Book Review/Compte rendu

Graeme Kirkpatrick, *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, 219 pp., $21.95 paper (978-0-7456-4110-2)

Computer Games and the Social Imaginary is not your typical games scholarship, which often falls into one of two warring camps — those who laud games and play in terms of increased socialization, problem solving, and technological mastery, and those who lament it in terms of (tenuous) linkages to "addiction," social withdrawal, and violence. Refreshingly, Graeme Kirkpatrick sidles somewhere in between, mediating the two approaches. Kirkpatrick, using the frame of the social imaginary, highlights how games change how we conceive "society," especially how we make sense of technology, and how we use this technology to socialize with others via playful, ludic, practices.

Amidst the recent deluge of claims about the emancipatory, educational and socially redemptive properties of digital games (see, for example, McGonigal's *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*), Graeme Kirkpatrick is not so much critical of games, as he is critical of scholarship that situates games as magic bullets that can address inequalities perpetuated by capitalist systems. In this sense, *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* is most fruitfully read as a dialogue between Kline et al.'s *Digital Play* (2003), a foundational read on the history, culture, and commodification of computer games and Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's *Games of Empire* (2009), which draws links the corporatization of game making to a hegemonic Empire, and the resistance of players to revolutionary Multitudes.

The opening chapters examine computer games as a culture industry and detail the struggles of the relatively new medium of computer games to secure larger social recognition as a valid pastime. They highlight how games have transformed the global economy and contributed to the broader development of digital technologies, such as encouraging the diffusion of personal computing, the development of easy-to-use interfaces, and the rapid embrace of online spaces. Chapter two is a brief, yet exemplary, lineage of the computer game, beginning with a history of play and toys and moving to more contemporary forms of entertainment that shaped the emergence of computer games. Kirkpatrick adds new

material to commonly told histories, emphasizing how local contexts in Japan, Europe, and the US each influenced the form of games in a dialectic of invention between cultural forces and the expanding capacities of digital technologies.

Chapter three is a notable examination of the prototypical gamer culture via early computer and gaming magazines. Kirkpatrick uses the work of Bourdieu to establish gaming as a cultural field with its own distinctive discourse and habitus which then become essential to the formation of a "gamer" identity and securing validation and recognition from one's peers. However, according to Kirkpatrick, this field never becomes truly autonomous, as gaming fails to receive legitimation from wider culture.

Much of Kirkpatrick's analysis and later conclusions rest on Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's (2007) thesis of a "new spirit of capitalism" and the move away from bureaucratic, hierarchical modes of capitalism (e.g., factory floors) towards more adaptive, rhizomatic modes enabled by networked technology (e.g., just-in-time production). For Kirkpatrick, the contemporary shape of games, both their physical manufacture (which is the focus of chapter four), and the spaces and modes of socialization they create (the focus of chapter five) are exemplars of this new networked spirit of capitalism, and the creative, yet precarious modes of labour that characterize it. The gaming self, Kirkpatrick argues, is well suited to participate in this new economy, accessing cultural resources (that of the "gamer") that compensate for the new kinds of vulnerability this participation entails.

For Kirkpatrick, ludic practices have many redemptive qualities, such as connecting us to communities of other players. The sense of order and control in-game offers momentary recuperation and escape from the insecurity, inequality, and tension caused by capitalist systems, but these very same qualities insulate players within ludic communities. Gamers become trapped within game spaces that are less about the creative powers of play, and more about soothing citizens' anxieties within sanctioned commercial leisure spaces.

Ultimately, accordingly to Kirkpatrick, computer games and the social spaces they create, act as compensation for the loss of civic society. At the same time, the limited forms of communication in games hinders meaningful connections to others, as players are never sure they are experiencing authentic sociality or are instead being "played" with. This curtails the ability of gamers and games to move beyond critiques of capitalism towards actual emancipation. The identity of a "gamer" — especially coupled with its negative connotations in wider society — is not one that affords self-validation, movement, and social action outside

of game spaces and ludic frames of reference, thus foreclosing the possibility that contemporary ludic practices can foster real social solidarity and thus revive civil society.

While striking, the concluding arguments of the book assume readers have prior familiarity with Luc Boltanski and Jacques Rancière's works on emancipation, art, and aesthetics. Accordingly, the final chapter often feels divorced from the rest in terms of its tone and level of analysis. In places, the broad scope of the book also results in glossing over important concepts and failing to provide in-depth documentation and evidence for central claims (e.g., claims that massively multiplayer online games are pathological, compulsive-addictive forms of play).

However, the largest drawback of *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* is that it describes a gaming landscape as it was, not as it currently exists. Outside of chapters two and three, Kirkpatrick reports and synthesizes other scholars' research on players and the industry at large. This leads to both a time lag and gaps in the research, as well as the replication of pre-existing biases. In particular, social network games (such as Facebook games) and mobile games now constitute a large portion of the game industry, yet both are largely ignored by Kirkpatrick, as are the growing number and influence of independent game developers. Instead, the book's analysis is overly dependent on research on one genre of games (massively multiplayer online games) and two games in particular, *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest*, using these games as a stand-in for the whole of the field (and, coincidentally, perpetuating highly problematic claims about players in chapter five).

Kirkpatrick's analysis also rests on the formation of a young male adolescent "gamer" identity premised on competitive and repetitive modes of play, although the Entertainment Software Association of Canada reports that in 2013 the average age of a Canadian gamer was thirty-one years old and that nearly half of gamers (46%) are female. Increasingly, the demographic of game players is widening to incorporate new platforms (e.g., mobile phones and tablets) more diverse play styles (i.e., not solely competitive), and increased player heterogeneity. Accordingly, the monolithic "gamer" identity is continually troubled, a fact that may impinge on Kirkpatrick's conclusions.

Despite these flaws, *Computer Games and the Social Imaginary* is an essential provocation to those who argue that games are a mode of art, a form of social critique, and/or an encouragement to deeper social engagement. It connects current game studies literature to philosophers and sociologists outside of what is often an insular and self-referential field, and so, while often problematic in its assumptions, it is an essen-

tial, recommended read for those interested in the impact of games on our everyday lives.

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