Digital Media, Society, and Culture

Angus A. A. Mol
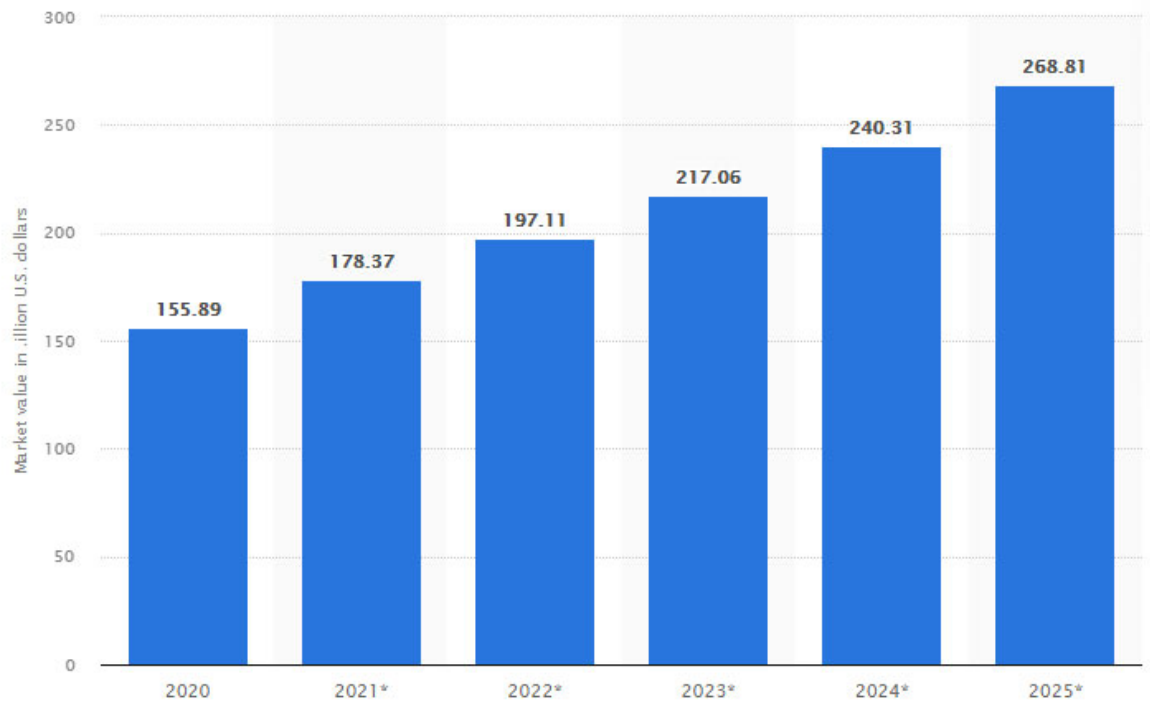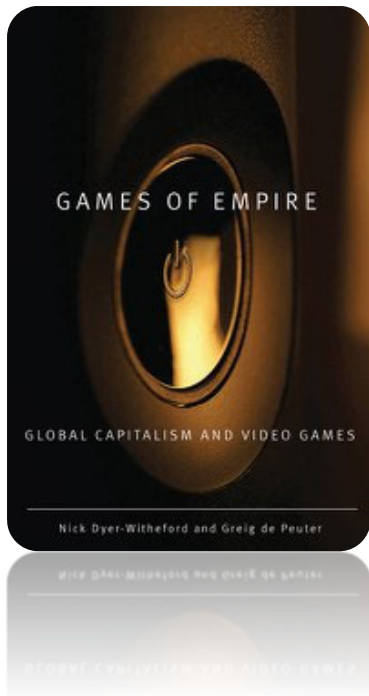
Digital Playgrounds
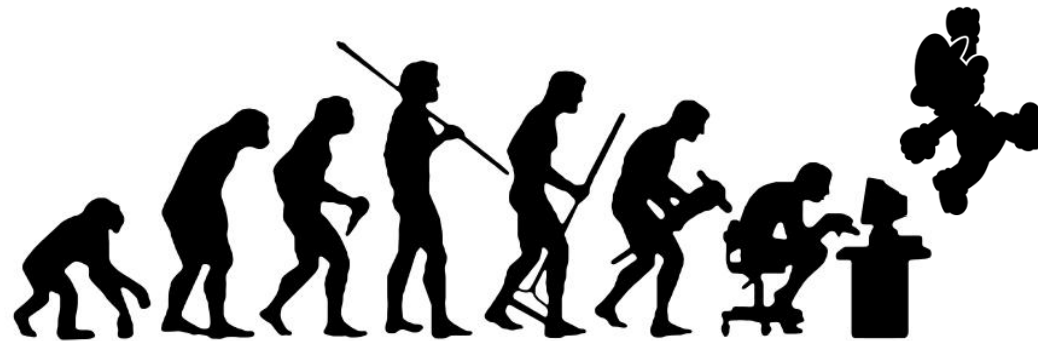
Video games are *serious* business

Source:

But… what is a game even❓

My own work on games

- How do we experience the past through play?
  - [Past-at-Play Lab](#)
  - [Playful Time Machines](#)

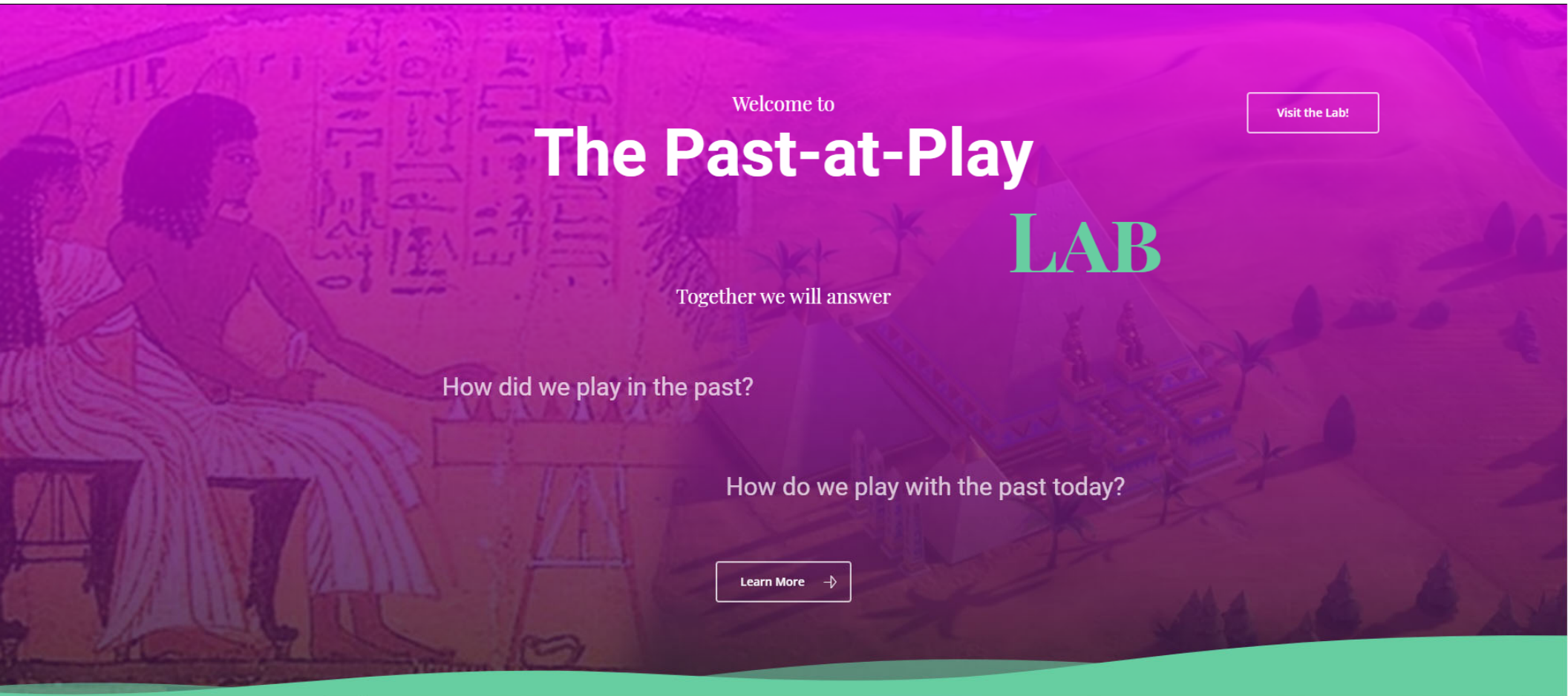- Move the playground into the Ivory Tower
  - [VALUE Foundation](#)
    - Playfulness, Accessibility, Knowledge
- Streaming the Past: (streamingthepast.com)
- Perhaps (2025): A Play and Games Studies Master

Games are ancient…

pastatplay.com

Play is even more ancient!

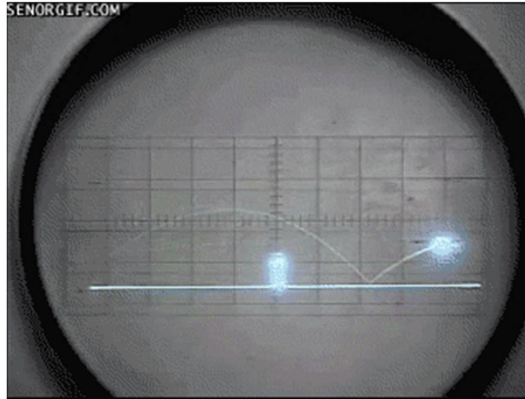My dog and I playing

Gorillas playing tag

~~Squid Game~~
Octopus playing with Lego

Digital games are pretty old already…
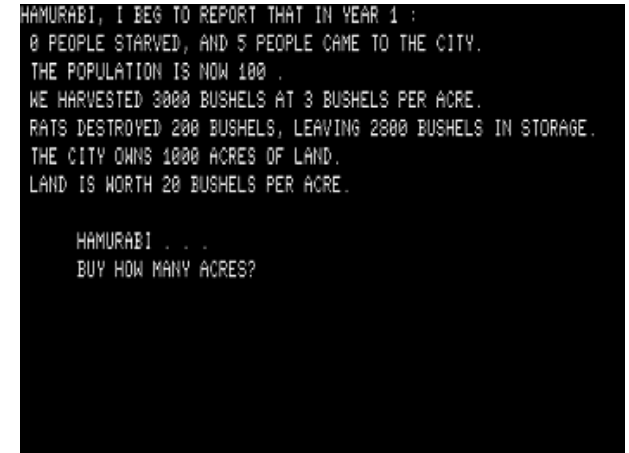

Nimatron (1940), world's first videogame-playing computer
Check out a slightly later version: Nimrod (1951)

Tennis for Two (Brookhaven, 1958)

Spacewar! (MIT, 1962)

The Sumerian Game(1964)

Check it out (Hamurabi, BASIC version)

Homo Ludens (Huizinga 1938)

- Play (1938, this from 1955, p.8-10):
    - **Free**: freeing and voluntary.
    - **Imitates**: is not "ordinary" or "real" life.
    - **Set apart**: is distinct from "ordinary" life both as to locality and duration.
    - **Rule-based**: creates order, is order.
    - **Seriously not serious**: connected with no material interest

Playground

The Real World

scoring a goal

kicking a ball into a net

The magic circle

Everything else
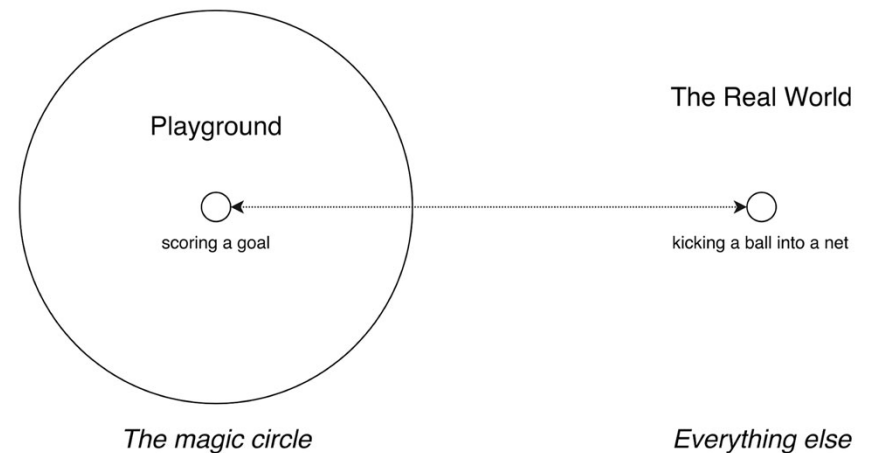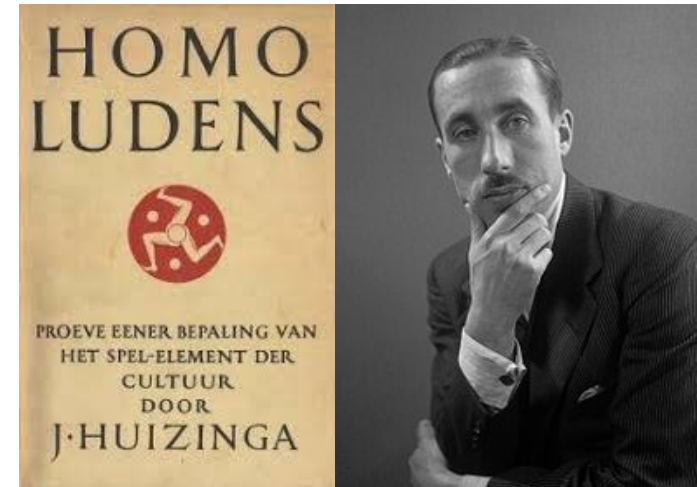
Research: Only slight risk of coronavirus contagion on football pitch

28 April 2020 - 3:32 PM

Photo: PA Images | Celebrations should be limited, and balls sanitized to further reduce potential spread among professionals.

Things that are playful

Things that are drawn into play

Things that are not play

**The Playground/
The Magic Circle/
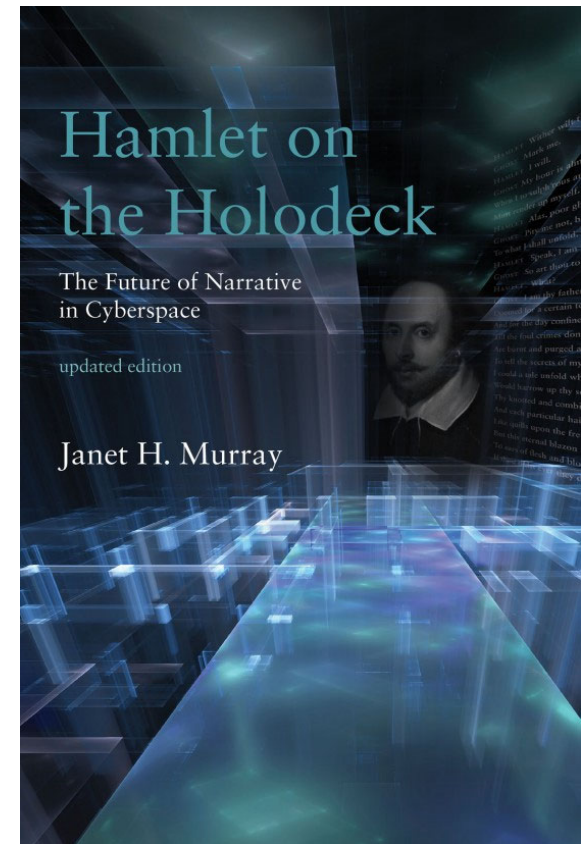Where Play Takes Place**

Things actively
kept out of play

So… What's new?

- Games as storytelling medium (Murray):
  - Procedural: computers execute a series of rules
  - Participatory: Computers respond to human interaction
  - Spatial: Computers provide a space for humans to move through
  - Encyclopedic: the computer helps us play with vast arrays of information

"The only radically novel [thing] about computer games in comparison with analogue games are their **ever increasing ability to handle vast amounts of information extremely quickly** and the machine's position as referee as well as definer and executer of mechanisms. (Iversen 2010, p. 33)"

Hamlet on the Holodeck

The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace

updated edition

Janet H. Murray

Play Anything (Bogost, 2016)

- Builds on *Huizinga*'s 'Magic Circle' (*Homo Ludens)*
- **Playgrounds**: anything with boundaries and content that is experienced as fun.
- Fun: any activity that is related to with commitment, attention, and care.
- Against: the irony baked into modern life
- Pro: seeing play in more than just digital games
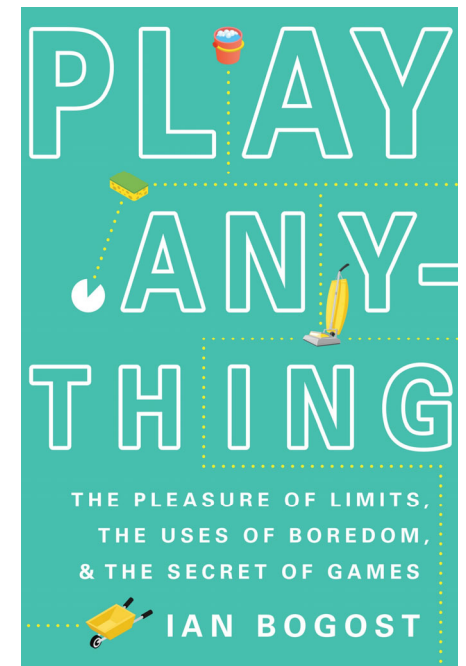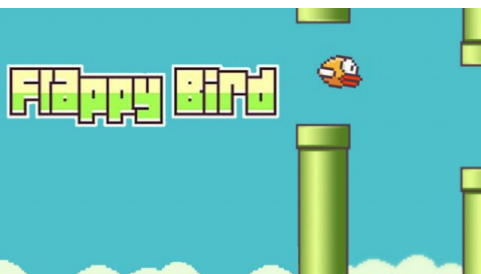
But still…what are video games?

Table 2.1 The elements of a videogame

|	
Graphics	Any images that are displayed and any effects performed on them. This includes 3D objects, 2D tiles, 2D full-screen shots, Full Motion Video (FMV), statistics, informational overlays and anything else the player will see.
Sound	Any music or sound effects that are played during the game. This includes starting music, CD music, MIDI, MOD tracks, Foley effects, environmental sound.
Interface	The interface is anything that the player has to use or have direct contact with in order to play the game . . . it goes beyond simply the mouse/keyboard/joystick [and] includes graphics that the player must click on, menu systems that the player must navigate through and game control systems such as how to steer or control pieces in the game.
Gameplay	Gameplay is a fuzzy term. It encompasses how much fun a game is, how immersive it is and the length of playability.
Story	The game's story includes any background before the game starts, all information the player gains during the story or when they win and any information they learn about characters in the game.

Source: Adapted from Howland 1998a.

Pong
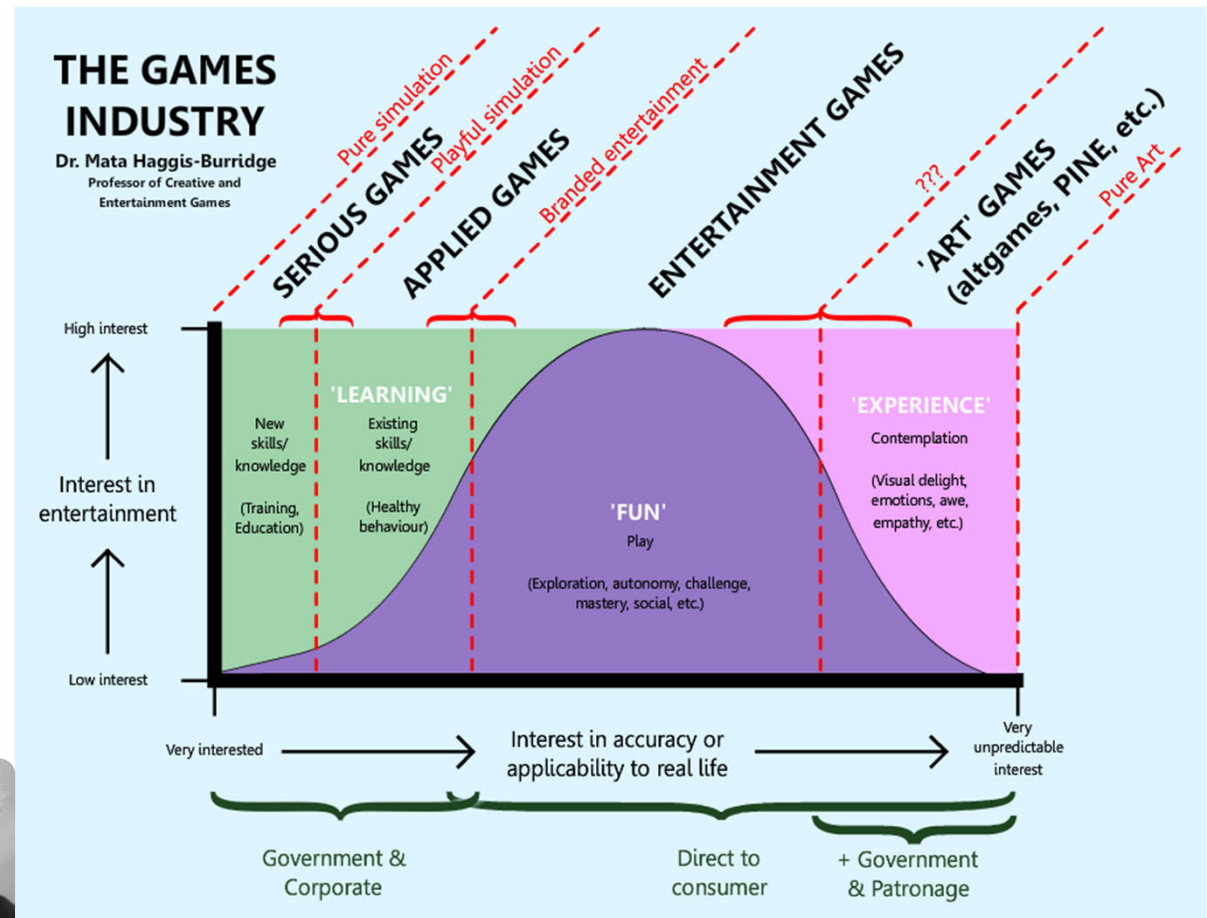
From Newman's *Videogames* (2010)

Video games come in many shapes and sizes
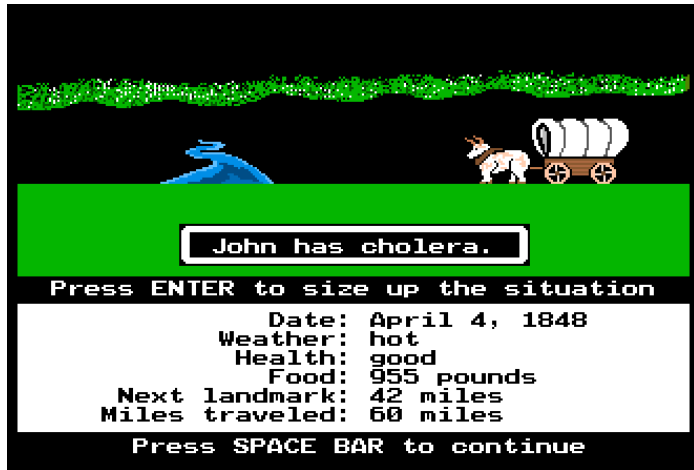
Oregon Trail:
The 'only' successful edutainment game

Mata Haggis-Burridge (BUAS)

THE GAMES INDUSTRY

Dr. Mata Haggis-Burridge
Professor of Creative and Entertainment Games

SERIOUS GAMES — Pure simulation — Playful simulation
APPLIED GAMES — Branded entertainment
ENTERTAINMENT GAMES — ???
'ART' GAMES (altgames, PINE, etc.) — Pure Art

High interest

Interest in entertainment

Low interest

'LEARNING'

New skills/ knowledge

(Training, Education)

Existing skills/ knowledge

(Healthy behaviour)

'FUN'

Play

(Exploration, autonomy, challenge, mastery, social, etc.)

'EXPERIENCE'

Contemplation

(Visual delight, emotions, awe, empathy, etc.)

Very interested → Interest in accuracy or applicability to real life → Very unpredictable interest

Government & Corporate

Direct to consumer

+ Government & Patronage

But really now…what are video games?

- "Any forms of computer-based entertainment software, either textual or image-based, using any electronic platform such as personal computers or consoles and involving one or multiple players in a physical or networked environment" (Fraschi 2001, in line with OED)
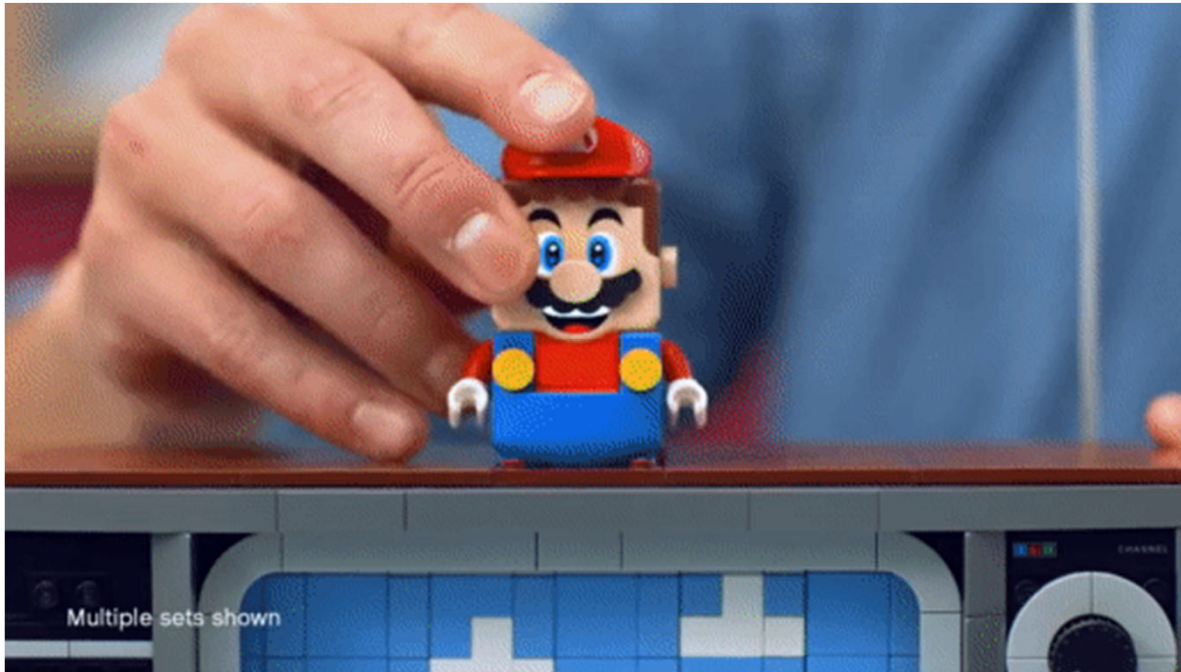

Pong   Legend of Zelda   Katamari Damacy   Journey   Red Dead Redemption 2

Seems simple, but…

… there are so many edge cases, e.g. Super Mario Lego…

Multiple sets shown

Any forms of **computer-based entertainment software (?)**, either textual or **image-based**, using **any electronic platform (?)** such as personal computers or consoles and involving **one or multiple players** in a **physical** or networked environment
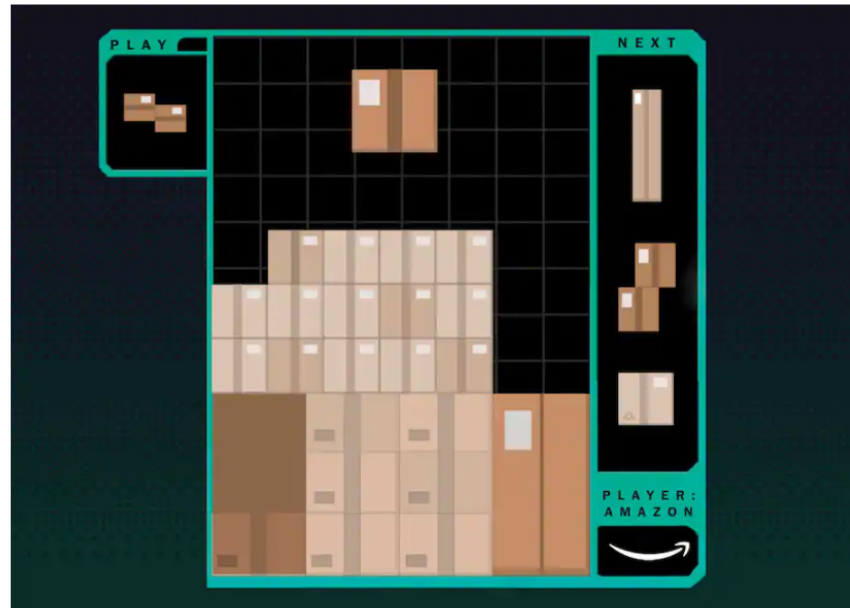
… or what about Twitter…

Any forms of **computer-based entertainment software**, either **textual or image-based**, using **any electronic platform** such as personal computers or consoles and **involving** one or **multiple players** in a physical or **networked environment**

See C.T. Nguyen's "How Twitter Gamifies Communication"

… or what about Shadowplay…

Any forms of **computer-based entertainment software**, either **textual or image-based**, using **any electronic platform** such as personal computers or consoles and **involving** one or **multiple players** in a physical or **networked environment**

… or Amazon's Mission Racer?

Amazon FC Games

The Washington Post

'MissionRacer': How Amazon turned the tedium of warehouse work into a game

(Washington Post illustration/iStock)

Any forms of **computer-based entertainment** (?) **software**, either textual or image-based, using **any electronic platform** such as personal computers or consoles and **involving** one or **multiple players** in a **physical** or networked environment

The Weird History of Solitaire (Bogost)

Girl playing Solitaire
(1809, Frank Benson)

Card depicting and
used by miners in the Klondike

Windows 3.10

Wes Cherry

Boss key-screen

80ties Office

Wes Cherry now grows cider apples

Where to find games: The Ludic Century

Squid Game (2021)

Animal Crossing: New Horizons (making a home in my lockdown home in April 2020)

In the 20th Century, the moving image was the dominant cultural form. While music, architecture, the written word, and many other forms of expression flourished in the last century, the **moving image came to dominate**. Personal storytelling, news reporting, epic cultural narratives, political propaganda – all were expressed most powerfully through film and video.

The rise of the moving image is **tightly bound to the rise of information**; film and video as media represent linear, non-interactive information that is accessed by a viewer.
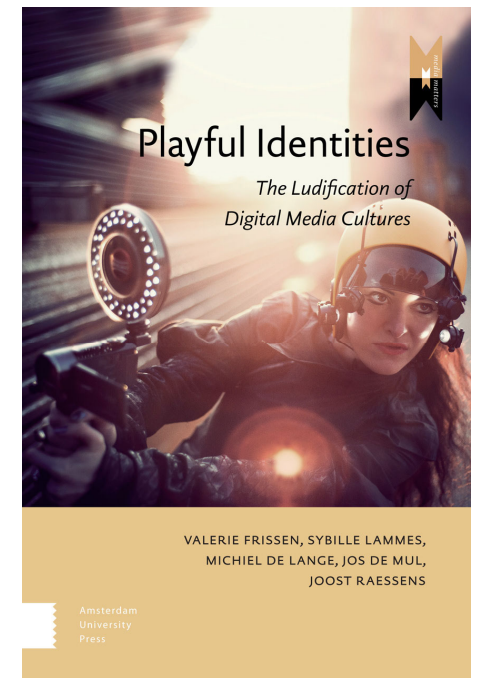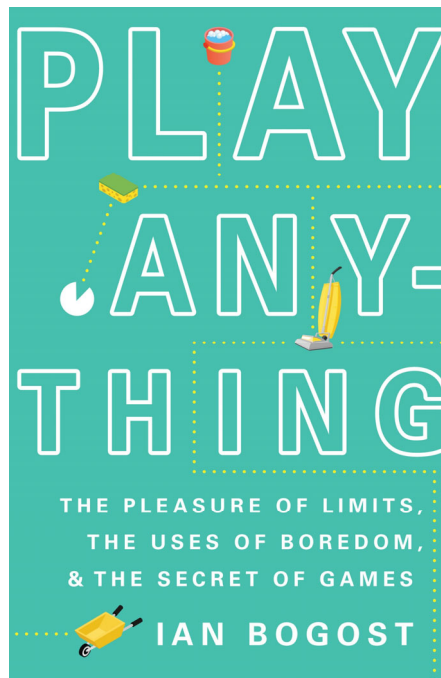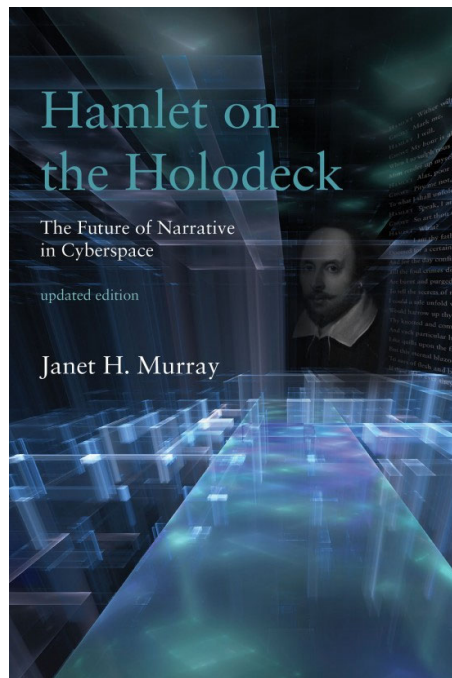
The Ludic Century is an era of games.
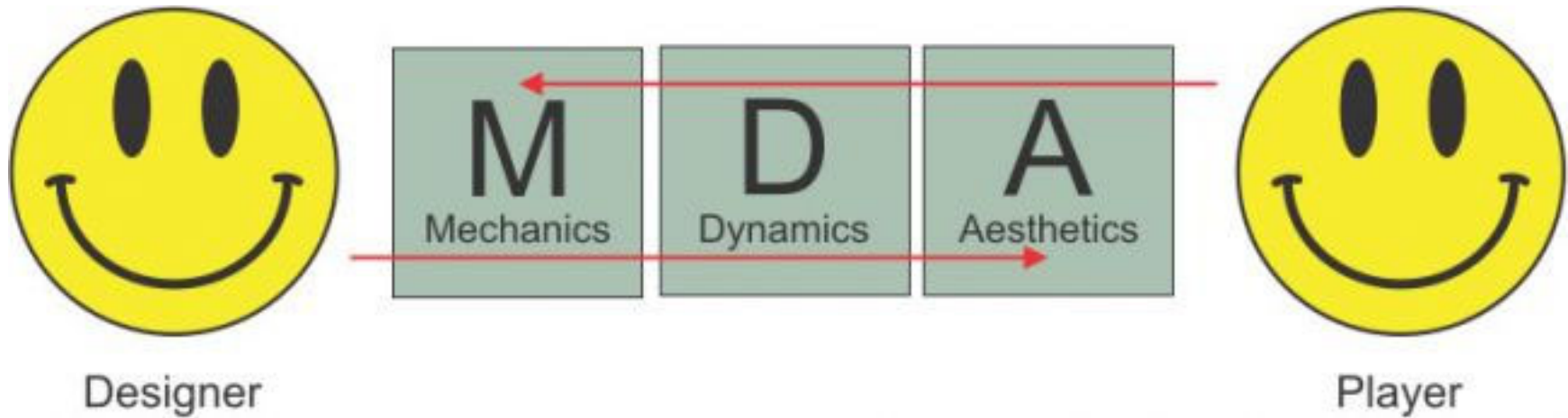**When information is put at play, game-like experiences replace linear media**. Media and culture in the Ludic Century is increasingly systemic, modular, customizable, and participatory. Games embody all of these characteristics in a very direct sense.

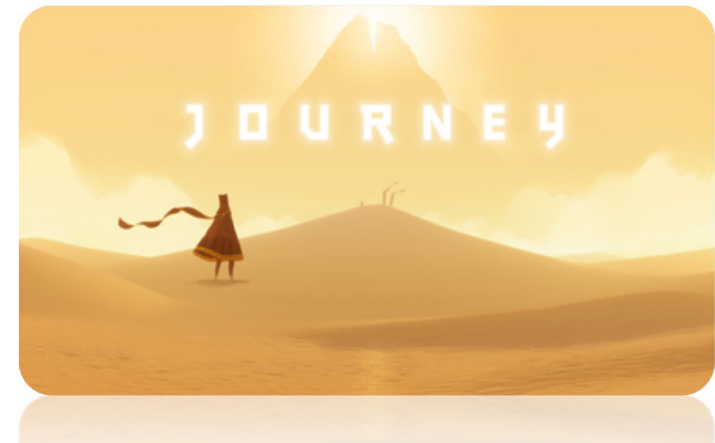~ Eric Zimmerman, Manifesto for a Ludic Century

How do digital playgrounds work?

How to analyze games?

MDA framework (Hunicke et al. 2004)

To understand our ludic century, you have to play!
So, have fun (?) with Flappy Bird!

Content cue: What digital playgrounds
do you play in? (doesn't have to be a game)

Ok, then…. One final definition: "Videogames are artifacts that evaluate performance"
(still curious about this and other definitions, check here)