

CAMEO CUTS #13

Production Intra-activity in the Computer Games Economy

OZ GORE

CAMEo CUTS

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PRODUCTION INTRA-ACTIVITY IN THE COMPUTER GAMES ECONOMY

OZ GORE

Spearheaded by computer games, interactive media forms have become a site of increasing cultural and commercial significance. In this issue of CAMEo Cuts, Oz Gore argues for a decentring of 'artefact interactivity', i.e. the interactive properties of games artefacts themselves and the latter's consequence in terms of media consumption, in favour of an examination of 'production intra-activity', i.e. how creative expression, game content, organisational concerns, and technological materialities get entangled within and throughout the process of producing interactive gameworlds. In particular, the piece argues that acknowledging 'production intra-activity' in interactive media means to recognise that mainstream cultural and policy discourses viewing interactive artefacts as mechanically manipulated and solely determined by market forces can be misleading. Although commercial rationalities are part of the story of media economies, the messier image afforded by 'production intra-activity' suggests that responsibility for what gets ex/included in cultural mediums is not necessarily the result of premeditated or self-contained decisions as, perhaps, regulatory and managerial discourses tend to imagine or prefer.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oz Gore is a lecturer at the University of Leicester School of Business where he teaches on information management and sustainability from a critical perspective. His qualitative research explores the hidden or unintended consequences of managerial techniques with a particular focus on the making of knowledge in formal organisations, relationships between social organisation and digital technologies, and questions of method in organisational research broadly understood. Oz holds a PhD in Management and Organisation from the University of Manchester, an MA in Sociology and Anthropology from Tel-Aviv University, and a BA in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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INTRODUCTION

Those watching BBC Parliament on the 19th of June 2019 were greeted by a somewhat peculiar, almost comical scenario. On the day, members of the Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee (DCMS) were collecting evidence as part of an inquiry into 'Immersive and Addictive Technologies' with senior executives from Electronic Arts and Epic Games, two of the most influential gaming companies in the world, present to orally answer Committee questions.

What transpired was a back-and-forth exchange between mostly uninformed public representatives failing to understand how interactive media functions and communications savvy managers who seemed guite comfortable misunderstanding what was asked of them. The hearing involved bickering over why people spend time with interactive media (are gameworlds appealing because of manipulation or because they are fun?), differences of opinion over job role definitions and commercial intent (are companies employing game designers or are they using behavioural psychologists?), and embarrassing misconceptions of the artefacts discussed (can you send SMS texts within the multi-player game Fortnite?).

The DCMS inquiry is characteristic of the way computer games technologies and artefacts are framed in mainstream cultural and policy discourses as well as in scholarly fields such as production studies, sociology of work and labour, and even game studies. For one, the Committee's concerns demonstrated the empirical

significance of computer games as a global media form underpinned by the interactivity of the experiences they offer.¹ The DCMS rightly identified that interactive gameworlds are, to use a colloquial word, a type of 'lean-forward' cultural entertainment. Unlike films or TV, gameworlds move and shape us through active participation in interactive experiences and thus can indeed be extremely powerful for evoking emotions, immersing users in engaging virtual worlds or forming bodily habits through participation in simulated fictions.² Second, the potentiality to be moved and shaped through interactivity is understood within these discourses in broadly negative terms and approached with suspicion. Similar to the DCMS, other regulatory bodies across the world have opted to respond to the rise of what is understood as 'problematic gaming' by collapsing the distinction between addictive gambling and particular forms of computer interactivity (MacDonald, 2018). Gaming audiences, likewise, have reacted negatively to the inclusion of invasive forms of interactivity within beloved franchises with publicised brand boycotts and social media backlash leading game companies (including Electronics Arts) to backtrack on their monetisation and marketing decisions in regards how interactivity is to be used. Lastly, within this treatment of computer games and their interactive powers, the making of interactive media - i.e., details about the convoluted realities of designing, developing, and producing computer games – is poorly understood and seldom considered.

In this piece, I would like to argue that such focus on what might be termed 'artefact

interactivity', i.e., what interactive experiences do (or do not do) to human users/customers. obscures another form of interactivity underlying this immensely popular medium. What is less visible is how the production of interactive experiences is itself interactive (or 'intra-active' (Barad, 2007)). With game projects, decisions on cultural expression, technological innovation, and commerce all interact within a process that is difficult to predict, and which is heavily reliant on iteration and emergence. This second form of interactivity, termed here 'production intraactivity', is particularly important to reflect upon precisely because interactive media is a powerful and spreading media form. With interactive experiences becoming ubiquitous both in games and beyond (e.g., in the use of Virtual Reality applications in healthcare, construction, or pedagogy) there is a need to reflect on how game environments, mechanics, characters and storylines are shaped through their interaction with commercial rationalities and technological materiality. As I will argue, this messier image suggests that responsibility for what gets ex/ included in gameworlds is not necessarily the result of premeditated or self-contained decisions as, perhaps, regulatory and managerial discourses tend to imagine or prefer.

The rest of the text is structured as follows. In the next two sections I explain what I mean by 'production intra-activity' and present some of the factors that make interactive gameworlds and the experiences they offer particularly susceptible to contingencies and emergence within and throughout the process of design and production. I do this by reflecting on some recent examples of how artefact interactivity came to be unexpectedly, and non-deterministically shaped by market logics, working conditions, or technological materialities. The text concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of acknowledging intra-activity, particularly for regulatory and managerial discourses, and by consequence for game education as well.

HOW DO INTERACTIVE GAMEWORLDS COME TO BE?

It has long been noted that design practice is shaped through organisational exigencies (Anderson et al., 1993) and media production is no different. Due to the unique production journey of interactive gameworlds, though, this 'extra-creative' influence over creative content is particularly pronounced. In terms of management and organisation, interactive media has no universal model of production (Osborne O'Hagan et al., 2014) making it particularly open to interventions by what design studies call 'proximate designers' (Woodhouse & Patton, 2004) – all those that might not be nominated as designers but still input to and shape design work. This includes artists and game testers, but also marketing managers, budget accountants and end users with their precise influence contingent on the game project, team and companies involved. Furthermore, interactive gameworlds are dependent on technological manipulation of what is often 'bleeding edge' hardware and software. Similar to the 'evolving object' of software production (Adler, 2005), videogame design is on-going (Tschang & Szczypula, 2006) and the content of games undergo significant modifications as they remain 'constantly in flux, rather than fully formed' (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). Thus, the development of interactive gameworlds is often unexpected and spoken about by gameworkers in terms of a 'struggle' where one is 'grappling' with software as oppose to commanding it to one's will (Whitson, 2018). Importantly, these uncertainties about what is or is not possible and what is or is not "fun" to do within an interactive gameworld turns the production process into one of tweaking and discovery through iteration rather than one with a clear bounded separation between ideation (game design) and 'then' execution (game development). Finally, the production process itself can be almost perpetual, continuing long after the release of the game as companies turn to view interactive gameworlds as platforms, further collapsing the distinction between game design and production. These characteristics mean that the shaping of design practice in videogames by organisational exigencies is both broad and intense - broad as many different disciplines and roles come to shape game design and content and intense as this influence over what gets ex/ included in gameworlds happens throughout the entire project lifecycle.

In the next section I will present 'intra-activity' is a way of engaging these characteristics.

ACKNOWLEDGING PRODUCTION 'INTRA-ACTIVITY'

Borrowing from feminist technoscience, I will use Barad's (2007) notion of 'intra-activity' to speak of the activities of design and production found in this domain. The concept was developed in the context of questioning method and agency within scientific practice. Barad presents intra-activity as a way of capturing how a 'thing' (that which is known by scientific research) is enacted in entanglement with 'the way' it is researched, thereby collapsing the assumed separation between epistemology/ ontology and, more importantly, doing/being. For my purposes here, what is instructive is that intra-activity compels us to view that which is considered separate as, alternatively, entangled, acting 'from within' and across differences.

Consider, for example, one of the most successful games of 2016, Uncharted 4: Theft's End. Commenting on the process of production in an interview for Rolling Stone, the game director reflected on how commercial logics in the form of production schedules played a major role in shaping the interactive experience from 'within' (Suellentrop, 2016): gameworkers on Uncharted 4 were subjected to intense working conditions, known as 'crunch' in the industry, prompting the emergence of new ideas among employees about work-life balance and how 'fun' and 'work might be brought together. The latter, interestingly, led to a re-appreciation of the game's storyline and its mixture of idleness and action

The notion of intra-activity becomes clearer thorough this illustration as the changes made to the interactive gameworld in Uncharted 4 (here, a re-balancing of the gameworld across action and idleness) did not come about through a mechanistic, inter-active process with 'management' acting on 'game design' directly and externally. Alternatively, managerial decisions around the organisation of work changed gameworkers' perceptions of their own creative work 'from within'. On the back of intensified working conditions (seemingly unrelated to game design) designers changed the way game testers were asked about the game to accommodate their newly found appreciation of idleness (e.g. by asking testers to rank their overall impression of the interactive experience rather than ranking how fun it was). Thus, while the design of the game changed it is hard to distribute clear responsibility or causation for what ended up ex/included in the game as the influence of 'design' and 'management' come to be entangled within the process of production.

Importantly, though, appreciating production intra-activity is by no means to say that gaming companies are not deliberately aiming to increase player's time with their products or that there is no strategic intent to emphasise user purchases behind how products are made. They indeed do. Alas, the concept is useful for acknowledging how nuanced the process might be and the ways in which the journey of production make straight-forward inferences about (business) intent and (creative) impact highly problematic when considering interactive gameworlds.

At times, this influence might be more direct, as, for example, with the case of the Assassin's Creed franchise. The last instalment in the series, Assassin's Creed: Odyssey, offered players the ability to choose their own identity within the gameworld, with players able to make in-game decisions which saw their character engage in either hetero-normative or gueer relationships. This design choice was later scrapped due to an overriding marketing decision when the publisher released download-able content for the game (a new 'chapter' with new narrative and missions) which only accommodated heteronormative choices, presuming that everyone playing this new chapter had also chosen non-gueer relationships during the earlier parts of the game (Blake, 2019). While this might be an example of market logics (consistency of the franchise) directly determining game design (here, heterosexist representations), the impact of market logics on game design is mostly not as clear-cut as it was here.

A telling example of how market logics determine game design in less straight-forward ways can be seen when reflecting on a new distribution and monetisation channel recently introduced to the industry – games subscription models similar to the likes of Netflix or Amazon Video. In an interview to *Gamesindustry.biz*, the head of Microsoft's Xbox Game Studios explained how the company's new subscription model, Game Pass, 'frees' designers from worrying about business models when designing interactive gameworlds. Outside of a subscription model each game product needs to attract users on its own. To maximize the longevity of their games, many developers decide (due to this monetisation model) to structure their interactive experiences based on perpetual updates and modifications that, hopefully, will increase the time players spend with their products. This kind of influence due to monetisation will now cease:

"Game Pass itself takes care of being the service and the platform so when we go to design a game, we don't need to be thinking about what our plan is to sustain this for three or four years," [he] explains. "We don't need to think about how we come up with a set of content updates so that this thing can run as a service, or whether we're going to be doing *Fortnite*style updates every three weeks. It frees us from having to think about that." (Dring, 2019)

Under Microsoft's new subscription model, game designers might not need to structure their interactive experiences with an eye for perpetual future content updates. As they get paid for the inclusion of the game within the subscription service, designers can stop worrying about the need to constantly engage players through new content and thus 'free' their game design decisions. Nonetheless, distribution and monetisation routes are not neutral, and gameworkers adopting Microsoft's platform will need to contend with a different set of contingencies, ending up replacing one way in which monetisation intra-acts with design with another. A subscription service gives users access to a list of game titles meaning that players can consume games that they would not otherwise purchase separately. While it means that smaller games now make 'commercial sense' within a subscription service that frees creators from longevity concerns with their content, it does call them to tweak their gameworlds for the possible influx of large volumes of players (everyone on the subscription service) or to redesign parts of the game for first time players (those that might have not played previous instalments or might new to the genre). Although market logics are decisive in shaping what experiences end up on these subscription platforms, how interactive gameworlds are shaped and the way game design come to accommodate commercial and market aims is better understood as emergent, not-necessarily deterministic, and as result of intra-action.

Another form of entanglement due to intraaction can be seen in the way game design

and technological materialities mix together. Interactive gameworlds are half 'art' and half 'technology' making them elaborate pieces of computer software. This necessity for technical breakthrough arguably exacerbates the 'indeterminacy/unknowability of creative production' (Caves, 2002), a challenge characterising all creative sectors. With studios striving to stretch the boundaries of what is technologically possible, R&D becomes situated at the heart of the design process (Lê et al., 2013). Post-mortems, a common industry practice in which gameworkers reflect on the production journey of games, are filled with references to how game technology, its development and requirements led to key design choices or unplanned divergences in creative vision. While game tech might be seen as a passive enabler of creative expression. something studios use to make their alreadyformed ideas about interactive experiences come to life, game engines and tools are often generative of creativity.



The Godot Game Engine. Computer games are produced using sophisticated, continuously in-development pieces of software.

For example, the designers of the genrebending 2018 game Mutant Year Zero: Road to Eden explained how they 'discovered' the right way to design their interactive gameworld as result of changing the game engine they were working with. Indeed, game tech tuning is notoriously bug ridden, hard to understand, and thus proceeds in parallel to game design (O'Donnell, 2014). Here, again, clear demarcation of responsibility or causation becomes problematic with design, technology, and production decisions all entangled. As the materialities of technological development become enmeshed with the symbolic and aesthetic attributes of experiential cultural products, management appears to be more concerned with the integration and coordination of creative forces (Cohendet & Simon, 2007) rather than with direct control over output, further debunking ideas about simplistic causation.

DISCUSSION

Acknowledging production intra-activity in interactive media has several consequences. Perhaps most important, and as been argued throughout, the image of production intraactivity means that simplistic ideas about clear causal relations between commercial aspirations and the kind of experiences found in interactive environments should be discouraged. This might be tricky for regulatory discourses that emphasize individualistic accountability (who made this decision?) and causality (why is this feature the way it is?). To better understand what is at stake in the production of interactive experiences that are deemed 'problematic', regulatory inspections might then benefit from engaging with the 'operations' side of companies instead of asking 'strategy' figures such as executives to provide their view

of production. Instead of engaging senior managers, regulatory bodies might do better to engage 'shop floor' employees such as game designers, software testers, or marketing officers who can provide richer descriptions of how particular interactive experiences came to be. While not solving the issue of how to imbue responsibility to individual people, roles, expertise, or practices these accounts, nonetheless, might shed more light on how things could have been done differently.

Production intra-activity, furthermore, does not only pose regulatory challenges but equally spells problems for managerial discourses as they, too, favour an atomised, clearly delimited view of decisions and (their) outcomes. Acknowledging how market logics, technological materiality, and creative expression are entangled in interactive gameworld production is also to recognise that managerial decisions on, for example, working conditions, marketing strategy, or hiring practices might, and indeed do, have unforeseen consequences for how interactive experiences are shaped. This might happen. as discussed above, by impacting employee perceptions of their own creative work through the structuring of their working conditions or by opening (or closing) fields of possible interactivity through choices on tools. Production intra-activity, thus, calls for rethinking how innovation is managed and a recognition that almost everyone involved in the process might end-up being a 'proximate designer'.

This last point calls us to also rethink formal training for interactive media sectors. Game education is today firmly fixed on the supply of 'creative talent' with little to go by in terms of training managers specifically. Institutions offering game education programs (game art, game development, etc.) are increasingly aware of the need to expose students to the 'realities' of industry production. This includes, for example, simulating studio production and training episodes whereby production schedules and artistic vision changes unexpectedly. Through such exercises, future gameworkers prepare for 'things to go wrong' within the emergent process of production and how to cope with decisions made without their input. What is missing, then, is a closer emphasis on managerial decisions and how these get to intra-act with other aspects of production by acting 'from within', unexpectedly.

NOTES

¹ Interactive computer play has by now far outstripped film, music and TV in terms of audience reach and consequently revenue. In the UK, local trade bodies are reporting that close to half of the population is engaged with computer play (UKie, n.d.). Outside of the gaming industry, computer-based interactive play is also flourishing, increasingly colonizing more traditional spaces of cultural expression, with museums, TV publishers, musicians, and educators variously experimenting with the powers of computer interactivity.

² Feedback has always been central to the interactive pleasures of playing computer games from the jubilant jangles of arcade games indicating ever-increasing pinball scores to the rumbles of joypads when a player's race car hits the gravel to the cheers of teammates after a particular difficult battle in an online game. The centrality of interactivity in computer games led commentators to argue for an understanding of computer games as an activity rather than an object, making gameplay akin to inhabiting an oscillating relationship between the 'here' of the player and the 'there' of the game (Larsen & Walther, 2019). This intimate relationship whereby players assume particular roles, characters, and thus meaning within the gameworld make interactive experiences into powerful cultural mediators as they propagate and rationalise particular versions of the contemporary and act to reframe pasts (Pötzsch & Šisler, 2019). This sort of mediation is particularly important as it is based on active participation and works through bodily rhythms and structured expressive creativity of which the player is a constitutive part (Costello, 2018).

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University of Leicester CAMEo Research Institute 7 Salisbury Road Leicester, LE1 7QR, UK

t: +44 (0)116 252 5633

e: cameo@le.ac.uk

w: www.le.ac.uk/cameo

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uniofleicester

@CAMEo_UoL

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