

Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing. By Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, & Greig de Peuter. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. 376 pp. ISBN 0773525912 (paper).

Get ready with your joysticks and console controllers, because here comes digital game studies. Although digital games have received attention in the fields of education and psychology for some time, they are a relative newcomer to the eyes and ears of most scholars in the humanities and social sciences, who have only just begun to awake to their significance as cultural forms. To date, there have been only a handful of book-length studies that focus specifically on digital games and gaming practices, which is understandable given the early days of the field. Unfortunately, these books are too often written as introductory studies or, in some cases, are written by academics who clearly do not play digital games and so have little sense or knowledge of their subject.

I get a sense that this is all about to change as long-term research projects begin to pay off in the form of good books. And I get this sense very strongly after reading *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter. Not only is *Digital Play* one of the strongest contributions to the cultural and political study of digital games in particular, it is also an important entry in the study of information capitalism in general.

The guiding argument in *Digital Play* is that digital games are an ideal commodity form of post-Fordist capitalism, in much the same way that cars, suburban housing, and appliances were ideal commodity forms of Fordist capitalism. Drawing upon Martyn J. Lee's notion of ideal commodity forms, Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter argue persuasively that digital games embody "the most powerful economic, technological, social, and cultural forces at work" in the current regime of accumulation (p. 74). Where "Fordist commodities were governed by a 'metallogic' of massification, durability, solidity, structure, standardization, fixity, longevity, and utility," post-Fordist commodities are governed by a metallogic of the "instantaneous, experiential, fluid, flexible, heterogenous, customized, portable, and [are] permeated by a fashion with form and style" (p. 74). According to *Digital Play*, the digital games industry falls into the post-Fordist category, even though it still draws upon some of the characteristics of a Fordist media-entertainment industry.

Digital Play is organized into three sections: Theoretical Trajectories, Histories, and Critical Perspectives. The first section provides a clearly written presentation of the authors' theoretical framework, including their indebtedness to Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1992), David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), and Martyn Lee's *Consumer Culture Reborn* (1993). Their contextualization of digital games within the broad shift from Fordist capitalism to post-Fordist capitalism is particularly engaging and should be useful to any scholar seeking an analysis of information capitalism and the perpetual innovation economy, especially within the context of digital cultural industries. Scholars on both sides of recent debates over how cozy digital games scholarship should be to the digital games industry might benefit from reading this section closely.

To demonstrate that digital games are a commodity governed by the logic of post-Fordist capitalism, the authors frame their study within a three-circuit model of technology, culture, and marketing, which, they argue, "mutually constitute[s] the experience of interactive play" (p. 60). This three-circuit model is supported by a theoretical framework admirably woven together by important strands from political economy, cultural studies, and media studies. Their multidimensional approach works very well to illuminate the intertwining of technology, culture, and marketing in the power relations that govern the digital games industry, but it is less evenly successful when used to explain the "potential for crisis" that exists in particular games and gaming practices. In the opening pages of the

book, I was both relieved and excited to read, “There is at the heart of the gaming industry a contradiction between ‘commodification and play,’ a tension that paradoxically drives its frenzied creativity and subverts its own success” (p. 57). Unfortunately, while Kline, Dyer-Witthoford, & de Peuter do consider the potentially critical effects of play on the industry’s commodification of digital games, more attention to a broader range of games and game-play practices could have demonstrated a greater variety and depth of responses by players to the commodification of digital play. Indeed, the book’s main title is *Digital Play*, but its content is much less about play than it is about industry.

The second section of *Digital Play* provides a concise economic and marketing history of digital games, with some critical analysis of this history from the perspective of the three-circuit model. Each of the first four chapters in this section focuses on a specific period in the history of the digital games industry, beginning with its birth in the 1960s at the “intersection of warfare state and hacker culture” (p. 85) and stepping briskly through periods of industry dominance by Atari, Nintendo, Sega, Sony, and Microsoft. These chapters provide especially insightful attention to the rise of marketing in the cultivation of gaming audiences and practices, including the escalation of violence in digital games. For anyone already familiar with the history of digital games, this section will at times feel a bit like a summary of other histories you have read, but its focus on marketing is a refreshing departure from the same old progressivist history of people, technologies, and games that is repeated so often these days. The final chapter in this section provides a strong critical analysis of this history, illustrating what the authors dramatically term “the enclosure of cultures of play by the imperatives of the mediatized marketplace” (p. 169). Their use of statistics, which they admit come from industry-biased sources, demonstrate that the market for digital games is expanding at the same time that they are creeping further into everyday time and space. But they also emphasize that interactive gaming still remains socially and economically stratified.

The final section of *Digital Play* is organized according to the three circuits of technology, culture, and marketing, with each circuit forming the basis of one chapter and a fourth chapter illustrating the deep intermingling of the circuits through a close analysis of *The Sims*. For each circuit, Kline, Dyer-Witthoford, & de Peuter demonstrate the paradoxes and conflicts of the post-Fordist digital games industry, or what they term “the dreams and nightmares of information capitalism” (p. 193). In “Workers and Ware,” they focus on the technology circuit, arguing quite convincingly that the crisis of games piracy is intricately linked to the “work-as-play” ethic that exploits industry workers. “Pocket Monsters” explores similarly paradoxical contradictions and crises in the marketing circuit, where, in an industry reliant upon perpetual innovation, innovation is stifled by the perceived need to design games via marketing departments and where aggressive advertising fuels antagonistic responses from players. In their analysis of the cultural circuit in “Designing Militarized Masculinity,” the authors critique the predominantly masculine nature of digital games design, arguing that games such as *Quake* and *Soldier of Fortune* are part of a “hegemonic strain of gaming culture that mobilizes fantasies of instrumental domination and annihilation” (p. 255). After reviewing four strategies for greater inclusion of women in games, they conclude that digital games, for all the variety and innovation they represent, run the risk of becoming monocultural in their focus on a primarily male militarized experience.

The concluding chapter in this section, “Sim Capital,” applies the three-circuit model to *The Sims* in one of the book’s only moments of sustained analysis of digital play. Although this chapter ends the book with some room for optimism for digital gaming, the analysis of *The Sims* oddly leans toward a deterministic understanding of representation and gameplay. After pointing to the contradictions within the marketing and technological circuits in *The Sims*, the authors argue that the game promotes and reinforces a consumerist

ideology through its representations of middle-class neighbourhoods and its structuring of play according to commodity consumption. While they do note that *The Sims* represents a degree of diversity in its shift away from the monocultural elements of “militarized masculinity,” they do not recognize that *The Sims* supports a variety of forms of gameplay, some of which invoke cheats in an effort to escape the game’s structures of consumption. Indeed, it is fairly common practice to play *The Sims* not according to the game’s explicit rules, but as if a sandbox where rule sets are created, selected, or discarded as the player chooses.

Digital Play is possibly the most important study of the material history of digital games to date. It undertakes the ambitious task of locating digital gaming within an entwined constellation of technology, culture, and marketing in an effort to understand digital gaming practices within their social, cultural, and economic contexts. Its three-circuit model works very well to demonstrate the complex and often contradictory array of elements that shape digital gaming. The book’s only significant shortcoming is its relative lack of analysis of forms of gameplay, which otherwise might have brought the authors closer to a more convincing expression of cautious optimism by the end of the book. But that will be the task of readers of *Digital Play* who extend the book’s arguments in future studies of digital games.

References

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