

Game Studies Analysis: Fortnite and Elden Ring

Self-Determined Major Final Project Proposal

Major: Film Studies

First Reader: Paul Benzon
Second Reader: Andrew Lindner

Proposal/Rationale:

Video Game Studies, the historical and theoretical analysis of computer, console, arcade, and Internet games, is a developing academic discipline that has quickly found its way to the cutting-edge of Media Studies. The growing importance of Game Studies reflects the ways in which, from their inception, video games have been created and consumed at the forefront of technological innovation and served as key tools for testing and shaping the future of digital interactions, new forms of storytelling, and virtual agency. Games occupy this position for several reasons: first, they comprise a massive—historically military-funded—industry with enormous financial resources that generates research and innovation to remain competitive. Second, billions of people engage with games daily and as active agents, rather than as merely passive consumers. As a result, games are often windows into the creation of new digital communities. Third, increasing access to and simplification of the digital technologies that undergird games have also democratized not only how games are played but also how they are produced; once limited to corporate studios, there is now a robust indie game culture. For all these reasons, it is impossible to understand where the world is going and what our digital futures will bring without understanding video games. Video Game Studies is where this understanding is being developed and is a process to which I seek to contribute.

Game Studies are a sub-specialty of media studies, which were historically related to art history. As a result, my media studies major and art history minor have prepared me with the skills I need to write a complex analytical thesis that contributes to contemporary game studies scholarship and is pertinent to my studies of contemporary media. I plan to produce a research paper that discusses the design, authorship, and user experience of specific video games that relies on visual analysis, the detailed study of surrounding scholarship, and primary research in

the histories of my case studies. This project will take the form of a research paper that will help advance the field of Game Studies by offering a comparative analysis of *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*, two distinctly produced but similarly popular and genre-defining games of the last 3 years.

Although I have selected specific games to analyze, I choose to study video games more broadly because of the way in which they are formed at the intersection of the design and consumption structures of a wide range of other mediums. Despite certain interactive and conceptual features typically understood as specific to game studies, video games also incorporate filmmaking techniques, literary narrative designs, interactivity between users akin to social media, and advertising. Created and consumed on the cutting edges of technological innovation, video games are the present modems for future technological realities of digital communication, entities, and education. Reflecting the heterogeneity of games, Game Studies are also increasingly cross disciplinary and growing in complexity. In addition, Game Studies are also moving beyond increasingly outdated categories that distinguish between art and commerce, technological determinism, and analyzing dangers of video games. Like video games themselves, Game Studies is a new but rapidly evolving field, which means that there is both room and need for new scholarship. I intend to draw upon and put into practice the various fields of media studies, media production, and art history I have studied thus far and use this knowledge to make larger claims about the advantages and pitfalls of allowing video games to be how our collective futures are imagined and produced.

I have chosen *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* as my case studies because they constitute two of the most popular games produced in the past 5 years. While they have global success in common, they also represent opposite ends of the spectrum of contemporary video games. *Fortnite* is multiplayer, while *Elden Ring* is single player; *Fortnite* is organized around world

making while *Elden Ring* is driven by narrative structures; *Fortnite* originated in a game jam sponsored by Epic Games and thus is corporate and collective in its authorship. *Elden Ring* by contrast was produced more in accordance with an auteur model, strongly associated with a single game designer Hidetaka Miyazaki, but differs from his traditional and highly popular formula of crafting games with linear progression that is geographically determined. In turn, these differences map clearly onto one of the most fundamental categorical differences within game studies, namely the difference between narrative and ludological analysis of games. On the other hand, just as the difference between these analytic approaches is increasingly collapsing to form a unified and more complex understanding of games, similarities between the games can also be discerned. Both games in fact mix narrative components with world-making elements, co-mingle borders of time and space, and provide newfound opportunities for players to influence their own experience of the game and its difficulty in reading and playing as a text. As a result, a comparison between the apparently clear differences and the less obvious similarities of these two games will enable me to discern and critically analyze important features of today's game ecology. My overarching goal is to contribute to media and game studies by using these case studies not only to better understand contemporary game studies and design but to consider the futures being anticipated by game culture today.

Methodology: This project will take the form of a research paper that will help advance the field of Game Studies by offering a comparative analysis of *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*, games typically understood to exemplify distinct genres that occupy opposing ends of the spectrum of contemporary gameplay and theory. Because neither game has received significant scholarly attention in this discipline, I will begin with a close reading of each game. For this effort, I will

rely on the techniques of textual analysis I have developed in nearly all my classes across disciplines at Skidmore. When I move on to juxtaposing these two case studies, I will be leaning on the art historical structure of comparative formal analysis to identify and explore the overlooked similarities and under-theorized differences. I also plan to explore whether conceptual categories that game theory has borrowed from other media studies and art historical discourses, such as genre and authorship, are useful in the context of the highly intermedial and hybrid nature of video games. Therefore, I will be able to draw upon my film theory and filmmaking classes to discuss cinematic perspectives and features within video games. I will also draw upon my English and screenwriting classes to analyze the narratives in video games, and my sociology and digital studies classes to analyze the user experience of these games. Additionally, my art history and digital design classes will inform my visual analysis of the aesthetics of these video games.

In addition to my direct analysis of my case studies, I will also ground my paper and research in a literature review of the historical and current environment of game theory, exploring where and how my hypothesis fits into the discourse. I will then move inwards, conducting a literature review of the scholarship concerning the two games I will be analyzing. I will also seek information from non-scholarly sources, such as industry journals and game-player social media sites, so that I can better understand aspects of how the games were made and are used. The scope of research is large due to the many factors that make up a video game's history and reception, but necessary to juxtaposing all the apparent differences between these games. My in-depth research will then enable me to establish clear criteria for comparing *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*, which I anticipate will focus on authorship within game design, narrative versus world-building design philosophies, and how user experience is affected in terms of difficulty, agency,

and abstracted interaction of players through caricaturized avatars. This research-based analytic comparison will, finally, permit me to arrive at a critical assessment of where these games fit in the contemporary gaming ecology and chart their impact on large numbers of global players, on other game producers, and on game studies itself. My overall goal is to situate these games within the contemporary zeitgeist of global video gaming, draw critical attention to how video games remain at the forefront of imagining the future of digital life and make a scholarly contribution to game studies today.

Timeline:

November-Winter Break:

- Historical Literature Review and Critical Synopsis
- Game-specific Literature Review and Critical Synopsis
- Additional Literature Review of authorship, worldmaking, and effectivity

January-February:

- Player Comments and Reviews and Critical Synopsis

March:

- Draft Body Paragraphs – (Mar 10) Weeks 2-6
- Draft Introduction/Conclusion – (Mar 24) Weeks 7-9

April

- Revision – (April 7) Week 10-12
- Final Due – April 15 (Comments and Evaluations)

Annotated Bibliography

Ken Perlin, “Can There Be a Form Between a Game and a Story?” and “Response by Will Wright,” “From Victoria Vesna’s Online Response,” and “Perlin Responds” (printed concurrently on the top and bottom halves of the same pages), from *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2006) (eds. Noah Wadrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan), 14-18.

Ken Perlin’s essay provides some valuable conceptual foundations of game studies, specifically on how storytelling operates in video games as an interactive medium; Perlin seeks to explore how stories and games can converge as methods of communication. Perlin posits that video game narratives rely on the interactions between the agency of gamers and the agency of characters within the game; furthermore, Perlin theorizes that the future of game studies and design lies at in the intersections and convergence of stories and games. This serves as a useful jumping off point for my own research and analysis of *Elden Ring* as a narrative-based game filled with the interactions Perlin is discussing here.

Nick Montfort, ‘Interactive Fiction as “Story,” “Game,” “Storygame,” “Novel,” “World,” “Literature,” “Puzzle,” “Problem,” “Riddle,” and “Machine”’ and “Response by Brenda Laurel” (printed concurrently on the top and bottom halves of the same pages), from *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (2006) (eds. Noah Wadrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan), 310-316.

Nick Montfort’s essay picks up from Perlin’s essay as a study of interactive fiction—the wholly unique region between games and stories. Montfort stresses to not analyze games using such a binary of story vs. game as a starting point to theorizing interactive fiction. Montfort then analyzes forms of interactive fiction and how their analyzation can be applied to video games, like storygame, riddle, machine, and world. In short, Montfort posits that interactive fictions like video games simulate worlds. Thus, Montfort’s essay provides valuable foundations of ludological theory and distinctions of studying simulated worlds. This essay therefore serves as a great starting point for analyzing Fortnite against Elden Ring and some of Perlin’s ideas.

Spawforth, Callum and Millard, David (2017) Multiplayer games as a template for multiplayer narratives: a case study with Dark Souls. In, Rubart, Jessica and Yesilada, Yeliz (eds.) *Workshops Proceedings and Tutorials of the 28th ACM Conference of Hypertext and Social Media (HT 2017), Prague, Czech Republic, July 4-7, 2017*. (CEUR Workshop Proceedings, 1914) CEUR-WS.org.

Spawforth and Millard’s essay analyzes the multiplayer interactions within the *Dark Souls* game, one of *Elden Ring*’s predecessors, as a model for developing multiplayer narrative models. In doing so, Spawforth and Millard provide useful categorizations for the varying types of inter-player interactions within the *Dark Souls* series and how they operate as narrative devices. They argue the organization of these interactions invokes an authored approach to the story of the game, rather than narrative generation software or techniques. These classifications and respective analyses provide useful foundations for analyzing *Elden Ring* as a multiplayer narrative against *Fortnite*.

Carter, Marcus, Kyle Moore, and Jane Mavoa. "It’s not an island, it’s a world: Fornite, Temporality, and Worldness." (2020).

This brief sociologically based study looks at *Fortnite* as a world-making medium. Carter, Moore, and Mavoa argue *Fortnite* departs from other first-person shooters by introducing temporality within the game through changing conditions of the in-game world, including the map, weapons, consumable items, and aesthetic items. Carter, Moore, and Mavoa argue this temporality provides *Fortnite* with persistence which imbues worldness; furthermore, they argue the worldness within *Fortnite* acts as a plane to be social and keep in touch with the world of the game. Thus, this study provides a useful conceptual framework for starting my analysis of *Fortnite* as a ludologically based in-game world.

Frasca, Gonzalo. “Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology.” In: Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge (2009).

Gonzalo Frasca's chapter is a conceptual analysis of the communicative techniques utilized in video games that provide authors with forms of representation and communication unique to the medium. Frasca specifically argues that opposed to traditional media, video games are simulational in nature. Frasca explores how simulation can offer new forms of communication for authors but entails a new kind of auteurship more akin to legislation—crafting laws of a simulated world. Within simulated environments, Frasca discusses differences between what he calls *ludus* games and *paidia* games as an exploration of play, competitiveness, and the goals for why gamers game. Thus, this chapter is a conceptual discussion of the underlying motivations, design, and effects of video games which will serve as useful foundations to specify this analysis onto *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*.

Juul, Jesper. "Fear of Failing?: The Many Meanings of Difficulty In Video Games." In: Mark J. P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (eds.): *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge 2009. pp. 237-252.

Jesper Juul's chapter sociologically explores how failure and difficulty underline player's attraction to and interactions with video games. Juul starts by differentiating types of punishments for player failures, both in terms of their design and effect on user experience. Juul then conducts a study using variable punishments of the same game to determine whether gamers want to fail while gaming, and whether they feel responsible for their failures. Ultimately, Juul's findings imply that gamers don't enjoy games that are too hard and too easy, and thus failure is central to the attraction of games. Furthermore, Juul argues that games must not be too hard or too easy. Although this study is limited to single-player games, this chapter provides useful foundations for analyzing how difficulty and failure are utilized within *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* as varying in genre but both offer newfound opportunities for gamers to formulate their own difficulties and failures.

Myers, David. "The Video Game Aesthetic: Play as Form." In: Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge (2008).

David Myers chapter takes a comprehensive look at the aesthetic experience of playing a video game and attempts at developing a formulaic approach to analyzing the types of 'play' inherent in playing a video game. Myers discusses the affordances of controllers, game rules, game design, and how gamers interact with digital representations of objects and worlds in games. Myers posits valuable assertions of analyzing the nature of interactions between gamers and games that he argues is predicated on the liminal, habituation of responses, and immediate engagement of the mind and body in favor of awareness while playing games. Furthermore,

Myers' exploration of semiosis and representation of video games and how players interact with them provides pertinent, conceptual analysis of the types of interactions that drive the aesthetic experience of both *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*. In conclusion, Myer's proposed framework will aid me in juxtaposing the aesthetic experiences of the two games I will be analyzing.

Apperley, T. H. (2006). Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres. *Simulation & Gaming*, 37(1), 6–23.

Thomas Apperley's essay discusses the use of genre in game studies and production and argues game theorists counter-intuitively place video games overly rigid genres that rely on prior media's vocabulary of representation and narrative. Apperley posits that video game genres are too predicated on aesthetic and visual representation of the in-game world, and that categorizing video games by their similarities and differences of engagement, interaction, and ergodic processes. To do so, Apperley discusses the processes of engagement of simulation, strategy, role-playing, and action games—the last being categorizations that apply to both *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*. By opposing visual genres and the remediation of prior media, Apperley posits a general and conceptual framework of which to analyze games more wholly and critically alongside one another; this is a valuable framework for my research and analysis that aligns with my prospective thesis in its foundations of analysis.

Guanio-Uluru, Lykke. "The Reader as Player: Exploring the Notion of Aesthetic and Efferent Gaming." *International Research in Children's Literature* 15.3 (2022): 338-52. Web.

In this chapter, Guanio-Uluru discusses the types of reading within various genres of video games, and how it differs from other mediums in its deployment of physical, semiotic, interactive processes of interaction with the player. Furthermore, Guanio-Uluru posits the distinction between aesthetic and efferent reading of video games that are dependent on motivations, operational literacy, and the genre of game. Guanio-Uluru then concludes with insightful contributions to defining "good and bad readers of video games;" this chapter posits new and useful frameworks of analyzing how *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring* engage players as embedded narratives, texts, and virtual worlds.

Mäyrä, Frans. "Getting into the Game: Doing Multi-Disciplinary Game Studies." In: Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge (2009): pp. 313-329.

Mäyrä's chapter is a comprehensive exploration of the pitfalls and advantages of multidisciplinary game studies in its recent history that emphasizes the interdisciplinarity of the medium and its analysis. Leaving the conflict of narrative and ludological frameworks of analysis aside, Mäyrä outlines some possible examples of multidisciplinary game studies that mix methods of analysis from the humanities and sociology. Ultimately, Mäyrä highlights the strength of interdisciplinarity within game

studies but the need to strengthen its disciplinary self-image. Furthermore, this chapter provides useful footing within the scholarship to start my analysis.

Järvinen, Aki. "Understanding Video Games as Emotional Experiences." In: Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge (2009): pp. 85-108.

Aki Järvinen's chapter posits that psychology is often overlooked in game studies and thus explores how video games engage emotions of players. Järvinen provides useful articulation of varying types of emotions that occur when playing video games, like prospect-based emotions, fortunes-of-others emotions, and attraction emotions to name a few types. In addition, Järvinen outlines variables that affect the intensities of emotions engaged when playing video games. Furthermore, Järvinen's chapter provides an comprehensive vocabulary for some of the types of emotional engagements that occur in *Fortnite* and *Elden Ring*.

Gregersen, Andreas and Grodal, Toben. "Embodiment and Interface." In: Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. New York: Routledge (2009): pp. 65-83.

Gregersen and Grodal's chapter categorizes different types of embodiment in video games as they manifest via user interfaces, control systems, and overall game design. Gregersen and Grodal explore how agency, ownership, *body images*, and *body schema* as nodes on the mechanisms of embodiment within games as neurological processes that allow players to extend their body into visual environments. They then outline some varying examples like the Nintendo Wii remote, keyboard and mouse, and more standard controllers. Furthermore, this chapter posits useful categorizations of how players interact with visual worlds and are embodied by the characters and the world within video games.