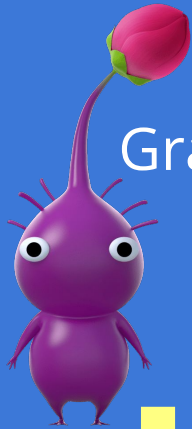


# Miyamoto's Pikmin and the Problem of Fun in Contemporary Video Games



Graham Culbertson

Critical Game Studies  
English and Comparative Lit  
UNC - Chapel Hill



How does anarchist philosophy apply to our everyday lives?



# Critical Game Studies Program

## About

The Critical Game Studies Program centers humanistic inquiry in the study and teaching of games by cultivating a community of instructors, fostering innovative research, and providing resources, including the [Greenlaw Gameroom](#), UNC's first game-based classroom. With its attention to rhetoric, literature, and film the Department of English & Comparative Literature serves as a hub for the program. This new endeavor leverages the department's expertise to furnish a critical perspective on games and culture as well as create an environment for exploring alternate play practices that embrace difference. To apply to teach in the Greenlaw Gameroom, fill out [this form](#).

### Gaming Courses



### Gaming Instructors



### Gaming Events



### Greenlaw Gameroom

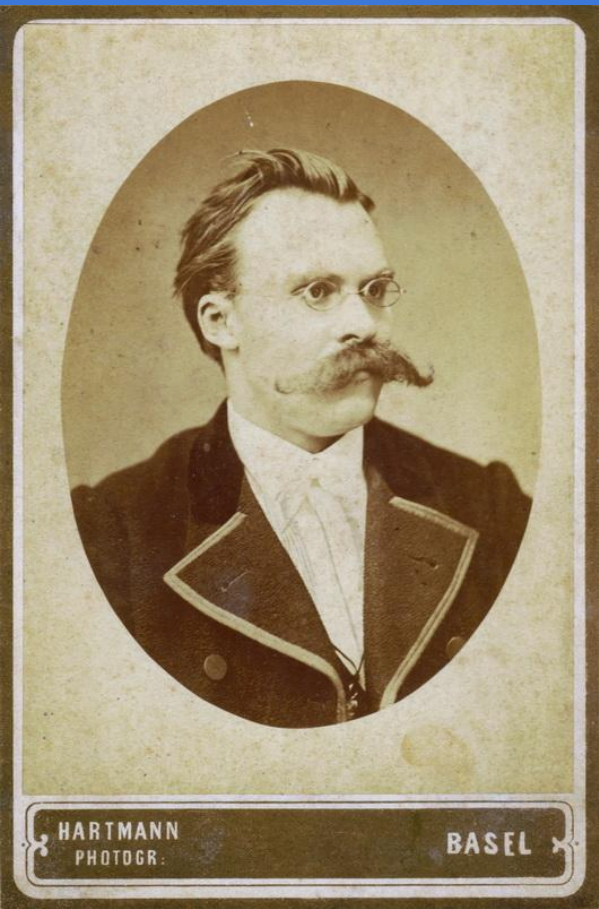


### Teaching Resources

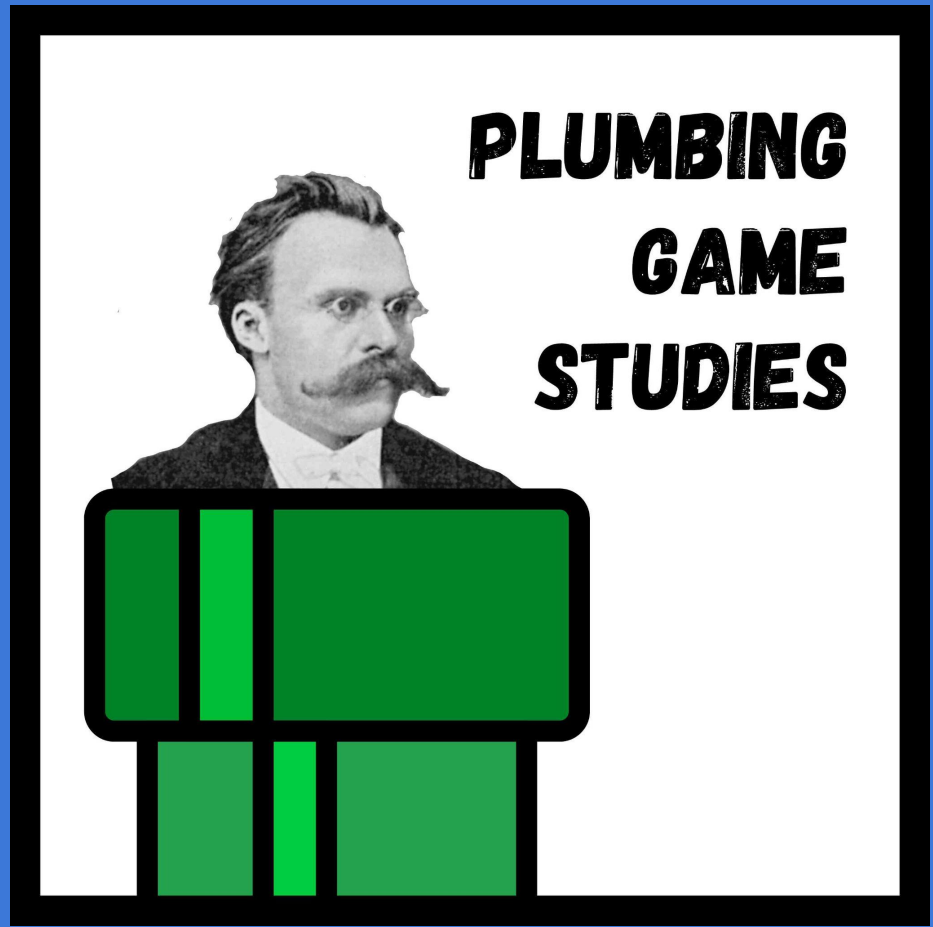


### Community





**A Games and  
Philosophy  
Podcast  
Philosophy is  
like plumbing for  
ideas - it makes  
connections and  
keeps everything  
flowing.**



# The Last Judgment

By Michelangelo



# The Last Judgment

By Michelangelo,  
Daniele da  
Volterra, Pope  
Julius II, and  
roughly 13  
assistants



# The Last Judgment

By Michelangelo





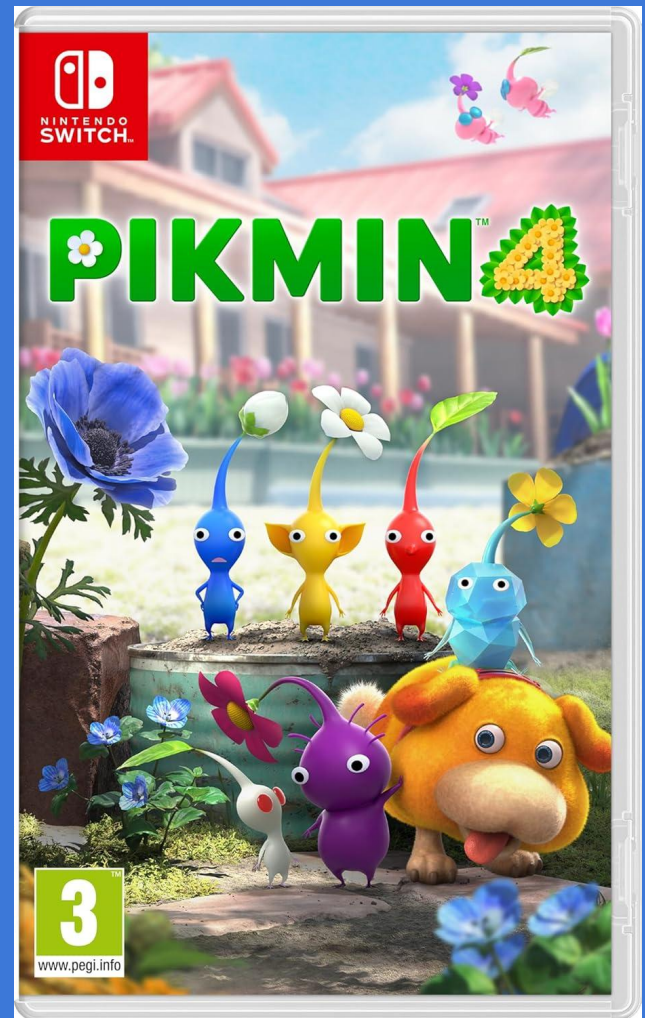
# Pikmin

By Nintendo, or  
Miyamoto Shigeru,  
or the workshop of  
Miyamoto, or in the  
style of Miyamoto



# Pikmin

By Miyamoto



**01**

**What's the Point if We Can't  
Have Fun?**

**02**

**Pikmin and Game Studies**

**03**

**Pikmin, Darkness, and Dark  
Souls**

**04**

**A Field About Fun**



# Part 1: What's the Point if We Can't Have Fun?



“a damning critique of them and everything they stood for: García Márquez’s delight in storytelling was so much juicier and more alive than the pretentious seminars designed (I thought) to make literature seem competitive, arid, and joyless.”

-Francine Prose, *1974*





ROCKSTAR GAMES PRESENTS

# RED DEAD REDEMPTION II



## Episode 3

# 1.3 Bernard Suits' The Grasshopper – C. Thi Nguyen



## 1.3 Bernard Suits' The Grasshopper – C. Thi Nguyen

Episode 3 • 9th May 2024 • Plumbing Game Studies • Graham Culbertson

Captivate



00:00:00

01:07:21



NOTES LINKS FOLLOW SHARE

Published on:

**9th May, 2024**

**Episode Details**

## Episode 4

# 1.4 Maria Lugones (and David Graeber) -- Miguel Sicart



## 1.4 Maria Lugones (and David Graeber) -- Miguel Si...

Episode 4 • 27th June 2024 • Plumbing Game Studies • Graham Culbertson

Captivate



00:00:00

01:02:10



NOTES LINKS FOLLOW SHARE

Published on:

**27th Jun, 2024**

**Episode Details**



# Graeber and Wengrow on Play Kings

Over the course of these chapters we have instead talked about basic forms of social liberty which one might actually put into practice: (1) the freedom to move away or relocate from one's surroundings; (2) the freedom to ignore or disobey commands issued by others; and (3) the freedom to shape entirely new social realities, or shift back and forth between different ones.

Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*

# Graeber and Wengrow on Play Kings


As long as the first two freedoms were taken for granted, as they were in many North American societies when Europeans first encountered them, the only kings that could exist were always, in the last resort, play kings. If they overstepped the line, their erstwhile subjects could always ignore them or move someplace else. The same would go for any other hierarchy of offices or system of authority. Similarly, a police force that operated for only three months of the year, and whose membership rotated annually, was in a certain sense a play police force – which makes it slightly less bizarre that their members were sometimes recruited directly from the ranks of ritual clowns.

# **Geertz from *Interpretation of Cultures***

**In her book, *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susanne Langer remarks that certain ideas burst upon the intellectual landscape with a tremendous force. They resolve so many fundamental problems at once that they seem also to promise that they will resolve all fundamental problems.**

# Geertz from *Interpretation of Cultures*

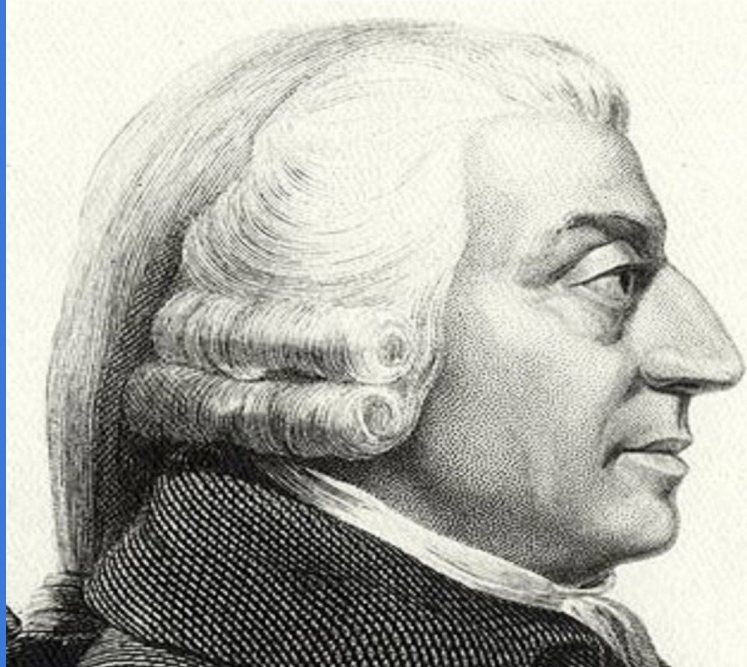
## Examples from Geertz:

- The second law of thermodynamics
  - The principle of natural selection
  - The notion of unconscious motivation
  - The organization of the means of production
- 

# Geertz from *Interpretation of Cultures*

After we have become familiar with the new idea, however, our expectations are brought more into balance with its actual uses, and its excessive popularity is ended. It becomes, if it was, in truth, a seminal idea in the first place, a permanent and enduring part of our intellectual armory. But it no longer has the grandiose, all-promising scope, the infinite versatility of apparent application, it once had.

THE WEALTH  
OF NATIONS  
ADAM SMITH



ON THE  
ORIGIN OF SPECIES



CHARLES DARWIN

# Graeber, from “What’s the Point?”

The tendency in popular thought to view the biological world in economic terms was present at the nineteenth-century beginnings of Darwinian science. Charles Darwin, after all, borrowed the term “survival of the fittest” from the sociologist Herbert Spencer, that darling of robber barons. Spencer, in turn, was struck by how much the forces driving natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* jibed with his own laissez-faire economic theories. Competition over resources, rational calculation of advantage, and the gradual extinction of the weak were taken to be the prime directives of the universe.

# Graeber, from “What’s the Point?”

The epitome of this line of thought came with militant atheist Richard Dawkins’s book *The Selfish Gene*—a work that insisted all biological entities were best conceived of as “lumbering robots,” programmed by genetic codes that, for some reason no one could quite explain, acted like “successful Chicago gangsters”



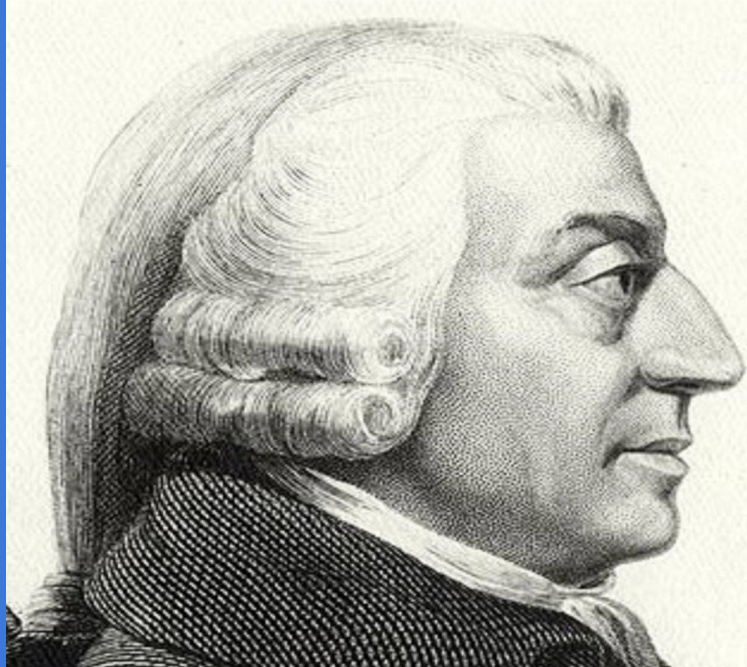
# Graeber, from “What’s the Point?”

(According to Dawkins), science demands a rational explanation, that this means attributing rational motives to all behavior, and that a truly rational motivation can only be one that, if observed in humans, would normally be described as selfishness or greed.

# Graeber, from “What’s the Point?”

If old-school Social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer viewed nature as a marketplace, albeit an unusually cutthroat one, the new version was outright capitalist. The neo-Darwinists assumed not just a struggle for survival, but a universe of rational calculation driven by an apparently irrational imperative to unlimited growth.

THE WEALTH  
OF NATIONS  
ADAM SMITH



=

ON THE  
ORIGIN OF SPECIES



CHARLES DARWIN

MILTON  
FRIEDMAN

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY  
*Benjamin Appelbaum*

CAPITALISM  
AND  
FREEDOM

"THE ECONOMIST  
OF THE  
CENTURY"

=

THE MILLION COPY INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

RICHARD  
DAWKINS

THE  
SELFISH  
GENE

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION  
30th  
Anniversary  
edition



# Kropotkin's alternative

“To take flight in flocks merely for pleasure is quite common among all sorts of birds”

- Peter Kropotkin, from *Mutual Aid*

# Graeber on Kropotkin

Animal cooperation often has nothing to do with survival or reproduction, but is a form of pleasure in itself. Kropotkin multiplies examples of social play: pairs of vultures wheeling about for their own entertainment, hares so keen to box with other species that they occasionally (and unwisely) approach foxes, flocks of birds performing military-style maneuvers, bands of squirrels coming together for wrestling and similar games.

## **Kropotkin, from Mutual Aid**

**While many plays are, so to speak, a school for the proper behavior of the young in mature life, there are others which, apart from their utilitarian purposes, are, together with dancing and singing, mere manifestations of an excess of forces—“the joy of life.”**

# Graeber on Life as Fun

To exercise one's capacities to their fullest extent is to take pleasure in one's own existence, and with sociable creatures, such pleasures are proportionally magnified when performed in company. From the Russian perspective, this does not need to be explained. It is simply what life is. We don't have to explain why creatures desire to be alive. Life is an end in itself. And if what being alive actually consists of is having powers—to run, jump, fight, fly through the air—then surely the exercise of such powers as an end in itself does not have to be explained either. It's just an extension of the same principle.



71

328





# Part 2: Pikmin and Already Existing Game Studies



# Typical Game Studies CFP

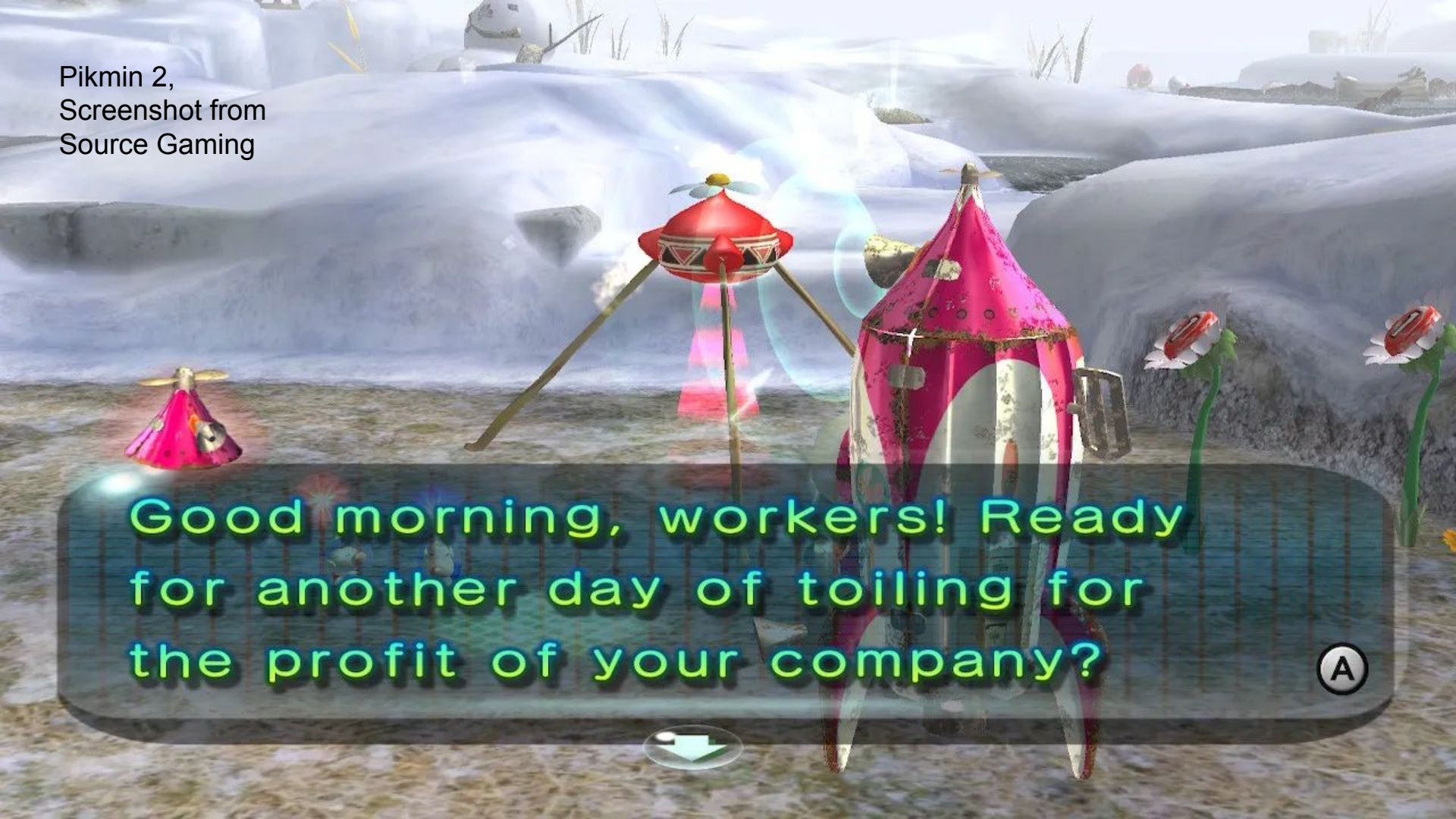
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- ? public discourse/controversy over violence, militarism, sex, criminality, racism, etc. in games
- ? game pedagogy and classroom practices, gamification, learning as play

# **Bogost, Procedural Rhetoric**

**My son began to realize the dilemma facing him: the more material possessions he took on, the more space he needed, and the more debt he had to assume to provide that space. And the additional space just fueled more material acquisitions, continuing the loop. This link between debt and acquisition gives form to a routine that many mortgage holders fail to recognize: buying more living space not only creates more debt, it also drives the impulse to acquire more goods.**

Pikmin 2,  
Screenshot from  
Source Gaming



Good morning, workers! Ready  
for another day of toiling for  
the profit of your company?

A

Pikmin 2, from  
Source Gaming

# Mail

Yesterday

Day 7




Olimar! Terrible news! I  
thought I went to **Happy  
Hocotate Savings & Loan,**  
but it seems my loan  
came from the shop next  
door: **All-Devouring Black  
Hole Loan Sharks!** Oops!

A

# **Whaley, Real-World Social Issues**

**Toward a Gameic World examines Japanese-designed video games in terms of how they engage with some of Japan's biggest social and personal issues, including traumas, such as natural disasters; a declining birthrate and aging population; nuclear proliferation; and youth social withdrawal. This book asks what some of the positive benefits are of working through a site of trauma from within a video game, and how games enhance and expand our understanding of these issues for the uninitiated.**





Due to a booming population, booming appetites,  
and a basic lack of planning,





Koppai's inhabitants have all but exhausted their food supply.



Collin



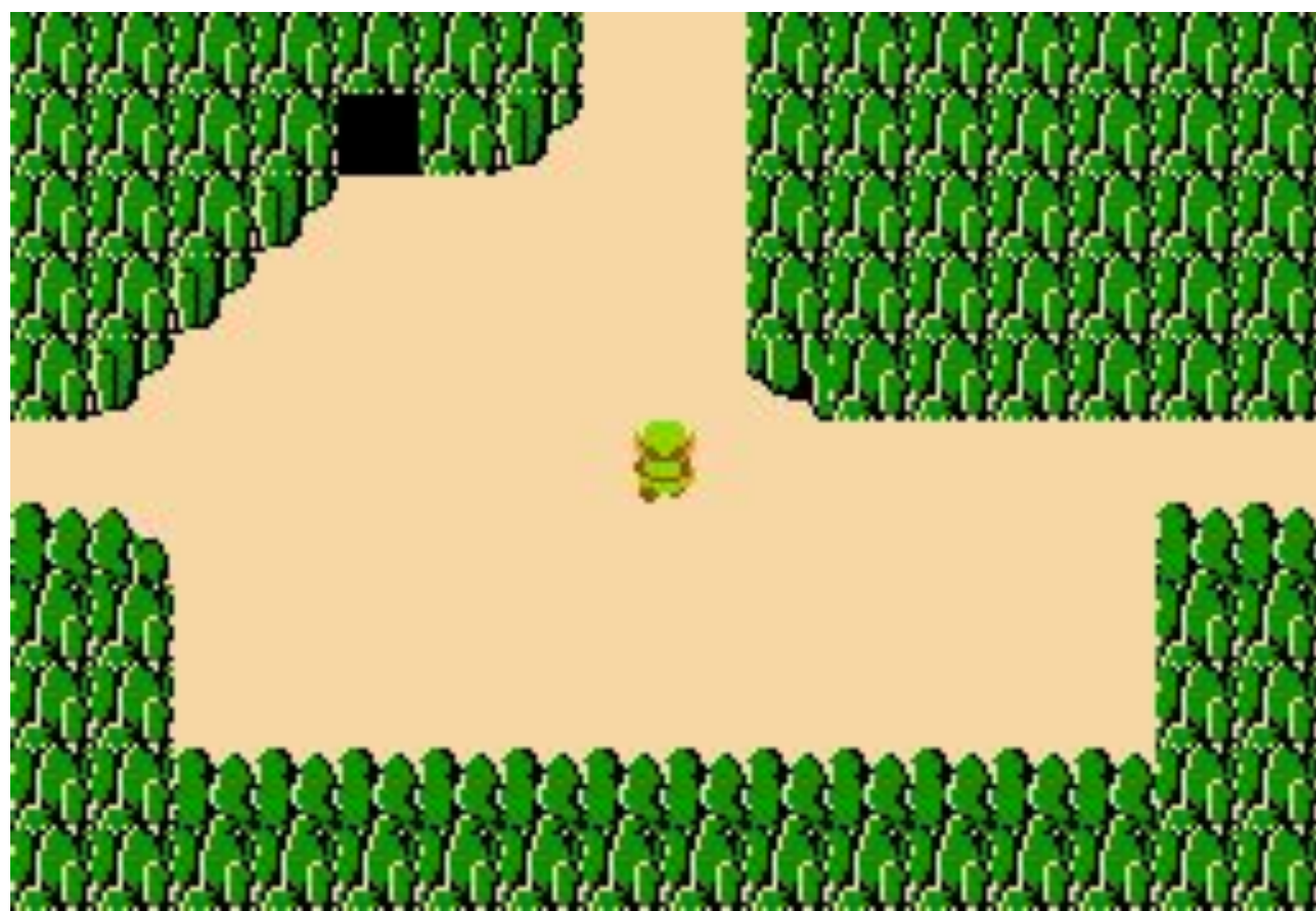
Dandori is the art of **organizing your tasks strategically and working with maximum efficiency to execute your plans quickly.**



Look Around



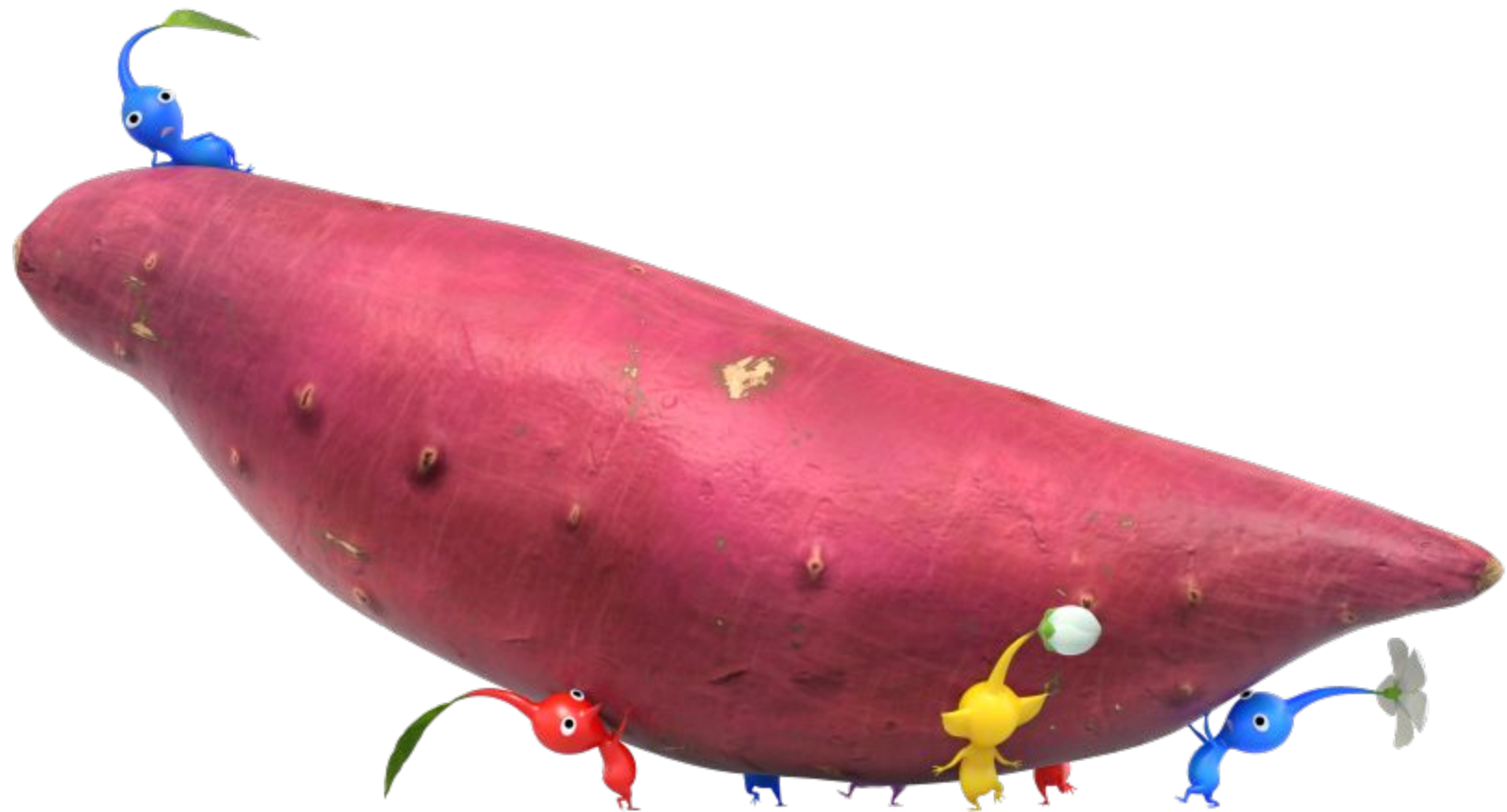
Message Log



# Miyamoto on Dandori

Simply put, the idea was something that I came up with while observing ants in my garden...

(from Ask the Developer on Pikmin 4)



# Miyamoto on Dandori

Simply put, the idea was something that I came up with while observing ants in my garden... I've always wanted to create this kind of gameplay where you manage things. For example, as a manager in your workplace, you think about who should be given what task to get things done. You have a small project here and a large, resource-heavy project there, and there's this sense of accomplishment when you're able to streamline and manage all of that efficiently.



# Pikmin Info

LEVEL  
SAKAI  
YODA

Onion

 115  117  73  97  136 / 538

Field

 45  7  19  14  15 / 100

Squad

 14

Working

 17

Idle

 68

ZL



ZR



Close KopPad



Russ



I use the **raw materials** you find and my handmade **components** to create all kinds of **items** and **gear** for use in the field!

> Visit the Lab.  
Bye for now.



# Training

Oatchi's Pup Drive: 🐶 4

Learn Buff Lv. 2.

1 2 3 🐶 1

Learn Chomp Lv. 2.

1 2 3 🐶 2

Learn Rush Lv. 2.

1 2 3 🐶 3

Dig learned!

1

New

Learn Heal Lv. 1

1 2 3 🐶 3

New

Learn Command

Shepherd



This Rescue Pup training curriculum has been passed down through many generations.



R Message Log

A Next

# Part 3: Pikmin as Souls-Like



# Miyamoto on Pikmin 4

**Interviewer:** Many people seem to think the characters are cute, but that the games themselves are a bit difficult. Pikmin die if you make the wrong decision, so there may be some fear of losing them.

# Noah Caldwell-Gervais on *Dark Souls*

In Dark Souls your hard work pays off, that's part of the fantasy. That is kind of the thrill of Dark Souls, isn't it? To have the whole world your enemy, to have to resort to your wits and reflexes simply to exist?

And having achieved existence, to grow strong, to thrive, to put the boot to those who would challenge the raw and unalterable fact of you?

# Graham Culbertson on Pikmin

In Pikmin your hard work pays off, that's part of the fantasy. That is kind of the thrill of Pikmin, isn't it? To have the whole world your enemy, to have to resort to your wits and reflexes simply to exist?

And having achieved existence, to grow strong, to thrive, to put the boot to those who would challenge the raw and unalterable fact of you? And turn Bulborbs into more Pikmin?

# Miyamoto on Pikmin 4

**Interviewer:** Many people seem to think the characters are cute, but that the games themselves are a bit difficult. Pikmin die if you make the wrong decision, so there may be some fear of losing them.

**Miyamoto:** I get that people find it more difficult when death is a factor. But I think the franchise's strength lies in its relationship with mortality.

# Herzog on Nature



# Pikmin Dying





# Real Predators



# Real Predators



# Real Predators



# Realish Predators



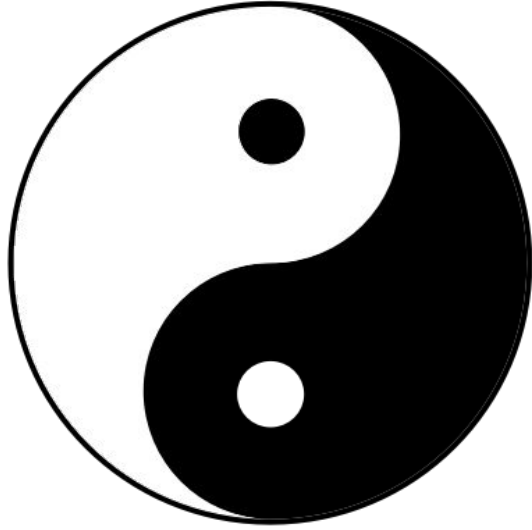
# Realistic Predator?





WHEN WE  
*ABSTRACT* AN IMAGE  
THROUGH *CARTOONING*,  
WE'RE NOT SO MUCH  
*ELIMINATING* DETAILS  
AS WE ARE *FOCUSING*  
ON *SPECIFIC*  
*DETAILS*.

BY *STRIPPING*  
*DOWN* AN IMAGE  
TO ITS ESSENTIAL  
*MEANING*, AN ARTIST  
CAN *AMPLIFY* THAT  
MEANING IN A WAY  
THAT REALISTIC  
ART *CAN'T*.



# Iconic vs. Grimdark





Francine Prose said that when fellow grad students wouldn't read Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* it was, "a damning critique of them and everything they stood for: García Márquez's delight in storytelling was so much juicier and more alive than the pretentious seminars designed (I thought) to make literature seem competitive, arid, and joyless."



# John Guillory, Rigor and the Canon

The syllabus of theory has the oblique purpose of signifying a rapprochement with the technobureaucratic constraints upon intellectual labor, symptomatically registered as a fetishization of “rigor.”

# John Guillory, Rigor and the Canon

The syllabus of theory has the oblique purpose of signifying a rapprochement with the technobureaucratic constraints upon intellectual labor, symptomatically registered as a fetishization of “rigor.”

Translation: By teaching really hard texts like Foucault and Derrida, English professors could prove to students, policymakers, and corporate employers that English was a “serious” major like economics, computer science, or chemistry.



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# Game Studies: A Field about Playing and Fun





# Game Studies: A Field about Playing and Fun

