# University of Alberta

The Coolest Medium:
Thoughts regarding the future of videogames in an overheated culture

by

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## Abstract

This study examines the nature of the medium of modern videogames explored through the works of Marshall McLuhan. I use McLuhan's themes of hot and cold media, retribalization, and technology as a force that extends human perception in order to to analyze and explore the structure and possibilities for player agency that are present within videogames. The evolution of videogames into what McLuhan would identify as a very cool medium is an important part of his belief that technology is a motivator of cultural retribalization. I propose, therefore, that McLuhan's theories should be included within the field of game studies as an additional framework with which we may discuss the medium.

## Acknowledgements

Too many people
have listened to me complain
to list in one spot.

So I'll just list one:
Thank you Jocelyn, you are
the love of my life.

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# CHAPTER 1: MCLUHAN AND...

> We can think of a medium's explored uses as a spectrum, a possibility space that extends from purely artistic ones at one end... to purely instrumental uses at the other... In any given medium, many of these uses are known and well explored, while others are new and emerging.
>
> -- Ian Bogost (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 3)

Canadian philosopher and communication theorist Marshall McLuhan's insights into media and human communication were so influential that they continue to affect our thinking 60 years later. McLuhan's concepts of hot and cool media are particularly relevant to modern discussions about media, even as technology has made possible new media forms that McLuhan and his contemporaries were not familiar with (although McLuhan's prescient insights may have prefigured many of them). Additionally, McLuhan's predictions about the future of culture and communication trends (his concepts of retribalizaton and the global village) remain very relevant to our understanding of technology and its effect on global culture.

Many other games thinkers have contributed concepts that help clarify McLuhan's theories. In this section, I will examine how McLuhan explains the concepts of hot and cool media, and examine how several other theorists' work can help us apply these concepts to the world of video games and game studies. I am not trying to place McLuhan within game studies or use his thoughts to take a hard stance on any of the

conversations within game studies. I believe that McLuhan's work speaks extremely well to videogames and thus, I will make a case for his consideration in the work of game studies scholars. Also, I am not attempting to address the field of game theory, an economic discipline unrelated to my work here.

**Hot and Cold**

It all starts with *Understanding Media* and McLuhan's first proposal of his theory of hot and cool media:

> There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition." High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, "high definition." A cartoon is "low definition," simply because very little visual information is provided. (22)

McLuhan mentions high definition versus low definition and engagement of the senses as principal differentiators between hot and cold, but his use of the particular words 'hot' and 'cold' can introduce confusion.

It may seem that a hot medium should be one in which all of our senses are engaged by the medium, meaning that the viewer is overwhelmed or overstimulated. This would leave 'cold' referring to a slow medium that requires singular attention. Interestingly, this cleanly inverts

McLuhan's intent: he is referring to the medium itself, not our reaction to it. We might incorrectly assume that a book, would be considered cool, since it causes the reader to slow down and read carefully. But actually, it is engaging the reader intensely. A book is high definition in one sense (there is no audio component for example). Thus, according to McLuhan's thinking, a book actually is very hot.

As a result, it is important to remember that the user is not part of the equation in determining the relative heat of a medium.

For example, at first glance McLuhan’s distinction between cinema as hot and television as cool can be confusing. After all, today there are television channels dedicated to showing movies, so how can there be a substantial distinction? If we reduce the question to one of affordance, and the control that the medium grants to the user through its structure, the difference is easier to spot. Movies in a theatre appear in a run and are shown on a set schedule, and when there is no showing the theatre is dark. Television is a different experience. The viewer controls when his/her TV is on or off, and there is a greater selection of shows to choose from. Because the user has so much more power over his/her experience, this is clearly a cooler experience for McLuhan. While it is much cooler today, television may have been the coolest experience possible for people in McLuhan’s time. Others, like Ian Bogost, have also noticed the transformation of television into a cooler medium: “devices like digital

video recorders (DVRs) are creating a McLuhanian shockwave in the advertising landscape" (*Persuasive Games* 151).

However, I am suggesting that we remove the user from consider only as an evaluation of the medium's relative heat. We cannot dismiss the role that the user plays in the game experience. In *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research*, Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, and Robert Zubek state that "games are created by designers/teams of developers, and consumed by players" (1). The MDA framework breaks games into their distinct components: Rules (Mechanics) – System (Dynamics) – Fun (Aesthetics). Mechanics are the domain of the designer, aesthetics the player, and dynamics is the space where the two interact (2). The MDA can be thought of a view of the game:

> From the designer's perspective, the mechanics give rise to dynamic system behavior, which in turn leads to particular aesthetic experiences. From the player's perspective, aesthetics set the tone, which is born out in observable dynamics and eventually, operable mechanics. (2)

Recognizing that both the game designer and player have perspectives on a game allows us to begin to tackle the negotiated space that exists between the game and the player.

Though not specifically referencing McLuhan, in *The Play of Imagination,* Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown highlight the concept

of agency, which I would like to add as another factor that I believe supports my interpretation of McLuhan's hot and cold theory:

> At the most basic level, abilities give rise to a sense of agency, the things a player can actually do in the world. Throughout the game, as the character evolves, the player acquires increasing amounts of agency, new spells, access to new items, and the ability to travel to new places or face new challenges.
>
> A player's sense of agency becomes increasing powerful as it is linked to the social network of play. Players learn to use items and spells, for example, that not only benefit themselves but that may provide benefits to other players or an entire group or party. Within World of Warcraft, there are spells that are so beneficial, they are considered "must-have" spells for a class or character, and not having the ability can even get a player kicked out of a group or raiding party. But the power of such spells or items is not based in having them but, rather, in knowing how and when to use them. (158)

The user's agency is present within the space afforded to it by the structure of the game. In a hot medium, there is a relatively small space for agency - in a cooler medium, there is more.

> Videogames are the coolest medium today. So cool, in fact, that

they are at the centre of a startling realization that McLuhan first discussed 50 years ago: we are a naturally cool species and thanks to technology, and specifically videogames, we are becoming cooler and cooler every day. We will see this through McLuhan's writings themselves as well as in the works of contemporary game theorists.

**McLuhan and Bogost: Art and Agency**

Ian Bogost tackles the cultural hot/cold tension that videogames expose with a discussion of the perception of 'artgames'. His argument is best summed up as “no one really knows what art is anyway, so why care” (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 9-12). I suspect that McLuhan would be unsatisfied with such an argument. For us however, it is extremely helpful because if we adapt Bogost's way of thinking, it allows us to cut through general debates about what art is or is not and focus more intently upon how videogames become art. How can one make a distinction between an ‘artgame’ and a ‘normal’ game? Artgames “rely primarily on computation rules to produce their artistic meaning” and “expression arises primarily from the player’s interaction with the game’s mechanics and dynamics, and less so (in some cases almost not at all) in their visual, aural, and textual aspects (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 13).

Bogost may seem to be departing from definitions that one may think of in relation to art in other media. Paintings are renowned for the skill of the painter, for example. However, it follows that in artgames “a

procedural rhetoric does not argue a position but rather characterizes an idea" (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 14) which, in a medium that is so completely dependent upon the agency of the player, is not far from the emotional reaction that occurs when gazing upon a painting that truly reaches us. The game sets the stage and the user plays out the scenario. The cooler the game, the more control the user has over the outcome.

Though it is not his goal, by filtering artgames through the framework of a cool medium, Bogost helps us see that 'art' (or measures of value) are really just red herrings. I believe that the key point is agency, not a subjective definition of art. A game's procedural rhetoric enables agency and a cooler experience. The less agency, the hotter the game. Ultimately, I believe Bogost is quietly telling us that the artgame is characterizing rather than evaluating the medium. This is a problematic argument in that it neither helps us evaluate artgames nor games, nor does it elevate the discussion. It is easy to find example of a non-artgame that communicates an idea based on its structure. For example, the *Call of Duty* franchise characterizes a fetishization of military violence. It is the coding of the game that makes it this way. However, I advocate that all games do this and cannot conceive of a game that does not derive its gameplay from its structure. Perhaps an open-world sandbox game would come close, but the user is still bound by the activities that the creators include in the game.

My issues with it aside, the reason that I chose to discuss Bogost's artgames essay is that it highlights the chief difference between the medium of videogames and other media, such as television, movies, books, or paintings: agency. A chief difference between a videogame and other media is that a videogame must be much more than beautiful or masterfully created. Bogost is essentially arguing that an artgame must provide the structure to allow the player to play the art or live the art. I contend that this definition extends to all videogames, not just artgames.

> [Videogames] are models of experiences rather than textual descriptions or visual depictions of them... when we play games, we operate those models, our actions constrained by their rules...we take on a role... putting ourselves in the shoes of someone else...
>
> Videogames are a medium that lets us play a role within the constraints of a model world. And unlike playground games or board games, videogames are computational, so the model worlds and sets of rules they produce can be far more complex. These properties – computational models and roles – help us understand how videogames work and how they are different from other media. (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 4)

The technology does not currently exist to allow us to model experimental worlds in a way that is indistinguishable from the real world. Our reality is

still constrained by the real world. The medium really is the message.

**McLuhan and Bissell: Control and Agency**

McLuhan traced the roots of our culture's modern, individualist nature back to the abstraction of the written word to the phonetic alphabet. Citing the loss of agency in the rich, multi-sense involvement of an in-person conversation in what today would be a flurry of emails, text messages, and tweets, McLuhan describes the transformation:

> The invention of the alphabet, like the invention of the wheel, was the translation or reduction of a complex, organic interplay of spaces into a single space. The phonetic alphabet reduced the use of all the senses at once, which is oral speech, to a merely visual code. Today, such translation can be effected back and forth through a variety of spatial forms which we call the 'media of communication.' But each of these spaces had unique properties and impinges upon our other senses or spaces in unique ways. (*Essential McLuhan*, 139)

The transformation that McLuhan is talking about here is woefully one-sided and only concerns itself with reducing complex experience to simpler forms. What he missed was the expansion from simple back into complex forms.

Taken in a broad context, the written word has been the hot outcome of translating cool culture into a simpler form. I believe that

videogames are acting in the opposite direction, translating our now overheated culture back into more complex, cooler, forms. But do we get the same culture out the other side, or do we experience a signal loss?

Important for us right now is this tension between the form of dialogue vs. written discourse and how it informs our understanding of hot and cold media. Or, put another way, conversation and debate versus rigid expression of a point of view. As the instantiation of a point of view, the phonetic alphabet was among the first technologies to have impacts far beyond its intended course:

> In writing, the tendency is to isolate an aspect of some matter and to direct steady attention upon that aspect. In dialogue there is an equally natural interplay of multiple aspects of any matter. This interplay of aspects can generate insights or discovery. By contrast, a point of view is merely a way of *looking at* something. (*Essential McLuhan*, 90)

I see eye to eye with McLuhan here. The tension of writing vs. dialogue plays out today in traditional media and new media in the form of videogames. For example, early in *Extra Lives*, Tom Bissell embarks on a discussion of the difference between traditional forms of media and videogames in terms of user engagement. He describes himself “allowing [him]self to be manipulated” or “in other words, surrendering” (38) whilst he is being entertained. This occurs for any media and we have all

experienced it. The nature of the particular surrender is, however, discrete between media.

Bissell describes watching television as “surrendering to the inevitability of commercials amid bite-sized narrative blocks.” Film requires humiliating surrender, “for the film begins at a time I cannot control, has nothing to sell me that I have not already purchased, and goes on whether or not I happen to be in my seat”. Finally, reading a novel means “not only surrendering, I am allowing my mind to be occupied by a colonizer of uncertain intent”. In fact, before videogames, electronic entertainment assumed a passive consumer who was unable to provide feedback to the system in any meaningful way. And we are willing partners in this contract, surrendering (39). Bissell tells us that this is not the case in videogames and sees the same patterns as McLuhan:

> You control and are controlled. Games are patently aware of you and have a physical dimension unlike any other form of popular entertainment. On top of that, many require a marathon runner’s stamina: Certain console games can take as many as forty hours to complete, and, unlike books, you cannot bring them along for enjoyment during mass-transit dead time. (39)

Videogames are cool, particularly when compared to hot film and even hotter novels. However, videogames are also far cooler than the media that McLuhan himself identified as cool, television. A common

thread running through all of these relatively hot media is the consumer's lack of agency. And agency can be present in videogames in a way that has probably never been possible in mass media before.

**A Connection Through Story**

Story is another way that we can reach the spectrum of hot and cool media. A more complex story implies a cooler medium. Story is a complicated and loaded term, and in combination with games it becomes even more complicated. I will dive deep into the narrative vs. ludology debate in the next chapter, but for now I am going to take the term 'story' to roughly include all of the things that a player can do, and actually does, in the game whilst playing the game. Surely a blunt instrument, but I believe it is adequate for our use here.

A cool videogame story engages many of our senses, while a hot one is concerned intensely with one sense. For example, in *Tetris*, this would be the falling blocks and ever-increasing speed as the user moves through levels. In *Fallout 3*, story manifests itself in its post-apocalyptic world and the possibilities provided to the player. In these two examples we see a broad spectrum of story and also temperature within the media of videogames. *Tetris* is relatively warm: the player has agency to move the falling blocks, but only within a confined 2 dimensional space. *Fallout 3* is relatively very cool; the player has agency to act freely within a richer virtual world.

Bissell's discussion of agency and surrender becomes more interesting to me because of my reading of McLuhan. We see through example that richer story can equate to a cooler game, but is it as easy as drawing a straight line between story and the temperature of a medium? Within older media it certainly is not, but how about within videogames? We have to consider that the inherent heat of the medium will have a great impact on our answer. It is all relative. By their nature radio, television, and film are out of the viewer's control, so the coolest story possible will still be within the bounds set by the heat of the medium. The coolest film will always be hotter than the hottest videogame.

While a discussion about story and heat of the medium is attractive, my interest rests with agency or, to use a more familiar term for game studies theorists, interactivity. As with artgames, I believe we need to look past the surface. Here, we should look past story and on to the agency that the consumer has when consuming media. Thus, we can say that lack of control is certainly a hallmark of a hot medium like radio while coolness in videogames is certainly positively correlated to agency.

**Hot and Cold Cultural Change**

Unsurprisingly, McLuhan did not see many limits to the effect of hot media. In the December 1968 issue of *Playboy*, McLuhan provided a clear explanation of his belief that technology, in the form of the printing press, is singularly responsible for nationalism and industrialism:

> Look a bit closer at both nationalism and industrialism and you'll see that both derived directly from the explosion of print technology in the 16th Century. Nationalism didn't exist in Europe until the Renaissance, when typography enabled every literate man to *see* his mother tongue analytically as a uniform entity. (*Essential McLuhan*, 243)

The printing press, and its specific relationship to phonetic language, was ultimately the force that drove modern culture away from our tribal, oral, roots:

> Printing, remember, was the first mechanization of a complex handicraft; by creating an analytic sequence of step-by-step processes, it became the blueprint of all mechanization to follow. (*Essential McLuhan*, 244)

Accepting that technology is the force that drove us away from our tribal, multi-sense, and ultimately cool existence, McLuhan believed that "the retribalizing process wrought by the electric media, which is turning the planet into a global village" (*Essential McLuhan*, 248) will ultimately break us out of our individualized states and bring us back to our communal, multi-sensory, nature.

Looking forward it is easy to confuse McLuhan's tribal future with an age lacking in freedom, an assumption being that 'tribal' refers to a small, homogenous group. However, he is not referring to community in this

sense at all – retribalization, for McLuhan, refers to the manner of communication within a group with shared values. Moreover, a retribalized society is a cooler one, not one in which everything is a game. As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, a game requires three basic things: rules, outcomes, and effort. The cooling of a society does not represent these things. Societal cooling is moving away from individualization and toward interconnectivity.

In practice, an individual could be a member of any number of small groups, particularly within McLuhan's "global village". He sees point of view over conversation; individuals over community; hot, high-definition, single sense over cool, low-fidelity, interconnectivity. Put another way, "[i]n terms of the theme of media hot and cold, backward countries are cool, and we are hot. The 'city slicker' is hot, and the rustic is cool" (*Understanding Media*, 27).

Beyond hot and cold media there are other aspects of McLuhan's work that are very applicable to game studies. For example, the Tetrad of Media Effects identify the properties and actions of media. He frames the tetrad as questions:

- What does the artefact enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate? This can be asked concerning a wastebasket, a painting, a steamroller, or a zipper, as well as about a proposition in Euclid or a law of physics. It can be

asked about any word or phrase in any language.

- If some aspect of a situation is enlarged or enhanced, simultaneously the old condition or unenhanced situation is displaced thereby. What is pushed aside or obsolesced by the new 'organ'?
- What recurrence or retrieval of earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form? What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres in the new form?
- When pushed to the limits of its potential (another complementary action), the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. What is the reversal potential of the new form? (*Laws of Media* 98-99)

While the tetrad of media effects would certainly be an interesting and valuable addition, I am choosing to focus my attention on hot and cold media.

McLuhan predicted that broad social change, or perhaps realignment with a natural state, will be brought about by modern technology. This, I argue, is in process through videogames.

Next, I will conduct a very brief overview of game studies. Starting with a search for a common definition for the term “videogame” and moving on to an examination of the ongoing debate between narrative and

story, I will end with a proposed cease-fire that allows us to bring McLuhan back into the conversation.

## CHAPTER 2: GAME STUDIES

In order for us to begin to evaluate the contribution made by McLuhan's work, we must make a move into the current state of game studies. My purpose here is not to provide a complete evaluation of this particular corner of academic thought. Rather, I will focus on two areas that I believe are important to us. First, we will find an answer to “what is a game”. Second, I will investigate the past debate between narrativists and ludologists within game studies. Building on this foundation, in later chapters I will clarify how McLuhan's theories relate to game studies.

To begin, I will echo Jesper Juul in that “relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games: Such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player's actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player” (Juul).

### Finding a Definition of Videogames

When approaching a concept as nebulous as games, it is best to start from the general and move to the specific. Even with a simple approach, the very nature of games will make it difficult to grasp a permanent definition, so we should seek a container built as something malleable and able to adjust to socio-cultural changes (Mäyrä, 33).

With future changes in mind we can say that, broadly speaking, “the formal study of games focuses on the nature of game and play and aims

to provide concepts, models and theories that accurately describe the essential and unique features in game form and its functions” (Mäyrä, 33).

Working toward a more specific definition, we find a large number of competitors. Roger Caillois defines a game as “an activity that is voluntary, separate, uncertain, unproductive, has rules, is make-believe” (Mäyrä, 33). Caillois also regards gambling as a game (Henricks, 166).

Juul provides us with his 'classic game model':

1. rule-based, formal system
2. variable, quantifiable outcomes
3. different outcomes have different values
4. player exerts effort to affect the outcome
5. player is emotionally attached to the outcome
6. consequences of activity are optional and negotiable (Mäyrä, 34)

Frans Mäyrä also brings in Greg Costikyan's model. For Costikyan, a game is an “interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires players to struggle toward a goal.” The game’s structure ultimately creates its own meaning (Mäyrä, 34).

Even though we have a number of theorists working to define 'game', we can see clear common ground between them: unproductivity, voluntary, separation from reality, and ultimately a goal.

Now that we have an idea of what a game is, Mäyrä is also of great

assistance by identifying Juul's borderline cases: games of chance, gambling (notably in opposition to Caillois), open-ended simulators, and pen and paper role-playing games (Mäyrä, 35). These 'games' share many characteristics, but not all of them. This is problematic when evaluating modern videogames due to so many being based on, or integrating elements from, classic RPGs. Juul believes that modern games have evolved out of the classic RPG model and that the history of digital games is this departure (Mäyrä, 35).

But we have not touched on play, an element that certainly any observer would equate with any activity or artifact claiming to be a game. For play, we will start with Johan Huizinga and Caillois and their discussions of play, summarized by Thomas Henricks:

> Huizinga (1955, 3–13) defined play as an activity possessing the following qualities: (1) it is voluntary; (2) it is different from ordinary affairs, especially in its disregard for material interest; (3) it is secluded or limited by special times, places, and cultural configurations; (4) it explores tension and balance within a framework of rules; and (5) it is characterized by secrecy and disguising.

> Caillois's definition has six elements. Play is (1) free—that is, nonobligatory; (2) separate—that is, cut off in the ways described

above; (3) uncertain—in the sense that the results are not known beforehand; (4) unproductive—that is, an expenditure that does not create wealth or goods; (5) rule bound; and (6) fictive—that is, it is "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life" (2001b, 9–10). (166)

Henricks expands further on Caillois in that he does not believe that "that play and the sacred—or the ritual, the vehicle by which the sacred is regulated and presented—are the same things." Even through some games may have historic or mythic origins, the two forms are motivated by very different things. "This distinction holds even though both kinds of events are routinely cut off from ordinary affairs by special constructions of space and time, behavioral regulations, costumes, language, elaborate preparations, and so forth." The difference for Caillois is that play is about 'form', *how* actions are taken; while sacred acts are about 'content', *what* actions are taken. "In other words, in play people themselves control the course of the events; in ritual, they subordinate themselves to otherness (163-164).

McLuhan discusses similar relationships, both with regard to how the medium is the message and in the connection between games and what he describes as everyday, "workaday life".

All of this is to say:

> “[O]ne is led to define play as a free activity in which man finds himself immune to any apprehension regarding his acts. He defines its impact. He establishes its conditions and conclusion. From this derives his ease, calm, and good humor, which are not merely natural but even obligatory. It is a point of honor with him not to show that he takes the game too seriously, even in the event of ruin or defeat” (2001a, 159).” (Henricks, 164)

Eric Zimmerman's definition of play is helpful here as well: “[p]lay is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system.” This is very similar to how I would describe agency. He continues,

> [E]ven though the play only occurs because of these structures, the play is also exactly that thing that exists despite the system, the free movement within it, in the interstitial spaces between and among its components. Play exists in opposition to the structures it inhabits, at odds with the utilitarian functioning of the system. Yet play is at the same time an expression of a system, and intrinsically a part of it.

**Narrative and Play**

A point of serious debate within game studies is the question: “are games a narrative medium?” On one side of the argument, narrativists see the answer as clearly yes. Games are certainly a narrative medium.

Ludologists on the other hand, see the inherent differences between narrative media (television and movies) and games, and argue that play is replacing narrative.

Luckily, Juul lays out some basic definitions for us.

Three reasons why games are narratives:

1) We use narratives for everything.

2) Most games feature narrative introductions and back-stories.

3) Games share some traits with narratives.

3 reasons why games are not narratives:

1) Games are not part of the narrative media ecology formed by movies, novels, and theatre.

2) Time in games works differently than in narratives.

3) The relation between the reader/viewer and the story world is different than the relation between the player and the game world.

For clarity and ease of use, I have chosen the term 'narrativist', taking a cue from Gonzalo Frasca (2). Narrativist holds the same meaning in our context as narratologist:

> (“narratologist”) has a different meaning outside and inside the game studies community. This of course can be the source of confusion. For this reason, Michael Mateas proposed the term “narrativist” in order to refer to a scholar who uses “narrative and

> literary theory as the foundation upon which to build a theory of interactive media." [14]. For the sake of clarity, any reference in this article to such scholars will appear as "narrativist". I will reserve the term "narratologist" to describe a researcher who focuses on narrative in any medium, including film, literature or videogames. (2)

**Argument: Games are Narratives**

First, what is a narrative? In his article "Narrative, Games, and Theory", Jan Simons helps us: "Narratologists might agree that a narrative is a sequence of causally and chronologically linked events, but, when it comes to filling in the details, opinions differ." He goes on to state emphatically, that games are indeed narratives:

> A ludologist would argue that a reader or film spectator nevertheless always knows that the story will come to an already determined end. But this too is a merely psychological and phenomenological matter. A reader or a film spectator who is engaged with and cares about the characters does not experience stories very differently from games. (Simons)

One issue with such a definitive statement is the two-part criticism that 1) as a medium, games are clearly separate from books or film and 2) one who takes part in game studies thought needs to have experience playing and/or creating games. Simons addresses this head-on.

> [b]y emphasizing the importance of the player's gaming experience ludologists seem to want to say that to understand games one needs to have hands-on experience with games. This requirement would safeguard games studies from intrusions by narratologists...

Referencing Michael Mateas, Simons states that since games have rules, therefore agency does not exist; and that the "trick of the trade of game design is indeed to make the player believe she is in control" (Simons).

**Counter-Argument: Games are not a Narrative**

In *The Gaming Situation*, Markku Eskelinen summarizes the case against games as a narrative concisely: "[o]utside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama and games. If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories." Raph Koster goes further:

> Games can and do exist without narrative. The core of a game is a problem to solve. As game grammar tells us, it's actually typically a series of nested problems: I need to reach this location, which means I need to defeat enemies, which means I need to traverse space, which means I need to mash a button. Some of these, like "defeat enemies," are complex problems in their own right. Some of them are trivial problems, such as "mash button."

**True: A Temporary Resolution**

Simons is not without reason:

> Narratologists tend to consider novels and fiction films as prototypical examples of narrative, and games studies scholars generally follow Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois by setting games apart from “serious” activities (Huizinga, 1997; Caillois, 1958). However, just as narrative is not confined to fictional discourse, games are not always fictional either.

By allowing that games may contain strong elements of both narrative and play, Simons gives us the space in which to find common ground while much of the disagreement may be over semantics.

> Much depends, of course, on your definitions of narrative and simulation, which, in turn, depend on the language game you’re in and the moves you want to make. More often than not, however, academics seem to be unaware of the “gameness” of their work and tend to overlook that terms and definitions are provisional and constantly changing labels for sets of assumptions, tentative descriptions, local theories, wild speculations, bold hypotheses, metaphors, pragmatic inferences, etc. The proposed distinction between representation and simulation is itself a good example of how categories and definitions are set up strategically in a attempt to re-model the playground of the humanities.

Overal, Bogost “is not interested in the function or characteristics of play, or in play activities“ (Klabbers), but according to Zach Whalen, Bogost does take the opportunity to exploit the opening:

> ... in dealing with the inevitable ludology vs. narratology disagreement, Bogost takes an interesting approach. Rather than exploiting one or the other, the author follows Gonzalo Frasca's lead in being skeptical to either viewpoint's claim of exclusivity as a critical approach, but goes a step further in rejecting both ludology and narratology (or narrativism) as such on the grounds that either viewpoint is the inevitable outcome of a critical equation that begins treating games by separating their form from their expressive function.

Ultimately, Frasca brings us to a reasonable conclusion with his statement that the **“**real issue here is not if games are narratives or not, but if we can really expand our knowledge on games by taking whichever route we follow” (7). This is the approach I’m going to take moving forward: whatever works.

**Back to McLuhan**

I would argue that the resolution of the argument lies somewhere in the middle. Narrative takes the form of non-participatory feedback in good games. If your game relies too much on this mechanic, often in the form of quicktime events, then you’re making a game that is at least not exploiting

the possibilities of the medium. Or as McLuhan might say, you've made a hot game.

Now, having spent some time with game studies, in the next chapter I will move on to a more intense interrogation of McLuhan. I must adapt some of his theories to the modern world. Then, with the help of Bogost and Jane McGonigal, we will see some of the deeper connections that videogames can make. Finally, I will analyze McLuhan's theories specifically referencing games.

# CHAPTER 3: THE COOLEST MEDIUM

So far, we have examined the medium of videogames and the current landscape within game studies. It is time to take the first steps in putting the two together.

Next, I will look at what some modern game researchers, in this case McGonigal, Bogost, and Bissell, are discovering about videogames, through the lens of McLuhan. And finally, I will look, in detail, at what McLuhan himself wrote specifically about games in *Understanding Media*.

## Role of Games in a Detribalized World

Central to my reading of McLuhan are the ever-present touchstones of detribalized and retribalized societies. He revisits the concept of a detribalized society in defining interplay in games:

> Real interplay is reduced to nothing in a specialist world of delegated tasks and fragmented jobs. Some backward or tribal societies suddenly translated into industrial and specialist forms of mechanization cannot easily devise the antidote of sports and games to create countervailing force. They bog down into grim earnest. Men without art, and men without the popular arts of games, tend toward automatism. (*Understanding Media* 241)

While McLuhan foresaw a future overflowing with individualistic, industrial, and commercial forces, Jane McGonigal sees videogames as relief, with

them providing the art, meaning, and community that McLuhan's specialist man is yearning for:

1. Tackle unnecessary obstacles
2. Activate extreme positive emotions
3. Do more satisfying work
4. Find better hope of success
5. Strengthen your social connectivity
6. Immerse yourself in epic scale
7. Participate wholeheartedly wherever, whenever we can
8. Seek meaningful reward for making a better effort
9. Have more fun with strangers
10. Invent and adopt new happiness hacks
11. Contribute to a sustainable engagement economy
12. Seek out more epic wins
13. Spend ten thousand hours collaborating
14. Develop massively multiplayer foresight (346-8)

Each of these fixes provides an antidote for a detribalized society that is specifically driven by the videogame medium, particularly when undertaken in the light of being more social with our fellow human beings. McLuhan refers to this as 'interplay', but he really means any activity that breaks us out of the specialist confines of the print society. Looking at McGonigal's fixes in aggregate we see keywords to this effect everywhere:

‘positive emotions’, ‘satisfying work’, ‘ social connectivity’, ‘participate’, ‘meaningful reward’, ‘fun with strangers’, ‘collaborating’, ‘multiplayer’. She is not alone. Returning to the MDA, if we look further into 'Aesthetics' we find that we are quickly back in territory that is similar to McGonigal:

> In describing the aesthetics of a game, we want to move away from words like 'fun' and 'gameplay' towards a more directed vocabulary. This includes, but is not limited to, the taxonomy listed here:
>
> 1. Sensation - Game as sense-pleasure
> 2. Fantasy - Game as make-believe
> 3. Narrative - Game as drama
> 4. Challenge - Game as obstacle course
> 5. Fellowship - Game as social framework
> 6. Discovery - Game as uncharted territory
> 7. Expression - Game as self-discovery
> 8. Submission - Game as pastime (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2)

Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek are not alone. James Paul Gee puts forward 16 points that bear a striking resemblance to what we have already seen:

1. Identity
2. Interaction
3. Production
4. Risk taking

5. Customization
6. Agency
7. Well-ordered problems
8. Challenge and consolidation
9. Just-in-time and on demand
10. Situated meanings
11. Pleasantly frustrating
12. System thinking
13. Explore, think laterally, rethink goals
14. Smart tools and distributed knowledge
15. Cross-functional teams
16. Performance before competence (Gee)

Thicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek's 8 points as well as Gee's 16 all line up very well with McGonigal's fixes, with the focus of most being on the experience of the player.

McLuhan tells us that these things will bring society back to our sane, true, selves:

> We think of humor as a mark of sanity for a good reason: in fun and play we recover the integral person, who in the workaday world or in professional life can use only a small sector of his being. (*Understanding Media* 235)

Now, through the use of a cool interconnected technology, we may be able

to resurrect the idea of community at the spot where it was replaced. For example, augmented reality gives us the ability to map a layer of historical architecture over existing buildings. This is precisely what McLuhan's cool student is looking for: historical context and depth. It also replaces the limited conversation that can be had in one dimension.

Zimmerman's modes of interactivity play very well with hot and cold. Descending, from hottest to coolest:

Mode 1: Cognitive Interactivity; or Interpretive Participation with a Text

This is the psychological, emotional, hermeneutic, semiotic, reader-response, Rashomon -effect-ish, etc. kind of interactions that a participant can have with the so-called "content" of a text. Example: you reread a book after several years have passed and you find it's completely different than the book you remember.

Mode 2: Functional Interactivity; or Utilitarian Participation with a Text

Included here: functional, structural interactions with the material textual apparatus. That book you reread: did it have a table of contents? An index? What was the graphic design of the pages? How thick was the paper stock? How large was the book? How heavy? All of these characteristics are part of the total experience of

reading interaction.

Mode 3: Explicit Interactivity; or Participation with Designed Choices and Procedures in a Text

This is "interaction" in the obvious sense of the word: overt participation such as clicking the nonlinear links of a hypertext novel, following the rules of a Surrealist language game, rearranging the clothing on a set of paper dolls. Included here: choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other procedures programmed into the interactive experience.

Mode 4: Meta-interactivity; or Cultural Participation with a Text

This is interaction outside the experience of a single text. The clearest examples come from fan culture, in which readers appropriate, deconstruct, and reconstruct linear media, participating in and propagating massive communal narrative worlds.

**Videogames Are Better Than Real Life?**

[T]echnology neither saves us nor condemns us. It influences us, of course, changing how we perceive, conceive of, and interact with our world. McLuhan calls a medium an *extension of ourselves* for just this reason: it structures and informs our understanding and behaviour. (Bogost, *How to Do Things With Videogames* 2)

Humans spend a lot of time playing videogames. “In the United States alone, there are 183 million *active gamers*” with well over 400 million in the rest of the world (McGonigal 3). Approximately half a billion people self-identify as gamers. I have already argued that we are living in McLuhan’s future world of re-tribalization and that videogames are at least one of the technological manifestations that is driving this change. I am not the only one who has witnessed and recorded this shift, though we may have to dig a little in order to see the connection.

McLuhan identifies technology as being a re-tribalizing force, and in her book, *Reality is Broken*, McGonigal identifies many ways in which reality is inferior to videogames and, indirectly, guides us through the re-tribalizing force that videogames specifically apply to culture. On the surface this may seem to be a ridiculous claim, or rather it may be an obvious claim depending upon your experience with videogames. However her argument is undeniably intriguing. Why do so many dedicate so much time to videogames? McGonigal helps us by showing us how videogames can help us fix real life and I see a clear McLuhan-esque theme running through this list that McGonigal does not clearly delineate: most of these fixes are about true, lasting happiness coming from *each other*. This could take the form of working more closely together; interconnectivity; helping a stranger; solving a problem that is not just about ourselves. The printing press pushed us toward specialization,

individualism, and hot media. The printed word is hot, *World of Warcraft* is cool.

What McGonigal has really identified is the modern expression of McLuhan's re-tribalized reality, but we are adding one truly important part – a part that I have spent much of my time discussing: agency. I would add another item to her list: 15. Choose what we do and how we do it.

McGonigal addresses hot and cool media through the idea of "connectivity". Echoes of McLuhan's predictions are resonant throughout her work as soon as we start watching for them: "globally we make the mistake of becoming less social the richer we become as individuals, and as a society" (80). Humans derive our happiness from other people and affluence isolates us from others (80). Looking at Facebook-centred games like Lexulous and Farmville, we start to see how these simple games can quickly and easily break through these isolationist barriers to reconnect with loved ones. Real-world distance between players is overcome through Internet technology, and the games are designed as turn-based systems so that you don't have to be online playing at the same time, making it is easy to participate in the game, on your own schedule, no matter how busy you are (78). This connection is undoubtedly one of the reasons that these games are so popular.

However, in light of our discussions of McLuhan we can go further with regard to McGonigal's notion of 'connectivity'. Social connectivity is

not just a part of games, it is what games are all about. Through McLuhan and Bogost we can see that by playing a game we are communicating, or at least characterizing, an idea. How I build the house for my Sims or level my Paladin in *World of Warcraft* are communicating specific and meaningful things about me. This is in the realm of non-written communication that McLuhan is referring to when he talks about retribalization.

Just as communication is not strictly shared verbally in games, experience is also shared in different ways. With this in mind, I would like to visit the idea of transit, something which has been lost as our world has sped up. In fact, much technological advancement has been made specifically in the name of reducing the amount of time we humans spend in transit. However, it has not always been so. The train stops, the layovers when travelling by carriage were an integral part of the experience of a trip. Now being in-transit is something to be avoided and minimized at all costs; today, transit is no longer part of the trip. It is a prelude and an old idea. The following excerpt from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an example of how the world, and the subsequent journey through it, are clearly an elements for Shelley.

> We had arrived in England at the beginning of October, and it was now February. We accordingly determined to commence our journey towards the north at the expiration of another month. In this

> expedition we did not intend to follow the great road to Edinburgh, but to visit Windsor, Oxford, Matlock, and the Cumberland lakes, resolving to arrive at the completion of this tour about the end of July. I packed my chemical instruments, and the materials I had collected, resolving to finish my labours in some obscure nook in the northern Highlands of Scotland.
>
> We quitted London on the 27th of March, and remained a few days at Windsor, rambling in its beautiful forest. This was a new scene to us mountaineers; the majestic oaks, the quantity of game, and the herds of stately deer, were all novelties to us. (186)

Descriptions of journeys like this one show how travel was an important part of people's everyday lives. Shelley's experience of transit or journey is a shared, cool, experience that technology has robbed us of and that videogames are restoring to us.

> If the panorama anticipated a kind of travel yet to come, the videogame looks back on one that's already passed. Games restore the experience of resistance and adventure that the rail (and the airplane after it) had removed from travel, even if only through simulation. (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 47)

It is easy to find examples of transit in contemporary games. The *World of Warcraft*, for example, is extremely large and ever expanding. In order to move around the world, players are at first limited to their avatar's

own two feet. The size of the world is reinforced by the fact that, even putting the strength of enemies aside, it would take tens or hundreds of hours to explore the entire world on foot. As players progress and become more powerful they gain other, more efficient means of transportation, but the world must be travelled. This is also true as the player completes activities and quests. Part of the conquest of the journey is traversing the distance between quests or within quests, with a manner of control over that journey and how it is completed. A large world provides many options.

It is almost as if, in addition to all of the player characters and non-player characters, the world is, itself, an actor in the story. In games we are always doing things and in *World of Warcraft*, and many other massively multiplayer online roleplaying games, one of the things you have to do is travel.

Games do not only break through our de-tribalized isolation by bringing us into close connection with loved ones. Gamers also experience what McGonigal calls “ambient sociability”. Best described as “playing alone together”, ambient sociability is a situation where “we want company, but we don’t want to actively interact with anybody” (89). This may seem odd, but it turns out that “players enjoyed sharing the virtual environment, even if there was little to no direct interaction” (89). The players derive happiness from simply being around other gamers, even virtually. McGonigal quotes one *World of Warcraft* player’s blog:

> It's the feeling of not being alone in the world. I love being around other real players in the game. I enjoy seeing what they're doing, what they've achieved, and running across them out in the world 'doing their thing' while I'm doing mine. (89-90)

McGonigal goes on to say:

> Reality is too easy. Reality is depressing. It's unproductive, and hopeless. It's disconnected, and trivial. It's hard to get into. It's pointless, unrewarding, lonely, and isolating. It's hard to swallow. It's unsustainable. It's unambitious. It's disorganized and divided. It's stuck in the present.
>
> Reality is all of these things. But in at least one crucially important way, reality is also *better*: reality is our destiny. (348)

Videogames provide relief from many of the problems of the real world, but in addition to the fun and relaxation, or 'unreal work' of levelling an avatar, 'real work' can take place in videogames as well. Bogost uses the example of the pre-flight safety demonstration as an example of something that can be greatly improved through the use of drill-game ideas. He cites one airline's use of a beautiful woman to grab passengers' attention during the safety demonstration. This was an effective use of video, but games can be a much more powerful tool:

> [O]ne benefit of games over media like print, image, and film is how effectively they occupy our attention, forcing us to become

practitioners of their problems rather than casual observers (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 141).

Bogost takies this idea one step further to create a game that has passengers practice evacuating the plane as part of the safety demonstration. It is obviously not the real thing, but it would work to convey the particulars of that plane to the passengers. Is the nearest exit in front or behind me, etc. And a simulation, even played through on the tiny screen on the seat in front of you, would be more cost effective than running all the passengers of each plane through a real-life practice evacuation. Surely, practicing the evacuation would help instill some skills in the passengers, at least those who are interested, and would kill time while waiting for takeoff.

As Bogost says, “some games just don’t take on topics that interesting. They’re regimens more than experiences. Tools more than art. Drills more than challenges” (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 141). Though, videogames do not have to be about ‘work’, Bogost goes further:

> Videogames, people say, are a ‘lean forward’ medium, while others are ‘lean back’ media. Leaning forward is associated with control, activity, and engagement. Leaning forward requires continuous attention, thoughts, and movement, even if it’s just the movement of fingers on analog sticks and digital buttons. It’s one of the features that distinguish games from television, even if the former is often

played on the latter. (*How to Do Things With Videogames* 89)

Videogames are certainly not meant to be relaxing; as Bogost says, they are definitely a 'lean forward' medium. We are at the height of engagement when we are playing a game. I doubt anyone would say that a session of *Call of Duty* could be described as 'winding down' or that *Left 4 Dead* is 'taking it easy'. But while videogames are not relaxing, they are a pastime. They are something done in our recreational time rather than productive time. Bogost clearly believes that this reality is changing, or at least should change.

**What is a Game According to McLuhan?**

Through Bogost and McGonigal we can clearly start to see the threads taking shape, forming a bridge from McLuhan's observations of what he saw as an overheated culture to the retribalized future that videogames will be a part of shaping. The massive connection and shared experiences provided by the intensely cool medium of videogames is slowly unravelling the world created by the written word. Next we will focus more intensely on McLuhan's relationship with videogames and how he may have structured his criticism by looking at how McLuhan wrote about videogames. We will have to extrapolate and bring in some of the other authors we have already discussed with the final goal of moving closer to an understanding of what McLuhan would have thought of modern videogames as the coolest medium.

Although McLuhan did not know videogames in a form that we would recognize today, his comments regarding other electric media hold true for the games medium. Additionally, in *Understanding Media*, McLuhan devotes an entire chapter to specifically discussing games, so we can at least begin our speculation from solid footing.

> Games are popular art, collective, social *reactions* to the main drive or action of any culture. Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism.... As extensions of the popular response to the workaday stress, games become faithful models of a culture. They incorporate both the action and the reaction of whole populations in a single dynamic image. (*Understanding Media* 235)

McLuhan is concerned with the concept of “extension”, in not only games, but technology as a whole. For McLuhan, extension is at the centre of all technology. For example, computer hard drives extend the storage and retrieval capacities of our brains, telephones give flight to our voices across great distances, and we are even able to see into the past with low-tech photographs. In the same way, games extend our minds and bodies into previously inconceivable dimensions of space and time, beyond written communication.

> Like our vernacular tongues, all games are media of interpersonal communication, and they could have neither existence nor meaning

> except as extensions of our immediate inner lives. (*Understanding Media* 237)

Today, games allow interpersonal communication at another level: via avatars in virtual worlds or participation in goals shared across the entire planet.

It is necessary to make a connection here between the extension of ourselves and increased communication. “If we take a tennis racket in hand, or thirteen playing cards,” McLuhan wrote, “we consent to being a part of dynamic mechanism in an artificially contrived situation” and in this dynamic mechanism we are translating our inner lives into some manner of public broadcast (*Understanding Media* 238). How we play tennis, poker, or *Mass Effect* are all reflections of ourselves broadcast outwardly, even if we do not intend for it to be that way. Extending ourselves implies community, but does not require others to be present. The translation here, specifically with regard to games that include others, is the communication that McLuhan is talking about.

Moreover, McLuhan also insists that games must contain at least a thread of our real lives:

> Is this not the reason we enjoy those games most that mimic other situations in our work and social lives? Do not our favorite games provide a release from the monopolistic tyranny of the social machine? (*Understanding Media* 238)

At first, it seems counter-intuitive that we would favour games that provide escape from the tyranny of our regular lives by mimicking our tyranny-filled lives. However, McLuhan insists: “[f]or fun or games to be welcome, they must convey an echo of workaday life” (*Understanding Media 238).* And reflecting upon some of the most well-known games of today, many of the criticisms they receive are linked to being too much like real life. *World of Warcraft* contains too many simple quests where the players collect x number of items only to have to then collect y number of other items (otherwise known as ‘grinding’); *Grand Theft Auto* glorifies street violence; and the *Sims* is actively trying to be a life simulator. These games are popular; players spend immense amounts of time playing them, and they follow McLuhan’s framework.

The evolution of games from extremely simple to extremely complicated has caused this part of McLuhan’s argument to age poorly: all games use some mechanics that echo workaday life. Can we conceive of a game that does not either use mechanics that we already know (pulling levers, jumping) or containing a measure of familiarity with regard to setting, context, etc.? I do not believe we can. Therefore, defining what is a game by stating that it mimics the real world leads us into a circular argument, that games are both 'real' and 'non-workaday'. While our games have overgrown this particular fence, it is still important for us to know that videogames may not be the escape from real life that we think they are.

Continuing, McLuhan not only provides us with an explicit framework for what a game is, but he also implicitly discusses what a game is not.

> What disqualifies war from being a true game is probably what also disqualifies the stock market and business - the rules are not fully known nor accepted by all the players. (*Understanding Media* 240)

So we add another integral item to add to our framework: a set of rules that are commonly known, with an accepted understanding of their meaning. Though, continuing in this same passage, McLuhan changes direction slightly, again using the lens of engagement; “[f]urthermore, the audience is too fully participant in war and business”. An audience that is too engaged pushes any situation or possibility out of the realm of games. A hot medium cannot be a game, but that is not because of engagement. It is because of the medium. A hyper-engaged audience in a cool medium makes it a stronger candidate for gaming.

It is very interesting that while McLuhan explicitly states that war is not a game, many games can be described as some kind of “war game”. Part of the translation from real world to game is that the game designer must create a set of rules, as we read with McGonigal. This translation and installation of rules that all game players must abide by, is what moves war from hot to cool, and into the realm of videogames.

*Call of Duty* and *Halo* are among the most recognizable series of

games ever produced and they are specifically about the military and war: war with aliens in the case of *Halo* and war with various terrestrial enemies in *Call of Duty*. The American military has even used a videogame, *America's Army*, to aid in recruiting, indicating that there is at least nominal support for a similarity between simulated war and the real thing. It seems as though McLuhan is missing something here: war may fit the definition of a game better than he wants to admit. Or that overall audience engagement, in this case culture's total involvement in war, is not relevant to his definition.

We have seen McLuhan wrestle with two issues that he is having trouble resolving; games involving workaday life and war (and business) not being a game. I believe that in order to distill a definition that he is comfortable with, McLuhan is falling into a 'values' trap and seeing business and war as too 'serious' to fall into the category of games. As with Bogost and artgames, this is problematic in that it removes the discussion from one of the definitions of the medium to that of the content of that medium – another medium itself. In a discussion of a medium, McLuhan tells us that the content of the medium is irrelevant.

Thus, the framework for a game in McLuhan's eyes contain four pillars, each building on the previous: communication, reflection of workaday life, standing apart from everyday life, and finally, sharing and cooperation.

First, a videogame must involve communication of some kind. In colloquial language I believe his idea is a close analog to the concept of agency, the dynamics of which are at the centre of engagement, and hot and cold media. For McLuhan, a videogame must grant the player agency.

> Art and games need rules, conventions, and spectators. They must stand forth from the over-all situations as models of it in order for the quality of play to persist. For “play,” whether in life or in a wheel, implies *interplay*. There must be give and take, or dialogue, as between two or more persons and groups. (*Understanding Media* 240-1)

Structurally, this allows the player to create an expression of themselves through gameplay, thus communicating something about themselves through the medium of the videogame. This is the structure of the game.

Second, a videogame must reflect something of real life back at us. Its cool mechanics will allow for a story that is of some relevance to us, instantiate some truth, provide an outlet for creative energy, allow us to relive an historical event, something to bind it, ever so tenuously to the real-world. This is the content of the game.

Third, while games must enable communication between individuals and contain echos of real-life, games must stand apart from other aspects of culture with clear, shared, and agreed-upon rules. Games cannot be rigged to be in favour of one player over another and players

must choose to participate in games apart from their workaday lives. McLuhan's games cannot be our workaday lives.

Fourth, games are a cool medium, arguably the coolest medium. This may be because activities that are strictly individualistic in nature simply have a harder time existing as a cool medium. Games are the domain of sharing and cooperation, or at least mechanics that support sharing and cooperation in some situations.

# CHAPTER 4: GAMES IN ART AND AN OVERHEATED CULTURE

## An Example: Pervasive Games

With our rough answer to the question “what is a game” and a familiarity with a modernized McLuhan in hand, I will now set out to understand how others are using these systems to interact with, and expand our ideas of, the world. In fact, later I will argue broadly that games are relevant in every application and that humans crave game elements in our communication and interpersonal interactions. I will begin with pervasive games.

*Pervasive Games Theory and Design* by Markus Montola et al. introduces, defines, and explores the theory of pervasive games and pervasive gaming. According to Montola, a pervasive game is one that permeates beyond the normal time and space limitations that we may normally place on a game. For example, a typical time and place to play a tabletop or video game may be indoors on a rainy Sunday afternoon, while a pervasive game can be played almost anywhere at almost any time. As a part of his exploration, Montola shares his thoughts on pervasive game design, and interestingly explores the possible societal impacts of pervasive games and gaming.

Montola focuses on real-world games and uses the "decades-old game" *Killer: The Game of Assassination* extensively as a means to

explain the concept of “the magic circle”, "the boundary separating the ordinary from ludic and real from playful" (3, 7). I am not comfortable with this distinction in that I do not believe that these elements are necessarily mutually exclusive. Certainly, humans can find ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ tasks fun.

It may be best to define pervasive games through the examination of its genres, which include established games such as treasure hunts and assassination games, and emerging genres like playful public performances and reality games. In these types of games, play is public and not bound by many of the same constraints as tabletop games or videogames. While only providing us the historical origins of pervasive games, this approach removes the technological and fully address the theoretical issues surrounding pervasive and augmented reality gaming on equal footing. Removing technology allows for the observer to fully appreciate the core content of older games where technology was inferior or at least inaccessible, rather than simply privileging new games based on superior technology. The content is actually platform agnostic and helps us understand how McLuhan might have been thinking about games:

> In order to understand the origins and implications of pervasive games, we need to move away from the technological origins of the form and look at it in cultural contexts.... The "history" thus created should be approached as an after-the-fact construct, a tool to understand the currents that have helped shape the forms in which

pervasive games were born. (68)

By removing the technological components of a game, the underlying mechanics float to the surface.

We see this in the form's historical precursors: play in public space, play in everyday life, roots in literature and the arts, and finally more recently in the culture of gamers with role-playing games and persistent virtual worlds for additional help. I argue that today nearly all games, and particularly videogames, could be described as pervasive games. Draw Something notifies us when our playing partner has completed a drawing and sends an in-app message if we have not logged in for a few days; more complicated games like *Mass Effect 3* (which is played on PC or console) can include a simplified app for mobile devices that allows the player to continue to make progress in the game even when they are away from home.

As the word itself suggests, pervasive games reach past the screen and become part of the life of the player. Having read McGonigal and now McLuhan we can see that increasing pervasiveness increases engagement across our senses and certainly cools a game. If all videogames cannot be described as pervasive, they would certainly like to be.

Concerning design, Montola introduces three approaches to expansion: spatial expansion, temporal expansion, and social expansion.

"Spatially expanded games are inherently about *discovery* and *changing perception*" (89), appropriating space, architecture, and external objects into the game, making the real world a real part of the game experience (77). I believe this is a typical example of gamification – inserting game mechanics into real world activities, though in this case the purpose of the game is likely not those activities.

Temporal expansion exists within a sliding scale of active play, peripheral play, and passive play (98), where the game appropriates the time of each of the players, "making the game available for play at all times while decreasing players' ability to control *when* they are playing" (97), and while this can be exciting, game design must take into account the excited states of the enjoyment and anxiety dichotomy that this can produce. I would suggest that games should not punish the player too severely for not submitting to the game's temporal expansion into their lives. A temporally expansive game should reward engagement rather than punishing absence.

And finally, social expansion brings external individuals into contact with, and sometimes directly into, the game. With social expansion, "It is essential to pay attention to the difference between a *participant* and a *player*" (117) and to recognize that there are three levels of game awareness (unaware, ambiguous, or aware [118]), and individuals in each level of awareness need to be treated differently. Montola is discussing a

specific example, situations where individuals can be unaware that a game is being played around them. But we can expand upon his idea and think of these levels of involvement as three different player types within the world of the pervasive game, and I really like this idea within the context of videogames and player agency. A pervasive game engages many types of players at various levels, allowing them to engage with the game in ways that make sense to them.

Montola continues his discussion of player engagement by examining how spatially expanded games, with the assistance of modern technology, can be used to meld the past and the present. He states, "spatially expanded games become most interesting when they make intense use of the city *as it is*, including its history and ambience" (79). Thus, "site specific games are able to enhance a player's understanding of a place and foster a deeper spatial experience of its geography" (80). This can equip an individual with the tools to understand and exist within their normal surroundings in a deeper and more substantial manner. An important subtlety here is that this experience is very personal: it is enhancing one's immediate surroundings and having a personal impact. The player's understanding of their surroundings is changed in the moment, contextually - an experience that cannot be replicated by another medium.

At the centre of Montola's discussion of expansion seems to be a

transfer of power away from the player that runs contrary to my core principle of agency and the tendency of pervasive games to be cooler than average. A pervasive game bleeds over the social, temporal, and spatial boundaries that a player may be used to, or comfortable with. I believe the core of the issue lies with temporal expansion. Montola argues that temporal expansion requires that the player no longer determines when they play the game; they lose that control. I see this as a failure of game design. It should be the player's choice how and when they interact with the game. If it requires too much control it ceases to be a game and becomes a part of McLuhan's workaday life. He tells us that games require elements of work, so pressure to come back to the game is certainly on-side, but complete lack of choice cannot be a game.

Montola introduces the reader to a series of holistic pervasive design strategies by touching on experience design, the level at which participants should be aware of the inner workings of the game, issues of game mastering and management, narrative, and strategies for maintaining participant engagement. These are the elements that construct the game itself, providing the goal. The player provides voluntarily participation, and technology is only added to the equation as a means to instantiate the game, but it has an active role to play. It provides the rules and feedback system for the players, particularly important in pervasive games that can permeate player’s experiences so thoroughly.

The introduction of mobile phone technology to pervasive games is of particular relevance to augmented reality gaming and reinforces the vision that McLuhan had of the future (and by extension, games in the future). Of primary importance is Montola's assertion that there is something inherently unique to mobile phones that both limits and expands, and fundamentally shapes, the games that we play with them or on them. People use their phones in different ways because of smaller screens and keyboards. While we surf the Internet with them, we tend to do so in shorter, 5 to 10 minute sessions. "We use the phone while waiting for the bus or riding the subway, in secret at a dinner party or in class, or while doing something else such as watching TV" (180). This has an important effect on how we play mobile phone games: they "need to be interruptible, but they can go on for long periods of time as people have their phones with them at all times" (180). Also, mobile phones include many useful capabilities: cameras, sensors, and methods of communication that can be exploited in creative ways to greatly enhance a pervasive game.

I agree with Montola: as society changes and “the ludic structures of gaming pervade ordinary life, we no longer require technical aids, or indeed, games to play” (275); augmented reality games, and likely virtual reality games, have the potential to turn everyday excursions out of our homes into adventures.

**Art and Videogames**

McLuhan uses the words ‘art’ and ‘game’ almost interchangeably throughout his text. In my reading, McLuhan believes that games are a close relative, if not a direct descendent of, art:

> Ancient and nonliterate societies naturally regarded games as live dramatic models of the universe or of the outer cosmic drama.... The participation in these rituals kept the cosmos on the right track, as well as providing a booster shot for the tribe.
>
> How art became a sort of civilized substitute for magical games and rituals is the story of the detribalization which came with literacy. Art, like games, became a mimetic echo of, and relief from, the old magic of total involvement. As the audience for the magic games and plays became more individualistic, the role of art and ritual shifted from the cosmic to the humanly psychological, as in Greek drama. (*Understanding Media* 237)

There are many parallels between games and art. Both are retribalizing forces; both echo the workaday life; both model the universe; and both translate that universe into something palatable or livable. I agree with McLuhan when he says that perhaps the reason for the deep similarities is that games are actually also an artform:

> Games are dramatic models of our psychological lives providing release of particular tensions. They are collective and popular art

> forms with strict conventions. (*Understanding Media* 237)

This argument seems to be in conflict with Bogost, who distinguishes between ‘normal’ games and ‘artgames’. As conversations with regard to whether the product of any amateur artist can be considered as art, this is really a difference in the definition of ‘art’. However, I must insist that the medium is the message and side with McLuhan in taking an inclusive view of art, the content of which is really irrelevant. Thus we can say that deciding on a definition of art is really about defining the content of a medium, which “is always another medium” (*Understanding Media* 8).

Both art and games provide us with separation from our workaday lives while maintaining a connection to them, stretching to fill the gaps left by the overheated, specialist roles we find ourselves in.

> Art and games enable us to stand aside from the material pressures of routine and convention, observing and questioning. Games as popular art forms offer to all an immediate means of participation in the full life of a society, such as no single role or job can offer to any man. (*Understanding Media* 238)

Through the act of filling gaps we see the final comparison that McLuhan draws between games and art, “translation”.

> Art, like games, is a translator of experience. What we have already felt or seen in one situation we are suddenly given in a new kind of material. Games, likewise, shift familiar experience into new forms,

giving the bleak and the blear side of things sudden luminosity. (*Understanding Media* 242-3)

This is precisely why asking airline passengers to play an evacuation game while they are waiting for takeoff would be very effective. The virtual game experience of having to quickly find your way to the nearest exit, find the flotation device under your seat, or help your neighbour secure their oxygen mask is certainly not the real-thing. It could be, however, a translation of that experience. Particularly when almost no one will ever experience actually putting on the oxygen mask, let alone jumping out of the plane onto an inflated slide. Some virtual experience would be better than no experience.

Once we accept that games do not have to be a replication of experience, we are ready to think about games other than just as a product of pop-culture or as the stereotypical kid in his basement.

It is possible that McLuhan envisioned media evolving into the modern videogame, but we do not know and the evolution was not a technological one anyway. So, there remains a tension in all of the above: the fundamental difference between electronic games that were available in McLuhan's time versus contemporary gaming technology. Our games require a different type of agency because the stories that they tell are much more complicated. A long time *World of Warcraft* player creates an intricate history as they complete quests and level up their avatar, just by

playing in their own way. *Pong*, while certainly not lacking decision-making, tells a very uncomplicated story about its user through limited engagement. A number of core features of modern games were not present in the past, like mass socialization with other players and avatar customization. It is not surprising that the potential of the medium went unnoticed.

At the birth of the electronic medium, McLuhan is writing from a position of submission to that medium. Television, film, and radio all require submission, a passive participant (Bissell 39). McLuhan recognizes this:

> A game is a machine that can get into action only if the players consent to become puppets for a time. For individualist Western man, much of his "adjustment" to society has the character of a personal surrender to the collective demands. Our games help both teach us this kind of adjustment and also to provide a release from it. The uncertainty of the outcomes of our contests makes a rational excuse for the mechanical rigor of the rules and procedures of the game. (*Understanding Media* 238)

I agree with McLuhan's definition of the structure, but Bissell correctly argues that the modern videogame medium involves a more delicate balance and more involvement on the part of the player:

> You control and are controlled. Games are patently aware of you

> and have a physical dimension unlike any other form of popular entertainment. On top of that, many require a marathon runner's stamina: Certain console games can take as many as forty hours to complete, and, unlike books, you cannot bring them along for enjoyment during mass-transit dead time. (39)

Modern game theories have refined our views of the relationship between player and game, and thus I do not see this dynamic in the same black and white terms as McLuhan. There are certainly elements of control, but within any medium there are important shades of grey that move us along the hot and cold spectrum as well. Control is particularly important because agency is so central to videogames and so lacking in other media.

Continuing with shades of grey, the heat of a game is relative, can change over time, depends upon the user's experience, and a cool game will certainly contain hot elements (and a hot game will contain cool elements). Drawing upon what we have discussed throughout, I will now work through five game examples and the factors that move them along the hot vs. cold spectrum. From hottest to coolest, I will look at *Pong*, *Tetris*, *Call of Duty*, *Fallout 3*, and *World of Warcraft*. My purpose is not to provide an absolute ranking or comprehensive list of heating and cooling factors, as the games may move along the spectrum, but rather to lay out some items to consider when determining a game's heat.

Table 1 – Hot and cold games

| | **Heating factors** | **Cooling factors** |
|---|---|---|
| *Pong* | Simple interface – the user may only move their paddle up and down.<br>Simple outcome – the objective is to score more points than the other player. No other sanctioned outcomes are available. | Simple narrative – the user is not constrained by a linear narrative, interaction with the other player determines the playthrough experience. |
| *Tetris (single-player)* | Simple interface – the user may only move their pieces side to side and accelerate downwards.<br>Simple outcome – the objective is to complete as many lines as possible. No other sanctioned outcomes are available. | Simple narrative – like *Pong*, there is no linear story.<br>Play style – the user may create a style, choosing to favour specific placements for certain types of blocks. |
| *Call of Duty (single-player)* | Simple outcome – the objective is to achieve military victory over enemies. | Open world – within the designated area, movement and discovery are unhindered by game mechanics. |
| *Fallout 3* | Central narrative – there is a central storyline that, while somewhat affected by the user's choices, largely plays out regardless of the user's intervention. | Open world – within a large area, movement and discovery are encouraged by game mechanics.<br>Optional narratives - exploration may lead to experiences separate from quests. |
| *World of Warcraft* | Gameplay elements – quests can be repetitive and of simple nature: collect X number of Y.<br>External narrative – there is a world-level storyline that is unaffected by the actions of individual players. | Open world – within a very large area, movement and discovery are encouraged by game mechanics.<br>Optional narratives - exploration may lead to experiences separate from quests.<br>Social interaction – interaction with other players is central to game mechanics and required in some cases. |

If McLuhan had been able to witness how the videogame medium has evolved, he probably would have come to the same conclusion: it is only logical recognition of the nature of the player's involvement in a game vs another technological medium. We have seen the evolution of a super-cold medium.

**Regarding the Future of Videogames in an Overheated Culture**

> As I confronted the game, I was amazed. It was hard, long, and complex. I failed many times and had to engage in a virtual research project via the Internet to learn some of the things that I needed to know. All of my Baby-Boomer ways of learning and thinking did not work, and I felt myself using learning muscles that had not had this much of a workout since my graduate school days in theoretical linguistics. - (Gee 34)

Knowing all of this about videogames, what does any of it mean? McLuhan provides us with the basics. First of all, we know that games are a transformational force, like any medium or technology. They have been a mechanism by which changes occur in society for a long time and they will continue to be so into the future.

> Any game, like any medium of information, is an extension of the individual or group. Its effect on the group or individual is a reconfiguring of the parts of the group or individual that are *not* so

> extended. A work of art has no existence or function apart from its *effects* on human observers. And art, like games or popular arts, and like media of communication, has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures. (*Understanding Media* 242)

Secondly, we know that videogames will take on a more meaningful role in our lives as more of the world industrializes:

> For fun or games to be welcome, they must convey an echo of workaday life. On the other hand, a man or society without games is one sunk in the zombie trance of the automation. (*Understanding Media* 238)

We see echoes of this outlook in Henricks' evaluation of Caillois:

> Through a series of developments, societies became much larger, more socially complicated, hierarchical, and economically specialized. Respect for tradition gave way to a search for progress. Smaller family units and, then, individuals, as possessors of private property, became important social agents as did their complements, huge organizations like nation-states, businesses, and schools. Relations became impersonal (and even money based). Religion turned from community-founded expressions to more individualized forms and (so some argue) to a spirit of secularism. Rationalization, as Max Weber (1958) famously

> described it, was let loose upon the world. Like the capitalist entrepreneurs in Karl Marx's books or the characters in Charles Dickens's novels, people became self-regarding, strategizing, and hard-boiled. (174)

As the world continues to enter the technological age, a shift from "primitive or Dionysian societies toward orderly or rational societies" (Henricks 174), our interconnectivity will only increase the velocity of games and gaming. We are seeing the beginnings of this already in all aspects of gaming: on XBox your online gamer profile, and the number of points you have accrued, is shorthand for how serious a gamer you are; Steam is offering buyers direct impact on which indie games are released, by way of Steam Greenlight; and it is rare to see a new game released that does not offer some sort of online co-op or multiplayer mode. These are basic examples that are less about traditional communication and more about shared experience and playing together, but the stage is set for game communities to continue to grow. McLuhan shows us that we share our lives through gaming and we are already sharing with people we will never meet, on the other side of the world, on a daily basis.

Aside from interconnectivity and global interplay, gaming is entering all aspects of our lives. Gamification is taking root in many parts of everyday life. Many people are working on ways to gamify each of the mundane aspects of our workaday lives - to layer some of the mechanics

of videogames onto real life tasks. This is what McGonigal is trying to show us, we can make our lives better by making our lives more like games. Looking back to McLuhan's discussion of games and art, there may be a point in the future where we wonder exactly where so-called game mechanics began, in or out of game.

McLuhan's vision of games will become more and more important as time and the weight of the world make games ever more a part of our lives. Games will always be wrapped in the shell of fun, but we will learn to do other things with them. McLuhan teaches us that games help us live our dreams. He shows us how they will help us make real life better.

> [G]ames are extensions, not of our private but of our social selves, and that they are media of communication, should now be plain. If, finally, we ask, "Are games mass media?" the answer has to be "Yes." Games are situations contrived to permit simultaneous participation of many people in some significant pattern of their own corporate lives. (*Understanding Media* 245).

Finally, I will bring us back to examples of how we are seeing all of this play out in modern videogames. How is the coolest medium likely to change, and change us, in the future and in a few decades will McLuhan's definition of games even be relevant or will games just be what we all do?

It is easy to equate communication in a game setting with the immediate presence of other players. However, other players simply being

around does not guarantee that those players are communicating with each other. And it is this choice to communicate or not that is something we have not had before. As Bissell says, traditional media requires surrender, whereas videogames require agency. That agency is what sets videogames apart: the choices in how we play games, no matter how small those choices may be.

**Agency in Expansive Game Worlds**

The difficulty is that the choices I am referring to here may not always be clear. For example, nuances in how we play, like the routes an individual takes between quest markers, are one series of choices that, when taken in aggregate over a long period of time, manifest as unique playthrough experiences. The summary of all these nuances is very similar to the sum of our deeds in life, they are that complex and expressive. Many of the 100+ hours I have spent in *Fallout 3* was not productive time spent not moving the game forward, but was instead spent exploring. There are no analogues for the typical 'non-productive' time we have in real life like watching TV.  Sleeping could be time away with the game off, playing videogames could be mini-games or grinding in-game, reading could be research done either in or out of game into talent specifications, maps, etc. So, in addition to all the obvious activities like levelling up, choosing talent points, making alignment (good or evil type) decisions, I was making significant decisions constantly. I was always

crafting a new experience.

Another facet of *Fallout 3* that creates these unique playthrough experiences is the presence of Non-Player Characters (NPCs), characters that are part of game-play but not controlled by the player. In *Fallout 3* the NPCs are very interesting because of the size and complexity of the world. There are a large number of NPCs, so many that you would likely never meet them all in one play-through. In fact, it is probably impossible for the player to meet everyone: even small decisions can have wide-reaching impacts, or none at all, much like real life.

In *World of Warcraft* a player's individual game decisions have less of an impact on the world because it is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG). Decisions are more about how the player wishes to interact with the events, NPCs, and other people within the world. The player's very first decision is a very important one, the kind of world that they wish to play within:

1. RPG, where all players agree to role play and stay in character at all times, even when talking to each other.
2. Player vs. the Environment (PvE) servers focus on players competing against the game, relegating inter-faction conflict to a secondary role. Players on PvE servers typically focus more on completing quests rather than fighting the opposing faction.
3. Player vs. Player (PvP), similar to PvE except the two main

factions are able to attack each other at any time. This is generally the most difficult, because a higher level character from the opposite faction could come along and kill your avatar at any moment. Venturing off by yourself is very dangerous indeed.

This first choice sets the stage for everything else the player's avatars on that server will do and how the player will build their avatar. Each type of server sets up an entirely different paradigm of shared values:

1. My enjoyment from this type of game comes from exploring what it may be like to actually live in this type of world and I want to share that experience with others.
2. I like to have a bit more control over my game and don't want to always have to be looking over my shoulder. Leveling up my avatar is my main focus.
3. Danger and excitement are central to my enjoyment of a game. I want to earn every level I achieve by vanquishing my foes!

In these examples it is easy to see how games can be an expression of ourselves; however, not all videogames are as nuanced and complicated as *Fallout 3* and *World of Warcraft*. Is it still expression and communication when playing *Tetris* or even *Pong*? Yes, but we have to look a little bit harder because these game worlds are more individualistic in nature and thus a lot warmer.

In both *Tetris* and *Pong*, gameworlds are much more restrictive: the players have fewer choices and has to surrender more completely (giving up their agency). The world of *Pong* limits the player to up and down movements, and in *Tetris* the player can only move a piece left or right, rotate it, or choose to make it fall faster. This does not mean that the player has no agency at all. Compare these games to seeing a movie in a theatre. There, the viewer can only choose to watch or not. With all games, the players controls when the game happens and, at minimum, their playstyle - not a small matter. I may choose to play *Tetris* with reckless abandon, as quickly as possible because I am on a short bus ride or choose to be as methodical as possible. Regardless, I have a measure of control and thus, some agency.

**Agency and Workaday Life**

I have already identified “grinding”, the repetition of simple tasks, as the source of common criticism of *World of Warcraft*. A large number of quests fall into a basic theme: venture out into the world and collect or kill X number of Y and return to the quest giver. Y can be opposing henchmen, hostile animals, items that grow in the world, almost anything. And one problem that many have with this basic structure is that it very closely resembles tasks that we complete in our everyday lives. Work eight hours a day and you get an evening, go to work five days in a row and you get a weekend, work two weeks and you receive a paycheque.

What we are seeing now is instead of real life impacting videogames, videogames are impacting real life. Elements from gaming are rapidly being incorporated into workaday life in the form of gamification. Example of this are earning points for completing homework assignments, similar to experience points (XP) in videogames; and badges for completing tasks on social networking sites. Basically, we are seeing McGonigal's fourteen fixes play out in front of our eyes -- videogames are migrating out of the screen and into our workaday lives.

However, while the line is perhaps growing increasingly blurred, games must stand apart from society. Games can address serious or trivial topics, allow us to 'test-drive' scenarios and explore things that we otherwise could not, or just help us kill time, but according to McLuhan they have to be something that not everyone is doing at all times. I agree with this point, but temporarily. I have argued that videogames are a cool, retribalizing force, so will 'standing apart' continue to be a requirement for games? Yes, but I predict that eventually the coolest games will be appropriated by and become a core part of the culture. What we call 'games' in the future will actually be the warmest ones like *Tetris* or *Pong*. Or 'Hyper Tetris' and 'Hyper Pong' (obviously I will not be in charge of naming games in the future).

**The Coolest Medium**

I believe games are the coolest medium, but their coolness does

not separate them completely from other mediums. The differences happen in degrees and the comparison is relative. Games even change their temperature over time, cooling off or heating up based on a number of complicating factors. For example, as communities build up around and in a game and players begin to share experiences, it cools off. If that community becomes very specialized, with particular groups of people responsible for small slices (group A may be the experts in collecting cloth, group B in collecting meat) then the game heats up again. This is partially influenced by the affordances of the game mechanics, but can be dependent upon the player as well. A player within a cool, open-world game who chooses to ignore exploration and focus only on the central storyline is turning the game into a hotter version of itself.

In my complete playthrough of *Fallout 3* I made an overwhelming number of decisions, from trivial to game-changing, that all impacted the experience that I generated while playing the game. That experience is partly an expression of who I am and partly a projection of who I believe myself to be. While this expression does not mean that I am making a profound statement about my being – I am communicating by playing the game, how I play says something about me, even if it is not something profound. Again, the content is not important, we cannot lose focus on the ice cool medium. Videogames are a medium of expression that humanity has not had access to before, in a cooler format than McLuhan's coldest

fantasy of non-codified communication. He was, after all, based in the real world. Today we have videogames, which McGonigal says, afterall, are better than real life.

Looking at videogames through the eyes of McLuhan, it is difficult to predict the interactions between the medium of games and the rest of the overheated culture. I contend that we will see, as McLuhan says, a cooling of our culture. And he is not alone:

> Caillois's final reflections address the theme that characterizes most of Huizinga's writing: the historical change toward organizational gigantism and formality that has eroded the vitality and creativity of small human communities. Caillois argues that we have entered "a world that is not sacred, without festivals, without play, without fixed moorings, without devotional principles, without creative license, a world in which immediate interest, cynicism, and the negation of every norm not only exist, but are elevated into absolutes in place of the rules that underlie all play, all noble activity, and honorable competition." What is needed now, he claims, is a recommitment to the principles of the playground. As he continues, "There is no civilization without play and the rules of fair play, without conventions consciously established and freely respected. There is no culture in which knowing how to win and lose loyally, without reservations, with self-control in victory, and

> without rancor in defeat, is not desired" (2001a, 161). Such ideas, which reaffirm Huizinga's own conclusions in Homo Ludens, are taken up again in *Man, Play, and Games*. (Henricks, 165)

**A Final Example**

This does not have to be science fiction. Bogost alludes to an aircraft training game. I imagine it being constructed as follows.

1. Players enter some basic information about themselves: are they able-bodied, are they traveling with a small child, etc.
2. The game shows the player, contextually, what they should do in varying scenarios: nearest exit is behind them, use their seat cushion as a flotation device, if they are in an exit row how to remove the door, etc.
3. The player runs through some of the scenarios, with information about players around them included.

The result of this simple game is to acquaint the player with some of the context of their situation. The experience of having played through the scenarios will be more powerful than listening to a boring safety demonstration, and the contextuality will mean that no matter how often you fly, each game will be slightly different. Now they will know important details that may actually save lives, for example, there may be a parent traveling with two small children sitting across the aisle who would need help in an emergency.

A game of this type would not require much more technology than is already present in many planes and I propose that beyond getting rid of the safety demonstration that everyone ignores, it may actually do some good and make flying safer. Moreover, there could easily be group incentives as part of the game. Why not run the disaster scenarios together as a section or row and the group who guides their avatars to safety the fastest is the first to receive refreshments? A little bit of camaraderie and competition is a good thing, never mind the opportunity to get to know the people around you. This is the essence of retribalization, shared experience, doing things together, and having a bit of fun while we are at it!

**In Conclusion**

Even though McGongial is bold when she says that videogames are better than real life, I unreservedly agree with her. Much of what we enjoy about videogames is really how we want to be living our real lives and I believe her 14 fixes are excellent proof of that. Who doesn't want more epic wins after all? We need to remember though, that games being better does not require the real-world to become a videogame, it should just become more like videogames! I agree with Bogost's insistence on structure, which I think plays interestingly with McLuhan in the same way that McGonigal's focus on social interaction does – the whole argument is greater than the sum of its parts. And finally among the contemporary

game theorists I have discussed, I am thankful to Bissell for giving me the tools to bridge the temporal gap between old and new media. His discussion of control, which lead me directly to agency, is central to my argument and the critical piece in placing videogames on McLuhan's hot and cold spectrum. The cooler a game is, the more agency the player has and that's a very good thing.

Keeping McLuhan in mind throughout, I have argued that the medium of videogames is an expression of an overheated culture trying to retribalize. Games are the next phase in cultural evolution that dates back to the invention of the printing press and it takes a careful reading of McLuhan to hold the whole picture in focus. He gives us the toolkit, hot and cold media, the medium is the message, and the retribalizing force of technology that allow us to gain a deeper level of understanding. We can't let McLuhan go just yet. Even though he is not a part of game studies reading, he has a lot of new things to say about videogames.

Games, like all media, are an extension of ourselves and allow us an agency that we have not had before with modern media, the ability to choose how to interact down to minute detail, and thus, games are extraordinary communication tools of which we are only just beginning to realize the capabilities.

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# APPENDIX

Leveling Up: Gaming Terminology

It is necessary to level up our understanding of contemporary gaming terminology:

Gamification - the process of introducing elements that are commonly found in games, into activities that occur in real life: earning points and badges, quick wins, sharing success, meaningful victories, etc. For example, there is much academic energy currently being spent on gamifying learning activities. Gamification commonly takes the form of earning points or badges for incremental progress in completing a task or set of tasks.

MMORPG - Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game. A game that is built upon an environment that supports thousands of individual players, playing at once. The most common MMORPG is *World of Warcraft*.

FPS - first person shooter. A very common type of game where the player experiences game-play through the eyes of their avatar. Typically, only the avatar's arm and current tool or weapon are visible. *Doom*, *Call of Duty*, and *Halo* are well known examples of FPS games.

Grinding - repetition of a particular task within a game, either purposely through game mechanics or by the choice of the player. Having to grind is a common criticism of MMORPG's, where users must

continually complete very similar quests, kill X number of Y, for example, in order to level up their avatar.

Leveling up - through completing quests, killing monsters, etc. a player typically earns experience points (XP). After earning a certain number of experience points, a player progresses to the next level and earns additional skills, talents, or powers that they can then use to continue playing.

Platformer - a style of game this is typically side-scrolling in nature, the player guides their avatar through worlds by jumping and running over, under, and around obstacles. Super Mario Bros is the classic example of a platformer.

World of Warcraft

What is World of Warcraft? World of Warcraft is an online game where players from around the world assume the roles of heroic fantasy characters and explore a virtual world full of mystery, magic, and endless adventure (“Beginner’s Guide - Game Guide - World of Warcraft”).

Fallout 3

Fallout 3 is a post-apocalyptic computer and console semi-open-ended, action role-playing game developed by Bethesda Game

Studiosand published by Bethesda Softworks as the third installment in the Fallout series and a sequel to Interplay's Fallout and Fallout 2. It was released on October 28, 2008 in North America, on October 31, 2008 in Europe and on December 4, 2008 in Japan. It is available on the PC,Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The game takes place in the year 2277, 200 years after the Great War, on the East Coast of what used to be the United States of America, mostly in Washington, D.C., Southwest Maryland, Western Pennsylvania and Northeast Virginia. The gameplay features include real-time combat and first or third person perspective, in contrast to the previous games, which were turn-based and isometric (“Fallout 3 - The Fallout wiki - Fallout: New Vegas and more”).

Call of Duty

Call of Duty is a first-person and third-person shooter computer/video game franchise. The series began on the PC, and later expanded to consoles and handhelds. Several spin-off games have also been released. The earlier games in the series are set primarily in World War II, including Call of Duty, Call of Duty 2, and Call of Duty 3. Beginning with Modern Warfare, which is set in modern times, the series has shifted focus away from World War II.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (released November 2007) was followed by Call of Duty: World at War and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2. Black Ops (released November 2010) takes place in the Cold War, while Modern Warfare 3 (released November 2011) takes place in the near-future setting. Black Ops 2 (released November 2012) takes place in the year 2025 (“Call of Duty”).

Tetris

A puzzle game where seven different types of blocks continuously fall from above and you must arrange them to make horizontal rows of bricks. Completing any row causes those blocks to disappear and the rest above move downwards completing four rows at once is called a Tetris. The blocks above gradually fall faster and the game is over when the screen fills up and blocks can no longer fall from the top.

Atari Games, the Tetris maker, released 87 different machines in our database under this trade name, starting in 1984 (“Tetris - Videogame by Atari Games”).