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Beyond Play in one of Yayoi Kusama's Obliteration Room Installations.

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Special Issue

Beyond Play

edited by

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The four of us were brought together first by the hands of others, as individual authors, within that well-established academic genre, the edited volume (Voorhees et al. 2026). We found ourselves once again gathered together, this time by mutual desire and design, within yet another well-established academic genre: the conference panel at the conference *Beyond Play: The Transformative Power of Digital Gaming in a Deeply Mediatized Society*. And here we are once again, gathered in collaboration within a third, distinct academic genre: the peer-reviewed article. Even then, we've gone against the grain of conventional academic rules for authorship. We are all first author so to speak, and have listed our author names in alphabetical order – via first name, not last – as a neutral way to list our names.

Perhaps implicitly in our earlier collaborations, but explicitly and intentionally at present, our collaborative process has been a form of play within an epistemic genre of academic writing. While we abide by certain expectations of a generic form – after all, our goal (or win state, if you prefer) is publication – but at the same time, our collaboration has allowed us to reflect upon the ways in which our scholarly process determines an epistemological framework for what it is that we can know. While not an autoethnographic project per se, we embrace the “active self-reflexivity” (Poulos 2021, 4) that informs this methodology to foreground that we are not observers of a research subject, but rather active participants in the formation and performance of academic discourse as an epistemic genre. Thus, the intentional first-person plural, and all that is implied by this rupture of academic convention in allowing our voices to *speak with* and *through* the text.

Autoethnographic methodology offers a challenge to normative ways of knowing, and what's allowable and not allowable, in academic discourse. It challenges

What are *gameenvironments*? What are *epistemic genres*? And how do these frames intersect? We might start by playing with the semantic field in which *medium* and *environment* overlap: the space, as it were, in which a game occurs. And what is a medium, an environment, and a space if not a *culture*? While tempting to think of each of these concepts as static containers, we must remind ourselves of the dynamic aspects at play. To place these concepts more clearly within the topic at hand: we

Let us first pass this question through the lens of *gameenvironments*. Radde-Antweiler (2024) reconceptualizes *gameenvironments* as analytically rich constellations that encompass not only the formal systems of games but also the communicative, social,

material, and mediatized environments in which games are embedded. She develops the idea of “deep gametization” (ibid., 5), a notion drawn from Hepp and Hasebrink's (2018) mediatization theory, to stress how games are entangled within networks of actors, discourses, technological affordances, value formations, and cultural practices. Recent work in *gamevironments* scholarship demonstrates both the continued relevance and the ongoing elaboration of Radde-Antweiler's original analytical lens. To illustrate: Zeiler (2024) explores *gamevironments* in relation to cultural heritage and global contexts; Grieve (2024) situates *gamevironments* alongside “ludic communication” based on Bateson's (1972) theory of play; Ford (2024) interrogates the relationship between *gamevironments* and theories of community; and Šisler and Švelch (2024) integrate political economy and game production studies into the *gamevironments* perspective. These recent works show how the *gamevironments* approach has diversified both methodologically and thematically and moved beyond its original focus on technical and cultural environments to engage questions of narrative, community formation, production economies, and global contexts.

In this view, the gameenvironment is a dynamic field of interplay among diverse forces that co-constitute the meaning of play. MTG exemplifies this concept through its expansive card-based system, which, while rooted in a commercially successful product, functions far beyond a mere transactional or ludic framework. For experienced players, MTG is a deeply familiar environment as it functions as a lived space of play shaped by shared knowledge, social norms, and decades of evolving narrative and mechanical structures. At the same time, MTG serves as a useful exemplar for how we define *epistemic genres*. The game fosters a complex interplay of knowledge systems: deck-building strategies, metagame literacy, lore interpretation, and even speculative economic practices around card value. These knowledge systems are embedded in the cards themselves while also extending into

broader fan discourses, digital forums, tournament structures, and casual play cultures. Players navigate these systems through an interpretive fluency that exceeds any single iteration of the game and connects MTG to other games, genres, and modes of play through shared cognitive and cultural practices. Thus, MTG resists being understood solely through its mechanics or its commercial framing as a collectible card game. Instead, it becomes legible as an epistemic genre that both shapes and is shaped by the gameenvironment in which it is embedded. The sustained cultural life of MTG, spanning decades of narrative continuity, mechanical innovation, and player engagement, illustrates how genre, knowledge, and environment co-constitute each other and how a game functions as both artifact and situated practice within wider epistemic and cultural networks.

Gamevironments and Epistemic Genres

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But let us not mistake our initial attempt to define terms as a point of closure. Rather, by putting *gameenvironments* and epistemic game genres into conversation with one another (much as our own writing process has been driven by a conversation-based methodology), we are attempting to avoid declaring: these and only these parameters define our terms. This conversation offers, if not a transgression of definitional frameworks, then at least a form of intervention: a mapping out of potentialities for an understanding of both *gameenvironments* and *epistemic genres* that might fall out of the definitional frame for either term. Our work, then, very much takes up Radde-Antweiler's (2024) call to revisit *gameenvironments* as a concept and analytical tool, to find new headings and new potentials in the evolving field of game studies.

The use of genre as a conceptual framework – in both industry practice as well as academic discussion – creates a dilemma for the games and play spaces to which it lays claim. Szamałek (2023), the narrative director of the *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), argued that genre theory is wholly problematic from an industry perspective, as it is not suited to categorize a multi-modal, shape-shifting medium that is not yet fully understood. The dual concepts of *gamevironments* and *epistemic genres*, we argue, offer a corrective to this problematic use of genre by providing useful frameworks for understanding how knowledge is constructed, circulated, and legitimized within and through digital game cultures, and in doing so, offer a more supple and dynamic means for discussing assemblages of games. Though distinct in origin, both terms describe dynamic, fluid structures of meaning-making that intersect in important ways, particularly when considering the communicative practices of players and fans, the cultural codes embedded in gameplay, and the evolving nature of genre itself.

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Our collective understanding of *epistemic genres* refers to the socially situated conventions through which knowledge is presented, validated, and rendered meaningful. As such, our use of the term *epistemic genres* intends to build upon and extend the established conceptualizations in educational research and game studies, particularly the notion of *epistemic games* articulated by Shaffer (2006). He argues that *epistemic games* are structured play experiences in which learners adopt professional identities and engage in authentic practices that mirror real world ways of knowing, thereby fostering the integration of knowledge, skills, values, and decision making within disciplinary communities:

“We can construct epistemic games [as] games that are based on the epistemic frames of socially valued practices. Because they develop epistemic frames of important communities of practice, such games have the potential to help

students develop ways of thinking that persist beyond the game environment, and, shape students' thought and action more broadly." (Shaffer 2006, 233)

This framing situates epistemic games as mechanisms through which players come to think and act like practitioners in a given domain, bridging gameplay and professional epistemic practices.

In related work, Shaffer and Gee (2007) further articulate the educational potential of epistemic games in the context of a changing economic and social landscape by arguing that traditional educational systems risk preparing students only for standardized work while failing to cultivate the creative, innovative thinking required in postindustrial economies. In this article, Shaffer and Gee (2007) position epistemic games as a response to that challenge, suggesting that games designed around authentic epistemic practices can help learners develop the capacity to innovate and engage with complex real-world problems. To that end, we focus and seek to

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redefine epistemic games and *epistemic genres* in order to specifically foreground the epistemological dynamics of play and knowledge production. By centering the ways in which game structures afford particular modes of knowing, we extend Shaffer's framework to analyze how rules, affordances, and constraints shape the kinds of knowledge production and epistemic practices that are enabled or constrained within and through game spaces.

Such an approach allows us to highlight the social, cultural, and methodological dimensions of play. In this sense, our utilization of *epistemic genres* moves beyond the static, formalist understanding of genre as a fixed set of textual features and instead positions genre as a form of social action. Miller (1984) famously argues that genre should be understood not merely as a textual classification but as a rhetorical and epistemological activity that is inherently political, social, and dynamic. Genres, in

illuminate how *epistemic genres* and *gamevironments* are co-constitutive, as they arise through the same communicative and cultural processes.

We might remind ourselves as well of the playful elements of genre: an invitation to play at and with the boundaries to see how certain elements can, in fact, play out. Here, we might turn to Wittgenstein's discussion of games and family resemblance as an apt example (Wittgenstein 1973, 31-34). What holds genre together is a loose resemblance with and around those defining elements that, in the midst of a language game, we may playfully define as genre-fying. Genre emerges, then, through a process of consensus amongst those individuals who are caught up within the production, circulation, and consumption of these cultural artifacts (Montembeault et al. 2019). To what extent might we find transgressive invitations in the notion of genre – to engage in new rules and new moves – even if that invitation to play along isn't taken up within a community of players? We will return to a discussion of what might motivate a desire to draw those lines of generic inclusion and exclusion in what Schniz (2025) refers to as the *Impossible Taxonomy* of video game genres. For now, we take up this notion of genre-play as a boundary object of sorts, and in this regard, we might start to see the usefulness of an epistemic approach to genre, and how such an approach might lend use to a discussion of *gamevironments*. How is it, for example, that certain *gameenvironments* result in the "innovation, reiteration and rupture which constantly enliven and redefine the outlines of genres" (Montembeault et al. 2019, 10) in video game genres, while in other instances, these boundary challenges are unrecognized, unheralded, and ultimately left unplayed?

Affordances and Environments

As much as *epistemic genres* and *gamevironments* aim to define and describe methods of which we might understand games and video games, what is it that makes visible a range of potential practices? To what extent does an environment map a field of potentialities by way of the relational interaction of the individuals who are caught up in that field?

We might think about the complicity in acknowledging the rules of play, and the terms of engagement as it were, as a kind of mapping of that field of potentiality. We can better understand the idea of potential through affordance theory. From its original conception from Gibson in ecological psychology, affordances are understood as what an environment enables for a specific organism. As Gibson (1986, 119) states, “the affordances of an environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.” Key to Gibson’s ecological account of affordances is that they are relational – affordances map potential engagements between an organism and its environment. Gibson lists what affordances are in relation to a user (or, in Gibson’s case, an observer). To a user within a particular environment, affordances can be either visible or invisible, either a physical object or something more immaterial like that of wind. To perceive an affordance is to make actual what is potential; yet an affordance is just as real as a potential, whether or not the user perceives, recognizes, and makes actual that potential. While Gibson’s concept of affordances has had wide reaching impact, first in product design (Norman 2013) and then migrating to digital media and interface design, the relational elements so central to Gibson’s concept of affordance often fall by the wayside. As Bucher and Helmond (2018) note, many applications of affordance theory to interface design flatten out the multi-layered and multi-directional nature of the interface itself – and the relational environment it enacts. In contrast, they write,

"by approaching the question of affordance from a relational and multi-layered perspective, the question is not just whose action possibilities we are talking about, but also how those action possibilities come into existence by drawing together (sometimes incompatible) entities into new forms of meaningfulness." (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 243)

The dynamic, relational aspects of affordances are all the more apparent in digital environments, in which maps of potential are constantly in flux, and in which

"users' needs and individual likings and behaviours increasingly play a generative role in producing those very offerings in the first place." (Bucher and Helmond 2018, 248)

In foregrounding how the interactive and algorithmic aspects of platforms create a dynamic environment for users of that platform, Bucher and Helmond (2018, 243) stress the importance of understanding "how interfaces produce and make visible particular *relations*." In a similar sense, we argue that game affordances, while caught up in mechanics of play, are best understood as a mapping of potential relations within a collaborative environment that cannot be reduced to gameplay features and modes of interaction. Rather, we might consider how players, games, and acts of play create a dynamic, relational environment that depends upon making visible affordances as well as creating a field for consensual and collaborative recognition. Again, as in Wittgenstein's (1973) discussion of language games, what matters most in defining *game* as a conceptual framing is a *family resemblance* across a variety of forms of play that share a normative framing as *game*. Shifting the rules of play, or what counts as a game, can only take place within a community willing to take up that play and acknowledge that resemblance. If we follow Arjoranta (2014) in thinking of game definitions as "context-sensitive, diverse language-games," we can start to see how affordances are never user-oriented, but rather map a potential way of

engaging in a shared environment. To draw a somewhat coarse analogy: a *school of fish* is both affordance and environment at the same time, irreducible to the individual fish involved. While Arjoranta (2014) addresses the definition of games, we argue that the relationship between *epistemic genres* and *gamevironments* maps a similar irreducible, collaborative, and consensual set of relations: “a language-game is associated with a certain way of being in the world, and these ways of being in the world are different forms of life” (ibid.).

Once again, we find play in this double sense. How is it, then, that a community of players, through engaging within a shared context, environment, or framework, define and are defined by that set of interactions? That becomes a way of thinking about game genre in a more expansive, epistemic sense so that the community produces itself by engaging in particular ways of being and acting within a particular environment. In calling back to our earlier examination of MTG, we can see how this game’s affordances have changed over time, from its first publication as a physical table top card game to now having a strong virtual component that allows more players to engage with the game in a new environment. As noted by Murray (2023), the shift from analogue to digital came with a change in player affordances and experiences. The digital version of MTG, as adapted in *Magic: The Gathering – Duels of the Planeswalkers* (2009), presents a new, digital environment for players to inhabit with a playable avatar, something not previously possible with the original MTG format. Different affordances, both actual and potential, emerge as communities of players engage with different expansion sets, some of which are online exclusives, and some that interact with other established intellectual properties, such as *The Lord of the Rings: Tales of Middle-earth* (2023) expansion set. What, then, does this merging of different mediums mean for what we might think of *gamevironments*?

We can consider how genre can operate as a framing and form of play, but also as a way of making that frame visible. Following Butler, we might add genre to the list of “categories, conventions, and norms that prepare or establish a subject for recognition ... and make possible the act of recognition itself” (Butler 2009, 5). Butler refers to these normative structures as “frames of recognition,” which operate by both making visible a subject in its conformance to norms while at the same time excluding from recognition those features that fall outside of that frame:

“The point, however, will be to ask how such norms operate to produce certain subjects as ‘recognizable’ persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize. The problem is not merely how to include more people within existing norms, but to consider how existing norms allocate recognition differentially. What new norms are possible, and how are they wrought? What might be done to produce a more egalitarian set of conditions for recognizability?” (Butler 2009, 6)

One such strategy for Butler (2009, 8-9), drawing on Minh-ha (1992), is to “frame the frame” itself, and in doing so, make visible those same normative structures of recognition and the means by which they operate – and also make visible the excluded outside that renders those conditions of recognizability possible,

“to call the frame into question is to show that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable” (Butler 2009, 9).

Epistemic genres, we argue, operate in such a fashion – by troubling established normative frames while at the same time suggesting new renderings of norms of recognition and new possibilities for recognizability within a community.

Epistemic Genres as Bids for Community: From Ludology to Friendslop

We might reflect on our own field of game studies through this same lens: to what extent does an academic genre function as a bid for community, or a play within a field of possible actions? The much-discussed foundations of the infamous narratology versus ludology debate, for example, mattered precisely in this fashion: as an epistemological move within an academic field of play that, through consensual agreement, became actual. In her critical reexamination of the debate and its impact on this field from its infancy, Vossen (2025, 69) crucially reminds us that this debate never had “a singular history, a canon, a ‘year one,’ or a grounding ‘debate’.” If anything, calling it a one-sided argument is much more accurate, as it generated from a desire to legitimize the field and push it toward a niche middle between the humanities and something unique and novel. Vossen’s summation of the debate is that it ultimately “causes us to privilege the game over the player, the story over the procedures, or vice versa” (Vossen 2025, 83). More crucially, the divisive terminology created a lasting legacy within game studies, as the

"ludology versus narratology debate was, therefore, about the proper versus the improper way to study games, and ludology defined itself largely by what it wasn't." (Vossen 2025, 73)

“while game studies may initially seem diverse, that diversity is largely made up of grad students, people the field will likely not retain. While there are lots of people who are working hard to improve the experience of game studies for diverse individuals, that labor is frequently done by the marginalized themselves who get very little recognition for that work.” (Vossen 2025, 86)

If we do not critically examine who is excluded within our spaces of academic fields of play, within our communities, within our works, we must ask ourselves, what are we missing? What ways of *knowing* are we deliberately ostracizing? Thinking in terms of *epistemic genres*, and the means by which these structures create, sustain, and at times challenge fields of possibilities (i.e., affordances and the relational environments that they map), can allow us to see more clearly how these bids for uptake operate in setting terms for consensus. In the case of our own academic field of play, we can see how *epistemic genres* are not unequivocally egalitarian or emancipatory structures; they are quite the opposite, in fact, to the extent that bids for community can (and often *are*) explicitly exclusionary, built upon tacit or explicit forms of violence.

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The dynamic, relational aspects of *gamevironments*, as understood through affordance theory, highlight the ways in which digital play is shaped by the knowledge frameworks that structure genre expectations and the interactional possibilities that are made available through game environments. As a case study, we turn to friendslop, a term that has recently gained traction within gaming communities as an informal label for emerging clusters of low-cost, cooperative indie games that emphasize social interaction, emergent chaos, and accessibility over technical polish or narrative complexity. These features situate friendslop as a socially enacted genre whose identity emerges from the interplay between players, communicative affordances such as proximity voice chat, and the cultural practices that structure how groups coordinate, improvise, and perform within shared digital spaces.

The term friendslop itself has an ambivalent status. It originated partly as a dismissive label implying low production value or minimal mechanical depth, yet many developers and players have embraced it as a marker of communal play and accessible fun (Wood 2025). Friendslop may be understood as a social-practice genre, a coterie of sorts, whose defining characteristics arise from player behaviors and shared performances. Rather than foregrounding complex progression systems or tightly authored narratives, friendslop games create spaces for collaborative improvisation and worldbuilding. Mechanics such as proximity voice chat and loosely enforced cooperative tasks shape a mode of play in which the primary pleasure stems from interaction among friends. This prioritization of social affordances reflects some of our broader theoretical arguments that genres are co-constructed by designers and communities that emerge through recurring expectations and patterns of use rather than strict formal traits. The genre's growing popularity is also closely tied to contemporary digital culture. Friendslop games lend themselves naturally to streaming and short-form video platforms because their *unhinged* scenarios frequently produce clippable moments: surprising deaths, miscommunications, improvised heroics, and comedic failures. As a result, the genre intersects with what Taylor (2018) describes as a form of participatory spectatorship, in which games are designed not only for play but also for circulation and reinterpretation within online communities.

Numerous games exemplify the defining traits of friendslop. *Lethal Company* (2023) presents small groups of players with the task of collecting scrap from procedurally generated planets while surviving hostile environments. *R.E.P.O.* (2025) adopts a similar structure and asks players to retrieve valuable objects from dangerous spaces while coordinating movement and managing fragile cargo; the resulting tension

between cooperation and improvisation contributes to frequent group mishaps.

Content Warning (2024) extends the core principles of the genre by framing cooperative exploration as a form of virtual content creation. Players enter hazardous environments to film monsters and hope that their footage will generate in-game popularity. Beyond these horror-game examples, *Peak* (2025) exhibits the same cooperative exploration and hazardous environmental aspects, this time casting players as a group of scouts who have crash-landed on an island and must climb to the top of a mountain to be rescued.

Friendslop challenges traditional video game genre frameworks by foregrounding sociality over form, thereby gesturing towards a type of ludic engagement that operates within economies of attention and interpersonal connection rather than prescriptive video game mechanics. Friendslop games keep getting more and more chaotic, yet as a genre it remains a recognizable field of play within a community of players. Treating friendslop games as a genre shifts our thinking away from taxonomies structured around kinds of mechanics or kinds of player/game interaction. Rather, the genre creates an environment and concurrent player affordances that define possible uses for play. Friendslop is both an epistemic genre and a gameenvironment. It can also provide a case study of sorts for thinking about the logic of genre as both an inclusive and exclusionary move. Who can take part in this boundary play? When does genre offer an invitation – however anarchic – to introduce a new move, or a new mapping of potential? And does that boundary-drawing seek to exclude, disorient, or limit the field of play?

To identify friendslop as an epistemic genre is to acknowledge a set of games as an environment in which play occurs. The kinds of interactions that players engage in become the structural formations that determine the boundaries of a genre. In



making such a claim within the field of game studies, we are likewise making our own move, helping to further blur those lines between how we think about genre within game studies, and how we might think about it more in the context of environment.

Environments, Game Scenes, and Genre as Epistemic Colonialism

Throughout much of this piece, we have spoken on the ways in which environments collide within games and how some games challenge the boundaries of genre. In using terms like genre, scholars have long noted the restrictiveness of categorization. Derrida (1980, 56) states that “as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn.” Within an academic, institutional setting, genre operates as yet another instance of the master’s tools (Lorde 1984) – power-infused mechanisms of society, wielded by the privileged, to oppress others. Within our own field, we argue that genre in game studies has predominantly served this role: a tool of epistemic colonialism, wielded by both self-proclaimed narratologists and ludologists upon a fledgling discipline, directly leading to exclusionary and discriminatory practices that alienated countless young scholars from the field rather than allowing it to grow into something unique and new.

Much of the criticism of genre attempts to address this limit and the rigidity through which genre has been traditionally applied to different texts. This has been further explored in the works of Indigenous and non-Western authors like that of Khan (2019, 10), who states that

"genres imposed sameness upon the works that supposedly belonged to them, assimilating every individual work to the model of something called the 'lyric poem,' the 'science fiction novel', or the 'sonnet'."

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subcommunity, or as cheaters, who are still not technically accepted into the larger community.

Closing Gestures

We end this piece as we began, with a reflection upon our own method and our own writing process, and as a return to the academic field of game studies – the space where consensual, collaborative moves allowed an academic field to come into play alongside the closures that render certain affordances allowable at the expense of others. We end, then, somewhat playfully, where Homo Ludens and Homo Academicus meet. If, as Bourdieu (1990) suggests, academia operates as a social field of power in which distinction is both concurrent with and constitutive of knowledge-formation, then we would do well to ask: what is it that we cast out beyond the frame of the genre that we call academic disciplines or academic writing? How is it that, in calling attention to the frame itself, we are putting into play the sorts of things that are still mapped potentially, but are excluded by consensus and convention? The barriers that colonize the very notion of genre limit the potential of what genre can be. This is also further facilitated by the type of people, be they scholars or gamers, that are drawn to or targeted by these genres, constructed by the fandoms that inhabit the genre, and mapped as a set of affordances actualized at the expense of other potential communities of play.

The form of scholarship that produced this article would not have been possible without a collaborative engagement within a particular digital environment. It was not a matter of mere mechanics and convenience that led us to meet on Zoom, record our conversations, generate and edit transcripts, and then write collaboratively – and at times simultaneously – on a Google Doc. These relational affordances between

Murray, J., 2023. Igniting the spark: Analog to digital adaptation of narrative affect and player subjectivity in Magic: The Gathering through analog to digital adaptation. In: *Proceedings of the 18th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital*



