games-based Learning*. Ed. Dimitris Gouscos and M. Meimaris. London: ACI Publications, 2011. 626-31.
- Voorhees, Gerald. "The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games." *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research* 9.2 (2009): <<http://gamestudies.org/0902/articles/voorhees>>.
- Weaver, Andrew, and Nicky Lewis. "Mirrored Morality: An Exploration of Moral Choice in Video Games." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 15.11 (2012): 1-5.
- Williams, Dmitri. "Groups and Goblins: The Social and Civic Impact of an Online Game." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 50.4 (2006): 651-70.
- Williams, Dmitri. "Why Game Studies Now? Gamers Don't Bowl Alone." *Games & Culture* 1.1 (2006): 13-16.
- Williams, Raymond. "Culture is Ordinary." *Convictions*. Ed. Norman Mackenzie. London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1958. 75-76.
- Young, Iris. *Democracy & Inclusion*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Zagal, José P. *Ludoliteracy: Defining, Understanding, and Supporting Games Education*. Pittsburgh: ETC P, 2010.
- Zhong, Zhi-Jin. "The Effects of Collective MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) Play on Gamers' Online and Offline Social Capital." *Computers in Human Behavior* 27.6 (2011): 2352-63.

Author's profile: Jeroen Bourgonjon works as a Research Foundation Flanders fellow at Ghent University. In his research he focuses on video games as a form of and in education. He has published in journals such as *Computers & Education* (2010, 2011, 2012, 2013), *Digital Creativity* (2011), *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2011), and *Computers in Human Behavior* (2012). E-mail: <[jeroen.bourgonjon@ugent.be](mailto:jeroen.bourgonjon@ugent.be)>

Author's profile: Ronald Soetaert teaches in the Teacher Education Program at Ghent University. His fields of interests include the study of rhetoric, media, literacy, and culture. In addition to numerous articles in Flemish and English, his book publications include *De cultuur van het lezen* (2006) (The Culture of Reading). E-mail: <[ronald.soetaert@ugent.be](mailto:ronald.soetaert@ugent.be)>