

# Game Studies, Aesthetics, and Active Objects: An Interview with Graeme Kirkpatrick

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*Graeme Kirkpatrick is a leading theorist in the field of game studies. His research traverses multiple theoretical and disciplinary terrains, most notably the philosophy and social theory of technology. His 2011 book *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* offers a genuinely novel take on the phenomenology of video gameplay, while his more recent books, *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* (2013) and *The Formation of Gaming Culture* (2015), provide incisive accounts of how gaming culture carved out space for itself in the wider social world. In this interview, Kirkpatrick reflects on the humanistic impetus underlying his aesthetic approach to videogames, and offers his thoughts on the “non-human” turn in game studies and media theory more broadly. He introduces the idea of “active objects” as a way of assigning an active role to videogame objects whilst also retaining a “minimal humanism.” Kirkpatrick also discusses his recent research on the formation of gaming culture, including the techniques he employed in order to analyse 1980s gaming magazines, and how his findings relate to recent events such as the “gamergate” controversy.*

Graeme Kirkpatrick is Professor in Media Arts, Aesthetics and Narration in the School of Informatics at the University of Skövde. He completed his undergraduate studies at York and Bradford, and was awarded his PhD at Birkbeck in London. Much of Kirkpatrick’s research focuses on the philosophy and social theory of technology, though he is perhaps best known for his contributions to the field of game studies. He has published three major works on videogames, each of which has offered important and unique interventions in the field. His strength as a researcher lies in his ability to explicate phenomena and occurrences in videogame culture that have gone surprisingly under-analysed in the scholarly literature—for example, his critical analysis of videogame controllers in *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* (2011), or his investigation into the origins of the terms “gamer” and “gameplay” in *The Formation of Gaming Culture* (2015). Kirkpatrick’s analysis is often couched in a diverse (and refreshingly unorthodox) set of theoretical traditions—many of which have been under-represented in the broader field of media studies.

Ultimately, what Kirkpatrick’s approach amounts to is a profoundly humanistic way of understanding videogames—one that is often at odds with much of the current research in game studies and media theory more broadly. Kirkpatrick’s main theoretical influences—aesthetic theory, Frankfurt School critical theory, and French sociology among them—enable him to position videogames as what he calls a “deeply ambivalent” medium. In some respects, his approach recapitulates familiar tropes from game studies’ formative discourse, such as the incentive to “defend” the study of games from disciplinary colonisation, and to maintain the view that videogames are somehow “different” to other media. This kind of thinking has, of course, fallen by the wayside in recent research. In a recent editorial for the open-access Web journal *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth (2015, n.p.) makes a bold declaration: “game studies is a success. We did it.” In essence, what he means by this is that the study of games has become successfully standardised, no longer defined by its difference within the academy but instead by its normalcy. Few would argue that this is a bad thing—after all, it means that videogames are no longer cordoned off into their own special domain, their own “magic circle.” In fact, games are now studied from a diversity of disciplinary frameworks, and as a result, the field has shed many of its pre-occupations with, for example, formalism. But if anything has been lost in this shift towards normalisation—this homogenisation of game studies—it is that games have forfeited their status as an inherently “awkward” or, in Adorno’s terms, “enigmatic” cultural form. This awkwardness, however, is something that Kirkpatrick’s work has continually sought to maintain. In the interview, Kirkpatrick reflects on the critical implications that the above processes have had not only for game studies but also for the state of humanities today. For Kirkpatrick, it is in a somewhat surprising place—aesthetic theory—that we might find the resources necessary to forge a path through these disciplinary tensions.

One of the recurring ideas in this interview is the notion of “active objects.” In media theory today, we are witnessing a decentralisation of the human’s privileged position in the study of technology, in accordance with what Levi Bryant calls a “flat ontology.” The traditional human-machine dichotomy has been collapsed such that all the “objects” and interactions that constitute media assemblages—whether humans can relate to them or not—are given equal consideration. This “nonhuman turn” has had clear reverberations in game studies scholarship. For instance, the notion of player embodiment—an issue that was once a core concern for game studies scholars—has been reconfigured to more adequately account for the game’s “experience” of the player as well as the various “effects” forged at the interfacing of the human and the technical. Kirkpatrick’s research has exhibited an ongoing concern with these issues—his critical analysis of videogame controllers sheds light on a set of objects that are typically ignored both in gameplay and scholarly writing, and his study of the “gamer habitus” reveals how humans and gaming objects are “disposed” to one another in complex ways. In this interview, Kirkpatrick draws on Adorno’s reflections on mimicry and non-human agency in *Aesthetic Theory* in order to discuss videogames as “active objects.” As active objects, videogames are capable of destabilising our sense of subjectivity. In fact, as Kirkpatrick highlights, aesthetic experience often entails a kind of “forgetting” of our own humanity—“perceiving it as absent,” as he puts it. Yet this forgetting is not associated with a diminishing of the human, but instead with an understanding that an alternative future, in which the subject and the object are reconciled, is possible. In this sense, the “agency” of videogame objects corresponds to a more general reformatting of what it means (or could mean) to be human. Playing games means creating new possibilities, perhaps, for envisioning alternative futures in this way.

This interview was conducted by Benjamin Nicoll in April 2015. It was recorded at the University of Melbourne while Kirkpatrick was visiting as part of a fellowship program arranged by Melanie Swalwell of Flinders University. The interview recording was transcribed and Kirkpatrick was given the opportunity to revise the text. The interview begins with a discussion of aesthetic theory and its place in Kirkpatrick’s approach to videogames. It then focuses on Kirkpatrick’s defence of humanism, especially in the context of game studies. In the second half of the interview, Kirkpatrick discusses his recent research on the demarcation of videogames as a social field. Finally, the interview touches on a fundamental tension in Kirkpatrick’s work, which relates to thinking of videogames as both aesthetic objects and “ideal commodities” of information capitalism.

**Benjamin Nicoll (hereafter BN): Firstly, I’d like to ask you some questions about your writing on aesthetics. Much of your work draws on ideas from the sociology and philosophy of art, specifically from theorists like Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière. It wasn’t until after I read Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* that I realised just how immanent his thought is to your analysis in *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*. As a discipline, aesthetic theory remains a largely untapped resource for media theory, perhaps because many scholars find it out-dated and unworkable in a contemporary context. So, intellectually speaking, what draws you to aesthetic theory – specifically to writers like Adorno, whose thought occupies a somewhat ambiguous position in contemporary media theory?**

Graeme Kirkpatrick (hereafter GK): I was interested in Adorno long before I began to study videogames or media. I never was drawn to media theory and, as you imply, aesthetic theory is really a very different approach. Often media theorists misrepresent Adorno’s work as involving a “hypodermic” approach to media, while presenting their own work as much more attentive to users and to the meanings they make from their interactions with media. That probably helped to make him unfashionable but, in fact, I’m not sure how unfashionable he is now because scholars have started to ask what active role media objects might play in those interactions and Adorno’s studies of music in particular have inspired developments in the sociology of art for that reason.

I’ve always been sceptical about the whole emphasis media theory places on media as “ideology machines.” In the British context it grows out of Stuart Hall and British cultural studies, I think. You get this whole emphasis on language and structuralist or post-structuralist methods, which are used to read politics into each and every use of media. The focus is always on textual meaning and the analysis aims at subverting hegemonic readings with reference to users and their articulations. I think that’s clearly not

applicable to computer games simply because there the meanings are often not textual and they're not where we expect to find them.

In the early years of computer game studies, when I went to conferences in 2002 and 2003, you had a lot of people who were very knowledgeable in areas like film studies—particularly film studies—and people who used media theory to decode or deconstruct traditional media in this way. And they were just bringing that methodological apparatus to the field of game studies because they found there was something new to write about. And some of them really liked games, to be fair, but this is what they were doing, academically. But, to me, it was just obvious that the theory didn't connect with the object so I was really dissatisfied with that. I thought some of the analyses I was hearing were... shallow would be a polite way of describing them. And so I wanted to provide a more appropriate account of what's really going on when people are playing computer games.

I thought that the aesthetic ideas I had been looking at clearly gave better purchase on this object—these kinds of objects—than the theories that were being put forward that were, as you say, more fashionable. So I decided to draw on Adorno and Benjamin to write about computer games. Of course, you can't just “apply Adorno” to computer games, that's too crude and mechanical, and very un-Adornian! What you have to do is to bring the theory into dialogue with this form and see what happens, including asking “does the theory gain anything?” from this engagement.

I think a fundamental point here, which brings aesthetic theory to bear upon games, and I think means that aesthetic theory can say more about them than media theory can, is the element of play. Once you have something that is so obviously working with the human desire to play, and the human faculty for play and imagination, you've created an opening—not just for Adorno, but for Kant, Schiller, the whole aesthetic tradition starts there. So taking that approach opens up a distinct perspective on games. I'd say in media theory they've tried to address some of these issues through notions like affect, but that's really a superficial add-on concept in a lot of cases. What really matters, or a better way to explore what games feel like is actually made possible by these concepts, especially the ideas of play and form.

Because if we focus on what players actually do with games we don't find that they interpret a story, recognise their role in it and act that out in a meaningful way. Playing a game requires a concerted physical and intellectual effort to hold multiple, often disparate experiential elements together in a single, more or less pleasing, coherent experience. There are multiple planes, if you like, including visual information on screen, manual operations with a controller, all informed by an idea of story or plot. Your role as the player is to maintain their unity in a kind of mobile point of intersection. And the unity of that point is inherently unstable and prone to collapse, after which it has to be re-built, re-learned and established all over again. This corresponds more or less exactly to Adorno's analysis of form in musical experience: it's there in the music as a kind of challenge and only active, intelligent listening pulls it all together and produces the meaning.

And actually, you refer to the sociology of art, and I think one of the interesting things that's happened in the sociology of art, perhaps partly in response to the digital is that after years of looking at how social processes “construct” the artwork—which tends to reduce it to its discursive or social context and makes it all nicely amenable to questions of linguistic meaning and interpretation—after years of that, there is now a new attitude that says the object is active in this situation. In this context Adorno has become a key reference point, and less unfashionable! I think, in a way, aesthetic theory is coming in through the back door, because once you acknowledge that the work is active in this way you've returned to the question of form.

**BN: So, there's a tension between Bourdieu's idea that art is just socially constructed, and Adorno's idea that there's something intrinsic to art that makes it special or “active”?**

GK: Yes, but I think we can draw on insights from each approach. One of the things I was reacting against in *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* was probably the attitude implicit in the scholarship that I encountered at the beginning of games studies, which was, we have media theory and sociology for games, and then we just don't really talk about them as art or address their relation to art. That seemed to be quite a common attitude. It's like sociology for games, philosophy for art. I wanted to treat these objects,

computer games, from the standpoint of aesthetic theory, without making any prior judgement about whether they were art or not, or what kind of thing they were. The materials of art don't enjoy any special status—Adorno is very explicit on this point. He even comments in *Aesthetic Theory* that work in electronics might be the basis for new experiments, new kinds of artwork. Art can be made out of any substance, so we should be open-minded. And so I took my cue from there, and I wanted to assess computer games in that way.

This led me to focus on their intrinsic, formal capacities, perhaps too much because in *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game* I think I abstracted too far from games playing as a social activity. The point is that computer games are not entirely “what we make of them” because they also act. But the actions they perform and the things players do that they accommodate and provoke only take on significance in specific social contexts. Computer games are not completely neutral, blank slates open to any interpretation but they also don't mean anything in abstraction either. They have to be instantiated in social contexts by humans—and perhaps other creatures and objects—and then they can have effects; they can participate in producing meanings.

This view isn't as antithetical to Bourdieu as a lot of sociologists seem to think, by the way. In his late study, *The Rules of Art*, he is strikingly ambivalent about form, which in earlier work he more or less dismissed as a kind of necessary illusion of art appreciation. The main idea I took from Bourdieu was the notion of a habitus that is essential to appreciating and playing games. Habitus is a kind of embodied disposition that equips us to operate in a given domain. People who don't have this in connection with computers and games struggle to make their actions comport with what happens on screen, while those who do will find it easy to relate to games and even feel that playing them is “natural,” or “comes naturally.” I think this is an important idea for video game aesthetics and it illustrates well how formal properties of games limit, constrain and even script human actions, but can only do so under specific social conditions.

**BN: One thing I find interesting about your work on aesthetics is that you seem to uphold many of the central tenets of ludology, as against what you call the “flimsy conceptual apparatus of media studies” (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p. 54). Many scholars have abandoned the idea that games are an inherently unique media form, and in so doing, they have subjected the medium to broader ideas from media theory, including post-humanism and affect. By contrast, your work seems more intent on maintaining somewhat unorthodox notions of humanism, so as to situate games in relation to deeper theoretical lineages and practices surrounding play. Is this an accurate assessment, and if so, could you explain why you feel such an approach to games is necessary?**

GK: I think that's an accurate description. As far as the humanism question is concerned, I view that in political terms. So it seems to me that capitalism has always wanted us to treat other people as if they're less than human, so to have theoretical post-humanism come along and say, “yeah, that's ok,” feels like capitulation; I think it's important not to embrace anti- or post-humanism partly just for that reason.

But on the other hand, I understand the critique of traditional humanism, or at least I think I do. Traditional humanism was shot through with prejudicial notions, exclusionary values. So, in the eighteenth century to be human was defined in terms of being fully rational. Women and colonised peoples were excluded because they were too emotional or their inferior levels of development showed they had failed at science. On that basis they weren't included in the “human” because they were supposedly less rational, and that was supposedly fundamental to the human. I think Mark Poster's critique of humanism in his work on new media is very good on that, and those questions are well raised.

But the problem here is not identification with the human as privileged in our thinking about the world, it's a biased inflation, or inflection of what the human entails. The danger is the very obvious one that you throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. I think that there is a minimal humanism that should be retained, just the same way that there is a minimal specification of rationality, which isn't the grand metaphysical system of Kant or Hegel with its exclusionary implications, but something much more simple.

The alternative is quite disturbing. The post-human scenario where genetic engineering is all okay, and we just accept technologies and forms of social organisation that modify humans and blend them in with other categories of object—this is a kind of post-democratic, post-human scenario that I think is complicit at a deep level with the contemporary drift towards totalitarianism. It's a subject for another conversation, but I think contemporary capitalism, specifically neo-liberalism, is a totalitarian project.

The aesthetic represents an area that is concerned with human experience. I think Adorno's aesthetic theory supersedes post-humanism by encompassing its main ideas. When he opposes the mimetic response of the subject to the constructed character of the artwork he presents a scenario in which the two poles get entangled and modify one another. To be authentic the constructed work has to take on something of the character of the subject; it takes on a constructed appearance in so far as it reflects the absence of the human yet, as such, it reflects the presence of its human recipient. And from the other perspective, the human who "moves with" the artistic object gets immediately folded into a constructed sequence of responses, extending into embodied actions and behaviours in the case of computer games. So the human element becomes machine-like and precisely in so far as this is the case, appreciating the work involves perceiving our own humanity as absent, yet determining the whole process and therefore present. Adorno identifies a "pointing beyond" here, to a different reality, if you like, another world where we can be reconciled with the thing that is absent yet curiously affirmed here in the authentic experience of the artwork.

This idea of authentic experience is an inherently humanist one. Even if animals or machines can be said to have experiences I don't think it makes much sense to speculate about whether and how they judge those experiences to be authentic. They lack criteria for such because they cannot imagine another world in the light of their struggle with this one. In other words, humanism relates to form, because humans are the creatures that appreciate form. There are clear connections here between the idea—which we find in Schiller but also in contemporary thinkers like Rancière—that the aesthetic opens onto discovery of what we always knew: that we *are* freedom, that we are equal.

Applying aesthetic theory to video games becomes political for this reason.

**BN: And regarding the idea that games are an inherently unique media form, fundamentally different to other technologies. Could you reflect a bit on your "defence" of ludology?**

GK: I think we need the clash between ludology and narratology more than we need either of those perspectives as such—which is fortunate because there are very few people who would actually identify with either of them. Ludology guards the space around games but it doesn't actually know what that space is; it doesn't understand its own activity. So ludology is important in so far as it repudiates the textual-meaning orientation of media studies in connection with computer games. But the mission of ludology—to say "we'll just study these things as games"—is a bit hopeless, actually, because there simply isn't enough conceptual resource there, in the theory of games, to mount a proper analysis of computer games. So, as soon as Jesper Juul defines a game, which I think he does brilliantly well, he then has to add to the model with all these bits and pieces of narrative and media theory, because what we're confronted with here is something more than just a game. So, I think he and the other ludologists are correct to say that there's something very specific about this cultural form, whatever it is, and that simply coming at computer games with existing media theory, and all that stuff that I talked about before, is shallow and misses the point in a lot of cases. This is about recognising that games are active and their meanings aren't one-sidedly determined by the player or the social context, or whatever.

So I can agree with all of that, but I don't agree that analysing them as games will be sufficient either. And this of course courts the danger that Espen Aarseth will turn around and say, "you're just applying another alien conceptual scheme, because you're using aesthetic theory the way those people use narrative theory." I don't think that's true, because there is convergence among the two perspectives, particularly on the issue of form. Once you start to analyse games as potentially complex and sophisticated things, you immediately run into, or start clarifying the kinds of form they generate, and once you're doing that you're already in the area of aesthetic theory. I think that in Aarseth's recent work he's running up against the lack of a properly aesthetic theory. So, now he's talking about the degraded character of signification in games

in order to say that they can't cause or promote violence. But trying to understand that purely in terms of their "gameness" doesn't work, not least because some traditional games are actually very precise in their textual or representational meaning-content. You need a theory that positions formal aesthetic structures specific to video or computer games in social and historical context to make an argument about their referential capacities: you need aesthetic theory.

I agree with nearly everything ludologists say when they are repudiating narratology. But as long as they try to hang their analyses on "gameness" and then supplement this with other theories, essentially media theories, I think that's not really going to work.

Ludology also played an important part in establishing the new academic discipline of computer game studies. I used to think that the fierceness of ludology's polemic was indicative of the kind of rupture that we often find in the history of science when a new paradigm asserts itself and new set of questions, or problematic, is established. I've changed my mind about that, though. If there's a claim for any new discipline at the moment it should be made in a pretty cautious way, because in contemporary academia everything's blending and melding in with everything else anyway. We're getting strange hybrid "disciplines" that combine traditional humanities with technologies and technical skills training. In this context, which is largely being shaped by the politics I mentioned previously, we need to be careful. That might mean stepping back and thinking about what we want people to be studying and why. What are the relevant disciplinary boundaries? This is a political question because there are powerful interests at work that would quite like to draw the disciplinary boundaries in ways that subserve corporate interests, like the need for suitably trained workers who lack critical skills, for example. And the wider ideological issues here concern the neo-liberal project of reconfiguring of what it is to be human, if it's to be anything at all. Given this, disciplinary boundaries are actually quite important and shouldn't be changed just because it seems expedient for realising short-term goals like attracting investment or seeming to be "up to date."

**BN: I'd like to turn now to some of your more recent work, which has focused on analysing the discourses in early gaming magazines as a means of identifying the social processes that were involved in the demarcation of gaming as an autonomous "field." What led you to pursue this line of inquiry, and how did you gain access to the archive of gaming magazines you analyse? And can you talk a bit about the methods and techniques you employed in order to read, catalogue, and analyse the content of these magazines?**

GK: I think it's well known that when home computers were marketed for the first time in the late 1970s and early 80s no one knew what they were for. I've been interested in this for a long time—I did a comparative study of home computing in the UK and Poland in 2006. It became apparent then that people referred to printed sources, as well as TV, films and radio, for inspiration and practical ideas on what to do with the machines. I think some of my UK interviewees mentioned that they had read magazines about programming and learnt to enter games programs into their computers this way. So I looked for examples online and found scanned issues of *Computer and Video Games* and *Commodore User* on the web. I found this guy in the UK, Stephen Stuttard, had actually scanned back issues of several gaming magazines from the 80s. So, it was a simple matter just to contact him and buy the DVDs from him. I have no idea who else is buying them from him.

It's perhaps worth saying that I didn't read these magazines myself back in the day. I had friends who used computers in the early 80s, but it was not part of my life, so I had no idea what to expect. And when I looked at them, I found that they were overwhelmingly technical in their content. Something like 20-25% of the pages were just full of lines of code. And there were lots of articles—even in the ones that said they were about games—about technical paraphernalia, technical processes, that were talking about technology in a non-fetishistic way, a way that wasn't to do with commodities or gadgets. The approach the early issues took reflected a kind of hobbyist, bits-and-pieces, or *bricoleur* type mentality—"you can take this if you can get one, and you can put it together with this, and you make the machine do that"—that was the kind of thing that they were sharing through their pages. And so, I started by reading the early issues, starting from about '81-3. And the change that happens in 1984-5 is quite striking. You have to

read them attentively to see it, but once you do, it becomes really apparent that there's a break here—a new departure in the way that games are discussed and in the kinds of people that are discussing them.

So once I registered that fact, I drew up a content analysis that was initially just focused on how the magazines talked about, how they described games. What did they mean by a “game,” how did they single games out from this mass of technical paraphernalia and objects? How and when exactly did games begin to become more salient in this world of programs, code and technical protocols? And then what values and criteria did they apply to the games in order to talk to each other about them? I developed a content analysis that counted occurrences of specific ways of talking about and evaluating games programs. This ranged from how “well programmed” they were to attempts to grasp what they “felt like to play” and their quality as games.

So that was the content analysis part. But mostly my analysis was focused on the discursive character of the magazines: the way they present games; the readership they anticipate; their tone and ethos, if you like. I also developed a kind of technical timeline, to see if I could identify correlations of hardware or new technology with the changes I was finding at the discursive and cultural level. There were no correlations like that, in fact. There was no real technological innovation that I could find in that crucial period in the '80s that corresponded to the discursive shift I was seeing in the magazines. So, that's quite satisfying for a non-technical determinist. It seems like there was something in the culture that happened. It wasn't driven by anything. It was associated with some ingenious programming. People working with these little computers who managed to create games that gave people feelings, sensations associated with computer games that hadn't been there before—they had been there, perhaps, in the arcades, but not on the little computers. And that seems to be closely bound up with the cultural change I'm talking about. This effort of programming to create big effects, if you like, on small computers is or was itself part the cultural change I'm describing, rather than its cause. And once the dynamic is established, the two things begin to be mutually reinforcing.

So the research shows that there's a shift in focus in the mid-80s from how well programmed a game is, how well it runs on your computer, how long it takes to start up, what does the documentation look like—these things are really important early on. And then after 1985 it becomes playability. Gameplay becomes a thing. The feel of the game becomes far more important than these technical questions. Whether a game is addictive or not becomes really key to the appraisal of games and central to the way people talk about them. And once that shift has occurred everything else—all the things we tend to think of as “gaming culture”—sort of falls into place. The idea of the “gamer” appears. In the early magazines we have references to kids playing games, but also a lot of discussion directed very much at adults. Then we get reference to “gamesters,” which I think is a sign that the kids are being assigned a more central role in connection with games. And after '85 “gamers” is the dominant term. So, the discursive shift is part of a concrete change, in a sense it produces a concrete change in lived experience—people can self-identify as gamers for the first time.

Methodologically the study is quite genealogical, because I think that what you can see is a completely new way of talking, a new configuration of language from 1985, which exists in connection with these objects and this practice of playing games. For example, you get this phrase “depth of gameplay,” which to someone in 1978 just wouldn't have meant anything. I'm not sure what it means now. But it meant something in the second half of the 1980s because all the magazines talked like that and it made sense to their readers. So there's a web of meaning that was spun around those objects at that time. I'm not sure just when or if it unravels, but if there ever was a time when “gamer” was an identity in the sociological sense, I guess it was then in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In *The Formation of Gaming Culture*, the discourse also looks at the relationship between this evaluative scheme and wider questions and at how the process of establishing a way of talking about games also involved positioning them in the wider culture. The new identity has to be made “normal” and acceptable. And in the process of establishing these things gamerdom became increasingly exclusive to teenage boys, excluding older people and females.

**BN: Your analysis relies primarily on UK magazines, and you seem to emphasise the importance of this British context in providing an alternative perspective to the often-U.S. centric narratives surrounding videogame history. What do you feel that the British context offers in this regard? And is there any scope in your future research for extending this analysis to other countries or regions where the magazine culture has been quite prominent?**

GK: That was the original plan. In about 2011, I put together a proposal for an international study, because when I started doing the magazine research, I thought “it can’t only have been Britain.” And what was really interesting was that the computer game is seen very much as a global commodity. I think Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter<sup>1</sup> actually call it the ideal commodity of global capitalism. And, you know, wherever games go, they seem to be the same, they’re part of the technological imaginary—technology is uniform, it’s driving all the changes, it’s bringing the world together in this global unity that it hasn’t experienced before. And, that’s obviously not right. Technology is disparate; it takes different forms in different places, and people do things with it, and people are different in different places and they have different ideas and purposes. So, we can break down that imaginary, and looking at it in detail, we’ll find that it’s actually local uses, local cultures of use that are shaping how people are involved in it. So there’s a history, I thought, that involves moving from local phenomena like magazines, and a local appreciation of things like games, to this situation where digital technology seems to be constitutively global, and games are a global commodity.

I wanted to explore that history and my first idea was to do a comparative study based on gaming magazines around the world. I thought, if I can contribute the UK bit, then I’ll get other people in other countries to do the rest. And so I wrote a proposal based on that, and I circulated it to people who I knew were interested in game history around the world, including Australia. As I mentioned, I’ve also done other work on the history of computing in Eastern and Central Europe, and some of that work had been published. I had contacts approaching me from Poland and other places saying that they were interested in that and that they wanted to collaborate on more of it. So all of that has been going on since about 2007.

I definitely wanted the comparative angle, but one of the things that I found was that in most of these places—a lot of them, anyway—the UK magazines had been there as exports, but there wasn’t anything similar published there until the late 80s, in other words after the break I just talked about had happened. So it seemed as if the British magazines were important outside Britain as well. For example, *Computer & Video Games* magazine reports in one issue that, of their regular 80,000 monthly sales, 2,000 went abroad. And talking to people in Scandinavia and elsewhere, I confirmed that a lot of them showed up there. There were vibrant local cultures of computing, and even locally produced computers (in Poland they had the Meritum and in Australia it was the Microbee, and so on) but people were often reading British magazines, initially at least, to make sense of them.

There was a magazine in the US that ran from October 1981 until 1985, called *Electronic Games*, but it coincided with the crash that affected the games industry there from Christmas 1982. The well-known histories of games generalise that crash onto the whole world, but that’s wrong. Elsewhere in the world this was the time when gaming culture was really born and the US was very much a spectator rather than a player, if I can put it that way.

And in Britain as well, there just seems to have been a lot of these funny little computers. I think I give a number in the book, like 20 of these more-or-less locally produced digital devices, home computers and other gadgets, and that’s an unusual concentration. I don’t really know the reason for that. There was a lot of focus on computers in Britain, around about 1980-81, and I think there was a kind of ideological drive to get people to use computers, which was studied by Les Haddon<sup>2</sup>. So, the answer seems to be that there is something distinctive about Britain in those early years. But I don’t have any nationalistic investments

<sup>1</sup> See Kline, S., Dyer-Witheford, N., and de Peuter, G. (2003). *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture and Marketing*. Montréal, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

<sup>2</sup> See Haddon, L. (1988). The Home Computer: the making of a consumer electronic. *Science as Culture*, 1(2), 7-51.



in this. In fact, I was as surprised at it as anyone. There seems to have been a lot of writing there about computers and then games.

**BN: Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, you write that the consolidation of gaming’s field was marked by “symbolic violence” to the extent that only those with the “embodied perceptions and skills necessary to play games” were included in the field, while everyone else—most notably women and older people—were aggressively excluded. You suggest that these tensions and formal contradictions still remain unresolved today. So, in your view, how are these tensions expressed today? And do you see any evidence that videogame culture might be outgrowing its formative phase?**

GK: I think field is a useful concept to grasp the way that gaming discourse framed the activity and enabled people to make sense of their own experiences. But it can become a bit heavy-handed, a bit insensitive to the way people actually live, and especially to the degree of reflexivity that people apply to themselves and to their own investments in activities, ideas about them, and so on. But nonetheless I do think that we need some way of talking about how cultural practices are framed, so that some aspects of computing were pushed to the fore, while others became less important. One reason we need that is that these processes involve social exclusions of various kinds as well: some people get foregrounded and others are made invisible in relation to a practice.

Recalling what I said previously about habitus, it’s clear that people acquired new dispositions, physical propensities, as they learned about computers and started to play games. The extent to which this change in the way we use our bodies was a reflexive process probably varied. Gaming discourse developed in and through the conversations people had about their activities, we can see this in the letters pages in the magazines, and as it establishes itself it becomes something objective, a structure that people refer to in making sense of their practices.

In places Bourdieu is too structuralist about this, so it seems as if the discourse is all-determining but, as I was saying earlier, I think his later work allows for more nuance, whereby people explore discrepancies between habit, sensation and sense-making possibilities in their language and culture, and this is more realistic. In the magazines we can see a culture in which people familiarise themselves and each other with “gameplay” and so on, but also tease each other and even taunt and insult non-gamers. This is experimental play, if you like, in the space between habituated behaviour and discursive sense-making: it’s the stuff of gaming culture. This activity, though, can take on an aggressive, exclusionary dynamic. In 1985–6 gaming separated from technical hobbyist culture, with articles and letters in the magazines deriding “tech heads” and “board game nerds” for being “too old” or stupid to “get it” about computer games.

In *The Formation of Gaming Culture* I argue that gaming discourse becomes overtly gendered in the course of 1987. I call this the “gendered articulation” of gamer discourse. The authentic gamer is increasingly described in terms that emphasise the masculinity of virtuoso gameplay and gaming is aligned with other youthful “male” pursuits. We can see the effect of this new articulation in things like the disappearance of female journalists from the magazines, the increased salience of objectifying images—usually cartoons—of females and in references to girls as non-gamers, people who do not read the magazine.

So, has that gone away? Well the schema that was superimposed on games and gave us the computer game held this technology—this set of sensations, this habitus, et cetera—held it in place for a certain period of time, and to some extent it still does. And we know that it still does because of gamergate. There are people out there who feel invested in what they see as established gamer values, the gamer identity, and who retain some of the attitudes that circulated in that gaming culture, including the misogyny. So we know it’s still there and for them, presumably, it still serves to tell them what an authentic game is. But the fact that we have had that episode, I think, is already suggestive that something is unravelling.

To return to your question, then, what I think is happening is that bits and pieces of “gameness” are detaching themselves, and they’re kind of floating off into other practices, other areas. And they’re taking on new significance, and doing different things. This is one of my current areas of research: the interaction of games and established arts. To some extent people will still talk about computer games as games, or

game elements. So, in contemporary theatre, we're seeing more and more of this kind of interactive experience that's very game-like. People in theatre—designers, choreographers, and other people—are using game rules to generate experiences and to create experiences that people play with. These things are not computer games—no one thinks they are. But we can discern a connection. And the people making the objects, they all both recognise the connection, and eschew any intent to, or any association with making computer games as such. I think it's that kind of thing that's going to happen more and more.

It's not really gamification, it's more interesting than that. And I think that, actually, the sociology of art, including the ideas that I talked about earlier, I think they're very useful in understanding these developments, since what we're seeing is active objects. We need to trace how they move into different social and cultural domains, and see what kind of work do they do there, what sense they enable people to make with them.

**BN: Increasingly, scholars are looking at the way games are entangled with processes of exploitation, gamification, and affective labour, perhaps as a response to the often-celebratory nature of early games scholarship. You contribute to this dialogue in *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary*, where you describe games and gaming practices as symptoms of, for example, the blurred boundaries between work and leisure in neo-liberal society. Your body of work as a whole, however, seems to oscillate between framing videogames as paradigmatic of new developments in the culture industries, while also maintaining the view that games do offer us some semblance of an escape hatch from the totally administered society. How do you reconcile these two perspectives—that, on the one hand, videogames are exemplary of neo-liberal processes of exploitation and “playbour,” while on the other, games are a kind of call to the emancipatory potential of aesthetic experience?**

GK: Well, I think games are deeply ambivalent and that's what my analyses try to show. For a long time it was taken for granted that the counter-culture, or bohemia, or the left or whatever you want to call it kind of “owned” play. The “system,” what Adorno called the “totally administered society,”<sup>3</sup> embodies seriousness, imposes order and rules, while anti-system elements subvert that with play and fun. But we don't live in the totally administered society anymore, so the analysis has to move forward from that, and it has to acknowledge the way in which play has become part of the psycho-social infrastructure of an exploitative, manipulative social formation.

I've tried to highlight this through my idea of ludefaction. The point is that play is not inherently positive or “natural”; its significance has to be understood relationally. In our context it works for exploitation by aestheticising labour processes and even technological systems. These systems are not “gamified,” they are subject to ludefaction: the energies of play are harnessed through them to service the system. This is one way that immaterial labour eats into our collective capacity for imagining alternatives; it channels our impulses to freedom and tempers our very dreams to serve the interests of power. But notwithstanding this, the imagination still needs play to get going. Play in this sense is about shaking off the world of the “sensible,” the authoritative representation that keeps us from believing the world can be any better, or that any world other than this one is possible. Thinking this through is also very serious, of course, but play makes it happen by separating us from this world and enabling us to look again.

Turning to games, I think this means that we have to assess computer gameplay according to where it leaves us in terms of this political-aesthetic problematic. At the end of a sequence of play does the game leave you wanting to play more? Is it boring but you want to play it more just to complete it? Was it shameful to win? Did it leave you with a sense of wonder? Reflection on the subjective effects of gameplay enables us to position the game, aesthetically speaking. Broadly speaking I would suggest that there are three kinds of outcome, each with its own, specific temporal mode. Two of these are ideological but one of them is more authentic and it's the latter that we should seek in good games.

Sequences of play that result in failure and leave us with a burning desire to attempt them again involve an attitude or belief that things will be better if we just try harder. This is the attitude of the

<sup>3</sup> See Adorno, T.W., and Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (E. Jephcott, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

addict. You can see that it's ideological: things will not get better if we carry on as we have in the past, however hard we try. We can see why this is so specifically in connection with games by turning to the second outcome, which corresponds to in-game success, or victory. This also leads to a desire to carry on playing but this time in the guilty, resigned way of the player who has mastered the game and found that, in the process, it has ceased to be that meaningful. Just as with drugs, the experience of taking them doesn't really change anything, it leaves us where we started out but a bit poorer. The compulsive play of the winner also involves a distinctive attitude towards the future, which says that things will not change but we will carry on anyway for want of any other option: the future can only be like the past. This is also ideological in a wider sense because the future will in fact be different, however resigned we may be to things staying the same.

The third subjective disposition that can arise from gameplay is one of inspired reflection, in which we may or may not decide to play again. Here the experience of play is one that raises questions in the mind of the player concerning in particular what the game and its experiences might have been like for other players. I think the encounter with another player in *Journey* (That Game Company, 2012) is emblematic of this kind of experience. When we meet another player in that game we cannot communicate with them in words, only by playing alongside them. We are left not knowing anything about them other than that they were someone who was there too. In that case we must wonder about their experience as well as our own. This attitude creates an authentic opening to the future because thinking along these lines at least raises the possibility that we might collaborate with others and make the world different than it has been in the past and is now. This is authentic because it is true: what we do, in collaboration with others, will make the world different in the future. The only issue is the extent to which we exercise conscious control over that process.

In other words, we need to place games according to how their particular experience of play affects us and how our altered subjective condition positions us in terms of temporal mode, or orientation to time. This is a function of both their formal aesthetic properties and our social and historical context, which is where we started our conversation!

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