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On the study of games as media

Marco Benoît Carbone

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Games have emerged as an industry sector undergoing significant growth during the pandemic, with increased time on hand and chances for people to come together playfully on servers and in online environments and cope with social isolation. Games have thus consistently been once again reappraised for their ‘applied’ potential for beneficial health and social effects. The medium has often oscillated between polarised frames of value. On the one hand, it has suffered from a focus on assessing alleged antisocial or psychologically noxious behaviouristic and cultivation effects as a consequence of play. On the other hand, a narrative in which games could be applied to social causes (in the form of educational or ‘serious’ games) has emerged in the past decade or so. This perspective has often looked at the medium through the lens of participatory culture and it has hailed digital and social media as drivers of interpersonal communication, growth, and social engagement.

The pandemic ‘games boom’ has contributed to games benefiting again from perceptions of representing a worthwhile or potential ‘wholesome’ medium. This carries a ‘good or bad’ approach to the uses of these media, at risk of overlooking their complex place in social life. Nevertheless, the many ambiguities of the place of ludic media in today’s media ecologies include both beneficial and worrying aspects of their social and cultural politics. Digital play provides expressive and social affordances that however largely reside within the flows of late-stage information capitalism, including its destructive corporate frenzy and its ideological naturalisation.

Games should be framed critically as cultural objects and social practices. Playful media should be understood outside of reductionist frames, but also by assessing the role they play at the planetary and granular level. The studies of digital play offer an opportunity to look at the expansion of ludic practices

globally as made possible – by now ‘classically’ – by digitisation and technological convergence, at the crossroads of related domains and within the broader concerns of media, social, and cultural sciences. Diverse research communities are called to understand and examine the diverse sets of media environments inhabited by games, including search engines and platforms, digital and social media, and the broader creative industries. Games present challenges both akin to those of other media and specific ones. The need to not sever the ties with a broader critical media tradition is crucial. It is important for analyses of games hailing from a critical standpoint to take place not only in a relatively niche paradigm of games studies. In spite of its momentous expansion, and besides the importance of establishing an object-specific field of analysis focusing on an ultimate distinction or uniqueness games, it is imperative to focus on ludic texts and practices from the standpoint of their relation with the broader ecologies of technologies, design, media, finance, and politics that are the object of media studies.

Indeed, for the past decade or so, the growth of games as a widespread set of practices, combined with a rise in interdisciplinary interest, has meant the rise of studies looking at the power, politics, and inequality of the games industries. Publications like Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter’s *Games of Empire* framed the global gaming industry via Hardt and Negri’s broader notion of the *empire*, or the oppressive plexus clutching on capitalism’s transformation into an overbearing financial, military, political, and cultural cloak. As a milestone in games studies from the standpoint of their relations with the political and economic disparities of capitalism, *Games of Empire* is part of a now growing body of critical work comprising issues of postcolonialism, class, and labour. The study stood as an important contribution (if maybe inherently limited by adhering to a binary and thus non-dynamic theorisation of cultural hegemony) paving the way to historically situating the modes of production and consumption of digital play.

From such perspectives, play practices no longer emerge from vaguely situated, abstracted dimensions like the magic circle – one of the notions appropriated by digital ‘ludologists’ from the decontextualised work of historians and philosophers like Roger Caillois or Johannes Huizinga, serving in their straw versions as part of a teleological pedigree towards newly proposed ludologies. Rather, games can be approached as forms of biopower, displaced agency, or even more or less alienated escapism under specific social contexts. Seen from this angle, ludic forms may very well play a part not just in potentially liberating art, role-play, and imaginative escape, but also in the same

mechanism of alienation relief within post-Toyotist production system as Japanese rage rooms[1] and the newly-designed Amazon scream-boxes. [2] As Simon points out in their review of *Games of Empire*, [3] ‘pleasure’, ‘fun’, and ‘desire’ are ultimately ‘the latest icing on an old Marxian media studies cake’; this should alert us to ‘exploitation and alienation under capitalism’ as well as the fact we may ‘learn to enjoy this acceptance and even seek it out’.

Under a critical lens, digital games are revealed to be a part of a system of cultural industries gated by conglomerates erecting increasingly unchallenged entry barriers. This is an industry with hardly any emerging unionising processes and characterised by labour casualisation under the mantras of work flexibility and freelancing freedom and agency. Related concerns include play’s affinities with the broader data mining, data farming, and digital foot-printing techniques of convergent technology and social media under a deterritorialised tax avoidance global culture. Games are part of the datafied landscape as products of a commercial ecosystem. Notions like those of prosumerism and playbour have framed the potential of empowering participatory culture within an alert about the latter’s marketisation agenda. Games can also be seen as reward and pleasure mechanisms, akin to the notification systems of smartphones, feeding the corporate with behavioural and consumer insights. Psychological dependency techniques have indeed been implemented in designing apps and smartphones. The phenomenon of loot boxes, where game users are induced into paying extras for extra content and features in digital games, have been equated to gambling, reminding scholars that actual dangers lurk beneath the distracting sirens of media panic generalists.

The games industries also offer important terrain for getting involved in broader sets of challenges and efforts for equality stemming from momentous campaigns like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Scholars from the fields of gender, postcolonial, and cultural studies have been fruitfully connecting intellectual and political efforts to the field of gaming. Throughout the history of the medium, women have been traditionally underrepresented in the industries and mis-represented as damsels in distress or sexual objects in the games; LGBTQI+ identities have been erased and stereotyped; engrained and systemic racism and colonialism have dwelled in the projections of predominantly white-centric gazes that have erased and stereotyped othered identities, particularly BIPOC ones. Relatedly, games industries have been shaped within geopolitical asymmetries, with large conglomerates setting standards worldwide, entailing the global spread of the ethnocentric

worldviews of a few actors; or creating sign-systems that have shoehorned national and ethnic typicalities into commonplaces to attract generic projections of global audiences.

Yet games – and the rest of the creative industries – require the tricky challenge of decoupling rising equality movements from capitalist and neo-liberal appropriation. Practices like astroturfing and green-, rainbow-, and pink-washing are common currency in the corporate world, where conditions to challenge inequality are often stifled by engrained privileges as well as the imperatives of marketisation and the maximisation of profit. We are acquainted with elements from corporations and industry sectors traditionally exploiting labourers within the regime of cognitive capitalism, dismissing equity in the workplace, promoting reactionary and ethnocentric worldviews, and perpetuating toxicity, racism, and sexism. We are perhaps less prepared to deal with the more deceptive challenge of companies that will adhere to performative approaches to gender equality and decolonisation while failing to approach the issue structurally or while still supporting exploitative practices, sometimes by ‘glocally’ articulating their progressive messages to target only a few markets, avoiding those in which they would not be tolerated.

A key challenge thus lies in decoupling concerted efforts for equality from the liberal progressive rhetoric that has appropriated them under capitalism. This is a form of critical distancing all the more difficult with media benefiting from the bombastic tones of a glowing industry, which also dictates marketized forms of academic practice under the technologic-centric capitalist view of universities as skill centres for job-procurement and service providers.

To follow on from that point, and in looking at *perspectives and key practices* that we might foresee for the study of games as media, it is perhaps unavoidable for a critical paradigm to come to address the issue of its marginalisation compared to the enthusiastic mantras of the acolytes of participatory culture. The *ludophiles* are supported by a thriving industry, motivated by large profits and benefiting from increasingly large audience bases; these also exploit most workers and marginalise smaller developers that struggle to survive. A critical approach to issues of power and participation should go beyond merely siding with an ‘apocalyptic’, media panic view of games, but at the same carefully avoiding uncritically ‘integrated’ apologetics of prosumerism, user agency, creativity, and development.

A fruitful perspective for the study of games probably consists in embracing play as an inherently trans-disciplinary concept. As a social, philosophical notion, play inhabits a variety of specialised domains. In itself a macro-concept and broad notion, play intersects with and entrenches on diverse, related domains in different languages, and sometimes on oppositional sets of values and concepts, including the likes of art, simulation, entertainment, and sport, or the ‘play vs work’ tension. Cultural investigations on play have attracted scholars of diverse extractions, from Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga’s forays into play as an essential aspect of human culture to the elegant and highly influential categorisations of play in French intellectual Roger Caillois’ dizzyingly eccentric intellectual edifice. More recent work, such as New Zealand philosopher Brian Sutton Smith’s analysis of diverse rhetorics of play, point explicitly to the cultural ambiguities of play as a notion and set of human practices; or, as in the case of French anthropologist Roberte Hamayon’s examination of play in an ethnographic context, underscore how this notion’s breadth has paradoxically resulted in its being subtracted from systematic scrutiny in most disciplines.

The complexity of play as a notion has been accompanied by the diverse approaches to digital games, whose technological and textual forms have been observed from multiple viewpoints, starting historically from ludological/formalistic or semiological and narratological approaches. Likewise, their emergence from the playful applications of technology within the apparatuses of research laboratories, their transformation into a mainstream commercial phenomenon, their closeness and their entanglements with global capitalism and the asymmetrical dynamics of financial, geopolitical, symbolic, and even military power have attracted scholars from fields as diverse as platform studies and media archaeology, media communications and cultural studies, and Marxist and postcolonial theory. Games have been framed within and understood via diverse epistemologies, methodological approaches, and rhetorics of values: the latter perhaps epitomised by the two extremes of games’ traditional entanglement in the behavioural/experimental models of social psychology and their most recent inscription within the instrumentalist-progressive mindset of ‘serious’, educational, and ‘applied’ games.

The ability of play to traverse all these different domains, and of games to be seen via so many diverse lenses, is perhaps inscribed in the vast expanse of the notion’s philosophical and cultural remit – a notion so vast as to have usually become also a model or metaphor to discuss and explain other large

notions such as power, society, or life, and more contextual entities, such as capitalism, or the society of data that we currently inhabit. Indeed, the notion of ‘gamification’ – as the functionalist, feedback- and reward mechanisms-oriented application of play principles to non-playful textual forms, organisational practices, or workflows – from language learning and museum exposition to citizen science and business engagement – has emerged at the same time as pervasive digitisation and datafication, amounting to a buzzword as much as a facet and extension of the logics of information capitalism.

Communication between diverse communities will thus probably not only be encouraged but necessary to understand the complexity of domains in which digital games and play have become central for our understanding of the politics, economics, and social and cultural configurations of media ecologies. The study of play is likely to endure while straddling the lines between different disciplinary traditions (including variance across different trans/national contexts – and implying further complexity on issues of linguistic hegemony) and its own specialised domain/s. On the one hand, a specialised approach to gaming will yield a medium-specific set of tools to frame its practices philosophically, technically, procedurally, and socially. On the other hand, games have been and are part of larger challenges that are impossible to disentangle from those examined by more traditional and established disciplines. As games further carve out their specific domain, their field of study will likely remain highly interdisciplinary. This is only seemingly a paradox: specific methodological and paradigmatic coordinates will emerge once the analyst turns to the concrete historical conditions and disciplinary contexts from which different approaches emerge.

To re-evaluate the past of the field of games studies, and to look towards the future, one might give up both the broad dismissal of the object by decades of scholarship and the acritical glib of current participatory enthusiasts. To gain such a platform, it is important to turn to areas of studies that have not been swallowed up by the liberal paradigm. Theory that looks at games critically as media, from the standpoint of power, class, and intersectionality (particularly if expunged of its liberal appropriations) is sorely needed. Moreover, the very notion of play, far too often approached with a formalist attitude, could be framed within more contextual social analyses of the conditions under which it emerges from and entrenches on labour. Notions like the one of ‘playbour’, discussed by Julian Kücklich, are particularly fruitful to reconfigure the traditional, oppositional couple of work vs play. Games are

not only intellectual products that establish an affective connection with their users, they are also a part of a model of production where users may become themselves both labourers and products. They partake of a value extraction workflow that ultimately drives people into employing their time and bodies to commit to the profits of a very small minority, within a naturalised ideological cloak where forms of resistance to the myth of capitalism become hardly imaginable.

One of the most fashionable ideas emerging among games scholars is indeed that we can use play as an ideal model to understand capitalism. In fact, this framing of the issue may ultimately consist in a form of media essentialism that conveniently suits those more or less invested vocationally or opportunistically in that field. Certainly though, games and play (particularly their global industries) appear hardly extricable from that dominant economic and values system. Their study thus appears like an increasingly unavoidable task if one is called to make sense of the challenges of digital societies today. Forms of resistance are increasingly represented *in* games whose designers (often independent) choose to focus on political content, forms of play-mediated activism, social media-driven manifestations, and what some have deemed *counter-play* or *counter-gaming*. Yet, the best potential probably lies in imagining resistance *via* games *within* the more complex assemblages of power, politics, and technology where they play their role. An important strategy probably consists of avoiding an excessively compartmentalised or essentialist view of digital play and games that, in attempting to define their specificities, would overlook the imperative of capturing the broader political and ideological systems in which they are embedded.

Author

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Notes

- [1] <https://japantoday.com/category/features/lifestyle/hate-your-boss-mad-at-your-ex-release-stress-and-unleash-anger-at-crash-box-japan>
- [2] <https://www.verdict.co.uk/amazon-amazen>
- [3] <http://gamestudies.org/1102/articles/simon>