COMPUTER GAMES AND THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY
DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIETY SERIES

GRAEME KIRKPATRICK
Computer Games and the Social Imaginary
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Computer Games and the Social Imaginary

Graeme Kirkpatrick
For Sarah
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Introduction

Computer games and the distinctive culture that is associated with them are beginning to receive the attention they deserve from social theorists and sociologists. This book argues that closer attention to games and gaming adds an important dimension to our understanding of society and contemporary culture more widely. Computer games have played a central role in the development of the digital technologies that are widely acknowledged to have transformed the global economy over the past four decades. They were central to the emergence of personal computers, to the diffusion of easy-to-use interfaces on technologies, and to the rise of the internet and the naturalizing of our experience of ‘virtual’ space. The spread and popularity of computer games can also be seen as a consequence of these developments but, I will argue, they exist in a complex and intimate interaction with the digital society and culture we now take for granted and they have shaped the world we live in.

In addition to the relatively obvious technological associations between gaming and other important forces in contemporary society, gaming is also exemplary in relation to fundamental social and cultural processes. Many of the changes to the commodity form in the age of digital downloads and ‘interactivity’ are most clearly exemplified by games. As Scott Lash and Celia Lury put it, ‘the global culture industry is what happens when movies become games’ (2007: 9). Moreover, the gaming industry has played a leading role in developing new working practices and applications of technology that have become definitive of the modern organization
in networked capitalism. Computer games have been instrumental in the transformation of modern consumption and production processes, and in the development of practices that increasingly efface the distinction between the two.

This book is written from the perspective of a reflexive tradition in sociology, which starts from the principle that society is unlike other objects of our experience in that it is itself a social product. In other words, in order for us to really live ‘in’ a society, we must first believe that we do. We can only believe this because it is true, but that truth is contingent upon our already living out certain kinds of connection to others and our common possession of a shared way of understanding the world, including some notion of social space, in which those connections are established. The category of the social imaginary is essential to what follows. It refers to the background sense-making operations that make the idea of society and its practical reality possible. As Charles Taylor puts it, ‘the social imaginary is not a set of “ideas”, rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practice of a society’ (Taylor 2004: 2). The idea of an imagined community, which becomes a real one when we all think about it in the same way and act ‘as if’ it were really there, rests upon this creative capacity for imagining and instituting the social that defines us as humans.\(^2\)

A central and in many ways troubling development of recent times concerns the relationship between the social imaginary and various technological media. As Lash and Lury point out, the social imaginary is a ‘virtual’ property: we have it in common and it is necessary to our experience of the world, but we cannot measure it or locate it empirically. At its heart is play, especially the play of ideas and concepts. This is, of course, an essential point of connection to computer games, and I take it to be indicative of their importance to contemporary culture and society. The character of our play is profoundly telling in relation to the character of our society. Luc Boltanski (2011) raises the question of what happens when
social reality is so overwhelmingly flexible, when we are so saturated with ideas and experiences from the outside that we can no longer ‘think against’ the world because the world won’t stand still long enough for us to get a good view of it. He suggests that contemporary social reality is too ‘viscous’ in this way for us to exercise our creativity, to bring about social change. Computer games are both a sign of this situation, confirming its reality, and a tool with which to think our way through it.

To do this we need to take a historical approach to computer games, in order to identify the reconfigurations they have brought about and to place these in their proper context. Computer games have shaped and been shaped in a dialogue with the rest of culture and this book attempts to trace out the key moments in this conversation. This book describes three intersections of gaming technology with mainstream computer design and technology change, each corresponding to a shift in the way that we conceive ‘society’. The first is the development of user-friendly, easy-to-use computers, which changed the status and meaning of computers and technology from the late 1980s onwards. The transformation of computers which happened at this time has changed the popular understanding of what technology is and of what it can be, and established new rules for making sense of technology as a part of our collective envisioning of the social as an assemblage of practices and objects. Broadly speaking, prior to this shift, technology was productive tools and as such it was hard and efficient, but since the change machines have become objects of desire associated with play and adventure. The second intersection concerns the innovations in gaming in 1994–5, associated especially with *Doom* (1994) and *Myst* (1994). These coincided with the development of the World Wide Web into something culturally mainstream, again associated with changes to usability promoted by the Mosaic and then Netscape browsers. Here, games clearly drive the ‘cyberspace’ metaphor and are integral to the emergence of ideas,
many of them utopian at first, about cyber or virtual society as a kind of new frontier, or an extension of established social space. Finally, and most recently, games have played an important role in promoting the metaphor and idea of the ‘social network’, as denoting ideas of connection under a horizon that makes the formation and maintenance of social ties into essentially ludic practices. Here, the way we process and make sense of the reflexive processes of relationship formation are being reconfigured, with implications for how we conceive and make sense of social experience.

The book begins with a further elaboration of the theoretical questions and concepts that motivate the enquiry, starting with the idea of the social imaginary itself. The kind of society that has shaped games and been shaped by them is portrayed, with particular reliance on Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) thesis of a ‘new spirit of capitalism’. According to that analysis, capitalism has taken advantage of computer and network technology to overhaul its core processes, especially in the sphere of work and management. The bureaucratic and industrial model of production has given way to a flexible system that is horizontally integrated. Instead of being managed from above, workers take responsibility for their own role in creative processes. Increasingly work is creative but it is also economically insecure. Individuals in developed economies face competition for most jobs, not just from local markets but from around the world as increasingly production is located in the ‘virtual’ space of electronic networks. The labour process is more of an ‘adventure’ but it also places demands on inner resources of each individual that were previously withheld from the economic sphere. This situation calls forth a new kind of economic subject, namely the ‘streamlined worker’, who is less concerned with developing a career than she is with playing the game well from day to day.

The origins of these changes lie in the counter-cultural movement of the late 1960s, which Boltanski and Chiapello
characterize as offering an ‘artistic critique’ of old-fashioned capitalism and its associated ‘culture industry’. Chapter 2 explores the origins of the computer game, one thread of which traces to a technophilic strain within that culture. This chapter examines the culture of play that existed prior to the eruption of games, looking at the history of play and toys in modern societies and at specific kinds of entertainment that also framed the development of the new form. In this way it emphasizes the contingency of computer games on a number of social and cultural factors. There was nothing inevitable about the creation of computer games and their existence was not ‘technologically determined’. Rather, the actions of specific social groups in the US, Japan and Europe determined that our tinkering with complex digital artefacts should take the form of a game in the sense that we now take for granted. There is what Michael Chanan (1996) calls a ‘dialectic of invention’ between these cultural forces and the expanding capacities of digital technology, and the first games reflect the outcome of this complex interaction.

Chapter 3 describes the formation of a computer gaming culture through the prism of early computer and gaming magazines. It draws on some theoretical ideas from Pierre Bourdieu to present gaming as a cultural field with its own, specialized discourse. A new way of talking about games and appraising them was developed in connection with games played on home computers in the UK and Europe in the early 1980s. For those who internalized this discourse and made it the rationale for their own preferences and behaviours, it entered and informed their identity. Becoming a ‘gamer’ is a means of securing validation for one’s activities and recognition from a group of peers. As such, gaming is recuperative for individuals. Learning to evaluate games and becoming an exponent of good ‘gameplay’ are the key to a certain kind of authenticity; to action in accordance with standards that are beyond manipulation by larger economic forces and may occasionally create friction between people