# Video Game Studies and Contemporary Folkloristics

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Games are a traditional research subject in folkloristics. Since William W. Newell's (Newell 1884) research on games, play cultures and singing games, many folklorists came to consider games as manifestations of folklore. Soon, several game classifications and collections emerged. For instance, Elsa Enäjärvi-Haavio presented in 1932 a historic-geographic analysis and a game classification in 'The Game of Rich and Poor' (Enäjärvi-Haavio 1932; see: Georges 1972: 174-176).

In was not before 1950s and 1960s, however, when folklorists began to pay more careful attention to games as specific research subjects. This tendency in research was encouraged by both theoretical developments of the discipline and by extensive studies on play cultures and games that were published in other fields of research at the time. The now classical works by e.g., Johann Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Brian Sutton-Smith, Jean Piaget, and Erik H. Erikson all influenced distinguished scholars of folklore such as Alan Dundes, Robert A. Georges, Roger Abrahams, Jay Mechling, and Kenneth S. Goldstein – all whom did not only investigate 'game' as a genre of folklore but also pushed folkloristics forward as an academic discipline.

Dundes, who conceptualized folklore very broadly as a type of knowledge in social lives, and how this knowledge was transmitted in cultural expressions, was among the very first folklorists to lay down a theoretical framework for analytical folkloristic game studies. (See Bronner 2007: 154) Whereas Dundes (2007 [1964]) investigated games with structural-morphological and psychoanalytic analyses, Georges (1972) focused later more on behavioral approaches, and Abrahams (1977) on rhetorical views on performances of games.

Given that folkloristics has a long history in studying games and play cultures, and also that folkloristic game studies have been made by many preeminent scholars who have directly contributed to the identity and development of the discipline, it is striking that there are so few folkloristic works on *video games*. With the exception of Sharon R. Sherman (1997), Kiri Miller (2008; 2012), Kimberly Lau (2010), Robert Guyker (2016), Jeffrey A. Tolbert (2016), Anthony Bak Buccitelli (2017) and Vahlo (2018), there are hardly any full-blown folkloristic studies on digital games and digital game cultures. This is true regardless of the fact that video games, video game cultures, and studies on digital games in other disciplines flourish today in a way that greatly exceeds how games shaped contemporary popular culture in e.g., 1950s. For instance, more than 40 PhD theses have been completed only in Finland on digital games since 1990s (Sotamaa & Suominen 2013). But not a single PhD thesis on video games was completed in folkloristics before 2018.

What happened and what kind of identity folkloristics of today has in relation to contemporary video game studies? In order to analyze these questions, two things are needed: a description of video games and video game studies of today, and a framework for examining the continuities and discontinuities the former has with folkloristics as a discipline. Let me begin by giving a short introduction to *game studies* and to the key concept of game.

## On Game Studies and Game Definitions

Although studies on games and play have deep academic roots in multiple disciplines, contemporary game studies as it is understood today began to take form only in 1990s, shortly after the emergence of new video game cultures. Increasing availability of computers in private use and public use and the advances in human–computer interaction at large were important for artists, entrepreneurs, consumers, and scholars of different fields of research. (Mäyrä 2008: 5–12) In the first issue of *Game Studies* journal, the Editor-in-Chief Espen Aarseth wrote that: '2001 can be seen as the Year One of Computer Game Studies as an emerging, viable, international, academic field... it might be the first time scholars and academics take computer games seriously, as a cultural field whose value is hard to overestimate.' At the same time, a novel concept of *ludology* was also introduced to academic discourses.

The concept of 'ludology' was first presented to video game studies by Gonzalo Frasca in 1999. Although 'ludology' can refer also to the general study of games and thereby also to studies on e.g. social play and children's games, it connotes here a specific approach to study video games, their structure and functionality, and to the academic movement which encouraged such a view. According to this academic movement, game as a research subject requires a particular kind of research methods and theories which cannot be 'imported' from other related fields of research such as narratology, anthropology, sociology, semiotics, or film studies. (See Aarseth 2014; Mäyrä 2008)

In relation to folkloristics, it is especially interesting to observe that early attempts of creating a new discipline of computer game studies included 'a debate' between ludological and narratological views on studying games. This is noteworthy for folklorists, because folkloristics has an inherent research interest in investigating both the playfulness and the storytelling qualities of cultural expressions. Ludologists of late 1990s and early 2000s argued that games are a form of participatory culture which rely more on simulation than on semiotic representation, the latter of which is paramount for narratives and for narrative interpretation. (Frasca 2004: 86; Aarseth 1997; Murray 1997)

Aarseth (2014: 186–188) has recently identified three themes in the ludology/narratology discourse all of which are relevant also for a folklorist investigating video games. The first theme of *critical ludology* deals with the question of whether games can tell stories. The second theme revolves around the problem that games constitute an autonomous research subject: do games require a particular methodology formulated specifically for studying games, or can we study games extensively by using the research tools of closely related disciplines? The third theme examines the close relationship between ludology and hermeneutics by asking how the semiotic representational characteristics of a game contributes to our understanding of player–game relationships *together* with an analysis of the interactivity of the game.

A short discussion on the ontology of games is required for putting forward an interpretation on why video games have largely escaped the attention of folklorists. A game is an artifact, and it exists as an object. There are myriad definitions of what are the necessary and sufficient qualities for a game artifact. A now classical definition by Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith (1971: 7) is a good one: a game is 'an exercise of voluntary control systems in which there is an opposition between forces, confined by a procedure and rules in order to produce a disequilibrial outcome'[1].

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1     The authors offered also a very short definition of play as an 'exercise of voluntary control systems' (Avedon & Sutton-Smith 1971: 6). I have offered elsewhere by following Piaget (1962 [1951]: 112–113) that the opposition of forces, and thus *competition* is a secondary quality to *collaboration*: we must first agree on rules of the game before we can even begin to play (Vahlo 2018). As Piaget wrote (ibid.): '[R]ules necessarily imply social or inter-individual relationships... rules are a regulation imposed

A game is not only an artifact: it is not only an *object* of rules, procedures, and positions. It is also a *process* by which it is played, and how the game is played. This is to say that a player brings along her motivations to play, her interest to explore the game and to coordinate her actions to reach an in-game objective, her voluntary decision to take on the position of the player and to maintain this position, and her player performance. (Vahlo 2018) The rule-system of a game affords a set of actions to be taken. But it is the player who then lives through this system of interactions and who thereby showcases how a game exists as process, *as played*. A game is thus both an object and it is a process (Aarseth 2014; Stenros 2015).

Two additional things should be discussed shortly. First, we should note that these definitions and demarcations do not in any way separate analogue games, traditional games, and contemporary video games from each other. All games are 'voluntary control systems' which exist both as objects and as processes. Second, we can study game as object and game as process in various ways. We can focus e.g. on investigating the design qualities of a game product (object ontology emphasis) or we can study how players experience, narrate and modify games in gameplay (process ontology emphasis)[2]. Or we can focus on player communities and the traditions that emerge in ever-evolving gamer *fandom*. All of these things should be kept in mind when considering video games as a potential research subject for folkloristics.

Although a video game is also a game and therefore it retains the same phenomenal qualities than traditional games which have interested folklorists for a long time, video games are typically also *institutional* and *commercial*. It is because of these qualities why folkloristics struggles with studying video games. However, a more careful analysis on the institutional and commercial nature of video games are thoroughly institutional and commercial is required before we can identify the ways in which video games may still be important research subjects for folkloristics.

## Folkloristics and the Cultural Product of Video Game

Folklorists are keen to investigate vernacular cultural meaning-making and unofficial forms of self-expression which emerge in folk groups. By studying folk groups, folklorists pay attention to common factors of these groups and how these factors participate in the traditions and the 'lore' of that folk group (Dundes, 1965: 2). These processes are understood to be separate from that of which is considered to be institutional, the latter of which falls beyond the interest of a folklorist. According to Lynne S. McNeill (2013: 6), it is not the *content* of an expression which distinguishes institutional forms of culture from folklore. Rather, it is the way in which cultural expressions are transmitted, used and shared. If a cultural object is transmitted through institutional channels, if it is used similarly from time to time, and if it stays the same instead of being modified and altered, the object is not considered to be folklore.

Also profit motive is taken to be a way to distinguish folklore from non-folklore. A folkloric expression does not typically have a commercial objective, but instead it is performed in various ways for different purposes. For instance, Dan Ben-Amos stated that an item presented on television or in a book is no longer folklore because there is a change in its communicative context (1971: 14).

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by the group, and their violation carries a sanction.' (See Fine 2002 [1983]: 182, 231; Juul 2008; Calleja 2007: 98; Deterding 2013: 123).

2    The term 'gameplay' can be defined as reciprocity between a player and a dynamically changing, responsive game artifact (Vahlo 2017).

Video games are problematic for folkloristics, because they are considered to be fixed commercial products which are transmitted via institutional channels such as digital marketplaces. They are understood to be covered by intellectual property rights (IPR), which means that video games are protected and legally recognized to be owned by someone. In this way, video games are very different from traditional games. There exists a deep tension between traditional games and video games, as seen from the perspective of folkloristics. Yet this tension seems to be problematic only for folkloristics since all other academic disciplines are able to study both traditional games and contemporary video games both separately and in relation to each other. Psychology is interested in play behavior, media effects, and in motivations to play. Media studies examine all kind of play as it mediated by games and gamified technologies. Cultural history focuses on how gaming has changed and evolved from traditional games to different kinds of digital games. And anthropology studies communities and their interactions with both analogue and digital games.

Video games are typically commercial products (but not always) and games are typically distributed via official and institutional channels (but not always). However, games do not stay the same across the contexts in which they are played. First, games are not *used* similarly than products are used. Games are *played*, and play is an essential form of vernacularity as it is an essential form of creativity in culture. This means that although a game would be produced by a company for making profit, it is experienced through playing which is a fundamentally expressive and folk-centered way to encounter culture.

The gameplay element of video games, which denotes to the process ontology of game, is folkloric in the same sense than the gameplay element is folkloric in traditional schoolyard games (Vahlo 2018). This is to say that a product cannot dictate the way in which it is used, modified and experienced. Memes are a perfect example of this vernacular practice in which an existing product e.g. a video or a photograph is modified via vernacular expression and playful behavior into folklore.

We should thus separate from each other 1) the objective of an artifact as it is intended to be consumed, and 2) the ways in which the artifact is modified, altered, and experienced. Whereas an artifact such as a photograph is not an object of folklore in the former sense, it can become folkloric in the practices of the latter. In the case of games—including video games—the vernacular practice of play is inseparable of the product since the ontology of game as process *is* about playing the game.

As Kiri Miller writes (2008: 263): 'while both the game and the book are mass-produced texts, satisfying gameplay relies on the unique realization' of the texts. By following Jeff T. Titon (1995), she proposes that an episode of playing a video game could be regarded as a folkloric text which 'exists in multiple versions and variants, similar to one another and thereby referencing one another… the instability of a folkloric text is the result of its emergent, processual character, stressing the dialectic of innovation and tradition within community-based expressive culture' (Miller 2012: 439). A renowned game designer Ernest Adams (2014: 3) has made a similar observation by stating that video games differ from e.g., reading books because 'each time you play a game, you can make different choices and have a different experience… play ultimately includes the freedom to act and the freedom to choose how you act'.

Furthermore, video games are not fully covered by IPR. *Game mechanics*, which can be understood as the methods in which the player–game interaction is modelled in a game, are not considered intellectual property. Instead, game mechanics are constantly shared, altered and modified from a game to another regardless of the fact that game mechanics are at the heart of any gameplay experience (Sicart 2009; Adams & Dormans 2012: xi). And this principle holds true in

traditional games, analogue games such as board games, and in all kinds of video games. We have traditions to model and simulate jumping, kissing, chasing, killing, constructing, collecting etc. in all kinds of games. These *are* traditions of how we imagine and model our player–game interaction regardless of the technology or its commercial purposes.

Practices of gameplay alter the game object, because in gameplay the player gains primary agency over the game product. We can identify a game as an object because it has stabile rule-system of *foundational rules* (logical and mathematical rules, and the abstract formal structure of the game) and *operational rules* (the guidelines which describe how to the game is played). (Salen & Zimmerman 2004) But a game has also *real rules*, i.e. how we decide to play the game, and *social rules* of e.g. gender roles, social statuses, and power positions which we bring along to any cultural context (Hughes 1999). We can break the rules, we can bend them, we can invent our own rules and play according to what we have decided and agreed upon. We can cheat, and we can bluff. We can lose purposely if we want. The formal object qualities of a game, any game, do not dictate how a game is experienced, and therefore playing commercial video games is an inherently folkloric practice not unlike playing traditional games.

## Folkloresque in a Video Game, Folkloric Gameplay

The concept of *folkloresque* illuminates further the folkloric elements of both game-as-object and game-as-process ontologies. Michael Dylan Foster (2016: 5) writes: '[T]he folkloresque is popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore. That is, it refers to creative, often commercial products or texts (e.g., films, graphic novels, video games) that give the impression to the consumer (viewer, reader, listener, player) that they derive directly from existing folkloristic traditions.'

Foster (2016: 15–19) argues that a product of popular culture may portray folkloristic themes by the means of *integration*, *portrayal* and *parody*. For example, a graphic adventure mobile game *Year Walk* (Simogo 2013) is a gamified interpretation of a Swedish tradition known as *Årsgång* which was a folk ritual in which 'a year walker' acquired knowledge of the following year. Similarly to what is known about *Årsgång*, a player of *Year Walk* engages with a ritual of travelling alone into the woods during Christmas time in order to hear and see the future (Kuusela 2016). The mobile game is even accompanied with a free 'Companion', that is a set of digital documents which include information about old Swedish folklore and folk beliefs. While many games such as *Year Walk* focus on integrating elements of folklore in the commercial product to make it more attractive, some games such as *Fatal Frame* series by Temco portray folklorists as experts of the supernatural (see Tolbert 2016).

While it is important to analyze how folkloresque manifests in video games, this approach is not sufficient in itself. Video games may integrate, portray, and parody folklore and folklorists, but so do many other forms of popular culture. In other words, these three dimensions of folkloresque are not unique for games as a form of cultural expression. The example of *Year Walk* demonstrates that folklorists should not analyze only how folkloresque elements are present in video games, but ask also how video games may present *folk practices* for the player. Games are a form of participatory culture, and in *Year Walk* a player does not only see and hear the folkloresque but also *lives through it* as a first-person experience by enacting folklore(sque). This quality renders video game gameplay closer to folkloristic performances: '[F]olklore must be enacted, as it exists nowhere outside of a performance', as Roger Abrahams (2005: 59) wrote.

As a form of expressive culture which varies from an experience to another, video games share important qualities with folklore. Games are designed products but it is the vernacular experience of play which adds a fundamental element of variation to each instance of gameplay. By playing a game, players participate in an activity which is not a far cry from activities of a folk group. Gameplay includes performative element of self-expression, and players who have played the same game have similar kind of participatory experiences. This shared quality of participatory involvement often encourages to create new folk expressions, performances, stories, and beliefs.

Many of us have seen how school children perform the floss dance which was made very popular by esports battle royal game *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017). YouTube has thousands and thousands of user-generated videos of players and fans performing these dance moves. Meme videos on players singing along (as enhanced by a social media app *TikTok*) a theme song of *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) are even more popular than the floss dance. As I write this article, social media is filled with humorous gameplay memes about the unintentional design flaws of new *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2018) game. All of these examples refer to what Erin James (2015) calls *storyworld accord*, that is, to how participatory cultural products such as video games encourage us to share our experiences of environmental imagination. In this sense games do indeed work as *story machines* (Vahlo 2018: 221).
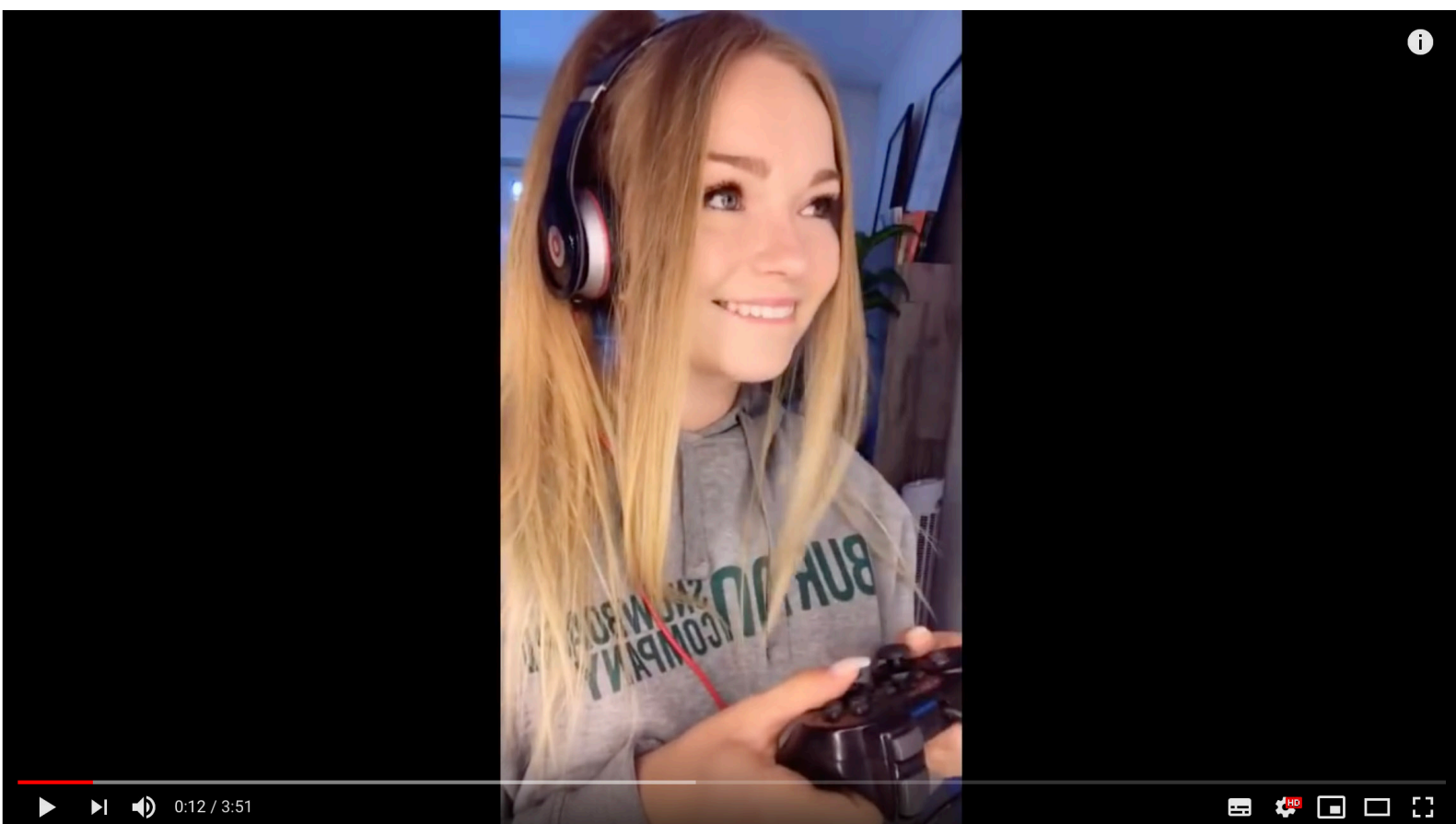


Overwatch FAKE Gamer Girls Tik Tok - i wanna be tracer

4,275,062 views

Figure 1. A TikTok social media video on gamer girls 'singing' Overwatch theme song, as posted on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4cmlhpupn0, visited 30th of November, 2018).

Commercial video games, or any games for that matter, cannot be regarded full-blown games without considering the vernacular play-element of gameplay. In other words, participatory players constitute a game through intentional play (Deterding 2013; Stenros 2015: 119–120) *Theory-crafting* is an example of a practice in which the way how a game is played significantly changes gameplay experience. Christopher A. Paul (2011) has studied the phenomenon of theorycrafting by defining it as retro-engineering of play strategies to find the optimal way to play a given game. Theorycrafters use mathematical modelling and statistical analyses to reveal the underlying formulae of a game, and then devise methods of play to take advantage of this knowledge. It is a practice of discovering the rules of the game not determinable through mere gameplay (Nardi 2010: 137). Seen from a folkloristic perspective, also player-generated hints, rumors, walkthrough documents and other vernacular gameplay strategy guides are interesting dimensions of emergent game cultures.

Making different play styles and play experiences visible for other players and global audiences is a main motivation of player-generated *game streaming videos*, *let's play* and *longplay* videos, posted on e.g. Twitch, YouTube and on other social media services. From the perspective of folkloristics, let's play videos can be studied e.g. as player narrated performances directed to different audiences, and as collective reminiscing of prior game experiences. Related phenomena are *speedrun* videos and other culturally shared player-generated modifications of gameplay.

Transforming, breaking and bending the game rules by e.g. *cheating* and *bluffing* is an important vernacular practice to be investigated. Maybe of special interest is, however, how both children and adults invent their own games by altering existing game rule systems. Many of us have memories of changing e.g. card games by inventing novel rules. When individuals craft their own games, they transform a set of behaviors into an interrelated system of interactions, restricted by normative rules of their own invention. Some of vernacular game inventions, whether they are alterations of the rules of an existing game or creations of completely new games, may become transmitted from a player to another and thus traditionalized over time.

Another example of vernacular practices in game cultures is *game jam*, a community event focused on developing new games typically during one weekend, in a 48 hour development cycle. According to *Global Game Jam* organization, game jams are based on the idea 'that in today's heavily connected world, we could come together, be creative, share experience and express ourselves in a multitude of ways using video games'. From the perspective of folkloristics, game jams, therefore, establish temporary *folk groups* that share the interest of both playing and creating new games. In the case of global game jams, these folk groups are indeed global: the organization currently has more than 600 locations in 93 countries. In the global game jam of 2016, a total of 6866 new games were created during a single weekend. (http://globalgamejam.org/about) Another example of quickly developed games that shed a light on the vernacularity in game cultures are *newsgames*. These games are unofficial games developed to comment, critique, mock and ridicule news and hot topics. The '*Bush's shoe dodge'* is an early example of a newsgame. As a phenomenon of social media, newsgames have many similarities with internet memes.

For a folklorist, game jams are intriguing subjects to be explored since they fascinatingly reside at the intersection of vernacular practices and commercial game development. Furthermore, investigating the processes through which video games become commercial products is also a relevant research theme for folklorists interested in the dialectic relationships between folk imagination and institutional culture. *Mods*, that is, player-generated game modifications to an official game product that add new functionalities in the product (Nardi 2010: 143), and *machinima*,

player-based exploiting of the 'build-in moviemaking capabilities of the game's software' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 550) to create own dramatized game-movies, are yet another examples of creative game cultures in which the folk cultures and institutional cultures intersect. In some cases, the player-generated mods—which as a practice go at least as far as to the year 1961 when students of the MIT developed *Spacewar!* (ibid.)—may become more popular than the original game ever were, which again illustrates the deep continuities between the vernacular and the commercial in game cultures. Quite typically mods are also free to download and they are maintained by the communities which developed them.

Finally, as argued by Kiri Miller (2008; 2012) both multiplayer online gameworlds and the gameworlds of single-player video games can be approached as field sites for ethnography. In Miller's view, games emerge story collections and 'tourist destinations' for player agency (Miller, 2008: 255–258, 272). By playing a video game, a folklorist enters into 'virtual museums of vernacular culture' which engender new traditions and folk narratives, such as *fan art*, *fan fiction* and *cosplay* in player communities both in offline and online environments. Indeed, already Murray (1997: 106) described the structure of participating in a video game gameworld as a *visit* that can resemble a ride in an amusement park. As Miller (2008) notes, video game gameplay is a valuable research subject for folkloristic performance studies since gameplay experiences generate new traditions and transform existing folk narratives into new forms of expressive culture. Some video games can be argued to bring about new lore in the dialectical relations between commercial video games and vernacular agency. For instance, massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) has rich backstory and lore to it (see Nardi 2010: 89).

## Conclusion

By definition, folklore describes expressive culture, which is not dictated by any author, designer, or professional artist (Foster 2016: 29). It is usually considered a shared tradition of a group, and it is enacted in varied ways and forms of cultural performance. (See McNeill, 2013).

At first, video games seem like a prime example of something a folklorist should not study. Video games are typically commercial products. However, video games are not fixed but malleable. It is a necessary feature of any game to change through first-person gameplay experience: a game includes always an element of uncertainty (Costikyan 2013). Video game gameplay is a participatory cultural enactment which is restricted, yet not dictated, by the digital technology and game design. First-hand knowledge on how to play the game as well as fan-fiction, memes and personal narratives that emerge from gameplay experiences can be considered a shared property of a folk group who has played the game.

Folklorists should look beyond the general disputation that video games as commercial products are not interesting for folkloristics. In contrast to this, folklorists could embrace the different traditions by which games are experienced, modified, altered, interpreted and communicated to others. In my view, folklorists should follow here the footsteps of many other disciplines which approach video games primarily as a manifestation of the game phenomenon, and only secondary as commercial and digital products. This change in research attitude may be valuable in relation to also other commercial products. Folklore emerges in the intersection of the institutional and the vernacular. For understanding these dynamics, folklorists should not focus only on the folk practices but also on the commercial environments in which the vernacular and the institutional become entangled.

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