Before and After: Towards Inclusive Production Studies, Theories, and Methods

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Abstract
In the afterword, Aphra Kerr revisits the early works of production-oriented research about video games, including her own ethnographic study of a small game development studio in Ireland. From a firsthand perspective, Kerr describes the first academic conferences that pioneered this direction of scholarly inquiry. Besides looking back at the foundations of game production studies, the afterword thematizes the recent developments in video game industries, such as datafication, the environmental effects of production, surveillance capitalism, and toxic game cultures, suggesting the future directions for more inclusive game production studies.

Keywords: game production, inclusivity, game industry, production studies, datafication

The first game production study I conducted was in a small independent start-up located above a tattoo parlor in the centre of Dublin, Ireland. There were fifteen employees, all first-time developers, and all working to create a game prototype to present to publishers. They were all located in one room alongside their computers, servers and various books, board games and other materials. The co-location of the servers meant that the temperature in the room was hot, and they were relying on small fans to cool the room. I had hoped to do an ethnography of the company and I had negotiated access. But there was nowhere to sit. This was the first of a number of spatial and social challenges to co-habiting the production space with the all-male production team and their equipment.

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Another unexpected challenge was the continued absence of the team from their office. As the first significant Irish start-up that had received both venture capital and public funding they were constantly out of the office, in demand from the media and their funders to explain their project. It seemed like the future of the games industry in Ireland was on their shoulders. There had been no internationally successful original game from Ireland on console or PC in the previous generation, and this company wanted to make one based on ancient Celtic heritage. There were some people working on games under licence in Ireland, but if you wanted to make it in game development most people emigrated to the UK or the US. Game developers based in countries like Ireland had to travel to London, New York, or Los Angeles to pitch their game ideas to game publishers. Most did not get a deal. It was 2001 and the PlayStation 2 was released in Europe at the end of that year. There was also a new kid on the block, Microsoft's Xbox.

This company was an independent first party game developer. In other words, they were independently owned and working on their own game project. They were not 'indie' in the sense that we might use the term today. In my first working paper on this study, I noted that the goal of the company was to get a publishing deal and to survive in the global games industry, not to produce the most innovative new game on the market (Kerr 2002a). Their prototype game had been shaped by discussions with publishers and investors about what would work in the marketplace. In our interviews, it emerged that they were designing a multiplayer online PC game for males between 25 and 40 years of age. I had not started out to study gender in this project – but from the moment I walked into the company gender became an issue. They had not realized that I was a woman, and they were designing a game for young men like themselves without really knowing anything about this prospective player base in different countries and contexts. I realized that studying production in digital games was going to be rather different to my previous studies of content production in multimedia companies (Preston and Kerr 2001).

The culture of production in the company could be described as creative, flexible, informal, and intimate in the way that people can be when they have known each other for a long time through college or school. They called themselves a 'studio' and a 'design house' to differentiate themselves from software companies. All interviewees spoke at length about how creative the industry was and how informal work environments enhanced this creativity. There was no hierarchy and everyone had multiple roles. For this company designing a game for adult males like themselves translated into designing for

young technologically literate young males, with a shared knowledge of turn based games and fantasy culture, and a particular version of masculinity. When I asked the designers if women might play their game – they said they had not really thought about it. They had no knowledge or access to research on game players other than what was provided by their publisher and eventually by beta testers of their game. They certainly were not co-creating their games with game players. Unfortunately, the games company never got to see their game published. Ultimately, both the company and my ethnography had short lives.

I interviewed a wide diversity of game developers in Ireland for this project. The most financially stable companies seemed to focus on games middleware or were branches of multinational companies engaged in localization. Many of the development companies I interviewed only lasted five years and most employed less than five people. The console lifecycle cycle seemed to play an important role in the longevity of these local companies. At each transition to a new console many small companies went out of business. They simply did not have the resources to invest in transitioning to the new consoles. Games for mobile phones were not seen as a viable option given the number of handsets and technologies on the market. I had no idea how generalizable my findings were. Academics from media studies, communication, cultural studies, and education were starting to research and write about games, but there were no game studies conferences at which researchers could meet. When I presented my research at media conferences it was met with enthusiasm but little knowledge.

I presented my first paper on the political economy of the games industry at a games conference at the University of Bristol in the UK in late June 2001 organized by Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy. Some of the conference papers made it into the second volume of the journal *Game Studies* in 2002 – including one by Jairo Lugo, Tony Sampson and Merlyn Lossada (2002), which applied a cultural industries perspective to the video game industry in Latin America. At this conference we had papers on the UK, Irish, and Latin American games industries. A subsequent set of thematic seminars on the digital games industry organized by Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce at the University of Manchester brought together a diverse network of international game researchers and led to another special issue in game studies in 2003[1] and an edited collection which had two chapters on the business and economics of the games industry (Rutter and Bryce 2006). I presented my paper on gender scripts in game design at the *Computer*

1 See http://www.gamestudies.org/0301/editorial/.

Games and Digital Culture Conference at the University of Tampere, Finland (Kerr 2002b) – drawing upon theories from the sociology of technology and gender. This conference was a precursor to the DiGRA games conferences, and the paper is available in the DiGRA online library. The meetings to establish DiGRA took place that year over IRC channels and sometimes in the middle of the night Irish time to accommodate international scholars in multiple time zones. From the establishment of DiGRA in 2003 there was at least one conference venue where game scholars could come together to network, discuss, and share their work.

I recount this rather personal biography to signal that games production studies have been part of game studies from the beginning of the field, and production studies were present at the first conferences and in the first issues of game journals. Most of the existing academic publications that I found in English in the early 2000s focused on the US, the UK, and Japan (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Consalvo 2006; Cornford, Naylor, and Driver 2000; Dovey and Kennedy 2006; Haddon 1988; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and De Peuter 2003). A study conducted in Ireland provided a different perspective, even if it was still enmeshed in the western Anglophone world. Of course, as acknowledged in the introduction to this book, the games industry is heterogeneous. Bringing local production studies and industry studies into conversation is a useful way to situate this heterogeneity. In 2006, I argued that one could distinguish at least four sub-sectors in the industry, which varied according to the structure of the market, the revenue model, the openness of the software system, and the software production process (Kerr 2006). At the time the first two – console (including handheld) and PC dominated – with massively multiplayer online games a distinctive but smaller niche, and mini (including mobile) games emerging as an interesting area of innovation. This typology was based on my own empirical work and challenged some of the industry's own descriptions of itself and earlier work by Dmitri Williams (2002), which identified three significant market segments. The existing typologies were largely based on the US, the UK and Japan and it was evident that in locations like Ireland, game developers were not able to secure console and PC publishing deals and needed to find other channels or outlets for their work. They were experimenting with mobile and browser-based games and some were exploring interactive television.

By 2017, the industry was even more internally diverse. Mini games had grown into the fastest growing sub-sector of the industry – mobile games. But analysing the industry in terms of hardware or software sub-sectors seemed to obscure rather than reveal important social, economic, and cultural patterns. This time I found the concept of a 'production logic'

useful in attempting to grasp the industry's internal diversity (Kerr 2017). This was a concept that was developed back in the late 1980s in France to understand the traditional media industries. What has that got to do with games you might ask? Well, sometimes concepts from a neighbouring field enable one to abstract away from the detail of an empirical project. This theoretical approach enabled me to situate the experience of workers and companies within the larger economic and social flows of the industry – in other words, to bridge the distinctions that are sometimes made between industry and production studies. I could identify the central brokers, who were capturing much of the value created, but also look at the implications for workers. Other scholars have usefully looked to the wider economics and social theory literature to expand our understanding of contemporary games production (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Whitson 2019; 2020). Importantly, this work allows us to critically engage with industry produced statistics and narratives rather than simply reproduce them. We can situate the experiences of our worker, maker, and organizational studies in a wider context. It also enables us to trace the connections between companies with seemingly different names but the same owners.

The histories that game scholars write about their field often elides the contributions of scholars from game production studies and those from outside the 'core' countries and universities. Such histories often focus almost exclusively on the early narratology/ludology debates, on textuality, and on the game/player relationship. This work often foregrounds how *games are different*. However, a recent analysis of the intellectual structure of game studies publications acknowledges that game production studies and industry studies have a long lineage, even if they are less numerous (Martin 2018). In game production studies, different disciplines, theories, and methods have been applied and at least as much attention is paid to understanding the *similarities* between games and other media and cultural products, as well as differentiating how particular histories, contexts, and cultures of production have emerged over time.

Game production studies have long provided an important counterpoint to the uncritical, and indeed sometimes celebratory, publications written by journalists, industry veterans and industry associations (Herz 1997; Poole 2001; Sheff 2011). By the early 2000s, the lack of diversity in the industry, its products, and game cultures was an important theme in game production studies. In the US, Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (1998) had released the influential *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* collection and Stephen Kline et al. (2003) wrote about 'militarised masculinities' in the games industry. In the UK, Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter (2003) mapped the gender dynamics at public

gaming events and Helen Kennedy (2002) wrote about the limits of textual analysis in the readings of Lara Croft. Across the developed Western markets, these studies identified the dominance of highly masculinized commercial production and consumption cultures, many of which were unwelcoming to those who did not conform. Compared to other media and cultural industries the narrowness of those who got to work in professional games production was stark. The industry reinforced this through its recruitment strategies, marketing, and game design choices. My very local ethnographic findings reflected a much wider Western norm. It is crucial that any reflection on the origins of game production studies acknowledges how the games industry is different from most cultural industries in this respect.

The established culture in the games industry was echoed in the questions this female game researcher received when she arrived into game companies and events. Do you play games, which games, and why are you studying games? The suspicions and questions about my gaming skills deviated substantially from the reactions I had received on arrival in multimedia and media companies more generally. Those workers took it for granted I was knowledgeable if I had started to study them. The questioning continued from my academic colleagues. Why are you studying games? Why are they important? They are just children's toys or toys for boys. At games industry events, I was shocked by the use of real women's bodies to sell graphics cards, and the placement of fans under their skirts to reveal their underwear. Was this really an acceptable part of the industry culture? I started to think about what I would wear while researching, which had never been a consideration before. I sometimes felt uncomfortable doing my fieldwork, but I never felt in danger. It is important to mention this because some people may not be able to apply ethnographic research methods in certain contexts because of their gender, race, or age. They may not 'fit in' or they may 'stand out'. As local companies were bought by publishers located in New York or elsewhere, local relationships were fractured and access had to be routed through unknown and unknowable others. As games production research has developed some challenges have remained constant: the dominance of a relatively small number of companies, designers, and games in the public and academic imaginary; the highly gendered foundations and norms of games production in many contexts; the relative marginality of games industry, production, and worker/labour studies in the field of game studies and the struggle faced by certain researchers and perspectives to be heard and cited.

This collection offers a chance to bring to the fore a range of scholars from different regions and approaches. The four sections on labour, development, publishing, and margins contribute to a broadening of our knowledge of

games production. In what follows, I offer some reflections on where we can go from here. I offer these thoughts because this type of research provides an important set of rich empirical insights that can confirm, or in some cases contradict, neutral administrative studies and commissioned industry reports. Sometimes, this scholarship can provide additional perspectives based on data collected by the industry (Consalvo 2008). Regardless, games production research is vital if we are to improve the diversity and inclusivity of the games curriculum, the games industry, games, and game playing cultures.

After – Into the Future

I believe it will continue to be fruitful for games researchers and workers to understand the similarities and differences between games production and production in other media and cultural industries, and to draw upon each other's theoretical frameworks, methods, and findings. Games production research is strongly interdisciplinary and networking with scholars from the humanities, social sciences and design can only strengthen our understanding of games production. Games are beginning to take their place in media and communication textbooks including the latest update of the *Cultural Industries* textbook (Hesmondhalgh 2019) and the *Making Media* collection (Deuze and Prenger 2019). These books bring games research to a broader readership, and potentially open up important new publishing and employment avenues for young scholars in countries and universities where game studies is not yet established or recognized. A growing avenue for research for some will involve working with the industry and existing cultural institutions to archive and record production materials that the industry often discards in its attempt to continually innovate and move forward. An interesting example of this type of work was evident in 2018/19 when the Victoria and Albert Museum in Abertay, Scotland held a high profile exhibition focused on the design and culture of video games, including showing game scripts, concept art, storyboards, and musical scores from published games.[2]

For me an important theoretical starting point in game production studies is to acknowledge that games production is a culture – and reflects the global and local struggles over culture, identity, and language, which emerge in different contexts. This holds true regardless of whether we are examining

2 See https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/videogames.

professional or informal games production. Game production studies can offer important insights into wider social, political, and cultural struggles – including around gender, race, class, and nationality. #gamergate was but one example of this (Mortensen 2018). Interviews with community managers provide insights into how other political struggles reveal themselves in game content and game play (Kerr and Kelleher 2015). Games as culture includes games as cultural heritage, not just as a resource from which to build new things, but also as an important way of exploring our collective memories, myths, and stories. Some policymakers and researchers have already accepted this point, some however find it difficult to accept that certain games are culture, particularly if they are not seen to contribute to healthy or acceptable forms of culture. Regardless, it is important that we attempt to better understand how inequalities in cultures of production and representation connect to inequalities in cultural access, consumption, and use more generally (O'Brien et al. 2017). We need to recognize and reflect on our complicity, as educators and workers, in the replication of such inequalities.

The culture/economy tension is core to the theoretical tradition of the cultural industries literature. This approach is one way of establishing the cultural status of games and trying to identify the similarities and differences with other forms of software and technology production. The shift in games from single player boxed products to multiplayer games services, and the wider shifts in ownership and connectivity across the media, and internet industries are in my view critical to understanding contemporary game production. In the future, it is likely that more and more games research will engage with the literature on surveillance capitalism and datafication (Couldry and Powell 2014; Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2018; Mau 2019; Zuboff 2019). Indeed, the contemporary focus on data colonialism and empire in critical data studies more generally heavily resonates with critical scholarship on the games industry published over ten years ago, which argued that games are a paradigmatic example of hypercapitalism (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009), and provides multiple examples of how digital capitalism extracts value, or appropriates unpaid labour and effort (Jarrett 2019; Kerr 2011). We also see connections and resonances with research on user generated content and on 'spreadable media' (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Game companies are now hiring data scientists and artificial intelligence (AI) experts to assist in the monetization of their games and to take on roles in games production that we are only beginning to understand. These shifts have implications for what is being made, where, and when it can be studied. They also have implications for the creative autonomy of game designers, programmers, and artists.

The deployment of AI in the creation and monetization of games may also prompt games production researchers to consider even more carefully the tension between the human and the non-human, and perhaps link with philosophical and ethical reflections on the ways in which we should design and govern AI technologies. These issues were of concern in earlier game publications which drew upon Bernard Stiegler's writings exploring 'technicity' and the attention economy (Crogan and Kinsley 2012; Dovey and Kennedy 2006). Today, across industry events, publications, and strategies we can identify a turn to ethics guidelines, training, and reflection as a means of trying to grapple with unethical technology design and use. A cynic might suggest it is merely an attempt to deflect from greater regulatory scrutiny and accountability. As games scholars we should ask, is it fair to some game players that they are specifically targeted for monetization and personalization? Are existing monetization processes clear and transparent to players? What tools can be provided to younger and vulnerable players to navigate the conduct and speech they encounter in multiplayer games? Indeed, the complex advertising infrastructure underpinning many online games, especially free-to-play (Nieborg, Poell, and Deuze 2019), raises many policy challenges. Many European countries policy makers and regulators are asking if games are crossing boundaries into gambling and banking, or challenging children's rights – with implications for the business models underpinning the fastest growing segments of the industry. In Europe game companies are now viewed as 'data controllers', which brings a range of legal responsibilities under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) framework. Established theoretical and research traditions including in the cultural industries, communication policy, philosophy and ethics provide some useful vantage points from which to analyse contemporary games production.

One of the fastest growing literatures and approaches of the past couple of years is queer game studies. This conceptual and methodological approach foregrounds gender and sexuality, provides a new way to interrogate past production research, methods, and theories, and suggests new ways to conduct game studies (Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Shaw 2009; 2015). It brings games and queer theories, scholars, and game makers together to produce new ways to think about inclusion and diversity. At times, the work seems to closely resonate with the writings and politics of feminist scholars and activists, and at other times to diverge from it. It makes space for challenging accepted ways of analysing and playing game representations, and for thinking about game design. What are the implications for games production research? As with all theoretical approaches it provides alternative perspectives and sensitizing concepts. It prompts us to question taken for

granted categories and methods, look for different sites of production, ask different questions. Asking questions about what is considered to be 'fun', 'failure', and a 'game'. Asking questions about alternative game mechanics. Given the conservative turn in politics in many countries, queer game studies may enable us to trace social and political connections between local and distant social formations.

Similarly, the rich terrain of feminist approaches to games production research takes an active, sometimes activist approach (Jenson and de Castell 2018) to games production research – let us not just study games production, how might we actively engage with or intervene in game production cultures. The *Refiguring Innovation in Digital Games* (ReFiG) project, for example, was a five-year network of scholars in Canada, the US, the UK, and Ireland which took a feminist approach to studying games production, education, and culture. Its projects range from the 'Indie Interfaces' team who explored game intermediaries and game incubators, to studies of the emerging esports industry, and the LGBTQ video games archive, an openly accessible games archive of queer games from the 1980s to the present (Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2018).[3] My own contribution to this project was concerned with how game jams may replicate a very narrow set of game production approaches and problematic working cultures (Kerr 2021). Such an international research network enables researchers to compare their local and regional production studies and contextual specificities to other contexts to better understand the constraints and structures faced by game producers, both commercial and non-commercial. More international comparative research would be welcome.

Much of the existing games production research that I can access and read presupposes that game makers and designers have a stable electricity supply, a fast computer, access to a high speed internet connection that does not keep dropping out, and each developer has their own accounts that they do not share with others. Indeed, this is the view of the Western games industry that produces the tools, software, and frameworks that attempt to marshal the unruly process into a manageable and codifiable production process. It largely ignores the environmental impact of the extraction of minerals to make game hardware or the energy requirements of the vast data farms required to support the making and playing of these games (an exception is Huntemann and Aslinger 2013). Even studies of non-commercial or activist productions in Western countries find that many of them share tools, platforms, and approaches with their more

3 See https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/.

commercial counterparts. We need to actively look outside of firms and established game production research centres to scholars studying games production outside of the Western markets to get a sense of alternative modes of production and play.

The methodological issues faced by researchers in media production research more generally are shared by games production researchers: the inaccessibility or non-existence of a singular 'site' at which to do production research, the careful brand management by workers, and attempts by the industry to co-opt or directly fund academic research. The number of long term ethnographic production studies that are conducted in game companies are very few (and as noted above may not be an option for some), and qualitative expert, or elite interviewing needs to be approached critically to reflect on the intentions and meanings of the interviewee. We gain and lose by shifting to virtual and digital methods to understand production, but certainly there is a lot of scope for new and mixed production research methods. This might include more 'live' methods, which Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (2012) advocate and includes the development of new tools to attend to liveness and to conduct live investigations. It might include more digitally native methods such as scraping digital data and digital traces.

Finally, we need to consider how to care for and protect highly visible voices in the games industry and researchers who call for more inclusive and just games production cultures. Now, more than ever, those who suggest things might be otherwise may encounter online and offline harassment or worse. We need to support these colleagues and actively seek out our non-tenured colleagues, who are the future of our field. For now, the connections between tenured Western academics and globally dispersed academics are weak, despite the emergence of regional conferences, special interest groups and research centres. Their resources for travel and for producing in-depth production scholarship are limited. These games production scholars need support to have their voices amplified and to have their work valued in their home institutions and countries. In some senses, these scholars are our own 'below the line' workers. We might draw upon current themes in media production research which calls for 'good' forms of work (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011) – work that pays sustainable wages, has constrained working hours, is safe, values diverse inputs, and contributes to the common good. If games production research is to contribute to more inclusive games production studies, theories, and methods, it might also consider how it can be more inclusive in terms of its own academic community and cannon. Perhaps there is a need for a manifesto of care(ful) games research.

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