Preface

THE TIME OUR KIDS CHEERED PROTEUS AND OTHER STORIES

It’s beautiful - look at that! It’s an asteroid belt. And the moon! Look at the shooting stars!

That was Matthew (names have been changed to protect the innocent), a cherubic young camper/game designer at a video game design-based summer youth program run by this book’s editors. And he was not alone in his fascination with the strange 8-bit-gone-2D/3D world projected in front of the classroom, pastel colors flickering across his eyes. A group of mostly young boys, ages 11-17, yelled—in a complete abdication of the “inside voice” concept—directions at the poor, befuddled camper stuck guiding the first-person character via the mouse and keyboard controls.

Together, the class was playing Proteus (Key & Kanaga, 2013), a video game so experimental that its developer once had to take to the company blog to defend its very status as a game (Key, 2013). To describe Proteus is difficult; the player explores a randomly generated island with flat, forward-facing 2D objects that emit tones, pulses, and musical swells. It would be a dramatic understatement to call Proteus’s narrative flow non-traditional. The game has no dialogue, no text beyond the menus, and no buttons with which to interact. The player advances the “story” by exploring this pixelated hybrid 2D/3D landscape that one camper described to us as “Atari 3D.” The objects in Proteus look flat, chunky, and pixelated, all rendered in a smooth high-definition, first-person environment where objects always face forward.

Chase the frog...follow the wisp. Wait, you can crouch. How did you do that?
Preface

In the middle! In the middle! See all the gravestones? Go down! Look, they’re (the wisps) going that way!

But the crystal light – they might lead you to possible death. You probably become one of the gravestones.

They’re going in all directions! Where are they going? Go that way! Go that way! They’re moving that direction – follow them!

Of course, games—even single-player video games—can be powerful participatory and shared experiences. Much like the author of the book’s foreword, Casey O’Donnell, we grew up playing ostensible single-player games like Metroid (Nintendo, 1986b), the Legend of Zelda (Nintendo, 1986a), and Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985) as multiplayer participatory experiences, passing Nintendo Entertainment System controllers back and forth in a collaborative effort to defeat the games. As O’Donnell and others throughout this book note, games serve as a powerful social connector. One needs to look no further than the flourishing world of e-sports and video game streaming to witness the boundaries between video game playing and spectatorship collapsing.

E-sports and the communities that grow around video games provide the historical context for two of the chapters in this book. Chapter 8 examines the use of gendered, homophobic, and sexually violent insults in competitive gaming online communities before the arrival of professional e-sports. The authors of Chapter 11 argue that e-sports and the live-streaming of video games might create “affinity spaces” for cognitive apprenticeship, where novices learn from experts through communities built around each game’s live stream.

We found a house! Forget the crystals, people! See if you can go inside. Oh, there’s a door! See if you can go inside. No, you can’t. Touch it. Follow the fairies (back to the fairies). They’re everywhere. They froze. They’re frozen. Oh, they’re crowding around that area. Okay, they’re moving! All the fairies – did you just get trapped? Turn around – it’s right there – touch it! We’re at the edge! So the farther away you go from that...Show him the fairy thingy – show him the gravestone circle. There’s the house again. Go to the house and see if the leaves don’t fall.

What makes this experience even more odd is that Proteus is a “de facto” music game: each pixelated frog, tree, or statue gives off a tone, so the randomly generated island is one giant ambient music generator. And yet the kids were cheering Proteus with the sound off because the speakers in the room were malfunctioning. Here is Proteus, one of the most infamous of a group of experimental games often tagged with the pejorative “walking simulator,” games where exploration and experiencing the game world and/or narrative—and, to be sure, Proteus’s narrative is quite opaque—is more important than the player scoring points or killing the bad guy or rescuing the princess. Because of Proteus’ experimental art style and dearth of combat, dialogue, or goals, it made an unorthodox candidate for this shared, participatory experience. Proteus is a video game so inscrutable that academic and designer Ian Bogost (2013) approached this notorious “not a game” from three different “artisanal” angles in one review. For him, a game so “unusual”—or perhaps any video game—necessitates dissection using multiple critical lenses, much like a movie might be deconstructed on more than one level, from aesthetic and technical concerns like cinematography or screenwriting, to its symbolism or implicit political message.

Its unique approach to narrative and aesthetics has put Proteus at the forefront of debates about what makes a video game a “video game” and whether some video games are even games at all (Key,
2013). These young campers cheering Proteus like a spectator sport are not regular avant garde game enthusiasts. Their tastes, while diverse, still adhere to the most popular game series of the day: Call of Duty; Minecraft; Smash Brothers; Minecraft; Grand Theft Auto; Minecraft; Pokémon; and Minecraft. Boundary-pushing genre and indie games like Portal (Valve Corporation, 2007), and Papers, Please (Pope, 2013) are popular, but rarely do these campers’ tastes veer into more experimental games where the notion of “winning” is subsumed by other concerns like storytelling or atmosphere. In Proteus’ case, we observed its unusual aesthetic, with its “flat” 3D and dripping 8-bit trees, engaging the campers the most. These aesthetics stood in stark contrast to the sepia-toned shooters that occupied so much of their mental real estate.

Video games have matured and are offering trailblazing, challenging, and alternative perspectives and points-of-view, through idiosyncratic combinations of the social, interactive, audio, spatial, and visual aspects of video games. Chapter 1 surveys the new video game landscape and explores how these new experiences are changing our traditional notions of what a game can or should be. The independent game sphere precipitated much of this challenge to dominant industry paradigms, by introducing these novel and provocative aesthetics and player perspectives. Chapter 15 compares this to the classic hardcore, punk, DIY, and indie movements of the 80s and 90s and how those values are represented in the perspectival shifting game mechanics of games like Monument Valley (Ustwo, 2014), Fez (Polytron Corporation, 2012), and Proteus. Indie games Outlast (Red Barrels, 2013) and Dear Esther (The Chinese Room, 2012), discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively, create much of their tension by subverting player agency. The player in Dear Esther canvasses a lonely randomly generated island, much like Proteus, in search of a narrative doled out in pieces out of the player’s control. In Outlast, discussed at length in Chapter 3, the player uses a video camera to document the gruesome horrors at an insane asylum run amuck. The player-as-video camera serves as an effective and scary narrative hook as well as a proxy embodiment of the surveillance state.

GAMING WITHOUT GOALS: WALL OF MINECRAFT

How was your weekend, Colin?

Pretty good, I guess. I was super depressed and shaky, but then I realized I just needed to play some Minecraft.
Preface

This actual exchange with a student decked out in a Minecraft hoodie and t-shirt is the stuff of parental nightmares, a confirmation of all the alarmist news stories about video game addiction and gamers dying from dehydration in Internet cafes. Sometimes it feels like physical force is necessary to separate children (and some adults) from the infinite Lego sandbox that is Minecraft (Mojang, 2011), the video game phenomenon that fetched billions of dollars from Microsoft. Some play and game theorists have suggested that there are four types of play: play for progress; play for power; play for fantasy; and play for self (Pellegrini, 1995; Rieber, 1996; Sutton-Smith, 2009). Others have said that gamers can be killers, explorers, achievers, or socializers (Bartle, 1996). We have observed all of these behaviors among kids playing Minecraft, so perhaps the possibility space it creates scratches the idiosyncratic needs of its different players.

We witnessed this phenomenon ourselves, manifested in the Wall of Minecraft, six children who played nonstop Minecraft on a row of computers against a wall, impervious to outside influence and distractions. They swapped between various mods—player-created modifications to the game’s core systems—and servers that housed different universes to explore, fluent not just in Minecraft’s internal rules, but also in the “meta”-game of mods, servers, YouTube Minecraft celebrities, and more. Did we mention that kids today like Minecraft? One of us jokingly referred to Minecraft as “The Great Equalizer”—Southern children from different socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, and religions—all playing games for different reasons and in different ways, united under the banner of this blocky randomly-generated playground. A few of the Minecrafters enjoyed the crafting elements, discovering new tools and blocks. Others focus on the building mechanic itself. Another just liked to explore and view everyone else’s creations. A couple were determined to beat the EnderDragon, the putative goal of Minecraft. One young girl approached Minecraft with the ethics of Sun Tzu, treating a non-competitive game as a competition, stealing or sabotaging everyone else’s stuff when they were not looking.

Within the Wall of Minecraft alone, we had kids playing for all of the reasons listed above, to be killers and explorers, to play for progress and fantasy, and to play for self, as Colin recounted. We have often debated as to whether the kids’ obsession with this world of never-ending Legos was a “good thing,” in part because we wanted them to “go outside,” so to speak, and experience new games and worlds beyond Minecraft. But, perhaps like all debates about whether something was a “good thing” or not, from Dungeons & Dragons (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) to Grand Theft Auto (DMA Design, 1997) before them, this is the wrong debate, and we should look to how a game like Minecraft satisfies so many needs of such a large, diverse group of players, young and old alike. Just like the Swedish-developed Minecraft can appeal to a diverse group of children in the United States, Chapter 17 holds up a mirror to the cultural dimensions of games and game design while examining video games’ increasing global influence. Similarly, Chapter 18 considers the importance of public games across the world, emphasizing the global cultural importance of community play that is not always connected to a game controller or a screen. Even with its technological trappings, Minecraft increasingly resembles as much a community as a game, from the playground conversations and layers of meta-content around it, the numerous servers and mods, to the live-streaming of Minecraft on Twitch and YouTube. One can even find specialized Minecraft parkour videos on YouTube.
EXPLORING FLATLAND: JUXTAPOSING CASES AS ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

One of the editors is a former middle school mathematics teacher whose most pivotal moment was problematizing space and perspective with 5th – 8th graders, incited by the short film Flatland: The Movie (Caplan, Wallace, Travis, & Johnson, 2007). “Is there a fourth dimension?” is the typical initial question this film inspires, following the rotating 4-dimensional cube (aka, tesseract, hypercube) expanded during the last scene. Building on this experience, she designed a hypermedia site (https://spaceandperspective.com) to support eighth grade learners investigation of cases as alternative perspective (Valentine & Kopcha, in press). One set of cases focused on video games like Asteroids (Atari Inc., 1979), Portal (Valve Corporation, 2007), and Super Paper Mario (Intelligent Systems, 2007). These video game cases became “geometric gifts” to support learners problematization of geometric shape and the dimensional qualities of these worlds. Alistar, one of the students, recounted this time as one where he found his gamer identity shifting:

Before, I just liked games that were big, you know were fun, interesting — I didn’t really care if they did anything new. And with indie games, a lot of them with their art styles and their mechanics like Fez kind feel like they’re almost taken from like different perspectives in space where every game feels different in that regard.

A typical console, blockbuster-loving gamer became mesmerized by games that messed with space and perspective, especially Fez (Polytron Corporation, 2012). However, he didn’t just play Fez for enjoyment, he wanted to re-skin Fez and tell the story of Flatland – a story about A. Square, a 4-sided polygon who lives on a plane. For Alistar, there were many parallels between A. Square’s visit to the third dimension and Gomez’s, the main character in Fez, ability to rotate his two-dimensional world in order to traverse the landscape.

So when I first bought Fez—this was right after the Space and Perspective class—I was interested and I had heard of this game before and I bought it. I played through the entire game and I thought it was great. Then I came across this guy on YouTube who had taken another game—like a space fighting game and made a modification where he actually converted the entire game and redesigned all the skins for everything—made all the different weapons for everything. And he made it a Star Wars game, which was kind of interesting. So what I’ve been trying to do is redesign Fez to kind of pretty much be Flatland.

Alistar is now in high school, taking classes in programming and video editing—anything that he sees helping him accomplish his goal to mod Fez. Not only is Alistar attune to the ability of games to mess with perspective, or create impossible perspectives, he is motivated by a desire to integrate the 1884 satire of Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions (Abbott, 1991) into an experience that only video games can accomplish. More about Alistar’s experience is explicated in Chapter 15.
SIZING UP KATAMARIS

[Paraphrased from the original conversation]

So I can suck up that cat?

When you get bigger, yeah. As you get bigger, well, more like wider, you can pick up bigger things.

I want to suck up that cat.

Yeah, that feels good. I like to pick up cinder blocks. I don’t know why. It’s just cool to pull them out of the ground because they’re so heavy.

{later in the level}

Oh, cool, I’m picking up trees. I was just bouncing off them.

Yeah, it kinda picks up steam as you get bigger. In the last level, you’re picking up islands and clouds and stuff.

So I was just here when I was small and now I’m eating it?

Yeah.

That’s [insert ‘cool,’ ‘amazing,’ ‘awesome,’ or whatever the kids are saying these days].

Truthfully, the exact superlative our camper used to describe Katamari Damacy (Namco, 2004) has been lost to the ages, but the look on his face displayed the mediation going on inside his brain, as he wrestled with the concepts. In his book, The Meaning of Video Games, Steven Jones (2008) attributes part of the Katamari Damacy’s unique appeal to a consumerist post-Ebay collectible-obsessed world, and, to be sure, there was a bit of that “gotta collect them all” completism going on here. But what motivated Jason was the size and scale of it all, that his tiny little ball had now grown into a world-destroying monster boulder and that he could watch grow on the diameter meter with every tree that stuck to it. His brain was working through the cognitive dissonance of the greater size and how small everything now looked on screen as compared to the earlier experience of being smaller than mice, pencils, and playing cards. He was contemplating volume and mass, all while playing a resolutely unrealistic, absurdist videogame, similar to the artificial flatness of Fez. The worlds of these games had a powerful affect on young learners.

Educators are well aware of these informal game experiences to contribute to learning; some educators, researchers, and game designers even seek to formalize this type of learning, creating games like Quest Atlantis (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carteaux, & Tuzun, 2005). In this book, several chapters describe games as a means to motivate and advance conceptual understandings of young learners. For example, Chapter 14 explores research on teaching science in a game-like environment, describing the benefits (and considerations) for motivation and learning. Chapter 12 presents a case study that uses games and social media as a way to increase an adolescent’s literacy skills. However, it is important to
point out that using games for educative purposes is wrought with complexity—formalizing informal experiences is not always well received by learners, nor are games that focus on teaching concepts always well designed. In the journal, *Science*, editor-in-chief Bruce Alberts expressed dismay at the state of what passed for “science” questions in a recent edition of *Trivial Pursuit*, but also how closely it resembled the rote memorization and regurgitation of facts that characterizes much science education in schools (2012). Even though he calls *Trivial Pursuit* “merely a game,” Alberts sees how the simplicity of *Trivial Pursuit*’s science section is reflected by poor science education and vice versa. Maybe the value lies not so much in the learning goals guiding these educative games as much as the game causing a shift in perspective, that leverages the sometimes educative value of video games. Whether through a perspective shift in identity, a reconsideration of dimensional landscapes and the physical nature of objects, or a shift in values from the consequences of in-game decisions, video games offer players a “safe space” to live, die, try, succeed, and fail at a range of activities and experiential phenomena.

**GAMES THAT MADE US CRY**

[Warning: semi-spoilers for *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013) and some other games ahead]

*Why did you make me play this?*

One of the editors came home to their significant other, sobbing in front of the TV, holding an Xbox 360 controller, the credits for the fifth episode of Telltale’s *Walking Dead* (2012) rolling onscreen. She had been warned about this by her editor boyfriend, who had been reduced to a heaving, inconsolable wreck by the same game months before. She came to the game not so much a console video gamer, but rather a fan of the *Walking Dead*’s zombie-filled universe in television and comic book form. That same world had the same emotional power in video game form, helped in no small part to that game’s superior writing and voice acting. Still, this experience was similar to a lot of interactive fiction in that it mirrored cinema or television, even with its branching narratives and quick time events (QTEs).

*Sob*

That was one of the editors of this book (*Ed. note: not Dr. Valentine*), at 2 o’clock in the morning, one hand on the controller, as he helped a young kid swim across a lake. *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* is a fantastical but gritty story of two brothers searching for medicine to save their dying father, is told through the actions of the two brothers, each mapped to a different analog stick on the controller and one of the triggers. Controlling the two brothers at the same time can be tricky, but you feel each one’s personality through the sticks as you solve puzzles. The younger brother is impish and playful and can crawl through small places and be hoisted up. The older brother is more thoughtful and strong, represented by the player’s other hand. The story plays out through this control scheme, so when one of the characters is…no longer there…*sniff*…that absence is felt via the controller.

This experience could only happen through video games because of the importance of the controller to the emotional response. The fractured video detective narrative of *Her Story* (Barlow, 2015), the exploratory house featured in *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013), or the metafictional game development
commentary of The Beginner’s Guide (Everything Unlimited Ltd., 2015) are only possible through
video games’ synthesis of interactivity and ability to tell non-linear stories. Though reports of crying
because of video games have sprouted up here and there over the years—of particular note is the death
of a certain character in Final Fantasy VII (Square, 1997)—it is only recently that games have become
an accepted vehicle for delivering emotional content beyond “shooting that thing was pretty cool.” Game
designers and developers increasingly embrace more serious topics and craft stories and narrative struc-
tures tailored to video games and concerns of player embodiment. Chapter 16 explores this embodiment
related to the game and controller use, with a particular focus on touchscreen games. Many of the other
chapters in this book, such as Chapters 2, 3 and 4, deal with the emotional power of this new breed of
games, and their ability to transform player perspectives through emotional resonance. More than that,
some of these games play with narrative tropes, such as the unreliable narrator famously used by Edgar
Allen Poe and employed in the cult classic, Shadow of the Colossus (Team Ico, 2005), as described by
Alistar, a youth game designer:

...you play as this criminal guy sort of, who is – your girlfriend’s been sacrificed...So you bring her
to this forbidden land where there’s this god who says, kills these 16 giant monsters and I’ll bring her
back. And um, the story at first is really simple, that’s all it is. But each of these monsters – they’re really
huge and every one you fight is kind of a puzzle. So there’s only 16 fights in the entire game. But also,
you get this feeling that first of all, where you are, you’re not supposed to be there. What you’re doing
is also wrong, because all of the things you fight never actually try and kill you – they only just defend
themselves. They never really try and hurt you, so you kind of feel bad for killing them. And it’s actually
a giant – the developer himself made it as a big non-violence message. And it’s a really beautiful game,
it’s just – the point of the game is you wake up in this temple; you have to find each one, just explore a
place. There’s not a single loading screen in the entire game. You just look around the land, trying to
find each one. And then, I don’t want to spoil it because I feel like you should look into this. It’s a VERY,
VERY cool game. Um, but the story does get deeper and as far as storytelling goes, there’s no dialogue
in the entire game besides this god talking to you and it still tells one of the greatest stories in games of
all time...and the ending of the game is so beautiful and so sad.

This ninth grader’s description of Shadow of the Colossus is a multilayered deconstruction of the game’s
message and central narrative. He notes the aesthetics of the world, the fact that it has no words, the final
twist that subverted his perception of his in-game actions, and even what he had of heard of the game
developer’s message, that the game was intended to make a statement about non-violence. While still a
ninth grader, this young gamer already viewed games on a number of cultural and political layers. This
kind of exchange was what inspired the editors to propose this book, and it was similar conversations
that most likely inspired the authors of Chapter 13 to explore the link between gamers and college-level
literacy and writing ability. The editors’ own video game youth programs feature quite a bit of writing,
as it is an essential part of game design.

Although Alistar admits he is drawn to unique narrative games, it is possible that many gamers, even
those attracted to the Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto series, will try out the pre-packaged missions
and develop a growing repertoire of the concepts of story—climax, anticipation, twists and turns – the
elements upon which great stories are created. Chapter 2, for example, delves into the videogame Alan
Wake and its embedded folklore as part of the game’s narrative, problematizing the notion of traditional
literary classification in this somewhat new narrative medium.
DESIGNING WAR GAMES AGAINST WAR

The inspiration for this book came from examples accumulated through our years working with game design in classrooms, summer camps, and after-school youth programs. During these programs, kids, typically middle- to high-school-aged, learn the basics and fundamentals of video and tabletop game design and development. At most of these camps, the kids work in groups on an original game design pitch, delivered to a group of experts, parents, and/or educators who offer frank, but constructive, feedback. The campers are required to generate these game ideas around loose educational design constraints, like make a game that addresses “economy” in some way, or “states of matter,” or “biomes,” or even “cicadas” (true story!). Despite the limited time allotted for this challenging design activity, the kids’ game pitches are often thoughtful, ridiculous, humorous, detailed, innovative, and educational, however rough around the edges.

Because video games have the power to place us in impossible worlds, show us unique perspectives, and make us feel genuine emotion like in Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons or the Walking Dead, games might be used to address more “serious” topics. As educators, we have observed the term “serious game” bandied about for years, as if games before were “not serious” and not to be taken seriously. A “serious game” is ostensibly a game that educates about a topic, though many “edutainment” games often fall short (Michael & Chen, 2005).

It is not that games have not addressed nor been symptomatic of political, economic, and social issues of their times. The old standby Monopoly, for example, is often portrayed as a celebration of rags-to-riches capitalism, but its underpinnings are more complicated, and it can be seen as a satire of such. Its roots are tangled, lying further back in a critique of unregulated monopolistic business practices (Pilon, 2015; Wagner, 2015). Certainly, its main purpose is the complete derailment of any family gathering, but even a beloved classic such as Monopoly, Life, or even Trivial Pursuit can transmit political messages, however subtle. There are idiosyncratic and complex systems in every game design, no matter how simple it might appear. The authors of Chapters 5 and 6 delve into these complex webs that interconnect the game design process, the designers and developers, and the game themselves, as well as the players, how we study and discuss games, and the spaces wherein games are created and distributed.

Throughout this game design process, the kids play plenty of video games for “research,” and over the years, we have observed their game preferences inform the designs of their game pitches, and vice versa. Nearly a decade ago, in the mid-2000s, our campers wanted to design grandiose unattainable wish fulfillment AAA blockbuster mega-budget games: “It’s like Gears of War meets Halo meets Grand Theft Auto meets Zelda meets...” Since the rise of mobile, indie, and generally “smaller” games, our kids’ perceptions of video games have changed, and so, too, have their designs, focusing on games with simpler mechanics and more specific goals. Our goal in sharing these stories is to elaborate upon the various phenomena that inspired us to reflect on games and their power to influence player perspectives.

Maybe it was something in the air or water that day, but one particular weekend game design workshop wrangled with complex sociopolitical issues, along lines of gender, race, imperialism, and poverty, to name a few.

You get points for showing the horrors of war.

Years ago, Nintendo released an adorable Nintendo 64 game about photographing Pokémon called Pokémon Snap (HAL Laboratory, 1999). War Photographer is sort of the polar opposite of that, and
an example of a youth-designed political game. The three boys in the small group told me this game was designed explicitly to demonstrate the human cost of war. The player goes to various war zones on assignment for a magazine to take pictures of destroyed buildings, families grieving, and bodies on the ground. In a rather cynical twist (especially for 11-year-olds!) on “if it bleeds, it leads,” the more gruesome the photograph, the more the war photographer gets paid and the more acclaim they get from their peers. Along the way they have to choose whether to involve themselves further in the conflict, saving lives in the process and treating people respectfully in the process, but also jeopardizing her/his budding photojournalistic career. This type of quandary is explored in Chapter 10 where the author assesses the educative affordances of analog games to place players in ethical and moral dilemmas, in much the same way the young creators of War Photographer imagined their titular hero finding him/herself trapped in a world of ethical gray areas.

You can’t call a game ‘Civil War Capers’.

And yet they did. Even after these nascent young white male game designers were told that the word “caper” suggested a comedy, and thus was a tad jaunty-sounding for a video game about the Underground Railroad, they went ahead and called their game idea “Civil War Capers” anyway. [Ed. note: years later, we also had to put the kibosh on a game concept called Killer Kar Krash]. They were also told that the premise of a game, wherein one of their actual real life best friends was sent back to a time before the Civil War and was sold into slavery might be perceived as...problematic to some.

Strip away the tone-deaf title and ridiculous time travel premise—that might be asking too much—and what these young designers created was a sincere, deep survival horror game idea. Their idea was steeped in actual historical events and shorn of the usual genre tropes like zombies, firearms, and doors that lock with magical amulets. This was real horror, the horror of escaped slaves along the Underground Railroad, foraging for food and supplies, trying to identify safe houses, escaping bounty hunters, dogs, local law enforcement, and the suspicious eyes of an often unsympathetic citizenry. Knock on the wrong door or eat the wrong plant, and it was peril. Their game design adhered to survival horror tropes, to be sure, but the situation was real. Now if they could just have changed the name....

These two examples parallel a recent rise in games that deal with heavy topics. For example, in the survival game This War of Mine (11 bit studios, 2014), players forage for food and supplies in a war zone based on the Balkan Wars. The greed of other humans represents as much of a threat as the war does. Papers, Please (Pope, 2013) tasks the player with being a border guard in a dystopian 1980s Soviet bloc-esque setting, where you check IDs and work visas for forgers and imprison the huddled masses yearning to be free, all for a little bonus money to pay for medicine for your dying son. These video games are popular, despite dealing with decidedly “non-fun” subjects like the ravages of war. Chapter 9 discusses these two video games and other serious games from a human rights angle, what values they impart, and how games might be used to educate on human rights issues.

Like in those ‘We Can Do It’ posters....

It is no secret that games fall short in offering a diverse palette of characters and stories along racial and gender lines, so this is why it is no surprise that a compelling and fascinating game design idea to come out of a weekend workshop challenged the assumptions of one of gaming’s most hoary tropes, the masculine, grim and gritty World War II shooter, which generally skew male in target demographic, to
say nothing of all-male character portrayal. WWII games focus on the male soldiers with nary a woman in sight, unless they are a civilian to be rescued. *Homefront*, designed by some of our campers, subverts these clichés. The girls in the group were inspired by Rosie the Riveter, *A League of Their Own*, and research into “war wives.” They demanded, to the chagrin of the boy in their group, that half the game feature the wife of a soldier, going to work in the factory, taking care of the children, selling war bonds, attending war rallies, rationing meat, almost like a high-consequence version of the Sims series. Depending on how the player did during the day, the wife wrote a letter to the soldier in the field depicting her mood. The reading of this letter affected the soldier’s morale, determining his health and ability in the more generic—and less interesting—“shooter” portion of the game. The soldier’s performance in combat elicited a letter in return that helped or hindered the wife, and so on. *Homefront* (not to be confused with any other Homefront movies, video games, or TV series), satisfied all three members of the group, in addition to shining a light on the importance of women to the war effort, seldom featured in video or tabletop games, even in the overused WWII setting. Chapter 7 wrestles directly with issues of unbalanced gender representation in the game industry, arguing for increased game design opportunities for girls, especially in the context of increasing female STEM participation. *Homefront* resembles few previous WWII video games in part because young women were given an opportunity to participate in the design process.

**SUMMARY**

This book surveys the current landscape of video (and non-video!) games, investigating recent trends in game narratives, gamer communities, sociopolitical gaming issues, educational gaming, and more. The authors of these book chapters examine the ways in which video games have broadened the definition of “video games” and the ways in which video games have caused perspective shifts in players by allowing them to embody and engage with unfamiliar, unusual, and uncomfortable scenarios. Video games, with their powerful integration of interactivity, storytelling, and aesthetics might be able to shift player perspectives on a number of social, cultural, and political concepts and issues, tackling topics as serious and diverse as living with depression (e.g., *Depression Quest*), LGBT issues and family dysfunction (e.g., *I Get This Call All the Time*), and working in an autocracy (e.g., *Papers, Please*), in addition to many of the games mentioned earlier in this preface. The chapters that follow turn a curious, critical, phenomenological, and educative gaze to the changing landscape of games, be they video, analogue, or somewhere in between.

*I just want to be able to do anything.*

Only one other game got the *Dead Poet’s Society* “Oh Captain My Captain” treatment given to *Proteus* that same summer camp, and it was not even a game at all, and one that still has not seen official release, as of this writing. In this case, the mere viewing (again, with the sound off!) of the promotional trailer for the sprawling, computer-generated space exploration game *No Man’s Sky* (Hello Games, 2016) sent the kids—and some counselors—into spasms of cheering and desk-climbing. *No Man’s Sky* features a near-endless universe of trillions of stars and planet, each one teeming with colorful, unique foreign fauna, flora, and topography ready for exploration. The player who discovers a new species even gets her/his name appended to it as a bit of a reward, and there is crafting and spaceship-upgrading and robot
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shooting. “It would take a staggering 5 billion years to visit every single planet in its universe, even in you were exploring those planets for just a single second each” (King, 2015, p. 133). The developer has even alluded to targeting the “Minecraft generation” with No Man’s Sky, meaning a generation of No Man’s Sky will eschew traditional narratives and mission goals and structures in favor of exploration, though, like Minecraft, there is a nominal ending to the game. Even a video game featuring epic space battles is not immune to the “not a video game” debate, and, indeed, it has raged on Internet message boards everywhere since No Man’s Sky’s unveiling.

In fact, an argument in the hallway broke out between one of our counselors and an old-school gamer visitor about whether No Man’s Sky had “enough to do,” or “was even a game at all.” This debate did not matter to the kids raised on infinite Legos, who cheered for the Atari 3D of Proteus. Back inside the room, these kids just asked to watch the video again, marveling at the near-infinite planets and perspectives that were possible within games.

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REFERENCES

11 bit studios. (2014). This war of mine [Microsoft Windows/OS X/Linux video game]. Warsaw, Poland: 11 bit studios.


