

Metagaming: Videogames and the Practice of Play

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ABSTRACT

The greatest trick the videogame industry ever pulled was convincing the world that videogames were games rather than a medium for making metagames. Metagames, simply put, are games about games. They are the games we play in, on, around, and through videogames. From the most complex house rules, arcade cultures, competitive tournaments, and virtual economies to the simple decision to press start, pass the controller, use a player's guide, or even purchase a game in the first place, for all intents and purposes metagames are the only kind of games that we play. And although the word "metagame" has a long history—from Nigel Howard's game theory in which he proposed a solution to the Prisoner's Dilemma during the Cold War to Richard Garfield's game design philosophy for *Magic: The Gathering* in the 1990s—since the turn of the millennium and especially since the emergence of social media and streaming services like Steam, YouTube, and Twitch TV, the term has become a popularly used and particularly useful label for a diverse form of play, a game design paradigm, and a way of life occurring not only around videogames but around all forms of digital technology.

For example, when Narcissa Wright plays *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) and *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (2003), the addition of optional constraints, like a simple timer, radically changes the game. Speedrunning is not only a metagame contingent on the virtuosic performance of real-time play, but a community practice based on discovering exploits like geometry clipping, cutscene skipping, sequence breaking, and memory manipulation--games within the game. And, as Wright (2013) remarks, when new techniques such as "dry storage got discovered [in *The Wind Waker*]. . . I was reinvigorated to stay on top of the current metagame." Other players recover the histories of shifting strategies and tournament trends around specific videogames as a playful and productive form of spectatorship--a game around the game. For example,

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Richard “KirbyKid” Terrell (2011) encodes VHS tapes to track the history of competitive *Super Smash Bros.* (1999) because “[e]very game with a metagame worth understanding deserves a devoted video game historian” and Daniel “Artosis” Stemkoski (2012) studies and commentates Korean *StarCraft* (1998) because “[t]he [m]etagame is not the same everywhere. . . . Korea, China, [North America], and Europe . . . each have their own [m]etagame.” The metagame can even take the form of a game outside the game, as is the case when Alex Gianturco (qtd. Goldman and Vogt, 2014) and Sean Smith expanded their *EVE Online* (2003) empire via cyber-warfare and offline espionage--what they identified as a “metagame which doesn’t require booting the program up at all.” Even the work of Anita Sarkeesian and her campaign to speak out against discrimination operates at the level of a metagame. Which is why it’s important to remember that the metagame also includes the most toxic elements of videogame culture.

From the perspectival puzzles of *Portal* and speedruns of *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) on Twitch TV to electronic espionage of *EVE Online* and international e-sports competitions in *StarCraft* and *Dota 2* (2013), metagames implicate a diverse range of practices that stray outside the boundaries and bend the rules. Through an introduction and analysis of the concept of metagaming, this presentation will attempt to uncover alternate histories of play not only through an investigation of the dates, dollars, and demographic data but also through the diverse cultures, community practices, and material traces that emerge between the experience of playing videogames and the technical operations of digital media. Metagames transform videogames from a mass medium and cultural commodity into instruments, equipment, tools, and toys for playing, competing, spectating, cheating, trading, breaking, and making videogames. Like prepositions are to parts of speech as metagames are to games. A signifier for everything occurring before, after, between, and during games as well as everything located in, on, around, and beyond games, the metagame anchors the game in time and space.

BIOGRAPHY

Stephanie Boluk is an assistant professor in the English Department and Cinema and Digital Media Department at University of California, Davis. She Her current research and teaching focus on videogames, electronic literature, alternative currencies, and the culture of work and financialization in digital economies. She is the co-director of the Alt-Ctrl Lab at Davis and co-editor of the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3* (2016). For more information see <http://stephanieboluk.com>.

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