

From Fragmentation to Formation: Academic Anthologies as Catalysts for Digital Game Studies

Reflections on the *Fallout* Collection *Old World Blues*

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Academic anthologies serve an invaluable function in the unification of disparate research domains, particularly in the domain of digital game studies. This abstracteditors as a principal illustration of the manner in which these collections facilitate academic cohesion, uniting a multiplicity of methodologies and perspectives. By addressing digital games as complex cultural, technological, and social phenomena, anthologies enhance the quality of scholarly discourse and facilitate the development of a shared academic framework. This contribution also examines four specific research fields and demonstrates why *Fallout* is an ideal topic for a game studies anthology. The *Fallout* series, with its intricate world-building, sociopolitical themes, and narrative depth, provides an ideal context for examining a range of issues, including post-apocalyptic storytelling, political allegory, player agency, and cultural memory. In this way, the anthology not only makes a contribution to the study of *Fallout* but also serves to exemplify how anthologies support and communicate the growth of digital game studies, offering foundational research and documenting the field's evolution.

Keywords: *Fallout*, Anthologies, Digital Game Studies, Research Dissemination, Research Practice

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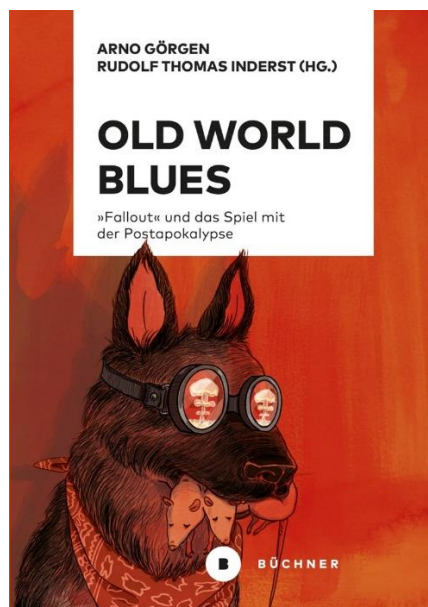


Figure 1. *Fallout* Collection: *Old World Blues* Book Cover by Nienke Klöffler

Introduction

The importance of academic anthologies in consolidating different areas of research is paramount, particularly in the field of digital games studies. Digital games are multifaceted entities, intertwining cultural, technological and social aspects – by addressing these facets, anthologies not only enrich the quality of scholarly dialogue, but also pave the way for the establishment of a common academic framework. We argue that the anthology's examination of *Fallout* as our go-to best practice case does more than contribute to the study of the game series; it also stands as a testament to the role of anthologies in the expansion of digital game studies. By providing foundational research and chronicling the evolution of the field, anthologies like *Old World Blues* play a crucial role in the academic landscape. The *Fallout* series, known for its detailed world-building, socio-political themes, and narrative depth, serves as an excellent subject for a game studies anthology. We identify and discuss four specific, interconnected areas of research in the context of *Fallout* to demonstrate its suitability as a subject of study. These areas include a) aesthetics and nostalgic themes/motifs, b) discursive connectivity, c) player agency/freedom and contingency, and finally d) economic value and identity politics.

The Critical Role of Anthologies in Emerging Research Fields

Academic anthologies play an instrumental role in the advancement and legitimization of nascent research domains, particularly those that have yet to be formally recognized as autonomous disciplines in their own right. This is particularly the case in the field of digital game studies in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, where the discipline is still evolving and gaining wider recognition.¹ It is impossible to overstate the significance of academic anthologies in this context, as they fulfil a number of essential functions that contribute to the maturation of a research area.² In digital game studies, where the interdisciplinary nature of the field necessitates the integration of multiple academic perspectives, the role of anthologies is of particular significance. The following sections and paragraphs will provide a more detailed examination and analysis of the subject matter.

Uniting Diverse Academic Perspectives in Digital Game Studies

Academic anthologies provide a forum for the consolidation of diverse perspectives, theories, and methodologies, facilitating the convergence of scholars from disparate fields under a unified theme. In the context of digital game studies, the necessity for such a platform is especially acute due to the fragmented nature of the research. The field draws from a range of disciplines, including computer science, psychology, sociology, cultural studies, media studies, and more. Each of these disciplines contributes its own theories, methodologies, and research questions to the field.³ By assembling a diverse array of scholarly perspectives in a single volume, anthologies facilitate a nuanced and multifaceted discourse that contributes to the evolution of the emerging field. Such diversity not only enriches the academic discourse but also encourages scholars to explore intersections between different methodologies and theoretical frameworks, thereby enhancing the overall depth and breadth of research. In this

¹ Cf. Rudolf Inderst, Pascal Marc Wagner: #GAMESTUDIES. 20 Jahre Forschungsfantasie: Von der Disziplinierung eines Mediums. Marburg, 2022. Pp. 93–95.

² Cf. Michael Hochgeschwender: Geleitwort. Pp. 11–15. In: Rudolf Thomas Inderst, Peter Just (Ed.): Contact. Conflict. Combat. Zur Tradition des Konfliktes in digitalen Spielen. Boizenburg, 2011. Pp. 14–15.

³ Cf. Daniel Martin Feige: Computerspiele. Eine Ästhetik. Berlin, 2015. Pp. 10.

way, anthologies facilitate the development of a shared vocabulary and framework for discussing digital games as cultural, social, and technological artefacts.

A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Games as Cultural Artefacts

The incorporation of diverse perspectives facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of digital games as cultural artefacts. It is a fallacy to consider games as mere entertainment; rather, they are complex texts that reflect and influence societal norms, values, and behaviors. As a culture-bound medium, games form something that Jan Assmann describes as the connective structure of a society: “It has a unifying and connecting effect in two dimensions: the social dimension and the temporal dimension. It binds people to their fellow human beings by forming a ‘symbolic world of meaning’ [...] that creates a shared space for experience, expectation and action, which instils trust and provides orientation through its binding and connecting power.”⁴ This is particularly pertinent in the contemporary era, where digital games have attained the status of mainstream cultural phenomena. They influence the ways in which people interact with technology, consume media, and engage with social and political issues.⁵ A compilation of scholarly essays from a variety of disciplinary perspectives can facilitate the illumination of these multifaceted relationships, thereby providing a more comprehensive view of the subject matter. The integration of theories from diverse fields, including psychology (which examines the impact of games on cognition), sociology (which studies games as social systems), and cultural studies (which explores games as narrative and aesthetic experiences), allows anthologies to offer a broader perspective on the role of games in modern culture.⁶

Legitimizing New Disciplines through Academic Anthologies

In addition to their function in consolidating perspectives, academic anthologies also serve to legitimate the position of the academic community. The act of publishing an anthology indicates to the wider academic community that a significant corpus of scholarship exists in a given field, warranting recognition and further investigation. This is especially crucial for disciplines such as digital game studies which may face challenges in gaining visibility and credibility during its nascent stages. By presenting a compilation of meticulous research, anthologies can assist in establishing the field as a bona fide area of inquiry. For scholars engaged in digital game studies, obtaining recognition from more established academic disciplines is frequently a significant challenge, as their field may be perceived as peripheral or niche.

Attracting Attention from Stakeholders and Securing Funding

This legitimization is an essential element in the process of gaining the attention and respect of funding bodies, policymakers, and other key stakeholders. The publication of an anthology can serve to attract the interest of those who may not have previously considered the significance of digital game studies. Consequently, this can result in increased funding opportunities, institutional support, and collaborative initiatives, which are vital for the field's continued

⁴ Assmann, Jan. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. 5. Auflage. München: C.H. Beck, 2007, 16. (translation by AG)

⁵ Cf. Arno Görgen, Tobias Unterhuber: *Politiken des (digitalen) Spiels zwischen Affirmation und Antagonismus*. Pp. 9–49. In: Arno Görgen, Tobias Unterhuber (Ed.): *Politiken des (digitalen) Spiels. Transdisziplinäre Perspektiven*. Bielefeld, 2023. Pp. 9–12.

⁶ As a case in point, the two-volume set on the *Souls* and *Wolfenstein* game series is worthy of mention: Rudolf Inderst, Pascal Wagner, Christof Zurschmitt (Ed.): *Prepare to Die. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf Demon's Souls, Dark Souls und Bloodborne*. Glückstadt, 2019; Rudolf Inderst, Aurelia Brandenburg, Pascal Wagner (Ed.): *„Eva, auf Wiedersehen!“ Zur Geschichte, Verhandlung und Einordnung der Wolfenstein-Spielreihe*. Glückstadt, 2022.

growth and development. In the case of digital game studies, which deals with an industry that is both rapidly evolving and financially significant, securing recognition and funding is of the utmost importance for sustaining long-term academic inquiry and innovation – demonstrations of the depth and rigor of research conducted in anthologies serve to bridge the gap between academia and external stakeholders.

Fostering Scholarly Communities in Fragmented Fields

Anthologies serve as a vital instrument for the establishment and consolidation of a scholarly community: They provide a common point of reference, a shared foundation upon which scholars can engage with one another's work, debate key issues, and collectively advance the state of knowledge in the field. This sense of community is of particular importance during the nascent stages of a discipline's development, when scholars may otherwise feel isolated in their individual research endeavors. The collaborative nature of anthologies fosters a sense of intellectual camaraderie and offers opportunities for the cross-pollination of ideas across different sub-fields.

Bridging Divides and Encouraging Interdisciplinary Collaboration

In the context of digital game studies in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, these benefits are particularly pronounced. The field is currently characterized by a high degree of fragmentation, with scholars working in relative isolation across a range of different institutions and disciplines.⁷ The publication of academic anthologies can facilitate the bridging of these divides, and help to foster a sense of shared purpose and collective identity that can propel the field forward. The creation of a network of scholars engaged in similar inquiries through the publication of academic anthologies can facilitate collaboration, mentorship, and the exchange of ideas, all of which are essential for the maturation of a nascent discipline. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of digital game studies makes such collaborations particularly beneficial.

Documenting the Evolution of Emerging Fields Over Time

Anthologies are well-suited to the task of documenting the evolution of a field over time. As digital game studies continues to develop, future researchers will regard earlier anthologies as important reference points that provide insight into the evolution of key concepts, debates, and methodologies. The historical dimension of academic anthologies thus adds another layer of significance to their role in the shaping of emerging fields – in rapidly evolving fields such as digital game studies, where the subject matter itself (digital games) is in a constant state of flux, the capacity to document shifts in thinking and approach is crucial. Future generations of scholars will be able to trace the intellectual lineage of ideas in the field, utilizing anthologies as a roadmap for understanding the evolution of digital game studies.

Catalysts for Growth and Innovation in Digital Game Studies

In the following discussion, we aim to demonstrate why academic anthologies are not merely collections of scholarly papers, but rather function as catalysts for growth, innovation, and community-building in emerging research fields. Specifically, we seek to highlight their role in consolidating disparate perspectives, serving as legitimizing forces, fostering the formation

⁷ Cf. Gundolf S. Freyermuth: Game Studies. Pp. 34–39. In: Deutscher Kulturrat e.V. (Ed.): *Handbuch Gameskultur*. Berlin, 2020. Pp. 31–33.

of scholarly communities, and preserving a historical record of a field's evolution. Such collections are invaluable tools in the ongoing development of digital game studies in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and indeed in any field that is striving to establish itself as a full discipline in its own right. The publication of such anthologies ultimately enrich the academic landscape and enhance our understanding of the cultural significance of digital games. As digital games continue to exert an influence on various aspects of society, the anthologies produced today will serve as essential building blocks for the academic frameworks of tomorrow.

Best Practice: The Becoming of *Old World Blues*

The above considerations give rise to specific steps for the practical process of compiling anthologies that is central to their successful development. These steps include finding a specific topic, structuring this topic and putting together a pool of authors that does justice to both the structure and the topic itself, and lastly, the processes of quality management. In the following sections, we will discuss these aspects from our perspective as anthology editors using the example of the anthology *Old World Blues*. At the same time, we must emphasize that all of these points can overlap and that there can be mutual influences in the organic process of the development of a volume.

a) Defining the Topic

Generally, editors of anthologies determine the topic very early on because a) it is usually a topic that is close to them in their academic biography, b) because it is a subject that is under-researched and should trigger further research (or even funding) by means of an anthology, c) because it requires swift academic contextualization due to current social/political/cultural developments (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic has led to countless volumes, including Görden/Eichinger/Pfister 2024) or d) because it is intended to initiate networks in certain research communities and make their work visible. For *Old World Blues*, it was certainly a mixture of all these variables, with networking and visibility playing a particularly important role. To put it plainly, the editorial team was keen to collaborate and make their own disciplines more visible. We therefore also decided to choose a topic that would become highly relevant and would be very relevant in terms of its publication: In the spring of 2020, the video on demand provider Amazon Prime announced the TV series *Fallout*, which was to be set in the gaming universe of the same name and was to be released in spring 2024. At the same time, *Fallout* as an extremely popular and long running game franchise promised to illustrate many different aspects of game studies using prominent examples.

This versatility stems from two sources: On the one hand, *Fallout* is a gaming franchise that has produced nine digital games since 1997. At the same time, a fan culture has also developed around the games which in turn manifests itself in its own artefacts and communications. These include analog games, fan fiction, merchandise, how-to literature, social media memes, fan wikis, game mods, a TV show, etc. In the case of *Fallout*, there are four different reservoirs which ensure that the series is of interest to a wide range of people, including academics in the humanities. Firstly, the *Fallout* series includes games that heavily utilize notions of nostalgia. This includes a nostalgic aesthetic that dramatizes and romanticizes the art and design vocabulary of the 1940s to 1980s. Over the course of the series, however, a self-referential nostalgia has also developed, which has created traditions of images, narrative, and game mechanics and amalgamated them into a canon that is resolutely observed by players, sometimes with religious zeal. Finally, there is also an (auto)biographical nostalgia that situates

the games in one's own biography and also ascribes an identity-forming character to it. It is precisely this biographical grounding that often leads researchers to engage with the subject of *Fallout*. In addition to this nostalgic element, the games also establish a discursive connectivity that integrates them into current and historical discourses, documenting and commenting on them and adapting them around the franchise's narratives. In this almost ubiquitous connection to historical and contemporary moral, political, social and cultural discourses, the games impart knowledge, modes of action, and patterns of orientation, which can be very well presented in their multidimensionality in an anthology.

A third important aspect that makes the *Fallout* games so fruitful for analytical examination in the context of an anthology is the two-fold contingency experience that the games offer. On the one hand, this refers to the gaming experience in the sense of play, which allows the player an amazing amount of freedom in completely different scenarios to adopt the games and make them their own. This includes the free, playful exploration of the games and the open game worlds, the appropriation of the game world via base building mechanics and other crafting mechanics, in the multiplayer context the autonomous interactions with game world and other human players, and finally, the autonomous alteration of the games in the context of a vast modding culture. At the same time, the experience of contingency in the context of highly rules-based and reactive games stands out throughout *Fallout*. The series is well known for constructing moral dilemmas and having players live with the gameplay and narrative consequences of their actions. This two-dimensional uncertainty of the game, in turn, underpins the aforementioned nostalgia of gaming.

Finally, the economic value chain should also be mentioned, as it has shaped the games and their development from the very beginning. Not only does *Fallout*'s distinctly retro-futuristic aesthetic enable marketing campaigns that seemingly resonate with American identity politics. The topography, including its specifically American landmarks, its recourse to and appropriation of US history, its implementation as a particularly "American" visual language, the use of American pop music from the pre-1960s – all this leads to an ironically interrupted self-affirmation of American identity. On the other hand, the series is also a global brand with very American semantics which can be read differently depending on the region, making it suitable for analyses centered on identity politics. At the same time, these anchor points also facilitate implementation in marketing and merchandise items. It is relatively easy to transfer them to merchandise strategies within such a strongly defined world design. In addition, the long history of the series is also analytically outstanding because it invites historical analysis not only of its content, but also of the expansion of the brand, the development processes in changing studio environments, and in the face of social and technological change processes.

The analytical value of *Fallout* thus results from the many facets that the games offer historically and in terms of their status as media artefacts. Of course, an anthology like this could also work for a single game or topic. However, the prerequisite is that the subject must be complex enough.

b) Determine a Book Structure

While the focus of the volume was very narrowly concentrated on *Fallout*, we also wanted the collection to allow for the broadest possible spectrum of different topics, methods, and perspectives. This broad approach also makes a coherent book structure more difficult, especially when, as it was in our case, the majority of authors were acquired through a later call for papers and not through targeted invitations. This means that the exact contributions are not

fixed in this model, which can lead to over or under-represented topics in the submitted contributions. This may have to be balanced out by targeted invitations to experts at a later stage. We decided to structure the volume along the so-called HGP method, a mix of methods that had been compiled in individual analyses as part of the SNF project “Horror-Game-Politics” by Arno Görge and Eugen Pfister.⁸ This mix, originally developed for the analysis of individual games, includes production analysis, which examines the historical contexts of the development of digital games; content analysis, which examines digital games in terms of their narrative, aesthetics, game mechanics, etc.; and reception analysis, which examines the reception of digital games among players, in journalistic contexts, and in society. Here, too, the terms were broadly defined so that texts that not only covered the reception but also the adaptation and instrumentalization of the *Fallout* canon in other contexts could be included in the reception analysis. Sometimes it can also happen that the focus of the call is so broad that a structure cannot be given from the outset. In such cases, the overall package of submissions then determines a structure because clusters form through accumulations and thematic relationships that can give the collection a narrative.

c) *Assemble the Author’s Pool*

We were able to define the above-mentioned content aspects for *Old World Blues* at the end of 2022, allowing us to publish a call for articles at the beginning of 2023 that communicated our ideas for the volume while also allowing enough leeway for contributions that deviate from our conception in a beneficial way.

By the deadline for the call, we had received 23 submissions. Usually, texts are selected through a blind peer review process, but we opted out of this process and instead had the editorial team carry out the reviews. Although this demands more time, it does mean that the editors are very familiar with the texts at a very early stage. At the same time, the review process is much more variable and, when selecting the authors, we paid attention to the greatest diversity of content and qualitative standards, but also to an appropriate mix of early career researchers and senior researchers, as well as inclusion and diversity.

In the end, we invited 12 authors to participate. In terms of content, it turned out that we only had contributions that focused on the content of the games. Paraphernalia, paratexts or historical contextualizations were completely missing at this point. Nevertheless, in order to achieve a well-rounded book structure, we invited Björn Blankenheim and Eugen Pfister to write a text on the history of *Fallout* (with Arno Görge). We also included an English-language text on fan translations of *Fallout* in South Korea with Hyerin Shin's contribution, which we then translated into German. However, paratexts and paraphernalia no longer played a role and thus remain unexamined in *Fallout* research for the time being.

d) *Provide Quality Management*

In the case of *Old World Blues*, it was planned from the outset that the publication of the anthology should be financed as part of the open access initiative of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). This in turn means that the entire volume, in its final manuscript form, was subjected to a blind peer review process. To avoid possible complications here, it is advisable to supervise the authors closely from an early stage. In addition, we decided that the blind peer review would be preceded by a critical and constructive review of the submitted texts by the

⁸ Eugen Pfister, Arno Görge: “How to analyse a Video game from a historical, source-critical perspective: The HGP-Method.” In: *Horror - Game - Politics*, 01.02.2023. Abgerufen am 21. Januar 2025 von <https://doi.org/10.58079/piqb>

editors, on the basis that the texts were provided with initial revisions. After the blind peer review, a second revision was carried out, which was then documented for the purposes of transparency to the SNF. By using this two-stage process, we were able to ensure the high quality of the anthology.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that academic edited volumes serve as important catalysts for growth, innovation, and community building in emerging fields of study. More than just collections of scholarly work, they consolidate diverse perspectives, legitimize fields of study, foster scholarly communities, and document the development of a field over time. In the context of digital game studies, especially in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, where the field is still developing, these functions are particularly important. Anthologies provide a platform to bring scholars from different disciplines together, which allows for broader understandings of digital games as cultural artefacts and acknowledges their impact on societal norms, values and behaviors. By showcasing a substantial body of research, anthologies also help to establish digital games studies as a legitimate field of inquiry, which is crucial for gaining recognition and support from funding bodies, policy makers, and other stakeholders.

In addition, anthologies create a common point of reference, enabling scholars to engage with each other's work and collectively advance the field. This is particularly important in fragmented fields where researchers may feel isolated, which is a regular talking point at game research conferences. Anthologies also serve as historical records of the development of the field, allowing future scholars to trace the evolution of key concepts, debates and methodologies. The anthology *Old World Blues* illustrates these points. The choice of *Fallout* as a subject is particularly relevant because of its intricate world-building, socio-political themes, and narrative depth. The game's versatility stems from its long history, fan culture, nostalgic elements, and connections to various social and political discourses. The anthology uses a combination of production, content, and reception analysis to provide a comprehensive examination of the games.

The process of creating *Old World Blues* involved several steps. First, the editorial team defined the topic, choosing *Fallout* for its relevance, popularity, and potential to illustrate different aspects of game studies and started talking to publishers and checked for possibilities of financial assistance. The book was then structured using the HGP method, which includes production analysis, content analysis, and reception analysis. A diverse pool of authors was assembled through a call for papers, and a two-stage review process ensured the high quality of the anthology. In conclusion, academic anthologies such as *Old World Blues* play an important role in the development of digital game studies. They provide a foundation for further research, serve as a historical record, and ultimately contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of digital games.

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