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### Abstract

There is a considerable amount of academic and non-academic interest in the production and reception of video games. At the same time game scholars encounter questions such as, “are video game academics irrelevant?” In this article I connect questions of relevancy in game studies with the need to develop forms of publishing capable of asserting that relevancy more broadly. As the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *First Person Scholar* (FPS), a middle-state publication based in the Games Institute at the University of Waterloo, I detail how FPS has attempted to reach beyond the traditional scope of game studies to engage a wider audience and assert a new degree of relevancy for the game scholar.

### Keywords

Game studies; Digital scholarship; Knowledge mobilization; Middle-state publishing

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## Introduction

“Is games academia irrelevant?” (p. 62) asks Mitu Khandaker in a 2010 article for *Kill Screen* magazine. Khandaker, then a video game PhD researcher at the University of Portsmouth, was curious about the value of her degree outside of the academy. And so she reached out to a number of game scholars and game developers in search of answers. One developer, Johnathan Blow – a household name for gamers and game scholars alike – offered a rather blunt response: “As someone in the industry, I just don’t pay attention to the output of games academia—none of it is relevant to me. Who is this stuff supposed to be relevant to? Or is games academia basically just about writing stuff, and who cares if nobody ever reads it?” (Blow quoted in Khandaker, 2010, p. 70).

In this article I address the (ir)relevancy of games academia from the perspective of a PhD candidate in an English department who is composing a dissertation that is both on games and part game. From that perspective, games scholarship appears to epitomize larger ongoing conversations regarding the cultural relevancy of the liberal arts. Games, after all, are typified in Western culture as irrelevant objects; the study of them, then, can appear doubly so. But the lens of games scholarship also sheds light on a growing number of conversations on publishing in the humanities. In making my argument I draw from my experience as the co-founder and editor-in-chief of *First Person Scholar*, a website that publishes essays, commentaries, and book reviews on games and culture. From these two vantage points I have become acutely aware of the need to start caring about whether anybody ever reads our scholarship.

In fact, my thesis addresses some of these issues directly, as I argue that games are an ideal medium for intercultural communication. I see *First Person Scholar* as an extension of that mode of communication, one that responds to the more *intracultural* mode of traditional academic publishing. I have broken my argument into two parts to demonstrate this distinction. In the first section I look at present-day circumstances, drawing on those scholars who have called for a revised approach to disseminating humanities scholarship. I then situate *First Person Scholar* (FPS) within that context, arguing that it is one means of addressing the pressing need to communicate games scholarship with those outside the discipline as it provides an avenue for students and scholars to develop the skills and networks needed to communicate the values and relevance of that scholarship to new audiences.

In the second section I historicize this issue by looking back at Giambattista Vico’s (1990) 1709 text, “On the Study Methods of Our Time.” This short text was written during a dramatic pedagogical and cultural shift, one that devalued Vico’s profession as an orator and rhetor, thus compelling him to assert the relevancy of his work. He responds by arguing that students and scholars need to be more engaged with the public, lest they lose their capacity to communicate their knowledge to those outside their scholarly domains. Vico’s essay is prescient given the current voices calling for renewed public engagement, and his overall vision of the humanities is much aligned with the new dynamic those same voices are advocating that humanities scholars adopt.

### First person scholar

A year after Mitu Khandaker asked whether or not games academia was relevant, Kathleen Fitzpatrick (2011) published *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*. In the text Fitzpatrick draws a parallel between scholarly forms of publication and the value Western culture attributes to the liberal arts. The two, she suggests, are correlated. Speaking from the perspective of someone representing the liberal arts, she writes that “until we take responsibility for our culture’s sense of our irrelevance, we cannot hope to convince it otherwise” (p. 14). For Fitzpatrick, taking responsibility entails exploring new methods of disseminating scholarship that allow us to “find a way to speak with that culture, to demonstrate the vibrancy and the value of liberal arts” (p. 14). Several months ago Paul Yachnin and Leigh Yetter (2014) published “The Future of the Humanities PhD,” a post on *Policy Options*. The authors argue that PhD students in the humanities should be encouraged to communicate their research to those beyond the academy. “It is important that students’ work become more public and more oriented toward the world outside academia,” they write. “Publicity confers a measure of relevance and permanence on the work students do” (n.p.).

*First Person Scholar* draws together all three of these issues regarding the relevancy of games scholarship, the future of publishing in the humanities, and the need for humanities students to be more publicly engaged. The site was launched in December of 2012 by a collection of graduate students in the English department at the University of Waterloo; it acts as the knowledge dissemination component of two projects funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC): IMMERS (the Interactive and Multi-Modal Experience Research Syndicate) and the Games Institute. Since launching, FPS has attracted and published 102 submissions, totalling 700 pages of content, mainly from graduate students but also professors, as well as interviews with researchers and game developers. FPS publishes an article every Wednesday, and the site attracts approximately 5,500 hits a month. At its peak, FPS garnered approximately 20,000 visits in one month, with 12,600 of those coming in a single week. Within months of launching, our articles began appearing on course syllabi; over time they have been referenced on game sites such as *Critical Distance* and *Gamasutra* and more recently they have been mentioned in more mainstream publications such as *The Huffington Post* (Ryan, 2014) and *The New Yorker* (Parkin, 2014).

In this section I connect these modest successes with the need for humanities scholars to pursue new platforms that can communicate the value of their work to those outside of academia. FPS serves as an example here because it is a *middle-state publication*. Here the term middle-state indicates that FPS publishes scholarship that is currently in development, with the intent of soliciting feedback at a time when ideas are just beginning to take shape. At the same time FPS strives to engage in *intercultural communication*, meaning that our contributors are encouraged to write for a wide audience for the purposes of engaging those situated in academic and non-academic cultures. In this way FPS complements the more intracultural forms of communication traditionally embraced by humanities scholars, such as journals and scholarly texts.

In using the term intercultural, I have a number of meanings in mind. First, FPS blends the cultures of journalism and blogging – meaning timely, informal, and topical content – with academic humanities culture – meaning content is situated within sociocultural, political, historical, formal, and/or ethical contexts. This allows FPS to address topics that are of public interest with a degree of academic rigour and acumen that is, at times, absent from more mainstream publications. One example that helps illustrate this point is the recent “GamerGate” controversy. GamerGate is a decentralized online campaign that has targeted and harassed socially progressive individuals – mainly women – involved in creating, reporting on, and researching games. When GamerGate coalesced in August and September of 2014 into a series of attacks on prominent women involved in the games industry, the movement received coverage by many major news networks in the United States and Canada. Given this widespread reporting, GamerGate became an issue of public interest. This provided FPS with an opportunity to interject into a larger public conversation from a scholarly perspective – in this case, from the perspective of those who have studied the long-standing issues games culture has had, and continues to have, with representing, employing, and, in some cases, simply accepting women.

As it happened, FPS received a submission that seized on this opportunity. In the article “‘We Will Force Gaming to Be Free’: On GamerGate and the License to Inflict Suffering,” Katherine Cross (2014), a PhD candidate at the CUNY Graduate Center, situates GamerGate within a larger historical context, drawing on political theorist and philosopher Isaiah Berlin to critique the revolutionary rhetoric adopted by the GamerGate movement. It was Cross’s commentary that drew in the twelve thousand visits in a single week; and it was that same article that was cited in *The Huffington Post* and *The New Yorker*. That commentary – which went through our editorial workflow that emphasizes accessibility and bolsters research – demonstrates the relevancy of a scholarly perspective on an ongoing issue, exemplifying what topical and timely scholarship on games can contribute that traditional academic platforms have not afforded. At the same time, it facilitated the movement of knowledge across cultures – in this case, from academic culture to gamer culture and into more mainstream cultures through references in popular media.

Another, more explicit way that FPS functions interculturally is through the connections the site has forged with persons and publications located outside of our academic, Canadian context. For instance, FPS has published essays from graduate students around the world, including the U.S., U.K., Norway, and Italy; our board of discussants – game scholars who provide constructive feedback to our contributors in the form of comments appended to articles – include faculty located in Canada, U.S., U.K., and New Zealand; our readership includes not only game scholars but historians, sociologists, and psychologists, as well as journalists, game enthusiasts, and game developers; lastly, thanks to a formal relationship with the German e-journal *Paidia*, our articles have been translated into German and we, in turn, have posted their articles in English. Through these relationships we have begun to form a network that is capable of communicating the value of games scholarship across professional, disciplinary, and national boundaries, extending the relevancy of that scholarship by

diversifying the voices and perspectives that contribute to an ongoing, open, and accessible conversation.

However, the benefits of raising the profile of games scholarship are not merely idealistic; rather, there are some very practical reasons for demonstrating the relevancy of game studies. As Yachnin and Yetter (2014) state in their aforementioned article, “It’s time to reconsider the way we steer doctoral students in the humanities exclusively towards careers in the academy and to cultivate roles for them in the world outside academia.” One of the reasons they are advocating for this shift is that humanities graduate programs are taking in more students than there are academic jobs – the authors cite a joint study by the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council as evidence of this. That study led Yachnin and Yetter to conclude that, “It is not merely possible to make room for humanities PhDs in the modern world, it is essential that there be room for them and that people with humanities training at the highest level be integrated into the political fabric of the country.”

As a humanities-trained PhD candidate studying games, I find myself asking: How do we “make room” for those studying the role of games in our culture? And how do we begin to “cultivate roles” for game scholars outside of game studies programs? The answer, in part, is that game scholars need to assert the relevancy of their skills and knowledge outside of the culture that intrinsically values them. Hence, Yachnin and Yetter’s recommendation that students be encouraged to engage with non-academic audiences. And, as Fitzpatrick (2011) notes, this will involve “opening ourselves to the possibility that new modes of publishing might enable, not just more texts, but better texts, not just an evasion of obsolescence, but a new life for scholarship” (p. 14). I think that *First Person Scholar* is a small but important step in that direction, toward creating a new life – and a new livelihood – for games scholars.

That said, the challenge remains formidable, and it will take many more publications and many more scholars engaged in this form of labour to bring about the change that some see as necessary to the well-being, and perhaps survival, of the humanities. At the same time those within academic culture, especially those that sit on hiring committees and adjudicate over the allocation of funding, need to be shown the value of this kind of scholarship, which can complement those traditional publications the academy already recognizes and even make them more accessible and intelligible.

### **On the publishing methods of our time**

At this point I would like to take a step back from the present conversation on the humanities and examine a figure who some scholars regard as “the father of our modern idea of the humanities” (Klassen & Zimmermann, 2006, p. 103): Giambattista Vico. Some three hundred years ago, Vico wrote *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (*De ratione*) (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*) a critique of the contemporary state of education in late sixteenth century Italy. What Vico saw in that education system was an increasingly popular pedagogy that, in his view, inevitably disconnected students from communities and cultures and left them unprepared to communicate with those outside their disciplines. That method of inquiry was the rational doctrine

of René Descartes and it emphatically diminished the need for students to study things like oratory and rhetoric, the cornerstones of Vico's profession. Vico, then, was facing the prospect of being obsolesced – his profession deemed irrelevant by the prevailing method of the time – and *De ratione* served as his platform for reasserting the relevancy of his vocation.

Given these historical similarities I think there are a number of lessons that can be drawn from *De ratione* and applied not only to the *study* methods of our time but also the *publishing* methods of our time. Foremost of those lessons is Vico's call for students and scholars to become more engaged with their communities. In doing so, he argued, they develop skills in the rhetorical art of invention – a means of discovering knowledge rooted in various communities and cultures.

Invention can be thought of as a doctrine of cross-cultural communication as it seeks to train rhetors and audiences to discover knowledge that is situated in culturally specific commonplaces or *topoi*. For Vico, studying the commonplaces allowed students to discover and express truths embedded in practical, contemporary discourse. This understanding of communication is also expressed in his maxim “*verum et factum convertuntur*” – “the true and the made are interchangeable.” Or, put differently, the truth resides in our capacity to make sense of it, which changes as languages, histories, media, and cultures change. This directly contradicted the Cartesian method that was taking root in Italian schools at the time; Descartes wrote of universal truths, of the virtues of solitary thought, and the insignificance of language, rhetoric, and the arts.

These two radically distinct pedagogies became what Ernesto Grassi (1990) calls critical philosophy and topical philosophy. The former refers to the detached critic, an observer who begins with a set of incontrovertible premises and a refined method that are used to derive (supposedly) incontestable truths. Vico lamented this approach, as it devalued the art of discovering new premises and new lines of reasoning. The Vichian method is what Grassi calls topical philosophy – that is, it begins by locating a *topos* or commonplace. The commonplaces represent collections of common relationships found in communities and cultures that are reflected in the discourses and artworks of those communities and cultures.

Another way of looking at this distinction between critical and topical philosophy is to note that the former excels at intracultural communication – the fixed methodology of Cartesian rationalism facilitates the flow of information among those trained in its intricacies. In contrast, topical philosophy, with its inventive method, seeks to develop intercultural forms of communication – facilitating what Donna Haraway (1998) calls the partial translation of situated knowledges. When Fitzpatrick (2011) writes of the need for humanities culture to speak with Western culture more broadly, she is touching on this neglected art of invention, the way that knowledge attains meaning and relevancy by training audiences to locate it in particular places, contexts, or standpoints.

A second lesson that can be drawn from *De ratione* is simply that we have been here before. As Grassi (1990) noted in the 1960s, Vico's text addresses “a problem with much

current relevance” (p. 15). Indeed, Vico’s remarks on education can be heard echoing in the voices of Yachnin, Yetter, Fitzpatrick, and others – they all share a growing recognition of and unease toward the irrelevance of a kind of knowledge translation that is sorely needed to enrich our understanding of one another across communities and cultures. The difference is that in a globally networked society, that need is heightened considerably. The increased interaction between what were once largely isolated communities, subcultures, and cultures makes it even more vital that we adopt a topical approach.

One final lesson I take from *De ratione* is that media can alter the relationship the humanities has with our culture, thereby affording a new means of proclaiming our relevance. When Vico (1990) expounded the virtues of being engaged with public discourse and art, he did so in a radically distinct media ecology, one dominated by oratory, painting, poetry, and print. In an age of instant messaging, video sharing, digital games, and online publishing, Vico’s argument that scholars should reach outside of their own cultures becomes even stronger.

One particularly noteworthy example of this argument in game studies is the work of Anita Sarkeesian. She is the creator of the video series “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” which has garnered nearly one million, and in some cases more, views per video. As a body of work this series has significantly elevated the level of discourse surrounding representations of women in video games. The videos themselves pair feminist theory with examples drawn from popular games. These videos bypass the trickle-down effect of scholarship; Sarkeesian takes what traditionally has been, and continues to be, criticisms that circulate almost exclusively within academic culture, and translates them into practical, actionable examples. In this respect the videos have exceeded the potential Vico saw for public discourse and art as a means of training audiences to understand the values of distinct cultures.

The videos are successful, in part, because of the accessibility of the material and their appeal to a non-academic audience – i.e., it is their intercultural rather than intracultural orientation that makes them so effective and popular. Recently I conducted an interview for *First Person Scholar* with Liz England (2014), a systems designer at a prominent video game studio. In the context of games academics communicating with those in the games industry, I asked her what effect Sarkeesian’s “Tropes vs. Women” videos have had: “The video series has given a lot of developers a common, shared vocabulary to use to describe the things they see, and it’s been invaluable in ways that I don’t think people outside the industry understand.” England’s (2014) phrasing here suggests a cross-cultural exchange of knowledges, one that is only appreciable from within those cultures. Indeed, she goes on to say that:

What Sarkeesian does is a form of “translation” that is really important to bridge academia with industry. She delivers content in an easy-to-digest format that’s not all that different than, say, a good, engaging GDC [Game Developers Conference] lecture by a peer. I believe there’s practical information out there in academia, but it needs to be translated in a form that is approachable (and actionable) by developers. (n.p.)

In respect to England's comments it is worth recognizing that Sarkeesian has done more to establish the relevancy of games scholarship outside of academia than any other games scholar, in part because her content was published in an accessible, intelligible format that has made scholarly research relevant to academic and non-academic audiences alike. Her work has resulted in a sustained conversation regarding representations of gender in video games, with players and critics alike now identifying common tropes, and developers vowing to change how women are depicted in the games they help create.

### Conclusion

Sarkeesian's open, accessible scholarship on games raises the question as to whether more can be done in other areas of game studies to raise the level of discourse – on violence, race, disability, economics, environmentalism, and many other issues that academics are well-trained to discuss. Online publishing platforms, such as video sharing sites and middle-state-publications such as FPS, provide opportunities to enrich the conversations of those developing and playing games. This is not to suggest that games scholars should become extensions of game development. Rather, translating scholarship for various audiences is the logical extension of efforts to define and critique games and the roles they play in our lives.

To summarize, what I am suggesting is twofold. First, that we consider the possibility that for some of us in game studies – perhaps most of us – knowing how to theorize and critique games are skills we will need to take outside the academy, in which case those providing education in these areas have a responsibility to communicate their value beyond academic culture. And second, that we consider the possibility that asserting the relevance of our scholarship is part of the process of producing scholarship. Embracing open, accessible, and timely publishing platforms as part of that process allows us to achieve both of these goals. Ultimately, websites such as FPS and initiatives such as “Tropes vs. Women” demonstrate that an argument that persuades those who produce and play games can be equally as valuable as an argument that persuades those who theorize and critique them. The latter enriches academic culture, whereas the former enriches culture more broadly.

### Websites

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