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Introduction: The valency of the 10th art: the place of videogames in French and Francophone studies

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The Valency of the 10e Art: the Place of Videogames in French and Francophone Studies

In July 2010, the very official Musée des arts et métiers in Paris (designated as a Musée de France in 2002) staged an exhibition of video games which represented a shift in focus from the more usual and more traditional preoccupations of the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers. *Museogames - Une histoire à rejouer* was the first instance of gaming being curated in a state museum in France, and led, within the space of only a few years, to the organisation of two further exhibitions in major 'official' museums in Paris. *Game Story* (Grand Palais, November 2011 - January 2012) and *Jeu vidéo, l'expo* (Cité des Sciences et de l'Industrie, October 2013 - August 2014) continued this new interest in the state heritage sector for shining a light on cultural artefacts and practices which were beginning to win their 'lettres de noblesse' within French and Francophone culture in general, within public policy in industry, science, technology and commerce and culture, and within official and quasi-official celebrations of contemporary popular culture. This move towards a celebration of the heritage of video games was also visible in the private sector, exemplified most clearly by the setting up in November 2013 of Art Ludique - Le Musée by Jean-Jacques and Diane Launier. Describing itself as the world's first museum of the 'art' of 'Entertainment', Art Ludique had a broad focus: 'Abolissant les frontières entre bande dessinée, manga, jeu vidéo, cinéma live action ou film d'animation, l'Art Ludique met en valeur les œuvres des créateurs d'univers qui marquent notre imaginaire et influencent la culture de notre siècle'. But to return to the Musée des arts

et métier, and its motivations for highlighting video games, we can find an interesting rationale for their cultural - and wider - significance. Presenting and justifying the theme of *Museogames*, the exhibition's curators Pierre Giner, Stéphane Natkin, Loïc Petitgirard provided a striking statement in their Dossier de Presse that encapsulated their belief in the growing validity - and what we could term the powerful combining 'valency' - of video games:

Après la photo, la radio, le cinéma, la télévision qu'il hybride, le jeu vidéo est né de l'ordinateur. Objet matériel et multi média, œuvre audiovisuelle et immatérielle, mêlant arts et métiers, il articule dans sa production, sa sophistication formelle et narrative, une multiplicité de talents artistiques et techniques. Ses créateurs, ses joueurs comme son industrie revendiquent qu'il soit reconnu comme une création à part entière, au même titre que le cinéma dont il se voit un prolongement. Ludique et réfléchi, à l'image du jeu vidéo, *MuseoGames - Une histoire à rejouer* initie une première approche scientifique et historique, augmentée de multiples regards. Invitant à rejouer comme à s'informer de la diversité des points de vue des gens du métier, des chercheurs, des créateurs et usagers de ce média, l'exposition propose au visiteur - joueur de renouer avec ses passions d'enfance au travers de ses objets fétiches et au profane de découvrir la richesse de cette histoire vidéoludique. Pour mieux s'attarder sur la place du jeu vidéo dans notre société, son influence, sa forme d'expression, sa fascination ou sa diabolisation, son statut muséal et son devenir. (Giner, Natkin and Petitgirard, 2010: 4)

This multi-faceted nature of videogames - as material culture and technology, and as a hybrid of other cultural forms such as photography, film, literature, graphic arts - is what makes them such powerful condensations in themselves of meanings and representations. Furthermore, as Giner, Natkin and Petitgirard suggest, as a leisure practice that readily inspires 'fascination' and 'diabolisation' in equal measures, videogaming is a highly visible prism of social, political and cultural debate. In terms of French and Francophone studies in the 21st century, the 'valency' - defined in science as the 'combining power' of a chemical element - of video games could suggest that a cultural form which blurs the boundaries of technology, material culture, language and linguistics, photography, film, music, narrative, and countless other arts could and should be the subject of more attention within the Anglophone 'French studies' community.

Originating in chemistry as an index of the number of atoms any given element can combine with, the concept of 'valency' has been adopted in the discipline of linguistics as a model of the numbers and types of connections which syntactic elements can form with each other. Space here precludes an in-depth discussion of inter-disciplinarity and multi-disciplinarity within contemporary French and francophone studies, but we use the term 'valency' to describe the ways in which video games – *qua* objects of study and research – necessarily involve explanatory approaches which enlist productive collaborations between disciplines, and which, for students, can illustrate the complex interactions between culture, society, politics and history in pedagogically intriguing ways. In 2014, George Ross' thought-provoking piece in *French Politics, Culture & Society* posed the provocative question of 'Can French Studies Exist Today?' within the context of globalization, academic disciplinary fragmentation, the rise of

comparative approaches to issues rather than 'single-country' studies, and other trends. The answer Ross provided to his own question was very strongly that 'holistic' French studies remains a necessary and noble activity even in the face of increasing obstacles to the task. The inherent disciplinary 'valency' of video games – or their 'stickiness' for analysis by students and research in French departments worldwide – surely makes them attractive subjects for a renewal of holistic French studies. In such a context, videogames provide a powerful means of reinvigorating high school and university level French syllabuses by enthusing new generations of digital-native students about the study of their culture and that of their young (and less-young) French and Francophone counterparts. Indeed, this special issue will show that videogames are becoming a form of popular culture that is increasingly appreciated and significant within French society as a whole and not - despite what Giner, Natkin and Petitgirard imply in referring to 'passions d'enfance' - just by the young.

Videogames are the most-purchased 'bien culturel' in France, with 31 million people playing regularly. Alongside reading, watching films, listening to music, enjoying *bande dessinée* and other cultural consumption, *jeux vidéo* are firmly established as a significant popular cultural form and practice. Commercially and industrially, the videogames sector is increasingly important to France, and public policy in innovation, technology, education, culture and commerce has been steadily adapting to its newfound significance. In 2010, the annual turnover of the videogames industry in France was higher than that of the French film industry and approaching the level of that of the French music industry (Craipeau, Genvo and Simonot 7). A French government report from 2016 stated that France represented the seventh largest videogames market in the world in terms of turnover and the third largest in Europe. It also

observed that 34.6 million French people play videogames. Furthermore, 4.5 million people in France watch videogames competitions on an occasional or regular basis and 850 000 of these gamers participate in competitive videogaming (Salles and Durain iii, 3). If competitive videogaming were to be considered a sport – an issue that we will return to later – it would be the third most popular sport in France.¹

Recent years have shown that videogames are a form of popular culture that can be the source of intense academic and political debate. In November 2014, an academic and political furore broke out in the French media concerning the flagship French videogames company Ubisoft and its *Assassin's Creed Unity* game based on the French Revolution. The discussions that the game provoked, which are discussed in Christopher Leffler's article in this volume, underlined the way in which videogames can take on great cultural, political and social, as well as economic, significance in contemporary France. Although the reactions to *Assassin's Creed Unity* were not all dismissive of the game itself or videogames in general, there have been other occasions in recent years when prominent French intellectuals have adopted a more reactionary stance. In April 2016, the French political scientist Thomas Guénolé accused Alain Finkielkraut of having 'craché au visage de la jeunesse française' due to Finkielkraut's comments about videogames in his 2015 book *La Seule Exactitude*, and in particular one unflattering and highly emotive comparison that the philosopher and public intellectual made in this recent work:

¹ Based on comparison with 2014 figures listing numbered of registered players of different sports in France (Salles and Durain 38).

Lorsque à Nuremberg, on a projeté un film sur les camps de Buchenwald, Dachau et Bergen-Belsen, montrant les survivants faméliques et les montagnes de cadavres jetés par des pelleteuses dans des fosses communes, les dignitaires nazis eux-mêmes détournaient le regard, se cachaient le visage dans les mains, et certains d'entre eux se sont effondrés. Aujourd'hui, les jeux vidéo sont des écoles d'insensibilité, et le pathos pédagogique suscite au mieux des bâillements, au pire des railleries. Ce n'est donc pas avec une nouvelle injonction de devoir de mémoire qu'on guérira cette jeunesse narquoise de ce qu'elle vit déjà comme une overdose (Finkielkraut, 2015: 133).

In addition to questioning the appropriateness of such an emotive comparison, it is worth noting – as Julie Delbouille does in her article in this volume – that videogames are no longer uniquely a young person's pursuit. Thus, there is much reason to challenge attempts to categorize (or dismiss) them as a necessarily youth-orientated form of popular culture.

As is clear from the most cursory consideration beyond moral panics over violence, sexism, impaired socialisation of young people and so on, videogames constitute a nexus where culture, cultural heritage, cultural policy, language, technology, industry, commerce, finance and education coalesce. In recent years, the French state has increasingly come to realise the potential of the videogames sector as a creative industry in which France can be a world-leader, promoting French culture abroad, and using the creative strength of French technology companies and graphic arts expertise to bolster Gallic competitiveness in the globalised market for cultural products. Fostering what is perceived as essentially France's 'comparative advantage' in this sector has involved deft redefinitions of policy in culture, industry and

technology in order to maximise the support provided by the state to this creative industry, not least by accelerating the acceptance of videogames as 'culture' rather than derided adolescent pastimes, but also by facilitating the convergence of industry, technology, creativity in the graphic arts, and education (Dauncey, 2012; Dauncey and Benneworth, 2016).

The ways in which videogames have become an increasingly important from a creative and commercial perspective in France underscores the timeliness of this special issue's exploration of their significance. Indeed, this volume will help to fill what seems to be a significant gap within the study of contemporary France and popular culture in France. Thus far, the academic study of French video games and videogaming remains largely underdeveloped, especially in UK and US French studies, even within the context of increasing research on French popular culture. Works that have sought to provide a panorama of the field of French Studies, such as Philippe Lane and Michael Worton's 2011 admirable edited volume *French Studies in and for the 21st Century*, have tended not to mention videogames. In addition, works that have focused more explicitly on popular culture in France have similarly tended to devote little space to exploring the significance of videogames in depth. In the early 1990s, Brian Rigby's seminal contribution to Anglophone considerations of the uses and meanings of popular culture in France *Popular Culture in Modern France. A Study of Cultural Discourse* (Rigby, 1991) was perhaps too early in terms of academic perspectives on culture to be able to conceive early videogames as something that was to become a significant yet long-ignored cultural pastime, and a subject of ongoing impassioned cultural discourses. Another early survey, less theoretical and more focused on case-studies of practices than that of Rigby was Pierre Horn's edited *Handbook of French Popular Culture* (Horn, 1991), but this work again did not seek to promote

any academic study of videogames as practice, form and policy. In the mid-1990s, David Looseley nevertheless demonstrated an awareness that videogames were something that would and should merit attention; in his 1997 book *The Politics of Fun*, he acknowledges in passing that Jack Lang's time as French Minister of Culture in the 1980s was one during which 'measures were (...) taken to develop a French industry in computer and video games' (Looseley, 1997: 130). Looseley's main focus was a comprehensive overview of the democratisation of cultural policy, and this perhaps explains why he did not devote more discussion to a subject tangential to his core theme. However, later works – such as the edited volume *French Popular Culture. An Introduction* (Dauncey, 2003) – continued to give relatively little space to discussion of videogames at a time when they were more clearly becoming a visible and valid object of study. Perhaps somehow en retard d'une guerre, *French Popular Culture. An Introduction* did however include a chapter on 'Cyberculture' (Jacobs, 2003) that looked back at the Minitel phenomenon and forward to popular cultural leisure uses of the Internet, but which omitted to explore videogames as the 'missing link' between the two. Within the Anglophone French studies community in the early 2000s, more work on French popular culture was emerging in areas such as advertising, television, popular fiction, the popular press or radio. Despite this trend, however, it remained the case that relatively few researchers within the field of French popular culture were devoting attention to videogames. A decade later, Looseley and Holmes returned to the fray of lobbying for a more visible place for popular culture within French studies with a thought-provoking edited collection of studies, in *Imagining the Popular in Contemporary French Culture* (Holmes and Looseley, 2013). Here again, for reasons of coherence, the analysis centers on music, literature, film, and television

(and language) as what have now become arguably the 'main-stream' sectors of research and teaching on popular culture within French studies, but the single reference to videogames - in a passing comment on the agency and physicality of Parkour runners in cinema - underlines once more the essentially 'hidden' nature of gaming in Anglophone research on contemporary French culture. A similar pattern emerges for teaching, when one looks at degree courses involving the study of contemporary France, as very few indeed feature modules that explore the importance of videogames within French culture. After the growth of interest of academics in French studies in cinema, *chanson*, *bande dessinée*, and then more latterly still in 'popular music', it is surely now opportune to focus on French and Francophone video games as 'popular cultural' artefacts and practice.

Within the discipline of French studies, there has thus far been a quite limited focus on videogames. Nevertheless, after having considered French public policy towards videotex, the 'information superhighway' and Minitel in the 1990s (Dauncey, 1996; 1997) principally as technology, but with attendant cultural challenges for French identity and traditional industrial-commercial practices, Dauncey (2012) has explored the place of videogames in French culture through the government policies and public discourses that have shaped this presence. Lorenzo Mondada's 2011 article about the use of imperatives by French speaking videogames players stands out as a very rare example of an article about videogames to have been published in what can be defined as a French studies journal, having appeared in the *Nottingham Journal of French Studies*. Within a broader context, it is important to note that the study of videogames took somewhat longer to establish a place for itself within French academia itself than it did in North America or the United Kingdom (Craipeau, Genvo and Simonot 8, Brougère 10, Trémel

15). However, developments such as the founding of the review *Réseaux* by the Centre national d'études en télécommunications in 1983 created a focal point for French researchers from different disciplines whose interest in videogames was increasing (Craipeau, Genvo and Simonot 8). A decade later in 1993, the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF) appeared to recognize this trend by including videogames within what Genvo describes as 'une collection patrimoniale de documents électroniques sur différents supports plastiques (disquettes, cédéroms, cartouches, etc.)' (71). To see videogames being treated as an element of 'patrimoine' by a national state institution points towards the way in which they have benefited from increasing levels of cultural acceptance in France during recent decades.

Despite the previously described increase in the cultural capital of videogames, Craipeau, Genvo and Simonot argue that it was only from 2001 onwards that one has seen what they term 'une multiplication des parutions universitaires' that analyse videogames (8). Bernard Perron (19) has stated that is particularly important that academic reflection on videogames takes place in France given that 'ce sont bien les Français qui l'ont défini comme le 10e art', and also because 'le jeu vidéo est un phénomène social, mais aussi artistique ... et culturel trop important pour ne pas avoir sa place à l'université'. Brougère (9) stated in 2005 that France was a country where 'le jeu vidéo devient peu à peu un objet d'étude scientifique légitime' to such an extent that one found 'plus d'écrits et de recherches sur ce nouvel objet que sur le jouet ancien'. However, the French media at times has a tendency to ignore the growing numbers of academics who can rightly be considered videogames experts. As Trémel notes, psychologists are often treated as experts within French television reporting on

videogames even when they appear to know little about this cultural phenomenon that is at times referred to as 'le 10e art' (16-17).²

The relative neglect of the French and Francophone dimensions of this 10th art by French Studies researchers in the UK and US is all the more to be regretted given that interest in France itself has been growing considerably over recent years. Following the well-known patterns and processes of the cultural legitimation of the study of 'dominated' cultural forms and practices within French academia that have seen the progressive integration of cinema, *chanson*, *bande dessinée*, sport and popular music into the realms of the acceptable, videogames are now becoming the focus of considerable attention. As Delbouille in this current journal issue indicates, much of the original impetus for Francophone research into videogames came from the moral panics surrounding their presumed or feared effects on individuals' psychological development and sociability, but more latterly, studies have covered a more comprehensive range of themes, from language and linguistics, player agency, and social interaction through industrial, commercial, and technological dimensions to wider issues of cultural identity, history, heritage and so on. These wider issues - which interrogate contemporary French economics, society, politics and culture and their positioning in a globalised, transnational world - are precisely the kinds of themes that Anglophone French studies in the 21st century must be concerned with. Perhaps paradoxically, whereas

² The precise process by which cultural forms and practices are 'inaugurated' as arts in the French and indeed any variant of the numerical taxonomy of creativity is open to much debate, but it seems generally accepted that in France at least, the status of video games as the 10th art began to be confirmed in 2006 when Culture minister Donnedieu de Vabres announced special measures in their favour (see Dauncey, 2012, and Dauncey, in preparation). A further step came in 2011 with the Martin-Lalande report on the legal status of video games and intellectual property rights. For further analysis of the evolving discourses in France on video games as 'art', see Coville (2013).

Anglophone interest in popular culture was from the 1950s onwards arguably a push-factor for French research into the 7th (cinema), 8th (radio, television, photography) and 9th (*bande dessinée*) arts, the peculiarly denigrated status of videogames - as violent, sexist, psychologically and socially damaging - in both Anglophone and Francophone society has meant that neither US/UK research in general nor Anglophone French studies have been able to irrigate and encourage French research into gaming in the same way that it may have done for, say, popular films, BD, reality television, or rap music. French studies within the Anglophone academy has arguably so-far failed to develop an interest in video games, both because of its traditional entrenchment in literature (however that entrenchment is modulated across the generations) and because its new interests in popular culture have tended to focus on forms such as popular film, music, BD which can be approached most readily in an essentially literary-textual manner. Interestingly, in terms of any putative genealogy of French and Francophone research into videogames, it would seem plausible that although starting from similar bases in social, moral and psychological panics, French, Belgian, Swiss and Canadian research has been catalysed and thematically inflected in essentially positive ways by specifically 'French' concerns and contexts. For example, strands in French research into the economics, commerce, technology and language of videogames derive support and legitimacy from 'typically' French concerns over the viability in a globalised world of French models and traditions of 'doing' technological development, industry and commerce, or French-language cultural creativity. Similarly, but from the perspective of the hierarchy of arts in French culture and academia, research into videogames and their intrinsic claim to proper status as cultural artefacts worthy of scientific attention has benefitted greatly from battles won by *bande dessinée* since the

1960s and 1970s: in videogames, the graphic arts combine with technology, culture and language in a way which may actually facilitate their study by French researchers (Dauncey and Benneworth, 2016).

In 2012, the review *Hermès* devoted a special number to videogames which for those coming to the subject for the first time provides a comprehensive overview of the themes that have exercised, and are currently still interesting French researchers (Hermès, 2012). The introductory text for the issue helpfully outlined some of the key questions:

Les jeux vidéo passent pour un sujet complexe, ésotérique et controversé. Complexe, parce que l'expression recouvre aujourd'hui une gamme proliférante de produits sophistiqués. Ésotérique puisque, sacrifiant à l'idéologie techniciste, le jargon y règne en maître. Et controversé, car le jeu vidéo serait infantilisant, capitaliste ou belliciste pour les uns, intelligent, créatif, voire sportif pour les autres. Sans nier cette polysémie ni négliger les recherches abondantes et toujours passionnées qu'elle a suscitées, la revue *Hermès* se propose d'aborder la question avec une idée simple : le jeu vidéo, au fond, serait un outil de communication.

The central thrust of the *Hermès* overview of videogames and videogames research was thus to consider gaming as communication, and within this conceptual framework, authors covered a wide range of issues relating to both French and worldwide gaming. Of most significance for an understanding of specifically French and Francophone concerns were Nicolas Oliveri on on-line gaming and 'addiction' (Oliveri, 2012), Jean-Paul Lafrance on social and psychological

dimensions of intensive on-line gaming (Lafrance, 2012), Mathieu Triclot on philosophical aspects of videogames as artefacts and practice (Triclot, 2012), Valérie Arrault and Emmanuelle Jacques on gaming and social media (Arrault and Jacques, 2012), Yves Chevaldonné on videogames and intertextuality (Chevaldonné, 2012), Brigitte Munier on how casual gaming exploits well-known stories from French cultural heritage as the basis for games accessible to many (Munier, 2012a), and a number of studies of the economic and industrial structuring of the French games sector (e.g. Le Diberder, 2012; Simon, 2012). Emmanuel Guardiola and colleagues discuss the French approach to 'serious gaming', in the context of a study financed by the Industry ministry (Guardiola et al, 2012), and Thierry Pitarque considers how encouraging the videogames sector intersects with training and education (Pitarque, 2012). The special issue concludes with an interview with the renowned Ubisoft executive producer Gaël Seydoux on the thematic cultural specificity of French, Japanese and US videogames (Seydoux, 2012). What this shows is that Francophone studies of videogames are moving beyond discussions of familiar topics such as moral panics to explore the wide range of ways in which videogames are playing an important role in daily life and culture in contemporary France.

In France, as in countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States, studies of videogames are often located within several different disciplines. Many leading academics who work on videogames can be found within the fields of sociology and communication. Sébastien Genvo, author of *Le Jeu à son ère numérique*, is based in a department of *Information et communication* at the Université de Lorraine. Philippe Mora, one of the editors of *Les Jeux vidéo : pratiques, contenus et enjeux sociaux* and an expert on e-sports (competitive

videogaming), completed his PhD at the Université Rennes II in the Laboratoire Anthropologie et Sociologie. Gilles Brougère, who has written on games studies and the videogames industry, is based at the Université Paris XIII and is described on his university's website as 'professeur en sciences de l'éducation'. It is against such an interdisciplinary backdrop that this special issue seeks to examine some of the different ways that US/UK French studies can explore videogames in order to assess what they can tell us about culture, politics and history in France. By bringing together articles by French, Belgian and British researchers who participated in a conference organized by the French Media Research Group in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 2015, this special issue of *Contemporary French Civilization* sets out to both establish a more visible place for the study and teaching of videogames within French Studies and - since US/UK French studies is increasingly embracing contributions from Francophone scholarship - to help tackle what Perron (19) has termed an 'absence de chercheurs francophones aux manifestations d'ampleur internationale'. Importantly, several of the individual articles seek to help fill a gap within game studies identified by Gerber (74), who has argued that this discipline in France is one in which there are 'assez peu de travaux traitant du rapport entre société et jeu vidéo sous forme de discours médiatiques et représentations sociales'. The articles in this special issue adopt a variety of different approaches, and the disciplinary backgrounds of contributors to this volume include French cultural studies, communication studies, history, translation studies and linguistics. As is perhaps to be expected (still, given the generational, institutional and cultural capital frictions that have arguably held back more established researchers) the authors are mostly young, and bring the enthusiasm of youth and fresh interest to a subject which is newly acquiring its *lettres de noblesse* within the 'field' of French studies. This trend is now evident on

both sides of the Atlantic, as was demonstrated by one of the panels in the International Colloquium for 20th and 21st Century French and Francophone Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington in April 2017: several North American-based academics presented papers that discussed postcolonialism and videogames in a French and Francophone context at this event. A few months later, in September 2017, the Sorbonne in Paris hosted a one-day conference at which eight French academics presented papers about the relationship between philosophy and videogames (see Audureau 2017).

The studies presented in this special issue of *Contemporary French Civilization* reflect both the current concerns of French research into video games, and general trends in Anglophone scholarship. In Anglophone research, *Understanding Video Games* (2016) edited by Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca identifies two main research communities. Firstly, there is the 'simulation community', which, as its name indicates, is concerned with 'all forms of simulations- including non-electronic ones'. Secondly, there is the 'video game studies community', which is broadly divided into a 'formalist' group (including 'narratologists' who 'prioritize representation' and 'ludologists' who 'prioritize rules') and a 'situationist' group, who are concerned with the 'analysis of game players or the culture at large' rather than 'all-encompassing statements that do not take content and variation into account' (12-13). Readers of the collection of articles in this special issue will recognise how our authors fit into these different 'communities', and see how the questions they ask of French video games engage with the kinds of – overlapping – concerns they investigate. In terms of the 'problematics' our authors have identified, they also reflect the recurrent questions identified by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al, such as 'What is a game?'; 'Why are there games?'; 'Why do some

people prefer certain games?’ or ‘Do certain types of games appeal to people in certain times or cultures, and, if so, why?’; and ‘How do games affect the player?’ (5-6). In different ways and to differing extents, our authors engage with the five main perspectives and associated methodologies that Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al identify in the analysis of video games: the game (textual analysis); the players (observation, interviews, surveys); the culture (interviews, textual analysis); ontology (philosophical enquiry), and metrics (statistical analysis of logged data) (10-12).

At the risk of over-stressing the inter- and multi-disciplinarity of the study of video games, we can also invite the reader to consider how this present collection fits with the themes in games studies recently identified by Mark J P Wolf and Bernard Perron in the preface to their *Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (2014). Although we do not have a study of what Wolf and Perron term Technological aspects (‘the machinery that makes games playable, and that underlie all games and systems’ or of Formal aspects (‘design graphics and sound, and the way they are used in games structures’, or Generic aspects (‘some of the popular genres of video games, and their connection to video games in general’), we do have studies that engage with Playfulness aspects (‘the experience of video gaming, the way games are used, and what they have to offer players’), Cultural aspects (‘topics as convergence, ecology, violence and more’), Sociological aspects (‘the way video games depict, engage, and influence human beings, both individually and in groups’) and Philosophical aspects (‘including cognition, ideology, meaning, ethics, ontology, transcendence, and more’ (xiv).

Another key source in recent Anglophone scholarship that has informed a number of the studies presented here is *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*,

edited by Matthew Kapell and Andrew Elliott (2013). The central concern of the score or so of studies presented by Kapell and Elliott is of course how play and narrative in video games interact with authenticity and accuracy, and with the past and the present (22). If we can conceive of 'French studies' as being at least in part, a process of engaging with the history of the past (and with the 'history of the present') with an awareness of intention, agency and narrative, a process which is seen most clearly in historical games, but which applies equally to society, culture, language and linguistics, then, as Kapell and Elliott remind us, the capacity of video games to stimulate learning (13-17) should not be underestimated.

In the first article of this volume, Julie Delbouille examines videogames in France and Francophone Europe. Via this contribution, we begin the main part of this issue by exploring playing habits and the status of videogames, as well as the discourses that inform how videogames are conceptualized. Delbouille begins by challenging the notion that videogames are a niche pursuit and argues that data from around Europe demonstrates that they are 'far from a marginal activity'. She does so by showing that age and gender are now much less likely to have an impact on game playing habits that they once were. As well as arguing that the mainstream press discussed perceived the dangers and violence of videogames in a somewhat reductive manner, Delbouille argues that recent decades have seen videogames gain a much greater sense of cultural legitimacy. This article pursues and complements a line of enquiry already followed by a group of French social geographers in an interpretation of their ANR-financed Ludespace survey (2012) and discussed in a number of research papers (e.g., Rufat, Ter Minassian, and Coavoux, 2014).

In the next article, Samuel Strong pursues the focus on gaming habits but does so by focusing on French Gamer-Speak and the use of non-standard language by French videogames players. Via a study of French players of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), Strong explores players' use of non-standard lexis, grammar and morphology when communicating with each other within the games *World of Warcraft* and *WildStar*, placing a particular emphasis on the borrowing of terms from English. He shows that there is a significant tendency for French gamers to use English 'gamer speak' terms within sentences in French when playing the aforementioned games, and argues that MMORPGs are a genre of videogames where gamers have progressively become 'text producers' rather than simply passive consumers of text within games. Although the gamer speak used by French gamers frequently draws on English, Strong argues that it also facilitates communication between players by virtue of often being highly concise. Although there have been rare linguistic studies of French popular cultural artefacts and practices in Anglophone French Studies - a recent stimulating analysis of rap springs to mind (Verbeke, 2017) - this article is a useful marker of the value of looking at French popular culture threatened by globalisation through a linguistic prism.

As well as exploring the history of videogames research and the history of videogames within a French and Francophone context, this issue features two articles that examine the relationship between videogames and history. The first of these is by Edwige Lelièvre and focuses on the *Versailles 1685* videogame that was released in 1996. Lelièvre's analysis of its game design process shows it to have been a game that exposes tensions between focusing on history (generally prioritised by 'official' state agents within the design process) and

entertainment. She argues that videogames of a historical nature need to negotiate a careful path when it comes to balancing historicity, playability and technology. This article is part of a growing French strand in videogames research which brings together French concerns over France's material heritage and immaterial *patrimoine*, and the cultural, educational, and commercial importance of 'serious gaming', in reaction both to worries about the museumification of French culture, and earlier moral panics about gaming's deleterious effects on players.

Chris Leffler's article analyses a more recent videogame that provoked much debate, namely *Assassin's Creed Unity*. This game's depiction of the French Revolution generated much discussion on its release in November 2014. Leffler examines such debates, and in particular the ways in which they focused on the anachronisms within the game. However, he also asks to what extent these anachronisms are of significance. Indeed, Leffler suggests that historical inaccuracies become less problematic if one views the game as providing 'a representation of how the Revolutionary city [of Paris] is remembered rather than as a precise replica of it'. Thus, the historical infelicities of *Assassin's Creed Unity* can potentially be read as a symbol of the imperfect nature of memory itself. Nevertheless, Leffler acknowledges that *Assassin's Creed Unity* has an important dual role to play as it 'both captures how the Revolutionary capital is perceived today and intervenes in how the player remembers it'. This article analyses debates about history and memory (e.g. Antley 2012, Erll 2011) and critically examines how historical knowledge is used – and potentially misused – in assessing the merits or flaws of contemporary videogames.

As well as focusing on videogames' relationship with the past, this issue concludes with an article by Jonathan Ervine that is more focused on how games depict the present and are likely to evolve in the future. He argues that we are seeing increasing interactions between sport and videogames in a French context that is not just modern but also postmodern. These interactions are blurring the boundaries between reality and representations of reality, and a form of intertextuality is emerging whereby football videogames are seeking to represent the sport of football and football is evolving in manners that are increasingly influenced by videogames. Ervine argues that France is a country particularly worthy of focus when exploring these issues due to its state support for the videogames industry and the ways in which it has embraced e-sports (competitive videogaming). This article discusses existing research about sports videogames (Consalvo, Stein and Mitgutsch 2013, Crawford and Gosling 2009) and postmodern aspects of football (Giulianotti 2004, Perelman 2012 & 2016). It also assesses what it can tell us about the ways in which sport and videogames are interacting in contemporary France, and also the cultural, economic and political importance of videogames.

Via this special issue, we aim to address the general reluctance of academics working within the field of French studies (and beyond) to engage with the growing importance of videogames within French and Francophone culture. Collectively, the articles present here exemplify both a range of reasons why videogames are an important element of French culture now and also map out areas that merit further research in the future. As we hope to show in this special issue, the marginal status of studies of videogames within the US/UK academic study of French culture is very much at odds with the processes of legitimization that are evidenced by approaches to videogames that have recently been adopted by successive French

governments. Video games may currently be confined to a largely peripheral role within Anglophone French studies' research on contemporary France, but statistics about numbers of gamers and the turnover of the French videogames industry show that they are much more mainstream pursuit than their most virulent critics acknowledge, and deserve more attention.

Interviewed in *Le Figaro* in November 2015, the prodigal son of France's high-technology cultural services industries Jean-Marie Messier, formerly boss of the French global multi-media empire Vivendi - from which he was sacked in 2002 in some disgrace amidst accusations of mismanagement and financial and regulatory irregularities - renewed his calls for a visionary strategy for French industry.³ Discussing the new possibilities increasingly offered by technological convergence, he stressed the bountiful nature of such synergies of techniques and services:

Les nouvelles frontières de la convergence nous mènent vers un monde prodigue, c'est-à-dire un monde d'abondance, de multiplication des possibilités, de choix, de services, de contenus, d'informations, de données, de créations personnelles. « Prodigue » veut dire que c'est utile pour la prévention, pour la santé, pour la vie. « Prodigue », c'est aussi beaucoup de liberté, au risque parfois de s'y perdre. Il faudra apprendre à domestiquer ce nouveau monde prodigue.

³ For brief discussion of Messier and his cultural and commercial ambitions for Vivendi-Universal at the turn of the century, see Dauncey (2003), esp. pp.46-50. For brief discussion of Messier's disgrace, see Davies (2010). For detailed discussion of Messier as a key figure in the French media industry, culture and politics, see Dauncey (forthcoming).

As well as their 'valency', video games exemplify a degree of 'convergence' both in the sense alluded to by Messier, and also in the way they converge different disciplines within academic teaching and research. These include, but are not limited to, issues such as the following: state support and recognition of videogames, the commercial, industrial and cultural value of videogames, and also the political and economic benefits of promoting French videogaming on the global stage. Furthermore, debates about videogames raise significant questions about cultural heritage, cultural policy, language, technology, industry, commerce, finance, and education. Given the importance of interdisciplinarity within modern languages research, there is much reason to believe that an increased focus on the study of the 10e art within French and Francophone studies would be highly timely, desirable, and illuminating.

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