

**JOE MCGONEGAL:** This is the MIT Alumni Books Podcast. I'm Joe McGonegal, writer for the MIT Alumni Association. If you've ever thought of the game *Tetris* as the perfect enactment of the over-tasked lives of Americans in the 1990's-- the constant bombardment of tasks that demand our attention and that we must somehow fit into our overcrowded schedules and clear off our desks in order to make room for the next onslaught, you'd probably make a good game theorist.

My guest, Clara Fernandez-Vara, SM '04, thinks about games a lot, about what they can mean and how. In her new book, "Introduction to Game Analysis," Fernandez-Vara lays out the methodology for this relatively new field, one that is far newer than literary analysis and yet not that far behind fields like radio and film studies.

Though Fernandez-Vara is clearly targeting the potential gamer turned academic, it's also a book for those seeking to think about how game theory applies to other research fields and for skeptics who are too quick to dismiss gaming as not worthy of an academic pursuit.

Fernandez-Vara is Associate Arts Professor at the Game Center at New York University. She teaches courses on video game theory and game narrative and is a freelance game designer herself. I asked her why she chose to write this book now.

**CLARA FERNANDEZ-VARA:** Well, it turns out that the study of games is growing really fast. We've been in the field for more than 10 years now but there hasn't been quite a guide on how to write on games. I think that it's particularly important to recognize that there are many ways to write about games because there are many fields that can talk about games from education to literature, film, media studies, to psychology, to computer science.

So this book actually started with a handout that I used to give my students and it was just a few pages. And I kept adding things to the handout until the how to write the game analysis was actually longer than the analysis they had to write. So I realized that there was a need for it.

There's by now a critical mass of people in game studies that are teaching courses not only in game analysis but it can be game studies but also game design. Journalism, for example, where we needed to have a kind of-- it's not a step-by-step guide, that was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to acknowledge the variety of fields that can write about games. But

something that would help people think about how to write analysis in a more nuanced way.

Coming from a literature and media study I see a lot of teachers who want to include games in their curriculum and they might be teaching film or media studies in general. Even though the book is aimed at students mainly, I would hope that professors and teachers would also find it useful as a way of thinking how they're going to incorporate games as part of the curriculum-- so that games are not only a technology driven field but it's also a humanities and social sciences field.

**MCGONEGAL:** I have to ask you that games I wanted to hear you talk about. *Lode Runner* was my absolute favorite growing up in the 1980's. It blew me away because you could construct your own levels and it was the First time I'd ever done that at a computer game before.

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:** It's interesting because after a certain age-- we've grown up with different games and even if we were part of the same generation we might have played a different games. Also coming from Spain and realizing that the history of games in Europe is different from the history of games in the US is very important.

**MCGONEGAL:** And I want to play *La Ballena* after I heard you talk about it so much.

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:** It's hard but you know, if you played games in the 80's you'd probably feel at home. Now, these games are hard on purpose. Back then it was because they didn't know how else to make them. But there's a lot of me in this book and the games that I've grown up playing.

**MCGONEGAL:** I was thinking back to the introductory text. As an English major that I had in college, wish that I'd had a text like this. You're saying a lot in here that I think is true about any good analysis.

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:** Yeah and this comes from many years of studying literature and film and reading guides like those. The goal was basically to recognize that writing about games is, on certain aspects, similar to writing about other media. But there are certain characteristics of games that make them different and are challenges in order-- when it comes to analyzing them.

So I wanted to really emphasize also the different parts and the challenges of writing about games.

**MCGONEGAL:** You end with an appendix of exemplary texts. When I read them, I realized you must have read a lot of text that are far from exemplary in your teaching.

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:** Yes. And that was one of the challenges actually, finding exemplary text. There are more and more, I've been really happy to see that there are now monographic volumes that analyze maybe one simple-- like one single game, like *Silent Hill* or *Doom* or *Mist*.

So that is becoming more common now. You know, you can write a whole book just on a single game, which I think is you know, fantastic because you're showing that games have the kind of depth and complexity that other media might have.

**MCGONEGAL:** In terms of the writing process or the publishing process, any of those obstacles to finally seeing getting this book to the light of day?

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:** It was more-- the obstacles were basically that I was in transition from being a post Doc at MIT to an academic job. So I started the book while I was a post Doc at MIT, at the Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab. Then, that lab closed. I stayed in at the trope tank with Nick Mumford. And then I got a job as a professor here at NYU.

So when you are kind of changing jobs it can be a bit challenging to go from one to the other. But I'm really lucky to have been surrounded by people who've been really supportive. Not only given feedback but also understanding that I needed the time to write.

The editors, for example, were super helpful. And actually, I have to thank my editor, Erica, who gave me the best prompt to get this book going. What she told me-- she was like, well, if you want to find your tone, why don't you write this the way that you talk to your students?

And that was really liberating, you know, thinking about OK, I'm going to just write this. As I'm teaching class, because this is what I teach in class.

**MCGONEGAL:** And did any of the skills picked up at MIT during your study here help you in writing this book?

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:** So a lot of what I did in comparative media studies was studying different media and this book comes from applying methods from analyzing one medium to another. And I think that in inception you know, talking about games and other media, for example is probably the clearest space where I can see that happening.

Henry Jenkins was my professor and one of the things that I learned from him was precisely this writing in a direct way in order to get complex, theoretical ideas across. It was an education that was very much about communication but not only about communication studies-- but also about communicating your ideas clearly and effectively.

I started getting games a bit before coming to MIT but I got the sense that it was a feasible field full of promise while I was there. Because I met people who were already studying games, like, Jesper Juul who was a visiting scholar while I was there, coming to a department where there were labs that were studying games.

**MCGONEGAL:** What other books need to be written on this topic in terms of establishing game theory? What work still needs to be done towards that aim?

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:** My book is a kind of general approach. And one of the things that I discarded at a stage while I was writing was writing a book on game analysis. This is written for students, I think that there is a space to write about theory crafting and game studies at a higher level-- more for scholars, researchers, not only for students.

At the end of the book, I admit that, you know, these are some of the ways that we can write about games but there are many more that can come up. And I would like to see books written by people, for example, in journalism that do this job but coming from a specific field.

You know, like how do you analyze the game for the field of history, for example-- or history of art? How would you write a book to analyze a game from the point of view of architecture?

And there have been bits and pieces and articles on this but I think that this field is rich enough that it deserves this kind of nuanced-- the fields that I describe in the book like literature, film, history, teaching-- I think that we can have monographic volumes also on how to write game analysis of a very specific type.

I wanted to show the variety of writing but we do need to go into depth in all these other fields.

**MCGONEGAL:** Would this book have come out if video games-- is there enough to be said about games outside of the video realm?

**FERNANDEZ-** Yes, sure. That's one of the specialized books that I would like to see written as well actually.

**VARA:** When I was writing, I kept wanting to write more about non-digital games.

Writing about analyzing non-digital games has a lot more challenges than digital games in a way. I covered this book a bit but the main thing is that when you are playing a non-digital game, it's going to be very likely that you're playing with other people. And actually reproducing the experience and playing that game or what that game is about is going to completely change depending on who you're playing with.

In digital games you have the computer enforcing a set of rules. As players, we feel have wiggle room about how we experience the game, what choices we make, what are our goals are but that is a lot more volatile than in tabletop games. And--

**MCGONEGAL:** You said if players don't like Old Maid they don't talk to the designer.

**FERNANDEZ-** Yeah, they just change it, right?

**VARA:**

**MCGONEGAL:** That's right, yeah.

**FERNANDEZ-** Just like how all my work, you just change it. Everybody plays Monopoly wrong because they

**VARA:** keep adding money to the bank and it's supposed to deplete. And that is something that is a challenge. And I wanted to have non-digital games be part of the book because they are games and because there is so much that we can learn from them.

But on the other hand, it is a huge challenge to write about them and research them. I have colleagues that are board game and non-digital game experts that I think could do a wonderful job. So I hope that that book also happens.

**MCGONEGAL:** Tell me about what you're reading right now.

**FERNANDEZ-** I just finished a reading "Generation Xbox," by Jamie Russell, which is an account of the  
**VARA:** history of the relationship between Hollywood and video games. As I was reading, I was like, oh, I wish I had read this before, I need my manuscript.

Because it analyzes the confrontation between video games and Hollywood and how they tried to come together again and again and again. You know, this starts with *E.T.* and the debacle of *E.T.* and why it happened and it ends with games like *Grand Theft Auto*.

It's interesting to read because in the games industry but also in games studies, we talk about the cinema envy of a lot of video games and this book makes me realize that there's also video envy in Hollywood. It goes both ways and now what's happening is that video games are realizing that they might not need Hollywood.

So it's a really interesting read and I've enjoyed it a lot. And I'll probably use it in class as well.

**MCGONEGAL:** Clara Fernandez-Vara's new book, "Introduction to Game Analysis," is available from

Routledge Press or at your favorite bookstore. Clara Fernandez-Vara, thank you for joining me.

**FERNANDEZ-  
VARA:**

Well, thank you for your questions. This was really great.