Interactivity, Interdependence, and Intertextuality: The Meaning of Video Games in American Civil Society

by

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Abstract

In recent years the video game community has undergone a drastic transformation. What began as a communal pastime for programmers in federally-funded research laboratories during the late 1950s and 1960s has erupted into a multi-billion dollar industry enjoyed by millions of Americans. Reflecting this transformation, social scientists from a wide variety of fields have begun to explore video games' social significance. Sadly, so far very little work has examined video games from a sociological viewpoint. In this work I attempt to remedy this serious omission by adopting a cultural sociology framework to study video games' social meanings in three different mediated spaces, including *The New York Times*, the popular video game media outlet *Kotaku*, and the internet discussion forum NeoGAF. Consistent with recent work on entertainment commentary's capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere, my analysis demonstrates that discussions occurring in all three spaces address broader sociopolitical concerns. However, the frequency in which these spaces engage in sociopolitical discussions, the type of topics they address, and the manner in which they do so vary. Consequently, my work adds new insight to the literature by highlighting how aesthetic public spheres are not isomorphic, but instead assume a variety of forms. Moreover, my work demonstrates how the particular type of aesthetic public sphere that an entertainment public facilitates is influenced by that entertainment public's position in civil society, the specific meaning the space attaches to the entertainment form under discussion, and civil society's overarching cultural structure. In this sense, my work strengthens the literature's understanding of entertainment's role in civil society by revealing the multiple forms

entertainment commentary can assume and the sociological factors that influence the shape of these discourses.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2009, a review for the latest installment in the popular video game franchise *Resident Evil* appeared in the Arts section of *The New York Times*. While a few decades ago the inclusion of a video game review in the Arts section of a prestigious American newspaper would be almost unfathomable, many of America's most popular newspapers and magazines now devote at least a small amount of coverage to video games. Although the inclusion of a video game review in *The New York Times* may not be so abnormal today, it is the content of this particular article that sets it apart from what many would most likely assume to be the usual form of a video game review in *The New York Times*.

Rather than provide a traditional or seemingly standard video game review focusing on the game's technological features, storyline, and level of "fun" in broad brushstrokes, the author of the article instead spends the majority of the work defining his own position in what by then had become an enduring debate within the video game community over the potential racist imagery present in *Resident Evil 5 (RE5*). Seth Schiesel, the author of *The New York Times* article expresses his intentions early on, opening the article strongly with the following statement:

> Let's get this out of the way: Resident Evil 5 is not a racist game. For at least a year some black journalists have been wringing their hands about whether the game, the latest in the seminal survival-horror series, inflames racist stereotypes because it is set in Africa. The answer is no.[1]

Schiesel proceeds to defend his position, documenting how past games in the series have taken place in different regions of the world, including the United States, Spain, and South America and pointing out that in all these past games the zombies the protagonist

[1] Schiesel, Seth. 2009. "There's No Time to Rest Until the Last Zombie in Africa Is Toast." *The New York Times*, March 16, p. C1.

combats largely mirror the demographic features of the surrounding area. For Schiesel, there is nothing problematic about moving the setting of the most recent installment in the series to Africa, and the game's imagery simply indicates the application of the franchise's overarching narrative to a new locale.

The New York Times is not the only "mainstream" newspaper to devote coverage to this debate. *The Wall Street Journal* also examines this topic, and opens with the question: "Is it racist for white people to shoot black zombies?"[2] Before answering this inquiry, the article explores the video game industry's potential racial bias in general, including quotes from media scholars, other game developers, and even a spokesperson for Capcom, the video game's publisher.

These prestigious mainstream media outlets' participation in this debate over the meaning of *RE5*'s imagery is striking for two reasons. First, this episode marks perhaps one of the first times a sociopolitical debate originating within the video game community permeated into broader or more mainstream media outlets, including two of the most influential newspapers in America today. As I will explore in more detail in a later chapter, *RE5*'s potentially problematic imagery had been a major topic of debate amongst video game media outlets and video game internet discussion forums ever since Capcom released its first trailer for the game in the summer of 2007. This debate intensified in 2008 after N'Gai Croal, a prominent video game journalist for *Newsweek*, criticized the game for its racially insensitive imagery in an interview with MTV's

[2] Brophy-Warren, Jamin. 2009." 'Resident Evil 5' Reignites Debate About Race in Video games." *The Wall Street Journal*, Mach 12, Retrieved on July 13, 2013 (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123672060500987853.html).

Multiplayer Blog.[3] The fact that *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* eventually report on and participate in a debate that originated within the video game community should not be overlooked. At least in this instance a degree of communication emerges between these two potentially isolated social spaces. In a sense, by covering a video game in this manner, widely read newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* not only recognize the existence of the gaming community's informal public sphere, but also share discussions occurring within the gaming community with a broader audience.

This episode is also significant in a different respect. Williams' (2003) finds that mainstream newspapers and magazines have historically viewed video games through a "dystopian lens," treating video games as either emblematic or the root cause of many of contemporary America's social ailments, such as violence or troubled adolescence. However, the coverage of *RE5* in both *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* neither treats video games as the root of all evil in contemporary America nor evaluates the video game through the traditional aesthetic review template. Instead, both publications take this opportunity to examine whether or not the game contains racially-insensitive imagery. This episode is consistent with recent scholarly works that problematize the conventional distinction between the "serious" world of news and public affairs and the superfluous world of entertainment (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2007, 2012; Jacobs and Wild 2013, Wu 2011). Consistent with this growing body of research, the *RE5* example illustrates how video game

[3] John, Tracey. 2008. "Newsweek's N'Gai Croal On The RE5Trailer: 'This Imagery Has a History.'" *MTV Multiplayer*, April 10, Retrieved October 11, 2011 (http://multiplayerblog.mtv.com/2008/04/10/newsweeks-ngai-croal-on-the-resident-evil-5-trailer-this-imagery-has-a-history/)

commentary can address broader sociopolitical concerns and can thus function as an aesthetic public sphere (Jacobs 2007, 2012).

In general, the aesthetic public sphere literature seeks to remedy a serious omission present in much of the most prominent literature on contemporary civil society. In the past, scholars interested in exploring the strength of civil society or the quality of public discourse have either ignored entertainment's civic functions or vilified it. Many of the most influential works in this area treat the popularity of entertainment media as a clear sign of a democratically impoverished civil society (Bourdieu 1998; Habermas 1989; Postman 1985; Putnam 2001). In contrast to the literature's general predisposition, aesthetic public sphere scholars insist that entertainment and entertainment commentary play a powerful role in civil society. According to these scholars, both entertainment and entertainment commentary promote social solidarity by providing shared experiences and circulating society's central codes and narratives to a broad audience (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2007, 2012). Moreover, aesthetic public sphere scholars insist that both entertainment and entertainment commentary possess the capacity to address broader sociopolitical issues. For these reasons, aesthetic public sphere scholars argue that we must not automatically assume that entertainment always and only inhibits a strong and democratic civil society, but must instead recognize entertainment's social capabilities and explore its various social roles in action.

The aesthetic public sphere literature that scholars have produced so far primarily explores the civic role of television and television commentary. Multiple studies document how television commentary often moves beyond aesthetic matters to explore broader sociopolitical concerns (Jacobs 2007, 2012; Jacobs and Wild 2013; Wu 2011).

Similar to these scholars' findings, the manner in which *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* participate in the debate over *RE5*'s imagery indicates that video game commentary also possesses the capacity to explore sociopolitical topics. Of course, the more sociologically important question is not so much if video game commentary can address broader sociopolitical issues, but instead where are such conversations occurring and how often. Scholarly work that provides insight into these two important questions would greatly enhance our understanding of entertainment's civic potential and the overarching structure of contemporary civil society.

In this work, I provide a rigorous analysis of video game commentary's capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere. First, I use a cultural sociology framework to explore the codes and narratives present in discussions on video games in *The New York Times*, the popular video game media outlet *Kotaku*, and the video game internet discussion forum NeoGAF. My analysis of the discussions occurring in these social spaces over an extended period of time provides a strong indication of when and how often these conversations on video games move beyond strictly aesthetic concerns. I find that all three spaces do include discussions that address broader sociopolitical concerns, thus lending support to the aesthetic public sphere literature. However, the frequency in which these spaces engage in sociopolitical discussions, the type of topics they address, and the manner in which they do so vary. Consequently, my work adds new insight to the literature by highlighting how aesthetic public spheres are not isomorphic. Instead, much like political public spheres, the sociopolitical discussions occurring in entertainment publics assume a variety of forms.

Chapter Overview

In the following chapters, I explore the multiple meanings of video games in American civil society, the capacity of video game commentary to facilitate the construction of an aesthetic public sphere, and the variety of discursive forms these discussions assume in different media spaces. In Chapter 2, I review the scholarly literature on video games' potential social meanings. Although scholars working from a wide variety of disciplines have provided valuable insight into the medium's potential meaning and significance, I argue that a cultural sociology framework particularly attuned to entertainment commentary's capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere is necessary for us to gain a stronger understanding of video games' multiple meanings and roles in contemporary civil society. In Chapter 3, I describe the three media spaces I have chosen to analyze in this study and the methods I utilize in order to do so. I have deliberately chosen these three media spaces in order to explore how different types of entertainment publics may construct different types of aesthetic public spheres. Additionally, I explain why my combination of techniques from narrative analysis and discourse analysis results in a methodology perfectly attuned to studying the various meanings of video games in civil society and the type of aesthetic public spheres that form around video game commentary.

In Chapter 4, I specifically examine *The New York Times*' video game coverage from 1980 until the end of 2009. I find that the majority of the evaluative articles during this time period primarily treat video games as a major threat. However, the specific threat video games pose somewhat changes during each decade. Moreover, a small subset of articles rejects this portrayal and instead characterizes video games as a valuable form

of cultural expression. During the 1980s and 1990s, this alternative account identifies video games' functional benefits. This narrative changes in the 2000s to celebrating video games' artistic merits. Moreover, my analysis during this chapter contributes to the social construction of technology literature by highlighting how civil society's cultural understanding of children and entertainment influence the specific narratives *The New York Times* attaches to video games.

In Chapter 5, my analysis shifts to an exploration of *Kotaku*'s video game coverage. Overall, I find that the publication predominantly treats video games as a serious art form. This narrative appears in a variety of different discussions, including articles that explore video games' connection to other legitimate art forms, the medium's unique attributes, and perhaps most strikingly in articles that vehemently rebuke public figures who criticize video games. Besides this different portrayal of video games, *Kotaku* discusses a much broader range of sociopolitical topics relative to *The New York Times*' video game coverage. The chapter concludes by comparing both publications' discursive attributes.

In the final two analytical chapters, my focus moves away from video game commentary in news media outlets to the conversations occurring amongst fans in the internet discussion forum NeoGAF. In Chapter 6, I specifically analyze the types of interactions taking place in the forum's most popular threads. I find that posts rarely touch upon broader sociopolitical concerns in these discussions. Instead, much of the conversation centers on whether or not a specific video game is fun to play. That being said, disagreements over the proper assessment of a particular video game do occasionally expand the subject matter into intensely critical explorations of what

constitutes quality video game journalism and the type of video game fan that is welcome in the forum.

In Chapter 7, I examine NeoGAF members' debate over the meaning of *RE5*'s imagery in order to explore how the forum's dynamics may change during a discussion of a more overtly sociopolitical issue. The heated, contested debate that takes place over *RE5*'s imagery illustrates NeoGAF's capacity to function as an aesthetic public sphere, even if such instances do not appear to happen frequently or in the forum's most popular threads. During this event, posters divide into two separate factions that possess competing positions over whether or not the game contains problematic imagery. Despite this difference in interpretation, both treat this debate as a serious issue worth the video game community's interpretation. Interestingly, NeoGAF is the only one of the three media spaces I examine to extend this debate into a broader examination of the state of racism and race-relations in the present day United States. Although in certain respects NeoGAF's debate over *RE5* clearly departs from the interactions occurring in the forum's most popular threads, the manner in which NeoGAF users engage with this issue exhibits certain dynamics found in the most popular threads, including posters' tendency to strongly rebuke video game media outlets and depict dissenters as casual or inauthentic video game fans.

Overall, my work reveals how different media spaces located with connections to different segments of civil society attach various meanings to video games. Although all three spaces function as aesthetic public spheres in certain instances, the frequency in which they do so, the topics they address, and the manner in which they do so somewhat varies. In Chapter 8, I adopt principles from cultural sociology and media sociology to

help explain the differences that emerge between these different media spaces in terms of how they treat video games and the topics they address in their conversations on video games.

CHAPTER 2: THE NEED FOR A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO STUDYING VIDEO GAMES

Today, the video game medium occupies an important position in the entertainment market as well as America's overall cultural landscape. Both economically and socially, the video game industry has grown immensely from its rather humble roots as a communal pastime for programmers in federally-funded research laboratories during the late 1950s and 1960s (Poole 2004). The birth of microprocessors in the early 1970s, the emergence of personal computers and home console systems in the 1980s, and the arrival of the internet in the 1990s have all contributed to the video game industry's ascendance into a prominent position within the cultural industries as well as a popular pastime for a large proportion of America's population.

Towards the end of 2008, the PEW Internet & American Life Project released two studies highlighting the video game industry's important social position within contemporary American culture Focusing on youths, the first PEW survey found that 97% of the respondents (ages 12 to 17) play video games, including 99% of boys and 94% of girls.[4] A few months later, the project followed this up with a second study which found that 53% of adults aged 18 and older reportedly play video games. As these studies help illustrate, playing video games is now a popular leisure activity for Americans in general.[5] So popular in fact, that in 2008 annual software sales reached $11.7 billion in America alone.[6]

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[4]"Teens, Video games, and Civics." 2008. *PEW Internet and American Life Project*, September 16, Retrieved February 2, 2010 (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Teens-Video-Games-and-Civics.aspx).

[5] "Adults and Video games." 2008. *PEW Internet and American Life Project*, September 16, Retrieved December 7, 2008 (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2008/Adults-and-Video-Games.aspx).

[6]"Industry Facts," 2009. Entertainment Software Association, Retrieved October 14, 2009, (http://www.theesa.com/facts/index.asp)

While focusing on industry figures and audience size are certainly important in justifying the need for a sociological examination of video games, we should not lose sight of some of the potentially unique and socially significant features that distinguish video games from other entertainment mediums. For more than a decade, a group of scholars have taken on precisely this enterprise, attempting to identify and examine what they consider to be the essential elements of video games relative to other entertainment forms such as film or literature. Initially referring to their approach as "ludology" (Frasca 2003), these scholars contend that unlike other entertainment mediums such as film, television, or literature; video games must be played to be fully experienced. Gonzalo (2003) explains this distinction in the following statement:

> [T]he player is not an external observer. Observers are passive, the player is active. If the player does not act, there will be no game, and therefore no session at all. It is a completely different activity to watch a game and to play the game.

Aarseth (2001) endorses a similar position, noting that for video games "playing is integral, not coincidental". The key insight for both these scholars is that video games are an inherently interactive form of cultural expression. As opposed to the "passive" experience of watching a film or reading a book, scholars from this school of thought insist that video games force their audiences to navigate and interact in a simulated world involving complex systems based on logical rules. According to these scholars, in order to fully experience a game, all players must first attempt to understand the logic that underpins the entire virtual world and then act on this logic.

A second element that ludologists claim distinguishes video games from other mediated forms of cultural expression is its capacity to facilitate direct interaction between participants. Reflecting this sentiment, Aarseth (2001) explains:

> The old mass media created mass audiences, who shared values and sustained markets, but the mass media communities remained imagined (in Benedict Anderson's sense), with little or no direct communication between participants. Clearly, multi-player games are not like that. In games like MUD1, Ultima online, or Quake Arena, the aesthetic and the social are integrated parts, and this could be regarded as the greatest innovation in audience structure since the invention of the choir, thousands of years ago.

Although not all video games provide this type of interaction, a growing number of the most popular video games in American and much of the world are "multiplayer" experiences, designed in a manner that allows (if not outright compels) players to communicate and interact with one another in a shared virtual world.

One such game that fits this "multiplayer" archetype is *World of Warcraft*. Developed in America, the game accumulated a global subscription base of 11.5 million players in 2009.[7] *World of Warcraft* provides players with a customizable virtual avatar and a highly complex fantasy world inhabited by the avatars of other players in which to explore. The game does not directly force players to interact with other players and players are free to ignore all the other avatars scurrying around the virtual world. However, many of the experiences the game offers can only be achieved through the active coordination and assistance of a large group of players. As Williams et al. (2006) discover, this aspect of *World of Warcraft* compels many of its players to create highly complex and dynamic "guilds" (associations of players) that work together to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals. These scholars find that these guilds often possess a complex organizational structure and a sophisticated division of labor, and that the in-game interactions facilitated through these guilds often promote meaningful friendships across a wide geographical area.

[7]"World of Warcraft Subscriber Base Reaches 11.5 million worldwide." 2008. *Blizzard Entertainment*, December 23, Retrieved October 22, 2009 (http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/press/pressreleases.html?081121)

Buildings from ludologists' early work on the value of interactivity, many scholars today suggest that video games possess the capacity to provide players with profound and potentially beneficial psychological and sociological experiences. The linguist and educational scholar James Paul Gee is one of the most prominent figures to espouse this position. In such works as *What Video games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003) and *Good Video Games and Good Learning* (2007), Gee argues that video games may offer simulations that challenge players' taken-for-granted perspectives on the world, providing them with opportunities to explore new identities or new experiences that they would most likely not encounter in the "real" world.

While Gee's principal focus rests on how we harness video games' powerful potential to promote "good" learning techniques, his work has also inspired a group of scholars interested in studying identity performances. These scholars attempt to empirically evaluate the ability of particular video games to provide players with opportunities to practice or explore gendered identities not possible or at least not socially acceptable in the real world. For example, Taylor (2003) describes how the multiplayer online game *Everquest* offers female players the opportunity to play or perform gender identities not possible or at least strongly stigmatized offline. Taylor finds that unlike in the "real world," where gender often plays a significant role in the perception and actuality of one's personal safety, in *Everquest* female gamers are free to roam the virtual world with the knowledge that "they are no more threatened by the creatures of the world than their male counterparts are" (p. 32). Additionally, Taylor claims that *Everquest* grants players the ability to collaborate or "group" with other players regardless of gender, allowing female players an opportunity to not only participate in a team but also

to work closely with men, an experience Taylor suggests is not open to many women outside of the world of video games to this day. Finally, Taylor notes that *Everquest* grants female players an opportunity to enjoy "violent" actions, a behavior often considered socially unacceptable for women to exhibit. Hayes (2007) arrives at similar conclusions in her research on the single-player role playing game *Morrowind*.

Overall, scholars from these fields provide valuable insight into how video games may facilitate powerful social experiences. Accepting this premise opens video games up to sociological investigation. If video games provide and stimulate socially meaningful experiences, it thus becomes the responsibility of sociologists to examine the social implications of such experiences. Sadly, while the literature discussed so far provides a provocative exploration of video games' social potential, these works ultimately fail to provide any insight into the broader social implications of such experiences. By focusing on the medium's potential or the "in-game" behavior of players, these works fail to provide much insight into this popular medium's social ramifications. This work will attempt to address this shortcoming by moving away from an emphasis on the "in-game" behavior and instead explore social outcomes of these experiences.

Video Games and the Sociology of Culture Approach to Studying Entertainment

As ripe as this new medium may be for sociological investigation, there remains very little sociological work on video games. Although researchers from a variety of fields such as communication, education, and cultural studies have been conducting promising work on the medium for roughly the last decade, sophisticated sociological examinations on video games are currently lagging far behind.

This is not to say that the discipline is ill-equipped to study video games. Although there may be few sociological works substantively studying video games, for years now sociologists working from a "sociology of culture" framework have provided one possible blueprint for studying popular culture. Whether examining popular music, film, or television, the sociology of culture approach operates under a central premise, namely that the best way to understand a cultural text is to examine the institutional context in which the texts are produced (Bielby and Bielby 1994). For most sociology of culture works, this translates into an investigation of how market features shape the production of cultural texts (DiMaggio 2002; Peterson and Berger 1975). Illustrating this principle, DiMaggio (2002) insists that sociologists need to first recognize that popular culture is "produced by profit-making firms operating under the constraints of the marketplace" (p. 152).

However, this is not to say that culture of sociology scholars simply reduce the creation of cultural texts to general market principles. Many of these works recognize that the cultural industries possess unique social characteristics or constraints that distinguish them from other industrial enterprises. For example, works by DiMaggio (2002), Peterson and Berger (1975), Peterson (1990), and Bielby and Bielby (1994) highlight how cultural industries must grapple with producing "creative" or "artistic" products that are also profitable for an often ambiguous or unpredictable audience. Additionally, Becker (1982), DiMaggio (1992), and Bauman (2007) highlight the important role intellectuals often play in legitimating particular forms of popular culture.

Sociological works employing this framework provide valuable insight into the process of creating cultural texts, highlighting the various tensions and demands that help

shape their production. For example, Peterson and Berger (1975) illustrate how the degree of market segmentation in the music industry largely determines the amount of independence given to the actual creators of popular music as well as the level of innovation and diversity in the products offered by the music industry in general. Similarly, Bielby and Bielby (1994) demonstrate how to confront the highly ambiguous network television market, network executives employ specific institutional frames related to genre, reputation, and imitation to help select, justify, and market new television pilots. More recently, Shyon Bauman (2007) employs this framework to explain why mainstream America suddenly recognized Hollywood films as "art" in the 1960s. To answer this question, Bauman identifies the three major social factors that must be present for any cultural product to be considered "art," including: the presence of an opportunity space, institutionalized resources/activities, and a process Baumann refers to as the "intellectualization" of the cultural form. Based on this perspective, Baumann argues that Hollywood film could not successfully be classified as art until the 1960s, when for the first time in America all these necessary criteria were finally met.

Beyond providing insight into the production of cultural texts, scholars have also used the sociology of culture framework to examine how the social reception of cultural texts may promote or legitimate social distinctions. Many of the scholars pursuing this line of inquiry draw significant influence from Bourdieu's groundbreaking work *Distinction* (1984). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) explores how cultural tastes legitimate class differences. According to Bourdieu, there is no "natural" cultural hierarchy or moral ranking for the various forms of culture. Instead, Bourdieu asserts that any claim to a moral ordering of culture is a social construction and serves primarily to

legitimate the dominant classes' privileged social position. In possession of a disproportionate amount of cultural resources, the dominant classes are able to have their own cultural tastes held in highest regard by society. Consequently, Bourdieu argues that the dominant classes legitimate their privileged social position by claiming moral authority in the field of culture.

In certain respects, examining the field of culture from this perspective mirrors the manner in which sociology of culture studies the production of cultural texts. Just as these works treat the production of cultural texts as shaped by their institutional context, a Bourdieuan approach draws attention to the social forces that influence the consumption of different types of cultural texts as well as their social impact. Perhaps not surprisingly, many sociology of culture scholars have adopted a similar framework to study the reception of cultural texts and how they may help construct or legitimate social distinctions. For example, after observing a strong association between a respondent's musical preferences and their occupational status, Peterson and Simkus (1992) conclude that musical taste continues to act as a status marker in contemporary America. Similarly, DiMaggio and Useem (1978) uncover a significant correlation between "high arts" consumption and indicators related to levels of income, occupation, and education. Finally, DiMaggio (1982) finds that cultural capital factors such as interest and participation in "high arts" has a significant impact on students' high school grades.

The sociology of culture framework provides one possible approach to sociologically studying video games. Similar to past examinations of other forms of popular culture, scholars can employ this framework to uncover the institutional factors that shape the production of video games as well as to examine how external social

factors may guide the reception of video games by particular social groups. There is no question that these are important academic pursuits. Creators of cultural texts certainly do not create their works in a social vacuum, and an examination of these traits provides valuable insight into the social factors that influence the production of cultural texts. Moreover, the sociology of culture literature reminds us that the consumption of particular forms of popular culture may entail more profound social implications than simply the exercise of personal choice in choosing desirable leisure activities.

However, as insightful as the sociology of culture literature may be, it is not without potential shortcomings. Although the approach provides an excellent account of the relationship between the field of cultural production and other social fields, by itself it is ill-equipped to examine and understand alternative but still sociologically significant aspects of popular culture. Namely, sociology of culture provides little insight into the social meanings of cultural texts. At its best, the approach highlights how social groups may use cultural texts to legitimate class distinctions. But the scholarly literature on the potential of video games indicates that social groups may use cultural texts for much more than an exercise in social distinction. Moreover, a theoretical framework focuses solely on status or class legitimation is ill-equipped to fully answer why some forms of popular culture enjoy such great popularity or why certain fan communities devote so much effort to consuming and enjoying particular cultural texts. By focusing so heavily on external social forces, sociology of culture fails to illuminate the complex role popular culture plays in facilitating collective meaning and thus promoting social solidarity. If sociology is to understand the capacity of video games to create new and potentially meaningful experiences as the ludologists and educational scholars suggest, and if the