

## A defence of academic game interpretation

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### Introduction

What is the point of academics doing game interpretations? In this paper I will argue that game scholarship that works through the meanings of specific games is not only of academic value but is in fact central to the arts and humanities strand of game studies. This is because this kind of work tries out new possibilities for meaning in games that, rather than validating theory from which they are derived, precede abstract theory-building. I am not defending the idea that games are meaningful, that games require interpretation or that players create meaning from games in a variety of interesting ways, though my argument rests on the assumption that all of these things are true. I am arguing, first, that the meaningfulness of games is, or ought to be, central to game scholarship, and, second, that close readings of specific games are, or ought to be, central to any attempt to understand the nature of meaning in games.

After briefly suggesting a number of potential defences of academic game interpretations I outline Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics (2004) as a means of thinking of a more fundamental value of game interpretations. I combine this with James L. Machor's (1998) work on interpretive change and reading formations to argue that academic game interpretations are instrumental in developing theory of meaning in games. In the final part of the paper I offer an interpretation of *Prison Architect* (Introversion Software, 2012-) to demonstrate the potential value of specific game interpretations in shifting ways of thinking about meaning in game scholarship.

### The centrality of meaning to game scholarship

While the humanities has always been centrally concerned with meaning, it is important to clarify from the outset the breadth with which I use this term here. Sometimes, particularly when criticising the centrality of 'meaning' and 'interpretation' in some branch of criticism, scholars differentiate between first and second order interpretation. In her polemic 'Against Interpretation' Susan Sontag (1966), for example, writes:

Of course, I don't mean interpretation in the broadest sense, the sense in which Nietzsche (rightly) says, "There are no facts, only interpretations." By interpretation, I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain "rules" of interpretation (paragraph 3).

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Similarly, David Bordwell (1989), writing about film interpretation some 30 years later, distinguishes referential and literal meaning (which he terms ‘comprehension’) from implicit and symptomatic meaning (for which he reserves ‘interpretation’). The first two are meanings upon which we—a dangerous pronoun—can all agree. The latter two are the arcane interpretations of exegetes, New Critics, Freudians, Marxists and other specialists.

The Roland Barthes of *Mythologies* (Barthes, 2012/1957) would have called this the distinction between denotation and connotation, though the Barthes of *S/Z* (1990/1974, p.9) could see that denotation, rather than being the central, first-order, indisputable meaning around which second order connotations accrue, is in fact ‘the *last* of the connotations,’ differing from other connotations not by virtue of its naturalness or necessity, but its *assertion* of its naturalness. By bracketing ‘interpretation in the broadest sense’ Sontag fails to see how closely related this is to interpretation in the narrow sense, and the extent to which it too is regulated by rules and codes. By claiming that ‘Nietzchean’ interpretation is *not* regulated by codes Sontag argues for a form of natural criticism, unencumbered by such codes, the naivety of which is clear in her discussion of the film *The Silence*. Taking a critic to task for ‘interpreting’ the tank in one of the film’s scenes as a symbol of phallic power, she claims that rather than interpreting what the tank *means*, the critic should say what the tank *just is*—‘an immediate sensory equivalent for the mysterious abrupt armoured happenings going on inside the hotel’ (Sontag, 1966, paragraph 6). But the claim that this is simply saying what the tank is ignores the interpretive effort—effort that is perhaps unconscious in the well-schooled film critic—that is required to see this tank metaphorically connected to the relationship between the main characters.

### Philosophical hermeneutics

To claim that meaning is central to games is to start with a view of hermeneutics as it relates not just to the ‘conscious’ interpretations of Freudian film critics but also to the barely registered interpretive moves learned and made in all of our dealings with the world. Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics takes understanding not just to relate to how we make sense of difficult passages in the bible, or how we apply legal documents to specific cases, but also, and fundamentally, how we orient ourselves in relation to others in the world. Understanding, then, following Heidegger’s (2008) ontological hermeneutic, is something that ‘pervades all human relations to the world’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. xx)

If understanding really is our ‘primordial way of being in the world’ (Vilhauer, 2010, p. 4); the way in which we can be with others in spite of the fundamental alienation of human being, then understanding understanding is an important task. Understanding is always directed. We are always trying to understand something. In understanding something we better understand our relationship to the world, and thus better understand ourselves. Another way of saying this is that we know ourselves through the texts we interpret. Understanding how understanding can happen in specific contexts, as it

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is directed differently, is a part of this larger philosophical question—understanding of interlocutors, of novel-readers, of judges, of game players.

The directedness that understanding takes in relation to creative artefacts (whether these are art or entertainment) is of a specific kind. The other that we attempt to understand in these situations is not a flesh-and-blood person with whom we have an everyday relationship. Nonetheless, this other does take the form of a subject insofar as we can say that we understand what the game (or novel, or picture) is saying. What happens when we interpret is that we make ourselves a part of an assemblage of physical and social actors, opinions and discourses in which we have a participating stake, but which is nonetheless something other. Gadamer calls this ‘tradition.’ Tradition presents as and demands to be treated as a ‘Thou,’ with which we have a relationship, rather than an ‘It,’ that we interpret in a dispassionate and distanced way (p.352).

While Gadamer focuses on interpretation of art and history his insights extend beyond these realms to understanding as such. This means that not only *can* Gadamer’s hermeneutics be applied to realms outside those he discussed, but also that they *must*. James Risser writes that in Gadamer’s hermeneutics ‘the interpretation of texts is to be woven into the broader concern of making one’s way in life such that the interpretation of texts is part of the communicative experience in which the world in which we live opens up’ (Risser, 2012, p. 1). If this is so, then thinking about the possibilities of meaning in different sorts of texts—including games—reveals the variety of ways in which the world can ‘open up’ at different historical moments. The coming onto the scene of novels, films, or games present new ways in which the world can open up, and it is the task of hermeneutics to investigate these new ways.

But one can accept that meaning in games is important or even central to game scholarship without feeling the need to write or read academic interpretations of specific games. There are a number of reasons why such work might be of importance. Academic game interpretations could demonstrate how people actually do interpret games; act as exemplars to demonstrate to people how to interpret games properly, thereby enriching their experience of playing games; help game producers make better, more meaningful games; reveal ideological aspects and anxieties of the society in which the texts were produced or consumed; or be used to demonstrate a particular theory. Space prevents a detailed discussion of the arguments for and against these purposes of game interpretation, but I wish to argue that behind all of these there is a more fundamental value in game interpretation that relates to how game interpretations clarify and test the assumptions about games that we take for granted and open up new ways of thinking about games.

As mentioned, philosophical hermeneutics as outlined by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (2004) takes understanding to be fundamental to our being in the world. We are finite, situated beings, yet we can

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understand others who are situated differently. This understanding of others makes self-understanding possible, and it is our ability to seek self-understanding that characterises our being in the world. This conception of hermeneutics as central to our being means that the question of interpretation is not just a matter of deciphering difficult passages in a novel in order to become a more astute reader, or uncovering the ideological anxieties latent in a first person shooter in order to say something about contemporary society. To understand understanding is to understand our being in the world.

Monica Vilhauer (2010) sees play as the central concept in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Play is the process of mediation through which the gap between people can be bridged without the collapsing of difference. We are situated beings, and as such there are limits—or 'horizons' as Gadamer puts it—to our understanding. But because we exist in a common tradition it is possible for those horizons to shift as we relate to other people who have different horizons of understanding. When we are really committed to understanding another person but fail to do so we are thrown back on ourselves. We question what it is about our existing beliefs that prevented us from understanding the other's position, and we reposition ourselves. We come back from this new position and try again. Perhaps we understand a little better, but still not fully. We again question why we've failed to understand, reposition ourselves, and come back, and so on, in a back and forth movement, until some understanding has been achieved.

Gadamer sees this back-and-forth movement through which all understanding takes place as play. This sort of play is seen most clearly in conversation, where interlocutors can question each other, ask for clarifications, and try different ways of explaining. Gadamer (2004, p.387) points out that in conversations neither of the interlocutors is fully in control of the conversation. The conversation happens to each of its members as much as it is something that each of them does. Such is the nature of all play and, so Gadamer asserts, of all understanding. Understanding is, therefore, a back and forth event rather than the product of that event.

In encountering and attempting to understand a text, for example a computer game, we begin with a set of beliefs and attitudes, about what a computer game is and how to engage with it. We have a first sense of what the game is about, perhaps from its title or our familiarity with the studio that developed it, and what our attitudes are to this theme or subject matter. These are what Gadamer calls 'prejudices.' While prejudices are often understood in solely negative terms, Gadamer claims that prejudices, far from being obstacles to understanding, are necessary to it. They are 'conditions of understanding' (2004, p. 278). Prejudices are opinions formed before all the evidence is available and as such are not necessarily wrong. When we genuinely try to understand a text there will be moments when our prejudices lead us to an interpretation that the text resists. This resistance is based on what is for Gadamer the fundamental goal of textual interpretation—harmony. A text will resist bad

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interpretations because such interpretations will lead to an incoherent whole in a given interpretive situation.

If an interpreter is committed to the play of understanding, aiming toward a coherent interpretation, then the prejudices with which one enters the interpretation are put at risk. Refusing to risk one's prejudices is possible, but to do so one must remain closed to the text, and to the ways in which it is meeting one's interpretive moves with incoherence rather than harmony. This is not to say that there is only one possible interpretation of a text. But since an interpreter is situated within a (in the case of an academic interpreter, institutional) context, and since this context exists in relation to the tradition that speaks the text, there are bad interpretations *in terms of that context*. Different interpretations differ not because some interpreters get at the truth of a text and others do not. They differ because the truth of an interpretation does not lie in the text. Interpretations are unique events, and each interpretation 'has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs' (2004, p. 398).

In interpretive theory, this concept is approached elsewhere using the terms 'reading formations,' (Bennett, 1983) and 'interpretive communities' (Fish, 1980) rather than 'prejudices' and 'tradition.' Both interpretive communities and reading formations indicate sets of beliefs, attitudes and strategies that guide interpretation, establishing the value of interpretations for a particular group, procedures for doing interpretations, and methods for distinguishing good from bad interpretations. When we interpret we do so in such a way that reflects the beliefs, attitudes and strategies of the reading formation that we are making use of or the interpretive community we are at that moment aligning ourselves with. For example, when Sontag's critic read the tank as a phallic symbol that critic was making use of an interpretive strategy that is central to a psychoanalytic reading formation, but finds little favour in the reading formation that Sontag is identifying with in her essay. To put this in Gadamerian terms, reading formations are composed of the prejudices that we bring to the text, and as such are indispensable in the task of interpretation. We cannot interpret from nowhere. While we can draw on different reading formations, and combine strategies, beliefs and attitudes derived from different reading formations, we can never interpret without one.

For Gadamer, creative processes always involve the same back-and-forth movement of play that he sees as central to interpretation. For example, a person writes code on a computer, which then compiles and runs it, and returns errors. The person corrects the errors, the programme runs again, and so on. The person is engaged in play, not fully in control of what happens, shifting their position as the play proceeds to meet its demands. When this play becomes available to others, for example when the programme is published as a game and people download it, the play process that went into its creation is transformed into structure. This 'transformation into structure' (Gadamer, 2004, pp.110-119) then makes more play possible, this time involving other players, each situated with their own 'horizon', each capable of coming to understand the game through the same back-and-forth play

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process. This process of understanding the game is a new instantiation of play, which can also undergo a transformation into structure if the interpreter writes down and publishes it as an interpretation.

### **What are we interpreting when we interpret?**

If understanding is our way of being in the world then there can be no question of a pre-interpretive state. As James Risser puts it, discussing Gadamer's hermeneutics, there is no 'zero-point from which meaning is first encountered' (Risser, 1997). We are historically situated beings, and this situation 'requires interpretation as a way of continually gaining access to it' (Risser, 2012, p.1). In everyday language we speak of 'interpreting a book' or 'interpreting a game,' as though the book or the game is a pre-existing object awaiting interpretation. But the book or the game is as much a product of interpretive effort as it is an object of interpretation. For Gadamer, the work of art is not an object that awaits interpretation by an audience. Rather, the encounter with the work of art (and the same can be said of any text that we genuinely wish to understand) 'is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of the event' (Gadamer, 2004, p.85). That is, interpretation does not entail a subject-object relationship between interpreter and text but is rather an event that is shaped by, amongst other things, the facticity—the historically situatedness—of the interpreter.

This is similar to the answer that Machor (1998) gives to the question of what we interpret when we interpret. Approaching the question from a different perspective, and not drawing on Gadamer, Machor argues:

When a novel, poem, newspaper article, or any text, as graphic or oral sign, enters the field, it becomes part of the site for interpretation, but what gets interpreted is not the text but the portion of the reading formation—the interpretive field—in operation during the particular sense-making act (Machor, 1998, p. 1136).

When we try to understand a text, a reading formation becomes part of the event of understanding, just as much as the interpreter does. When the play of understanding happens, reading formations shift. Strategies that worked before do not work now, new strategies are attempted, worked on, attempted again—played with. This is because, as Bordwell has convincingly argued, people do not rigorously employ theories when writing interpretations for publication. Rather, interpreters have a general sense of the purpose of doing an interpretation—to produce a novel and plausible interpretation—and make use of theories as 'heuristic devices that yield institutionally approved results' (1989, p.107).

The play of understanding, where prejudices are risked, can also be understood as an event in which the reading formation is risked. Machor argues that it is through individual interpretations that are accepted, rejected or amended by others who share in a particular reading formation that the reading

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formation changes. Such change can occur because reading formations are not discrete clubs, where membership of one reading formation discounts one from membership of another, or where the characteristics associated with one are found nowhere else. Reading formations change as specific interpretations point to new ways in which the goals of interpretation (which are of course themselves matters of interpretation) can be achieved.

This would suggest that, rather than being a means by which theory of meaning in games can be demonstrated and proven, specific interpretations of games precede abstract theorisation or model-building. Interpretations are not exemplars or applications of theory but are foundational to theory. In the remainder of this paper I will offer an interpretation of the game *Prison Architect* that makes use of common interpretive strategies in game studies, returning to the game as new strategies present themselves, and so allowing shifts in this reading formation that could be subsequently theorised.

### *Prison Architect*

In January 2014 the lead game designer at Molleindustria, Paolo Pedercini (2014) wrote a critique of the indie game *Prison Architect*, a management sim in which players must build and manage a prison. The game had been released as a paid alpha with monthly updates from September 2012 and was, at the time of Pedercini's article, on alpha 16 (the sixteenth version of the game). In his critique, Pedercini claims that the game misrepresents aspects of the US prison system on which it seems to be based. Given what he sees as the massive injustices of incarceration in the US, he argues that it behoves the designers to offer a more realistic simulation. He acknowledges that all simulations are reductions of the source system they simulate, but takes the position that 'what gets included and what's left out of a model [...] ultimately determines what a game "says"' (Pedercini, 2014). He offers a number of suggestions for how the game-as-simulation could be a more accurate representation of its source system and one that could highlight the perceived injustices of that system. Fewer riots would reflect the reality of the relative rarity of US prison riots and would also allow for a more sympathetic bond between player and prisoners. Changes to the way solitary confinement happened could highlight the ineffectiveness and injustice of this procedure<sup>1</sup>. More focus on the prevalence of drug offences would demonstrate the absurdities of the US 'War on Drugs.' Mechanics built around education and rehabilitation could present ideas about recidivism. Making prison labour a less important source of income than government subsidies would reflect the real tax burden that prisons represent. Lastly, a greater effort at relating what happens in the prison to the implied outside world—by linking it up to the judiciary, for example—would demonstrate the role that prisons play in wider social injustices.

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<sup>1</sup> As Pedercini acknowledged in an update to his essay, this criticism was based on his misunderstanding of how solitary confinement operated in the game.

### The representational model

This critique was based on a representational model of simulation. In this model, there are two distinct spheres—the simulation and the source system. In this case, the simulation is *Prison Architect*, and the source system is the US prison system. *Prison Architect* is about US prisons. We can tell this on the one hand by the rules (or mechanics, or gameplay). On the other hand, the fiction (or audiovisual elements, or story) can tell us. In fact Pedercini relies solely on the fiction aspects to determine the source system. *Prison Architect* is to do with US prisons not because of how the simulation *behaves* (its rules) but by how it *looks*—the prisoners’ orange jumpsuits, the dollar currency, the license plate workshops. The critique is based on a mismatch between these two halves of the game. While the simulation looks like a US prison, it does not behave like one.

In a podcast largely sympathetic to this interpretation of the game, the Introversion team said that many of Pedercini’s ideas were interesting, and that some of them were things they were already considering (Totilo, 2014). Many of the changes recommended by Pedercini have in fact found their way into the game. At the time of writing, *Prison Architect* is on alpha 30 and due for release in October 2015. Prisoners are far more complex characters now than in alpha 16, and less prone to rioting. Drugs and rehabilitation are more important aspects of the game. The lawyer staff member has a greater (and ethically dubious) role in the game, linking the running of a profitable prison with corruption in the wider legal system.

### A progressive reading based on the representational model

With these changes in place it is possible to read the game in quite progressive terms that would be sympathetic to Pedercini’s political views on the injustices of the US prison system and theoretical position in terms of the representational model of simulation. Pedercini, despite his criticism, sees in the game the possibility of the player engaging in ‘compelling ethical role-play’ because of the trade-offs that exist between treating prisoners justly and managing to turn a profit. He says that this is scuppered in alpha 16 for two reasons. First, because labour is the dominant strategy for making money and because there are no significant benefits in increasing prison population, the need to cram the prison with large numbers of prisoners (and the ethical problem that this entails) does not present itself for ethical play. This is different to the source system, where large government subsidies, Pedercini claims, tempt private prisons to increase their population at whatever ethical cost. Second, because the prisoners are not sympathetic or fully-rounded characters—because they are dehumanised—the guilt that a player might feel in cutting ethical corners to save cash is not keenly felt.



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If we focus just on the latter obstacle to sympathy, and skip forward to alpha 30, we find a game with more complex structures of identification between player and prisoners. The very premise of *Prison Architect* suggests this complexity, even if it is not fully leveraged in alpha 16. Unlike in *Theme Park* (Bullfrog, 1994) the characters that the player is responsible for are not willing customers. They are not there to be entertained (or, as in games like *Theme Hospital* (Bullfrog, 1997), to be made well). They are required to be there and are, by default, unhappy about it. The player's aim is not so much to make them happy, but to keep them in a state of relative contentment.

Foucault (1979) famously described prison as an example of discipline—a means through which power produced docile bodies, trained to be trainable. The relation between power, discipline and the prisoner-body in *Prison Architect* is not a simple mapping of Foucault's discussion of docile bodies. I refer to Foucault because it serves as a way into thinking about the prisoners' subjectivity, which is an issue in the game. The prisoners are differentiated based on name, ethnicity (in terms of visible markers such as skin tone), biography—including family relations and age, and crimes committed. They also have distinct personalities—some prisoners are prone to violence, or good at studying, or addicted to alcohol, and so on. As the game has developed from version to version, the social life of prisoners has also developed. They form gangs with other prisoners and are visited by their families. Indeed, social contact has always been an important 'need' for the prisoners, though some prisoners experience this need more intensely than others.

Working against this individuation based on personal characteristics is a tendency toward growth of the prison population. From alpha 6 (January 2013) this tendency has become more complicated. Up until this version, prisoners arrived every 24 hours, so expansion was a necessary part of the game. From alpha 6, the player has had much more control over how many and which type of prisoner will be admitted. Pedercini claims that prison growth is not encouraged. However, several aspects of the game do encourage prison growth. The grant system offers money directly for population expansion, and there are federal grants for new prisoners. But there are also indirect rewards for larger populations. Larger populations make other grants easier to obtain. For example, one of the grants requires 15 prisoners to pass the foundational educational and advanced educational courses. This is extremely difficult with a small population of prisoners. Similarly, a large population of prisoners gives a large labour pool, which, as Pedercini notes, is a major source of income. Also, a well-managed small prison quickly reaches a state of equilibrium, leaving the player relatively little challenge and relatively little to do. Retaining a small, simple prison is possible, but the player who does this is playing against the conventions of management sims of this sort, in which the reward and challenge structure is indicative of a preferred style of play. The preferred player, then, will tend to move from a small to an ever-growing prison.

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Pedercini argues that prison growth has the capacity to instigate moments of ethical reflection on the part of the player. As the prison population gets larger, prisoners ‘cease to be people and become numbers.’ Prisoners are not actually assigned numbers, they remain individuated on the basis of name. What Pedercini means is that after a certain point the prison population becomes an undifferentiated mass that must be managed as a mass rather than as a group of unique individuals. In later versions of the game, however, the player must continue to differentiate prisoners from each other. However, aspects of the prisoner’s life that are not relevant to the managing of the prison can be safely neglected (by the preferred player) and the prisoner is reconstituted as a type in terms that are relevant to the running of the prison. Like Foucault’s prisoners they are constituted as subjects of the prison system, their subjectivity arising from their place within the system both spatially—the cell they occupy—temporally—years served and to serve, the time-table that the player sets—and socially—relationship to other prisoners (snitch, gang leader etc.) and to guards (violent, informant etc.). These various compartmentalisations of subjectivity are most clearly gathered under the security level system, by which the prisoners are assigned to a category—Minimum, Medium, Maximum, SuperMax, Protective Custody, Death Row and Special.

Previous scholars have discussed the way in which gameplay demands affect aspects of the game not directly related to game goals. Speaking of *Civilization* David Myers (2005) argues that as players become better at the game they can (and do) ignore the fictional elements of the game, treating these elements as game objects rather than fictional entities: as power-ups and threats rather than as barbarian tribes or nuclear bombs. Similar points are made by Ralph Koster (2005) and Jesper Juul (2005).

However, as Pedercini realises, this propensity for the waning of extra-game significance must be countered if games are to ‘say something’ about the world. In the representative model of simulation, the game is always in danger of losing its ability to represent. The game designer must work hard to keep players in touch with the fictional side of the game.

One way in which this happens in *Prison Architect* is in the different structure of identification used in relation to guards and prison staff. In early versions of the game these staff members were, within particular roles, entirely undifferentiated in terms of behaviour and artwork. All of the guards looked the same, none were more or less strong, corrupt, violent than any other. The same went for the other roles—doctors, janitors and so on. Still in alpha 30 staff, while differentiated now in terms of gender and facial features, are unnamed and undifferentiated in terms of behaviour. Unlike the prisoners they have no personality or backstory. Unlike the prisoners, many of whom talk to their families on the telephone and in periodic visits, staff seem to have no life outside the prison. They never go home, indeed they never even sleep. In contrast to the prisoners the staff members are entirely defined by

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their role. Unlike the prisoners they have been completely socialized (and so have no need of prison). They have been entirely reduced to human capital. This gives very little for the player to identify with amongst the characters who are ostensibly on the player's side. Any identification that does go on is, I would suggest, related to the prisoners.

Both prisoners and staff are subject to the same dehumanizing system. Diegetically, this is the private prison where both prisoners and staff produce surplus value within a capitalist system. Non-diegetically, this is the game, in which both prisoners and staff as 'textual objects' work to represent 'the prison system' in the face of game structures that drain them of extra-game significance. On both counts what we see in the prisoners is not a successful outcome of this work, but rather an effort at resistance.

Nowhere is this resistance more clearly seen than in the gang system, which provides the possibility of an alternative form of socialization to that provided by the prison system. Socialization through rehabilitation holds the possibility of freedom from prison through the parole system. But if this freedom entails, as the game necessarily implies, a form of subjectivity akin to that of the prison staff, this is a dubious sort of freedom. The prison gang, on the other hand, allows the prisoner to enter a social formation and an economy that affords the prisoner that which the staff cannot get—ownership of property in the form of 'territory.'

This reading of the game relies on the representational model of simulation. The prisoners in the game represent prisoners in 'real life.' The staff represent staff in 'real life.' The way they behave is more or less like how prisoners and staff in the critic's mental model of prisons might operate, and it is through this play of similarity and difference that meaning emerges. Ian Bogost (2006) has called this 'simulation fever'—a gap opens up between our mental model of a system and what the simulation seems to be saying about the system and through this we are encouraged to reflect on our understanding of this system.

### **An alternative to the representational model**

Writing about film, Bordwell (1989, p. 3) claims that critics 'typically agree upon what textual cues are "there" even if they interpret the cues in differing ways.' He argues that, in selecting which textual factors ought to be made use of, and which ought to be ignored, the interpreter is guided by the critical institution, which,

steers the interpreter away from trivia toward those zones which are taken to be (a) presumably effective in spectators' responses (either potential or actual), and (b) traditionally capable of bearing meanings (1989, p. 133).

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In other words, the reading formation that an interpreter makes use of allows salient aspects of the film to be identified. A main schemata used in film, according to Bordwell, is the character as central, with interpretations being founded on the character and cues from the diegetic world and then from outside the diegesis being used to elaborate this character-focussed interpretation. In other words, it is a feature of most reading formations that film critics make use of that the character is the fundamental textual unit. This is the schema used in the foregoing reading. The prisoners and staff are at the centre of this reading, with the prison as system and the player actions as non-diegetic elements being seen to 'say something' about these characters.

This schema, while widespread, is not natural or necessary, and it is open to being overturned. Machor (2008, p. 1141) demonstrates that the 'hierarchical arrangement of [a reading formation's] interpretive codes' shifts not through theorising but through the accumulation of specific interpretations. He cites the example of a switch in the New Criticism from a form of interpretation based on textual unity and coherence to one based on ambiguity and paradox. Again, this shift happened not because of abstract theory-building but because of specific interpretations through which the goals of interpretation were worked out and the strategies by which those goals could be achieved were tried, refined and accepted. To put it in Gadamer's terms, the play of interpretation put the prejudices of unity and coherence at risk, and led to a re-ordering of these prejudices.

A case could be made for reversing Bordwell's hierarchy when it comes to games. One way of thinking about ludology is as an attempt to reverse this—to see what players do (the non-diegetic actions of the player) as the primary object of analysis. One potential consequence of this is to see games as primarily non-interpretive (Eskelinen, 2012) but another is to see game interpretation as primarily non-diegetic. This latter is the approach taken by Alexander Galloway (2006). In his discussion of *Civilization* Galloway disagrees fundamentally with the textual cues usually seen as preeminent in a reading of that game, arguing that the game is not about a particular model of history and particular representations of different civilizations' ethnic or racial characteristics. Such a reading is, of course, possible, but Galloway convincingly argues that such a reading is of less interest to one based on the kinds of actions players perform in the game. A game's fictional aspect is less important (at least in this particular reading of *Civilization*) than the performance that its algorithms encourage. The meaning of this performance lies in its being simultaneously a performance of informatics control and a performance of world domination. Galloway explains this in terms of the rhetorical figure of the zeugma, where a single word does double-duty in relation to two other words, for example in the sentence 'He took his hat and his leave.' Transformed into the realm of gameplay, a single action does double-duty in relation to two different spheres of action. In playing *Civilization* the player is not only planning world conquest by moving sliders and deploying troops around a map. The players is also, by the same actions, engaging in the sort of informatics control that is symptomatic of the

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contemporary control society as discussed by Gilles Deleuze. Galloway calls this ‘polyvalent doing’ (2006, p.105).

The kinds of things that the player does in *Civilization* are similar enough to the kinds of things that the player does in *Prison Architect* for Galloway’s reading to be borrowed wholesale in an interpretation of the latter game. It does not matter that *Civilization* is ‘about’ history and *Prison Architect* is ‘about’ prisons, since these themes are merely excuses for a particular form of play—an alibi or, in Galloway’s words a ‘decoy’ that sets us thinking about representation, when really we should be thinking about action and informatic control. What is at stake here is a game’s subject matter.

### The reintroduction of representation

However, I wish to argue that in thinking about *Prison Architect* we can engage in interpretation that thinks about representation without subscribing to the representational model of simulation and we can think about action without abandoning the concept of representation. To do this, we might think about what games are apart from sets of actions, based on rules, and covered with a fictional layer. T.L. Taylor (2009) provides a large menu for us to choose from in describing games as assemblages, as does Ian Bogost (2009) in describing games as ‘a mess.’ In each case, assemblage is a useful way of undermining binary views of games. This is not to suggest that such binary models are inherently bad. But models are always processes of reduction which are both productive and limiting. Interpretation allows us to see the limits of these reductions as well as alternatives to them.

To say that games are commodities might seem to move us away from the realm of meaning. The fact that media are part of an industry is sometimes seen as a threat to the cultural value of media. In order to make a case for popular culture as culture, John Fiske first declares that ‘popular culture is not consumption’ (1989, p. 9). This is following in a tradition from the Frankfurt School that sees the commodity nature of popular culture as a debasement of folk culture. Fiske is not denying that popular culture makes use of commodities but that even though objects of popular culture are commodities, they are also texts through which people construct meaning. It is possible to go further though, and say that the fact that a text is a commodity is a salient textual factor that can be brought within an interpretation of the text. In the following interpretation I claim that *Prison Architect* is meaningful not in spite of the fact that it is a commodity but because of this.

The digital games industries have proven particularly inventive in the forms of monetization they have deployed for their commodities: coin drop, loss-leading consoles, merchandise tie-ins, shareware, freemium, and subscription to name a few. Furthermore, digital games have been important in developing models of audience commodity and audience labour—for example, player production and

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other forms of playbour (Kücklich, 2005), in-game advertising, and rewarding visits to partner websites with in-game bonuses.

To the extent that these facts of game commodities have been discussed by those interested in meaning in games, they have been related to how design decisions have been influenced by the need for monetization. For example, the explanation of the shift from lives systems to energy systems is often explained in relation to the shift from arcades with their monetization model based on coin drops to the home console that allowed for longer play sessions without risk of financial damage. This financial decision then has implications for what a game can mean, so the possibility of long play sessions on the home computer allows for the development of RPGs, a genre that could not have evolved given the monetization strategies of arcades.

I wish to go a step further. Not only does the game-as-commodity, and the particular form that this commodity takes, indirectly influence what a game can mean by privileging certain meaningful mechanics or fictional schemes, it is itself productive of meaning.

As mentioned, *Prison Architect* has been a paid alpha since September 2012. This means that from that date Introversion charged for a digital download of a playable version of the game. This has a number of potential advantages for the game producers. It potentially provides an income during the development of the game, allowing for a longer development period which can cover some of the development costs and perhaps even make profit. A paid alpha also helps to test the market for the game, and to produce a market through word of mouth. A significant amount of the pre-release marketing and advertising costs can be outsourced to players. This market can also be addressed as a community and even co-producer of the game. Monthly updates of *Prison Architect* are accompanied by videos from Introversion explaining the updates and explaining how they have responded to player feedback in developing the game. A significant amount of play-testing, then, can be outsourced to players.

Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2003, p. 19) argue that game designers work hard to conceal the ‘technical, cultural and promotional dynamics’ that come together to create the game that the player is playing. This is often true, but it is also often true that designers foreground these dynamics within the game. This is what happens in *Prison Architect* with respect to its promotional strategies. In the initial period when the game went on sale as a paid alpha players could pay at a number of different levels. Paying more allowed players to make their mark in the game in various ways. A few pounds above the minimum price allowed players to name a prisoner, a little more allowed them to provide a prisoner biography, and so on. Within the finished game the trace of this promotional strategy can be seen. When any player brings up the rap sheet of a prisoner these names and biographies—some presumably the name of the paying player, others comical—is what is found.

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This is one example of the way in which the player *qua* player is interpellated as a customer from within the game. This is a customer of a very particular type. *Prison Architect* is not so much a product that involves a single transaction, in which this product passes over fully from the possession of a producer to a consumer. Buying *Prison Architect* inducts the customer into a community with certain expectations of behaviour. The fact that the shared object of the community—the game—changes every month requires a certain kind of activity on the part of its members apart from playing the game. At a minimum, the player is expected to continue to update the game monthly as new versions are released. It is often necessary to watch the accompanying videos or consult wikis and guides to understand how each version differs from the last. Other forms of participation are also encouraged—sharing mods and prison designs on platforms like Steam, or contributing to wikis, forums and strategy guides, for instance.

As Tiziana Terranova (2000) realised before these sorts of activities became as commonplace as they are today, free digital labour presents a challenge to traditional analyses of labour. Terranova presents this labour as paradoxical—‘Simultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited’ (2000, p. 33). *Prison Architect* modders (indeed, modders of many games) may be contributing value to the commodity they have already paid for without monetary compensation, but this is voluntary. To describe it as ‘exploitation’ requires us to call on ideas of false consciousness, which suggests an access to truth on the part of the critic that is denied the ‘ordinary player.’ This elitist viewpoint is problematic in that it fails to adequately explain by what criteria the critic gains the insight that ordinary players lack. It also fails to explain how players, when confronted with the idea of free labour as exploitation, very often shrug it off. Such players (or audience members, or fans) do not feel exploited because they are compensated in ‘affective currency’ (Ross, 2013).

If we take a position that free labour is a form of exploitation, then it is not hard to see the work of the player and the work of the prisoner as mirror images of each other.

Just as the prisoner and the player are both undergoing a suspect form of labour, both are also undergoing surveillance. This is what Mark Andrejevic (2002) calls ‘the work of being watched.’ The submission to surveillance in both cases allows for the regulation of behaviour. The player’s surveillance of the prisoner allows for the tailoring of timetables, the segregation of troublesome prisoners, the organisation of space to expedite prisoner traffic in such a way that needs are met quickly and full use is made of the time allotted to labour. The player can make use of all the expected apparatus of surveillance—patrolling guards, guard dogs and CCTV cameras.

But while the player is watching the prisoners, the player is also being watched. For Andrejevic, the TV viewer subjected to surveillance via technology such as TiVO is induced to ‘watch more efficiently’ (2002, p. 242). Precise metrics of minutes viewed and ads watched or skipped produce an

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audience commodity that is defined specifically enough to be sold at a premium to advertisers. Advertisements can therefore be targeted to only the most receptive demographics, ensuring that “wasted” watching will be kept to a minimum’ (2002, p. 242). Similarly, the surveillance of the player in *Prison Architect* allows the player to play more efficiently. By submitting to surveillance the player provides the producers with information which will improve the game. This submission is open and voluntary. I accepted on downloading the game that Introversion would collect information on the compatibility of the game to the hardware I use. I can choose (or not) to report bugs, or contribute to forum discussions and votes on ideas that I would like to see implemented in the game. This is a form of ‘being watched’ that is connected to the propensity toward voluntary disclosure that Andrejevic, writing in 2002, connects to the confessional talk-show and reality TV, but has only broadened with video-sharing websites like YouTube and social media like Facebook and Twitter.

In a special issue of *Surveillance and Society* on the interaction between surveillance and digital games Jennifer R. Whitson and Bart Simon (2013) see an affinity between digital games and surveillance. Games are, they argue, ‘ordering devices’ that constitute the player’s subjectivity and agency through a pre-designed rule set. At the same time, games work to disguise this disciplining of the player, offering an illusion of freedom through interactivity. This is similar to the Kline, Witheford and de Peuter’s (2003) critique mentioned earlier: play is fetishized and misrecognized as a free and unhistorical space of possibility.

With this conception of the player in mind, the prisoner in *Prison Architect* becomes a mirror and a parody of the player. But while the prisoner ‘knows’ he is imprisoned, his every move determined by the spatial and temporal orderings of the omnipotent player/architect, the player (at least as conceived by Kline et al (2003)) is ignorant of this. The contrast between the prisoner and the staff is repeated then in a contrast between the prisoner and the player. Like the staff, the prisoner is confined to the prison, but unlike the staff he is aware of his status as prisoner and is capable of performing some limited resistance to this imprisonment. Similarly, the player is confined; fashioned by technological, cultural and commercial forces the belief in which is willingly suspended in order to experience an ‘immersive’ experience. In this reading, the game is not ‘about’ prisons and prisoners at all. This is in the same way that for Galloway (2006) *Civilization* is not ‘about’ history. But there is a difference. For Galloway, history is a theme that could be substituted out for any other theme without affecting the fundamental aboutness of *Civilization*. Representation and ideology are, in Galloway’s terms, a ‘decoy’ for the real algorithm based on the player’s actions. In this reading of *Prison Architect*, however, it is different. Here, while the game is not ‘about’ prisons, the fact that the theme is prisons cannot be ignored. While *Theme Hospital* can be thought in terms of the same structure of player freedom and confinement, it is only when the theme of prisons enters the interpretive field that this



finds a second register against which it can resonate. The theme is allegorical in the conventional sense.

## Conclusion

The transformation into structure that this paper represents is an attempt to show how close reading might employ prejudices in an effort to understand, and in that effort to question these prejudices, shifting, if ever so slightly, the reading formations that make understanding games possible. This happened through a playful re-ordering of the hierarchy of textual features. But a single interpretation does not shift reading formations. To understand the important topic of understanding in games, game scholars need more interpretations that risk the prejudices on which they are based.

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