

# BEYOND THE IVORY TOWER

## POP-PHILOSOPHY AS PUBLIC SCHOLARSHIP IN GAME STUDIES

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Book series like the Popular Culture and Philosophy series (focusing on *Halo*, *Zelda*, *BioShock*) bridges academia and public discourse by translating complex theories through gaming's familiar worlds. These books democratize scholarship, functioning as "gateway drugs" to deeper critical engagement. Unlike traditional research confined to academic circles, they thrive in mainstream spaces (like bookstores), sparking broader conversations about games as cultural artifacts. By framing games as vessels for existential inquiry akin to literature or film, these texts undermine the stubborn "high/low" culture divide that still marginalizes game studies. They legitimize the field while preserving its populist appeal, striking a vital balance as academia faces growing pressure to demonstrate public relevance. This opinion paper argues that such pop-philosophy works are not substitutes for rigorous scholarship, but indispensable ambassadors, weaving games into humanistic discourse while inviting new audiences to "play" with critical theory.

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## Introduction: Starting point 2000s

In 2008, I had just finished my dissertation on forms of community building in MMORPGs.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the anthology *The Legend of Zelda and Philosophy: I Link Therefore I Am*<sup>2</sup> was published one year later as part of the Popular Culture and Philosophy book series by Open Court. Was there something in the air? With appropriate contacts abroad, I was able to obtain these representatives of the series at a reasonable price. This volume was the 35th pop-philosophical iteration of the series; authors and editors had previously dealt with media phenomena such as Star Wars, Bob Dylan and superheroes. Three years later, in 2011, *Halo and Philosophy: Intellect Evolved*<sup>3</sup> (an allusion to the original title of the game *Combat Evolved*) was published and finally, in 2015, the anthology *BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*<sup>4</sup> was released. As a game scholar and researcher, reading these volumes took on important functions in my work and my professional field. As I will demonstrate below, its role in science communication is particularly significant. In an interdisciplinary field as young as game studies, which often straddles media studies, design, psychology, and cultural theory but still struggles for academic recognition, academic communication is not an add-on but a constitutive part of research. Game scholars must produce findings and publicly justify why digital games are a relevant subject of study, whether through debates about the effects of violence, narrative innovations, or social participation. While introductory literature on game studies certainly exists, the field still lacks a long-standing, consolidated body of knowledge comparable to those of more established disciplines. I suspect that every study must also help define the field itself. Different media formats such as YouTube, blogs or the pop philosophy books to be discussed here (for instance *The Last of Us and Philosophy: Look for the Light*<sup>5</sup>, *Final Fantasy and Philosophy: The Ultimate Walkthrough*<sup>6</sup> or *The Witcher and Philosophy: Toss a Coin to Your Philosopher*<sup>7</sup>) become epistemic tools in the following way: They break down technical jargon, demonstrate practical relevance (for example for education or inclusion) and fight against the cliché of the supposedly dubious medium of digital games. Anyone who pursues game studies is therefore always working to draw boundaries between university, industry and the public.

### Pop philosophy as a door opener for academic discourse

The popularization of social or cultural science concepts relating to digital games is by no means a trivial simplification but represents a conscious and intentional act of mediation. The anthologies mentioned above have a special role to play here. They are more than just entertaining fan reading; rather, they are serious attempts to transfer academic thinking into pop-cultural forms. This is done by linking narrative and ludic elements with (in this case) philosophical categories, for example when Link's mute heroism is linked to Sartre's existentialist concepts or Geralt's moral ambivalence is viewed from the perspective of utilitarian ethics. These volumes thus have a dual function: On the one hand, they make complex approaches accessible to a broader audience; on the other, they legitimize games as

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Inderst, *Vergemeinschaftung in MMORPGS* (Boizenburg: vwh, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Luke Cuddy, ed., *The Legend of Zelda and Philosophy: I Link Therefore I Am*, Popular Culture and Philosophy (Chicago: Open Court, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Luke Cuddy, ed., *Halo and Philosophy: Intellect Evolved*, Popular Culture and Philosophy (Chicago: Open Court, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Adam Barkman, ed., *BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*, Popular Culture and Philosophy (Chicago: Open Court, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Horn, Charles Joshua, ed. *The Last of Us and Philosophy: Look for the Light*. Popular Culture and Philosophy. Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Blahuta, Jason P., and Michel S. Beaulieu, eds. *Final Fantasy and Philosophy: The Ultimate Walkthrough*. The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Brake, Matthew, and Kevin S. Decker, eds. *The Witcher and Philosophy: Toss a Coin to Your Philosopher*. Popular Culture and Philosophy. Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2022.

culturally significant objects. They transform the medium of games into a place for the application and formation of theory; in a disciplinary field that is still struggling to establish itself institutionally, such forms of pop philosophy are of strategic importance. I would like to call this type of reading “epistemic threshold objects”. They are borderline media between the specialist public and an open-minded cultural public. Personally, I have experienced this more than once: I have recommended reading them more than once as a “gentle” introduction; this works particularly well if you keep the respective target group in mind. It should come as no surprise that especially friends and acquaintances from undergraduate philosophy courses, who also have a certain affinity for games, were easier to convince to take a (cautious) look at a “Game XY and Philosophy” reading and to engage with the questions.

### **Epistemic tools between reflection and fandom**

The potential of digital games for reflection is evident in the way pop philosophy volumes use gameplay and narration as starting points for theoretical considerations. In *BioShock and Philosophy: Irrational Game, Rational Book*, the central plot twist, “Would you kindly?”, is analyzed not only as a narrative revelation but also as a philosophical prompt for questions about freedom of action, determinism, and manipulation. A similar approach is evident in *Final Fantasy and Philosophy*, where recurring motifs such as redemption, identity, and time travel illustrate post-structuralist theories. Players are not merely understood as recipients, but as acting subjects in symbolically charged spaces. This perspective allows us to think of games as discursive platforms, i.e., media in which social negotiation processes, ethical dilemmas, and subjective positioning can be simulated, tested, and reflected upon. This clarifies that pop philosophy volumes are not just entertaining, but also hybrid instruments of knowledge that link academic reflection to popular culture. They use ludic immersion, the unique combination of interactivity and narrative, as a method to make abstract theories tangible. At the same time, they demonstrate the extent to which digital games function as cultural spaces of articulation in which contemporary debates (for example on autonomy, surveillance or ecology) are condensed.

### **Communicative interstices and academic boundary work**

As far as I can see, the academic debate on games no longer takes place exclusively within the traditional framework of conferences, journals and monographs. It is flanked by formats such as podcasts<sup>8</sup>, video essays on platforms such as YouTube and Nebula<sup>9</sup>, Blogs<sup>10</sup> or popular philosophy anthologies. These new communication spaces allow game researchers to present their work to social and media publics while simultaneously addressing both specialist and non-specialist target groups. Formats such as the aforementioned books act as media of transfer. They translate theory into game language and game practice into theoretical models. This creates a kind of “reflected participation” in which the scientific view is anchored in the game itself rather than pointing beyond it. The reception of such works by fans, students, and journalists generates feedback that reshapes the self-image of game studies and the role of researchers.

### **Science communication as a constitutive practice – it’s a must**

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<sup>8</sup> I'm thinking of a German format like *Behind the Screens* or the English-language podcast *Game Studies Study Buddies*.

<sup>9</sup> The works of Jacob Geller, *Writing on Games* and Max Derratt are worth mentioning here.

<sup>10</sup> Examples include the German-language *Spiel-Kultur-Wissenschaft* by Eugen Pfister and *Language at Play* by Pascal Marc Wagner.

The structural position of game studies as a young, interdisciplinary, and often institutionally marginalized discipline transforms academic communication from an optional "add-on" into a constitutive condition of disciplinary legitimacy. It's not just about communicating research findings; it is also about the epistemological necessity of anchoring the purpose of one's research in an academic and social climate that still considers digital games to be trivial entertainment. In this context, popular philosophical publications on digital games transcend mere public relations. Rather, they embody a knowledge practice in which research and communication function as a dialectical unity. I have come to this realization through my experience attending conferences, advanced seminars, and conversations with publishers during book projects. By addressing a nonspecialized audience, the publications presented here generate academic connectivity and produce discursive relevance. This dimension remains underdetermined in traditional formats of peer-reviewed specialist literature because their visibility is simply not high enough.

### **From template to motivation to my own project(s)**

The idea of dealing exclusively with a specific game or series of games in a single volume is something that has certainly not been done in German-speaking countries with the title *"See? I'm real...". Multidisziplinäre Zugänge zum Computerspiel am Beispiel von 'Silent Hill'* from 2010.<sup>11</sup> Five years later, *'The cake is a lie!' Polyperspektivische Betrachtungen des Computerspiels am Beispiel von 'Portal'*<sup>12</sup> appeared in the same series. These two volumes are no longer considered pop philosophy; they are now standard works in German-language game studies. The titles demonstrate how digital games can be examined as multifaceted cultural artifacts from various academic perspectives. The first volume is the first German-language anthology to systematically compare media studies, pedagogy, literary theory, and other disciplinary approaches based on the Silent Hill series. The second volume focuses on Portal and Portal 2 to demonstrate the necessity of methodological diversity in analyzing complex gaming phenomena. Both works are united by the conviction that digital games can only be adequately understood through multi-perspective approaches. This can be seen through the comparison of different disciplines investigating the same subject (Silent Hill) or the application of different interpretive approaches to a single game (Portal). Thus, these books function as a plea for a hermeneutic practice that seeks to do justice to the complexity of its subject matter through methodological openness.

With the reading experience from "both worlds", i.e. the English-language pop-philosophical volumes and the "classic" German-language game studies titles, I finally ventured in 2018, together with Christof Zurschmitten and Pascal Marc Wagner, to write my first own volume, which was to focus on one specific game series: the *Souls* games.<sup>13</sup> 16 authors took up the narrative and themes, the spatial design and the social components of the individual games (*Demon's Souls*, *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls II*, *Dark Souls III* and *Bloodborne*). After the volume was published in 2019, another volume on the *Wolfenstein* series followed in 2022, again with Pascal Marc Wagner and Aurelia Brandenburg.<sup>14</sup> The ludo-cultural phenomenon *Wolfenstein*, dating back into the year 1981, seemed ideal for us to let different authors reflect on it in around 250 pages due to its controversial history and publishing policy in Germany. Finally, in 2024, the volume *Old World Blues: »Fallout« und das Spiel mit der Postapokalypse* with over 400 pages was published together with Arno Görge.<sup>15</sup> 22

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<sup>11</sup> Britta Neitzel, Matthias Bopp, and Rolf F. Nohr, eds., "See? I'm Real—": Multidisziplinäre Zugänge zum Computerspiel am Beispiel von 'Silent Hill' (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hensel, Britta Neitzel, and Rolf F. Nohr, eds., "The Cake Is a Lie!": Polyperspektivische Betrachtungen des Computerspiels am Beispiel von "Portal" (Münster: Lit, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Inderst, Rudolf/ Pascal Wagner/ Christof Zurschmitten (Hg.): Prepare to Die. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf Demon's Souls, Dark Souls und Bloodborne. Glückstadt, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Inderst, Rudolf/ Aurelia Brandenburg/ Pascal Wagner (Hg.): „Eva, auf Wiedersehen!“ Zur Geschichte, Verhandlung und Einordnung der Wolfenstein-Spielreihe. Glückstadt, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Görge, Arno/ Rudolf Inderst (Hg.): Old World Blues. Fallout und das Spiel mit der Postapokalypse. Marburg, 2024.

authors were involved and their contributions deliberately approach the Fallout series from a broad thematic perspective; they can be assigned to established analytical approaches from media studies: a production, product and reception analysis. This is by no means exclusively a success story; many a planning process had to be canceled and one call for contributions even yielded no contribution proposals (project on Gears of War in 2024). As these volumes are often projects close to our hearts, this "reality check" is doubly painful. Further joint volumes are currently in the works, for example on *The Elder Scrolls*, *Elden Ring* or the Lucas Arts adventure games.

## Conclusion – my joy and sorrow

The publication of interdisciplinary anthologies is joyful and necessary work. It emphasizes the cultural and academic relevance of games and builds a bridge between specialist discourses and a broader public. Editing such volumes teaches one how to take digital games seriously as cultural artifacts by synthesizing media studies, philosophy, design analysis, and social science perspectives. Game studies benefit from their interdisciplinary openness here, which allows topics such as failure, spatial perception, and interactive narrative to be viewed in a new light; however, despite this intellectual enrichment, working on such anthologies remains a career risk. The academic landscape is still fixated on quantifiable impact metrics, such as the h-index, third-party funding, and journal rankings. Editorships and contributions to edited volumes rarely receive the same recognition as peer-reviewed individual publications in high-impact journals. Game studies is a relatively young field that suffers from a double legitimacy problem. On the one hand, pop culture-related topics are still considered "soft" in traditional disciplines. On the other hand, despite their often-greater accessibility and practical relevance, collaborative knowledge production in edited volumes is systematically undervalued.

However, it would be shortsighted to view this work solely through the lens of "publish or perish."

The true significance of such volumes is that they lay the foundation for future research while simultaneously shaping discourses outside the academy, whether in the gaming industry, the arts, or education. Their greatest strength is their hybridity: they are neither purely academic nor purely popular science. Instead, they demonstrate how theory and practice, play and analysis, and specialist discourse and public debate can work together. In this sense, the editors and authors of these works should not be discouraged, even if institutional incentives are lacking. Game studies needs these books to further define its field. Who knows? Perhaps it is precisely these texts that will inspire future generations of researchers long after the current ranking cycles have been forgotten. So, tell me, what will be *your* next project?

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