

Ludic Economics 101

Introduction to Ludic Economies special issue, *Games and Culture* (in press 2018).

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It is a well-established journalistic cliché to begin reports and assessment of the videogame industry with a statement of its economic scale in comparison to other popular media forms, particularly that of Hollywood box office takings. Hype around these ever-inflating numbers fails however to capture key shifts and transformations within the games industry over the last two decades. Such accounts mask in their celebratory (or anxious) framing the complex, dynamic, and often exploitative practices enabling this economic triumph. They certainly neglect to contextualize these profit gains within arguments of games as hypercapitalist or indeed as a “paradigmatic media of empire” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter 2009, xv). Moreover, they fail to address the peculiarities of the economic dimensions of digital games. Beneath these headline figures lies a dynamic ecosystem of emergent business models, new modes of production and labour, and new cultures of play and attention in which the micro-economics of game code and macro-economics of the entertainment industry, and late capitalism itself, are entwined (Kerr 2006, Kerr 2017, Nieborg, 2015).

That videogames are a hugely successful product in the global economy of entertainment, cultural production, technology, and communications services is evident and well-documented. Attention to the relationships between the economic context of games design

and the experiences they offer is less consistent however, tending to arise only at moments of distinct upheaval in the games industry and the broader economy. Such disruptions would include the original popularisation and commercialisation of computer games with the arcade machines and home consoles of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Kocurek 2015), the 'Atari shock' games industry crash in the mid 1980s, and the new social and economic models of the MMOGs from the 1990s. In recent years, the popularity of mobile devices and online distribution platforms such as Steam has triggered an explosion in new business models quite different from the more established 'AAA' console and PC market. These business models – free-to-play, pay-to-win, the varying types of downloadable content, micro-transactions, loot boxes, and other in-game purchases all fundamentally shape the games they produce and distribute, and hence play experience and game culture more broadly (Harvey, in press, Nieborg 2015).

Games and play then are central to developments in the global entertainment economy, but also to emergent patterns of mediated behaviour, experience, and sociality. From the new and intense business models that drive the micro-temporalities of freemium games and in turn everyday negotiation of time and attention (Harvey, this issue), to the manipulative aspirations of educational and/or commercial gamification and 'nudge' behaviourism, and to the mechanised and algorithmic ruthlessness of fixed-odds gambling machines, our 'ludic century' (Wark 2013) is shaping up to be as much an expression of capitalist accumulation and its digital colonisation of everyday experience as it is an opportunity for pleasurable, creative, and social interaction (Goggin 2012, Goggin, this issue).

In this special issue on ludic economies, we argue that the study of digital games – their milieux of production, cultures and contexts of play, user-generated production, and spectatorship should be applied as a primary heuristic in understanding the cultural economy of neoliberal late capitalism - as well as vice versa. The articles here focus on a range of issues related to both mainstream profit models including digital distribution platforms and mobile games as well as peripheral game economies such as jams and indie production (Crogan, Kennedy, this issue). Each of the studies share an attunement to the tensions and contradictions embedded within what are commonly approached as matter-of-fact within traditional economic analysis of games. Rather than framing industrial changes as necessarily either overdetermined exploitation (of workers in the mainstream games industry, players and their ‘free’ labour) or emancipatory and progressive (new forms of creative production, play, resistance), they address the specificity and peculiarity of game economies at both the micro- and macro-levels of industry, technology, and everyday play culture (Joseph, this issue). And rather than simply countering a pessimistic picture with other, more progressive examples of contemporary game culture such as ‘games for change’, art practices and political interventions – as important as these are – the contributions to this special issue instead track the contradictions and tensions within game cultures and economies as reflections of those within the late capitalist and patriarchal cultural economy at large (Giddings, Goggin, Jenson & de Castell, this issue).

Play and games have long been understood as profoundly ambiguous, flickering between the liminoid, generative and subversive, and the rule-bound and reproductive of social relations and behaviours. But this ambiguity is no simple dialectic of the progressive versus

the conservative. Play's unpredictable and mercurial character flips and reverses moral positions, satirises and ridicules, and the simple but profound fact of games' moral, semiotic, and epistemological separation from the non-play worlds that they simulate (from Monopoly to cops-and-robbers) carries the persistent potential to undermine dominant ideologies and power relations as much through rendering them ridiculous as through any direct opposition. Micro-economies of games can be seen as nested within, and synecdoches of macroeconomic systems. The complex articulations of gender in contemporary game culture is a case in point, and one explored in depth in this issue (Harvey, Kennedy, Jenson and de Castell, this issue). The tensions between play's potential to render entrenched subject positions fluid or reinforce them, the marketing analyses of the games industry that both reinforce and undermine demographic categories, and anxious backlashes to perceived threats to the integrity of masculinist game production and gameplay sub-cultures interact in ways that are complex and at times even violent.

This approach to ludic economies resonates with the increasingly ambiguous and abstract character of capitalism itself. Whilst it might be too much of a stretch to argue that contemporary economics are playful, there is certainly a widespread perception that from the global financial crash in 2008 to subsequent crises such as the Greek bailouts, austerity in UK, and the kleptocratic behaviour of the tax-avoiding hyper-wealthy, the global and national economies are no longer the (pseudo)natural operation of market laws, of supply and demand, of the distribution of strictly limited resources. Rather they are more game-like in their abstractions, complexity and symbolism. From the abandonment of the totemic gold standard in the early twentieth century through the Thatcher-Reagan deregulation of

the 1980s to the fractal complexity and mendacious legerdemain of futures, derivatives and sub-prime lending, and the emergence of internet-based systems of exchange such as bitcoin, contemporary economic developments appear as more or less arbitrary or ideologically-motivated systems of accumulation. Money supply floats free of any material connection to the production of goods into a cybernetic megasystem of minute temporalities, impossibly complicated predictions and deferrals of futures. If game theory conceptualised mid-twentieth century economic behaviour as straightforwardly agonistic and ruthlessly rational, we would argue the contemporary economic order requires a significantly more phantasmagorical understanding of games and play (Giddings, this issue). Ludic economies as an analytical frame is oriented towards capturing this essence of the contemporary implosion of play, games, and capitalism.

Altogether, this special issue offers itself as a clear reminder of the importance of deep, grounded analysis of both mainstream and alternative political economies of material and immaterial labour. The contributions reveal the complexities of creative and political interventions, theorisations of new economic relationships, the construction of neoliberal subjectivity, the pervasiveness and perversity of feminized affective labour, the insistence on the playful as an ambiguous mode of behaviour and sociality, and the game as a distinct cultural and media form in understanding the contemporary cultural economic moment. They highlight the importance of considering insights from the past as well as visions of possible, more sustainable futures in relation to ludic economies. Just as at moments of significant technological development or breakdown bring the workings of dominant machines and systems come into view - and (hopefully) technosocial alternatives imagined

- so at times of cultural economic transformation we can perhaps grasp the intangible workings of systems of value and exchange in everyday life and in cultural production - and again, with hope, glimpse alternatives.

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