

Game Studies, Middle State Publishing, and Scholarly Identity

BETSY BREY

In 2014, I moved from my hometown where I got my Bachelor's and Master's degrees at the same university, to start my PhD focusing on game studies. Starting a new program after spending six years as a student and one as adjunct faculty in the same institution, I knew I would be in for some form of culture shock. Adding to that, however, was the fact that I was moving to Canada from the United States. And to be honest, that culture shock could have been worse; moving from northern Minnesota to southern Ontario meant moving south to a slightly warmer place, and my accent was already so similar to the locals' that I did not stand out much. My Canadian cohort, upon learning I wasn't Canadian myself, almost all uniformly responded the same:

“Oh, where from in the States? Minnesota? That's basically Canada, anyways.”

While that's not quite true—at times, I find myself struggling to reconcile the differences between American and Canadian cultures—I do share a multitude of values with my Canadian friends and colleagues. However, in my first year of my PhD, I noticed a valuable and very important shift in my scholarship and the kind of values I hold as an academic, ones I might

not have experienced had I not come to Canada. Understanding that I am American and will likely have to return to the States after my studies means I feel strongly that it is important to carry these research values with me and continue the kind of work I do now.

From my own personal experiences, Canadian scholarship within the humanities has a few focuses that I did not experience within a purely American scholarly field. These have greatly impacted my own research methodologies, goals, and desired outcomes. SSHRC (the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, a household name for Canadian scholars) is utterly beyond the pale for an American grad student in the humanities. It was scholarly culture shock, to say the least. The conversation with my academic supervisor went something like this:

“What do you mean, students just apply for this grant and *there’s actually a chance they get it?*”

To which my supervisor responded, “That’s pretty much the situation.”

It wasn’t a terribly complicated conversation, but I was surprised. Coming from a hyper-competitive pool of *every humanities student in the States*, I found it inconceivable that funding could be so in reach. A number of students in my department have this kind of funding—*it’s really real*. And it seems bizarre to my Canadian cohort that I would be so blown away by the concept, but it’s the kind of opportunity I wouldn’t have in America.

What this means is that SSHRC’s values and goals are a focus for many humanities scholars in Canada. I have been able to fund multiple projects through SSHRC and SSHRC-related grants, including a research partnership with a local business, as well as funding for another Canadian influence on my scholarship and my life: a publication called *First Person Scholar*.

First Person Scholar (shortened to *FPS*, a not-so-subtle play on words towards a fairly contentious videogame genre) is a middle-state game studies publication, seeking to bring academic thinking, research, and ideas to the

public, as well as to bring the public into a community of critical discourse stemming from academic research. The hallmark of middle-state writing is its accessibility, both in language and thought in addition to its publication format. As Steve Wilcox, previous *FPS* editor-in-chief, defines in his article “On the Publishing Methods of Our Time: Mobilizing Knowledge in Game Studies,” middle-state publishing focuses on “scholarship that is currently in development, with the intent of soliciting feedback at a time when ideas are just beginning to take shape,” which allows for a kind of mentorship for new scholars and an opportunity to challenge the thought processes of more experienced scholars, too.

But Wilcox also notes that “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.” It is not enough to research and learn without making that knowledge available to anyone interested in learning about games. The goals of *FPS* are deeply impacted by Canadian research values of knowledge mobilization, ones that have affected me as a scholar throughout my years working with *FPS*, first as a copy editor (2014), then as an associate essays editor (2015), then as the essay section head (2015-2017), and finally as editor in chief (2017-2020).

This statement about mobilization as a Canadian research value is, of course, not intended to downplay or ignore the valuable work and effort of American scholarship in areas of knowledge mobilization. A huge part of knowledge mobilization is accessibility, and I have been fortunate enough to meet and work with many champions of open-access journals, for example. Accessibility and knowledge mobilization are hard-fought battles and worthy goals within American academia. However, from my experience within the humanities in Canada, these are not goals but instead, they are the expectation.

In particular, the work that *FPS* does is valuable to academia because of the field we work in. While game studies as a field is growing, it has not met widespread acceptance on an academic level. Many question the need to study games, but simply stated, games are ubiquitous. The annual Entertainment Software Association report for 2019 states more than 165 million American adults play video games, and 75% of households have at least one family member who consider themselves a gamer. Over \$43.4 billion USD was spent on games in 2018. However, the sheer economy of games is a less impressive motivation to study them, I feel, compared to the numerous opportunities game play allows; the same report states that the average gamer is now 33 years old and has been playing games for at least 14 years, meaning they have grown up within a gameful lifestyle, and they reach out for games to interact socially, politically, and educationally.

Game studies prides itself on its interdisciplinary and flexible nature. Much like games themselves, game studies changes constantly and is resistant to some of the more dominant modes of knowledge dissemination and teaching from other fields. For example, my degrees are from English departments, and English is a field well-known for its canons. Much like rhetoric, there is an expected, shared knowledge base, and to start in the field of English or rhetoric is to acquaint yourself with the expected canons and begin work within those critical conversations, either expanding, challenging, or reinforcing. Game studies, however, tends to reject canonization processes in terms of what games we should have common knowledge of, as well as what scholarly work we should be familiar with to demonstrate expertise. While there are certainly popular and well-cited theories, games, and pieces of scholarship, the multitudinous areas within game studies mean that what is accepted or expected in some disciplines within the field may not be as useful to others; the methodologies of a software engineer, for example, do little to help my own research in narrative structure, yet both fall under the category of “game studies”—at least, that’s what someone who calls themselves a “games scholar” would say. Whether that’s true is, of course, up to the individual.

However, game studies aims to do more than simply comment and critique; game studies aims to do those things in addition to changing how games are made and how we play them. What *FPS* does for game studies is to bring academic criticism to the wider community of people in the games industry as well as to players and other researchers, a valuable and needed middle ground in a fast-paced field. However, as noted by Wilcox, games research by academics often goes unregarded by game developers and the industry at large, despite the fact that a great deal of game studies research has practical advice and has even tested various theories for industry use. I've seen this kind of work first-hand, every single day at the University of Waterloo's Games Institute, a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research lab supporting any and all research on games in the Waterloo area. By writing for a non-academic audience but maintaining academic rigor and thought, *FPS* shifts the usability of the knowledge we, as researchers, create. Rather than keeping the critical discourse within academics, middle-state publishing helps encourage that same kind of critical thought to a wider audience. Ideally, it not just encourages critical thought within industry, players, and academics alike, but also encourages new and underrepresented voices to step forward and get involved.

In "Hybrid Publishing: The Case for the Middlestate," *FPS* alum Jason Hawreliak argues that middle-state publishing is crucial for solving two of academic publishing's largest issues: accessibility and speed. By publishing short (2,000 word), free-to-access articles every week, *FPS* attempts to be both timely and easy to engage with for writers and readers of all backgrounds. As Hawreliak states:

But apart from this, the fact is that most people who play games are not academics, and so if we want to engage them, then we have to do so on their turf. As Kenneth Burke puts it in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, "You persuade a man [sic] only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image attitude, idea, identifying your way with his" (p. 55), and I think that's dead-on.

The trick is to construct intelligent, sophisticated discourse without relying on esoteric jargon. If our goal is to foster intelligent discourse outside of an academic environment, then we should restrict jargon, as it can be off-putting. This doesn't mean we have to "dumb-down" our material; rather, we should simply work on developing our skills as better, more lucid writers.

Emma Vossen, another previous *FPS* Editor-in-Chief, agrees and takes the mission a necessary step further. In "Publish or Perish? Or Publish with Purpose?" Vossen challenges the current academic publishing model for its exploitative nature, as well as its major accessibility flaws, stating that open-access journals are simply not enough. "An open access journal article may be physically available to the public, but that doesn't mean the knowledge in the article is effectively disseminated or effectively translated to the public," she states. "If we want our research to make changes to culture, industry, and policy, we need our writing to not just be physically accessible but also readable, i.e. understandable by people who haven't spent a decade learning how to read academese." It is easy to forget that we have spent so much time deciphering academic language, learning to speak within the boundaries of accepted canons and expertises. This is not to suggest expertise is bad—simply that academic writing has a time and place, something we, as rhetorical scholars, know all too well.

My time in Canada is, unfortunately, likely temporary. While I have permanent residency, job competition here is even more fierce than it is in America. But having a set of experiences as an American scholar, living, working, and studying in Canada, has deeply impacted my views on how I will proceed as a teacher and a researcher, regardless of the country and culture I decide to teach and research in after my degree. I view my work with *FPS* as teaching academics, non-academics, industry, fans, and other teachers about working together in ways we can all understand. This work brings forward to others the knowledge that we, as researchers, have brought to light.

Works Cited

- “2019 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry.” *Entertainment Software Association*, Entertainment Software Association, 19 Aug. 2019, www.theesa.com/esa-research/2019-essential-facts-about-the-computer-and-video-game-industry/.
- Hawreliak, Jason. “Hybrid Publishing.” *First Person Scholar*, U of Waterloo, 31 July 2013, www.firstpersonscholar.com/the-case-for-the-middle-state/.
- Vossen, Emma. “Publish or Perish?” *First Person Scholar*, U of Waterloo, 6 Apr. 2016, www.firstpersonscholar.com/publish-or-perish/.
- Wilcox, Steve. “On the Publishing Methods of Our Time: Mobilizing Knowledge in Game Studies.” *Scholarly and Research Communication*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2015, doi:10.22230/src.2015v6n3a203.