# Interactive inhabitations: The atextual problematic of games in digital humanities

CSDH/SCHN Conference 2021
30 May – 3 June 2021

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske
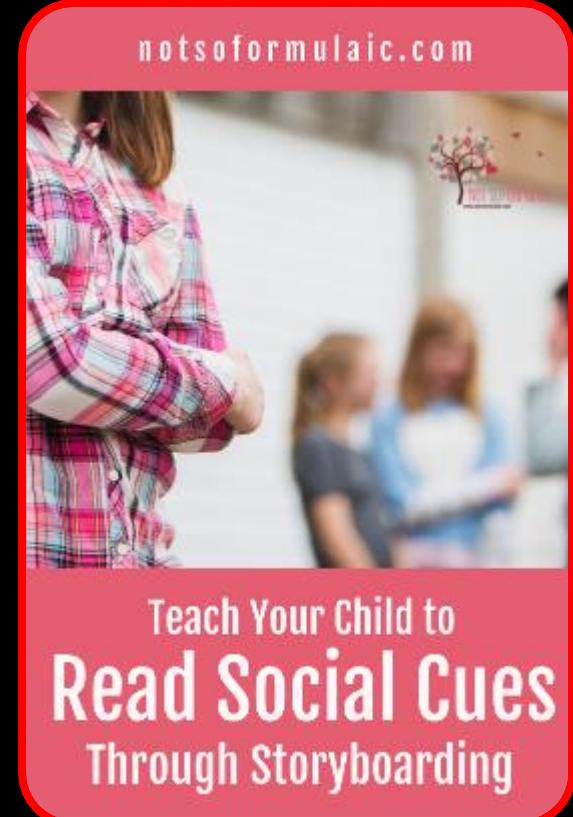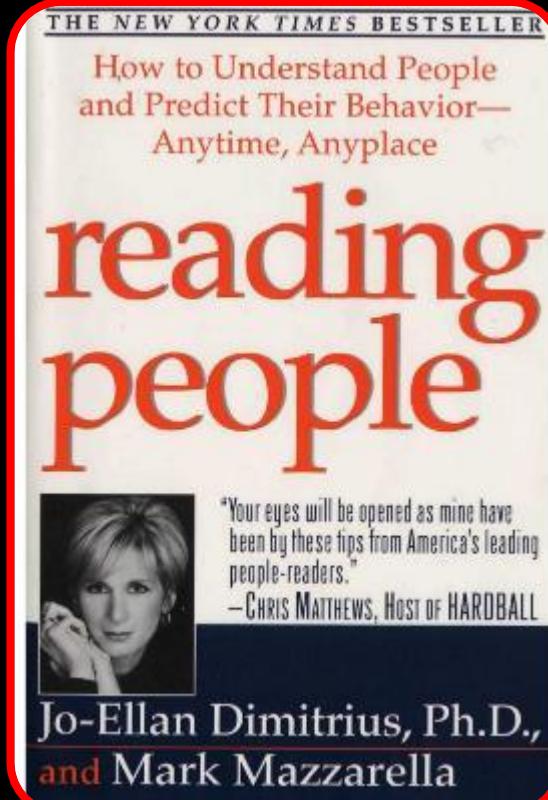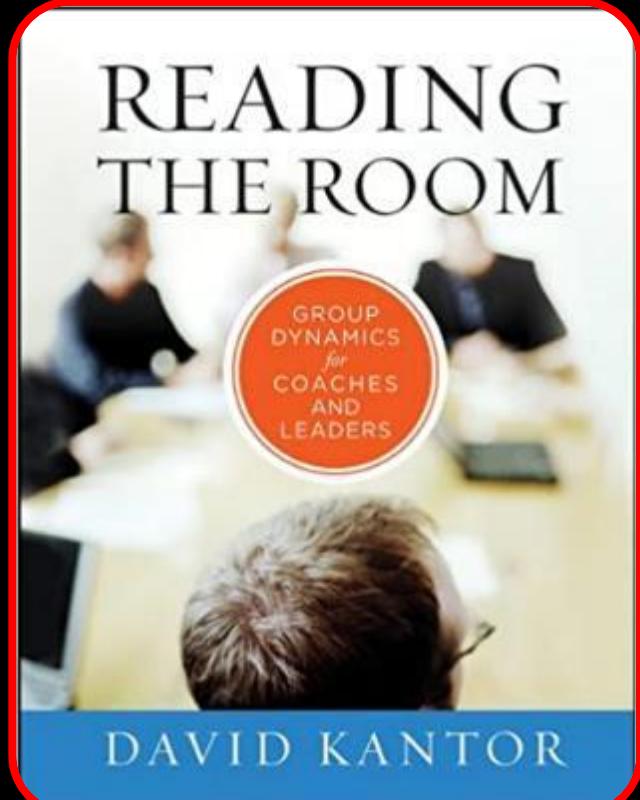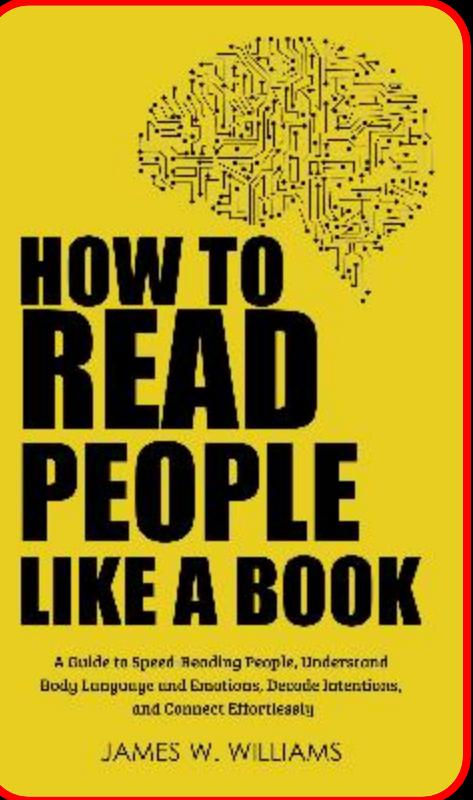
Reading as an extensible metaphoric method…

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Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske
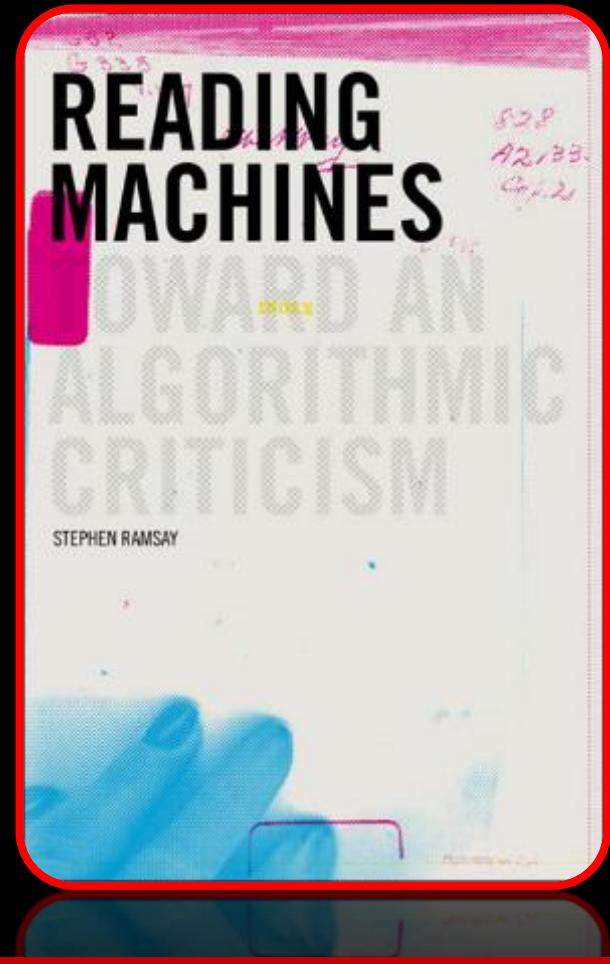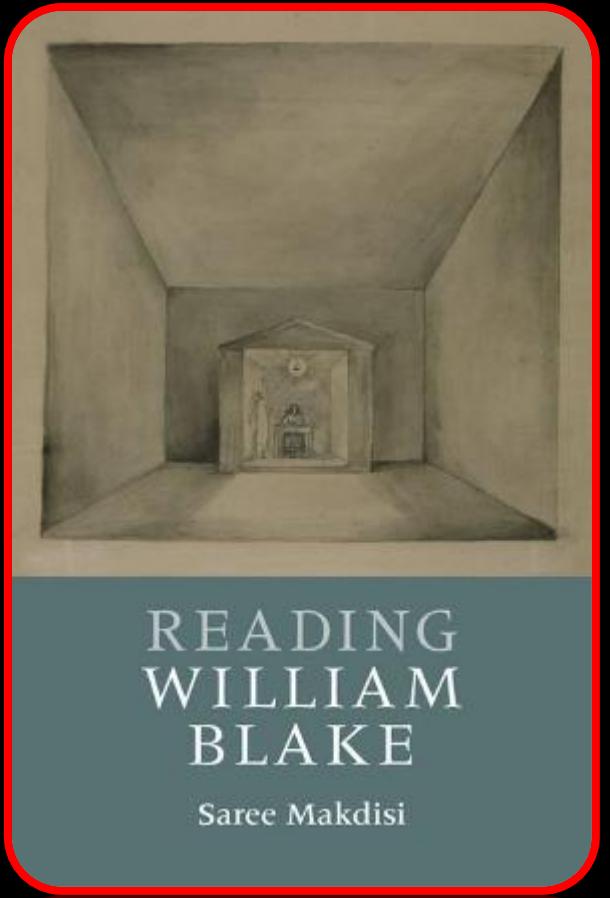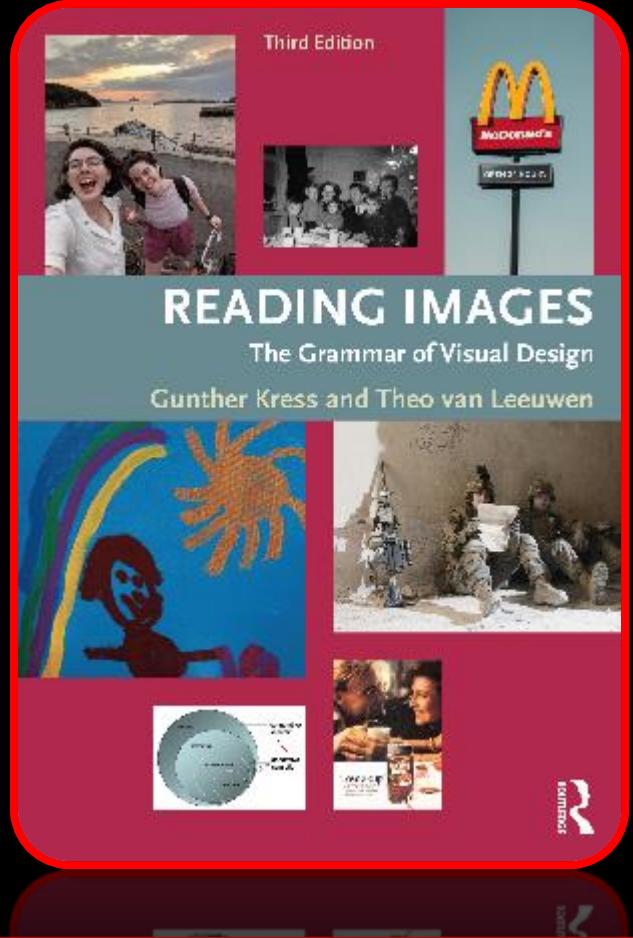
…we need critical and creative experiments that complicate long-held assumptions that may limit our ability to think and thrive.

Jagoda, Patrick. "Gaming the Humanities: Digital Humanities, New Media, and Practice-Based Research." *Differences* 24.1 (2014): 189-215.

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Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
                      @jsaklofske

…reading as the principal mode and
method of encountering the world…

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske

Voyant Tools offers a collection of alternative reading interfaces, BigDiva (ARC) and Collex (NINES) encourage advanced searching and curation/aggregation methods that allow new interpretative readings to emerge from broader data sets, and platforms such as the Humanities Commons initiative encourage social reading practices.
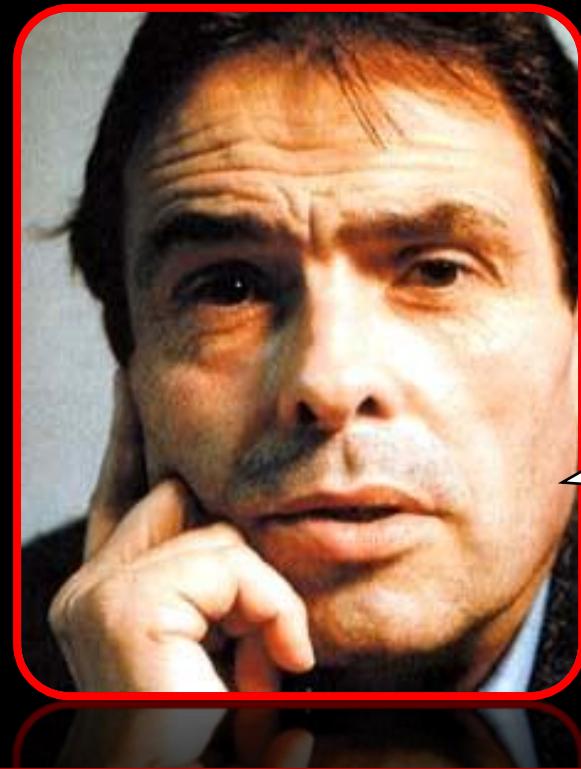
Doxa establishes "the universe of possible discourses" (167), defining what is thinkable and sayable, and functions as an evaluative and legitimizing standard of belief and practice.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice.*
    Tr. R. Nice. Cambridge UP, 1977.

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske

For literary scholars, doxa is the belief in the inherent value and meaning of the literary object….The tendency to characterize every method in literary study as a method of reading (surface, close, symptomatic, reparative, etc.) indicates that this literary doxa persists today.

Goldstone, Andrew. "The Doxa of Reading."
*PMLA* 132.3: 2017, 636-642.

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske

Bourdieu argues that the "scientific objectification" of the literary field requires not simply the negation of doxa but a "rupture" that suspends the question of whether it is true or false.

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Games are not simply ideological or capitalist tools. They have been shown, in a number of contexts, to activate a wide range of thought styles, promote prosocial behavior, foster both cognitive and emotional empathy, model alternative modes of action, and enable players to frame problems differently through procedural interaction

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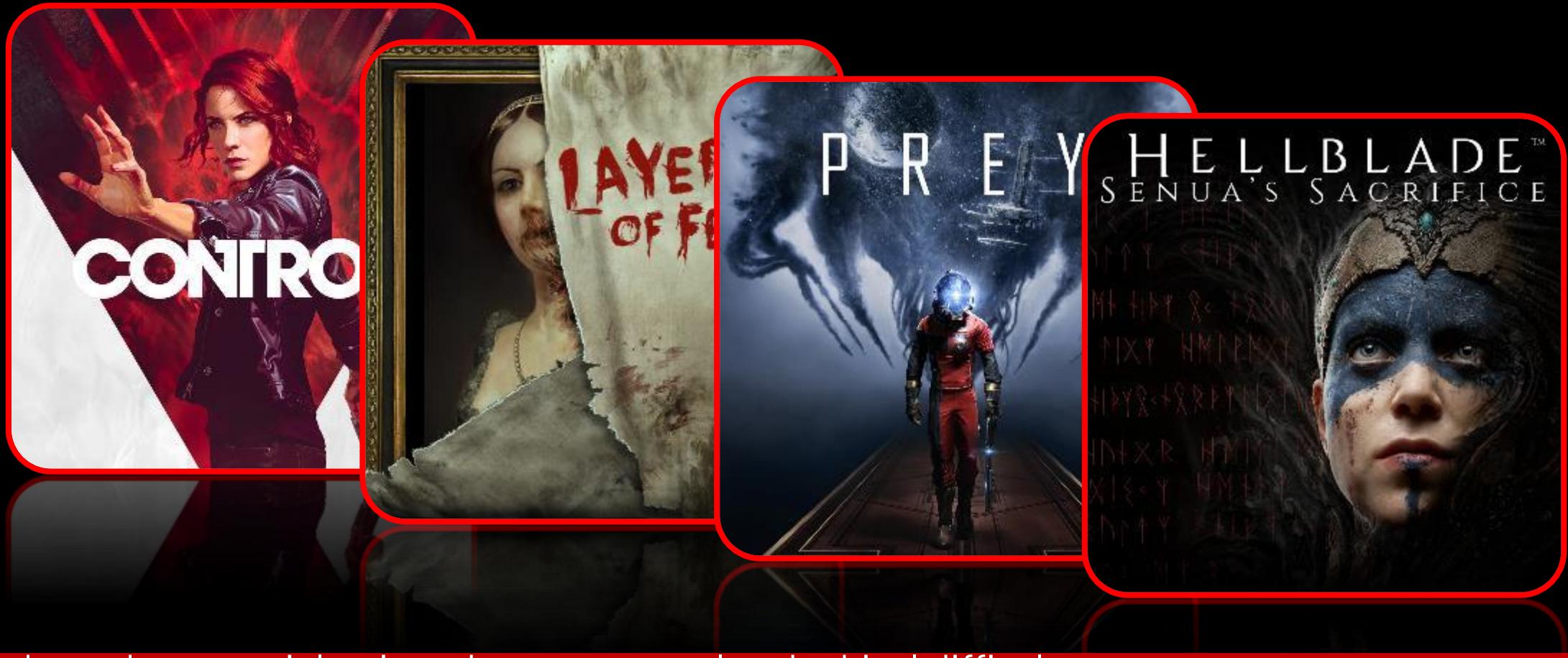
Games have the potential to introduce conceptual and ethical difficulty via atextual encounter and experience; not just interpretative difficulty, but an experiential dissonance triggered by problematic relationships between action, consequence, and understanding.

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske

Perhaps the worst hegemony is the…hegemony of thinking…that there is some clear and certain ruleset for intellectual discourse…that maximizes progress or justice…and that we ought to reconcile and resolve that commonality, [and] boil it down to the average of its various components.

Bogost, Ian.  "Game Studies, Year Fifteen: Notes on Thoughts on Formalism" bogost.com, 2 February 2015.

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske
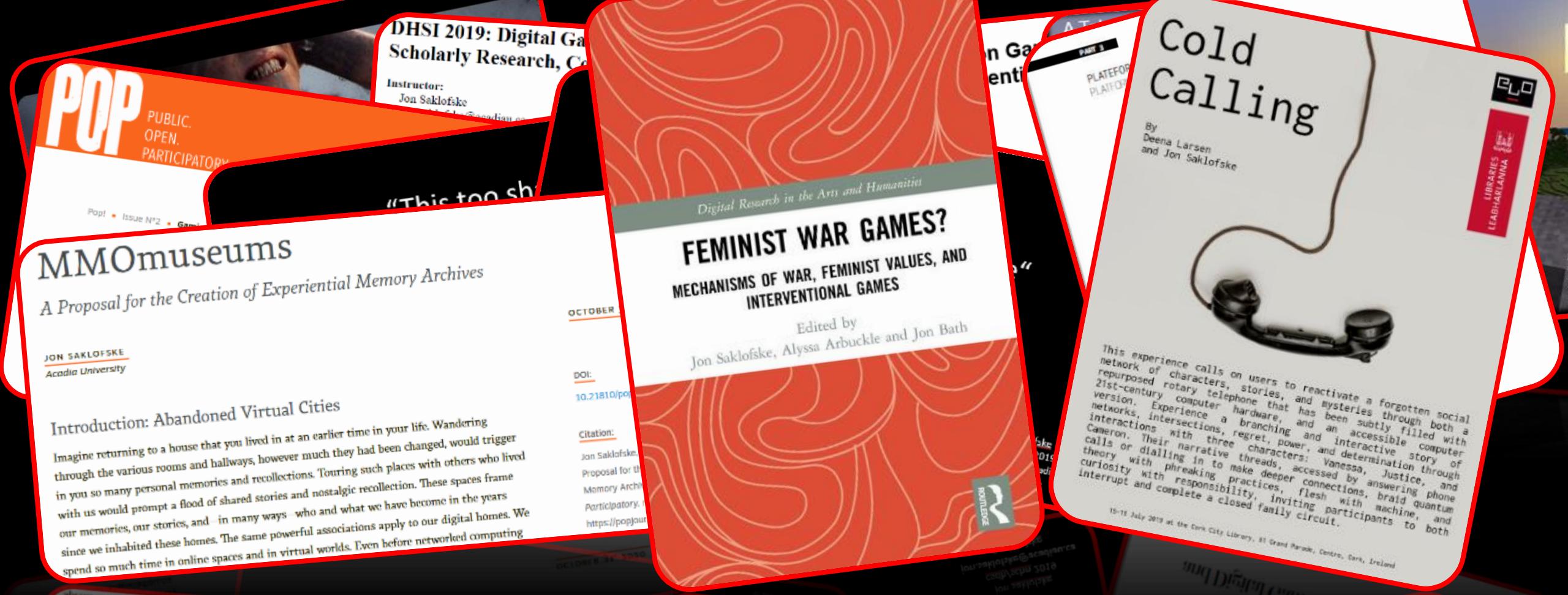
These projects collectively assert that games are not just a problematic for DH, they are a problematic for the literary studies paradigms that still dominate DH perception and practice.

The doxa of reading that determines much of DH practice preserves and extends a literary habitus that digital games can't completely simulate, because digital game players inhabit and are inhabited by what they experience, resulting in a unique intimacy that replaces the inherent loss of critical certainty.

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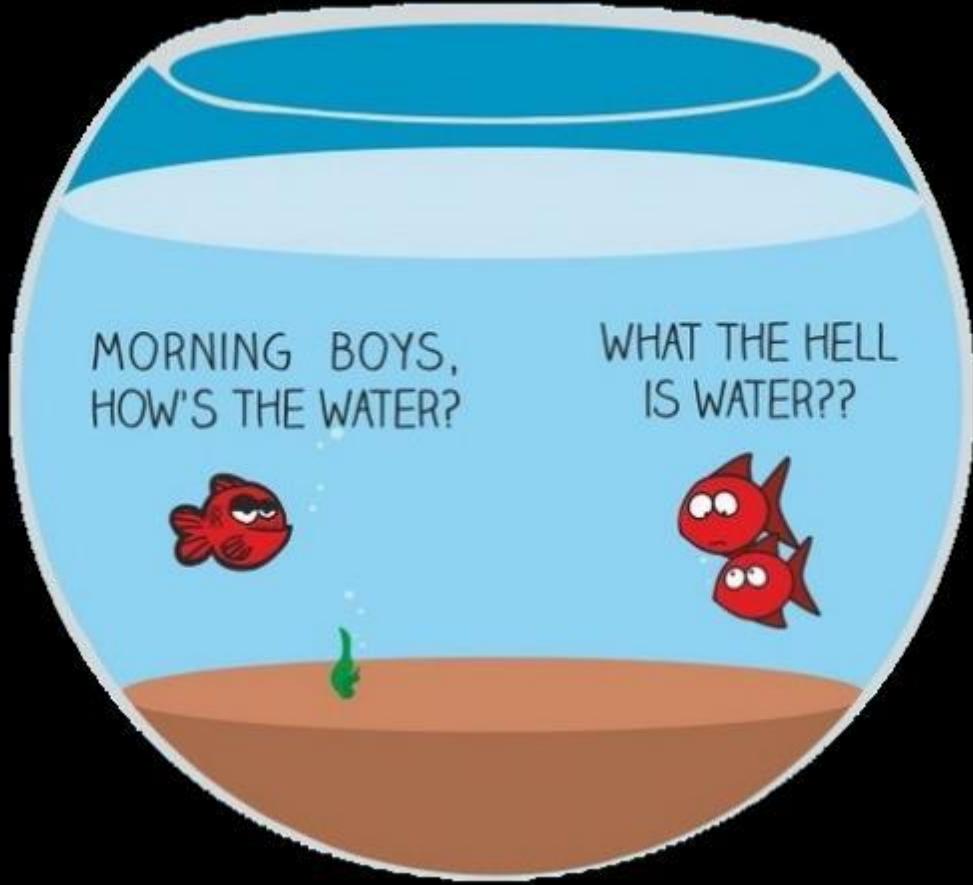
What would a digital humanities look like that truly problematizes the doxa of reading as a primary method of critical inquiry and interpretative interaction? How else can we productively experience mediated information, history, story, and each other?

Digital games are objects "of practice-based research that enables the exploration of the role of social justice, transmedia design, collaboration, and transdisciplinary coalitions within the changing humanities"

Jagoda, Patrick. "Gaming the Humanities: Digital Humanities, New Media, and Practice-Based Research." *Differences* 24.1 (2014): 189-215.

In literature we get to stop, we get to control how we read, we get to go back and use critical thinking to say either 'yes, this is is true' or 'no this is not,' and then respond accordingly. Whereas with commercials and billboards, the sensations overtake us and we lose so much agency. So for a reader to say, 'no thank you, I'm going to read a book,' that's a political act.

Murphy, Devon. "Ocean Vuong on Why Reading
        Will Always Be a Political Act." Banffcentre.ca,
        27 June 2017.

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske

Through games, I have been exposed to powerful ideas and examples while performatively engaging in a number of affective experiences that I was responsible for causing, navigating through, and bearing the consequences for.

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske
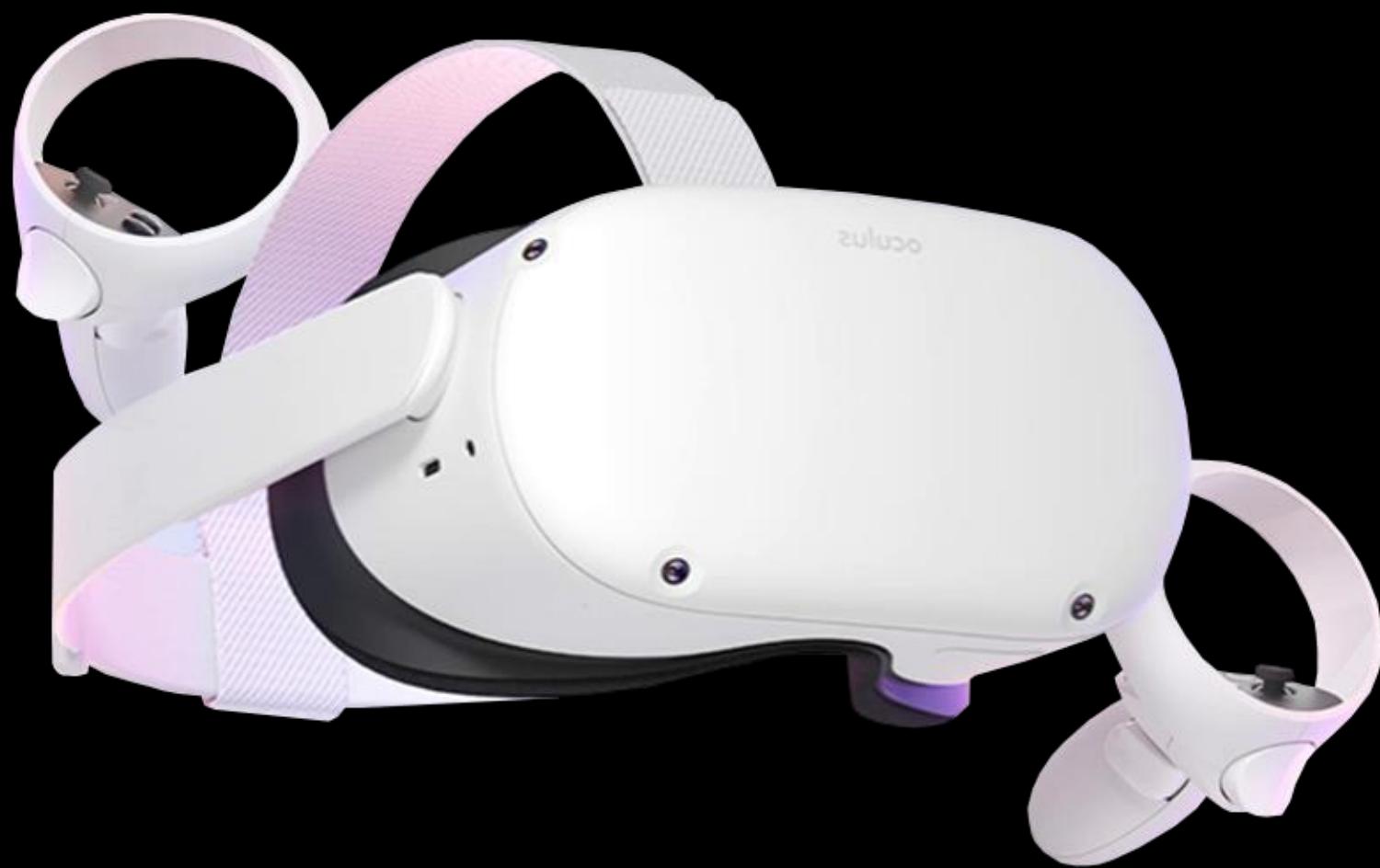
VR constantly reminds me how limited and limiting screens have been but I can't forget that the headset is there. It's heavy, it makes me sweat and irritates my skin. If I step out of my pre-defined boundary, whatever digital world I'm in is replaced by a view of my living room....

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More generally, a digital game's lived experience is always mediated through representation and various degrees of reductive simulation and so comes with a built-in distancing effect even as we participate and interact in a directly consequential sensory experience.

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske

The design of games is a form of modelling.

The playing of games is a form of transactional mapping between software, player, and player networks.

The critical engagement with games needs to be approached via something more than a digital augmentation of reading methods

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske

Deep mapping demonstrates the richness of a DH practice that circumvents a literary habitus, embraces multiple modalities and methods, and engages fully with the problems and possibilities presented by "critical and creative experiments that complicate long-held assumptions that may limit our ability to think and thrive."

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Thanks!

Jon Saklofske, Acadia University
@jsaklofske