'Indisciplinary' Approaches to Digital Play

A one-day symposium

21ˢᵗ June 2019

Digital humanities and game studies are well-known for their emphases on interdisciplinary approaches to their objects of study. The growing trend of academic collaborations has also seen a pronounced interest in what interdisciplinarity or multidisciplinarity entails and how it ought to be practised on boundary concepts like 'play'. In this symposium, we draw inspiration from the notions of 'indiscipline' and 'indisciplinarity' to think about how digital play, or play that is made possible through digital technologies, can be thought afresh.

For W.J.T. Mitchell, the best form of interdisciplinarity was a form of 'indiscipline' (1995, p. 541), of turbulence or incoherence at the inner and outer boundaries of disciplines. He distinguished this form from two other kinds: a 'top-down' model that dreams of a Kantian architectonic of learning, a pyramidal and complete organisation of knowledge; and a 'bottom-up' model that responds to emergencies and opportunities, but which ultimately also ends up being disciplinary in its need to carve out professional spaces. Jacques Rancière (2008), whose mode of philosophising opposed the recognition of boundaries that separated philosophy from other practices, ended up leaning on a similar term: 'indisciplinary' practice was, for him, a method that works in explicit defiance of normative divisions. If interdisciplinarity keeps existing disciplines in place and shuttles between them (without breaking existing boundaries), indisciplinarity aims to show how the disciplines themselves are constituted.

Taking a different approach, Rosi Braidotti has drawn attention to 'the transformation of the classical disciplines and the growth of the infra-disciplinary 'studies'', citing as one example the way that the study of 'New media has proliferated into sub-sections and meta-fields: software, internet, game, algorithmic and critical code studies and more' (2018, p. 14; 10). But even as she celebrates these developments as steps towards new kinds of 'supra-disciplinarity', Braidotti also acknowledges that the 'intense and hybrid cross-fertilization' of disciplines is in many respects an index of the 'speed with which they are over-coded by and interwoven with 'cognitive capitalism' (through practices like the academic star system, the research audits, the privatization of universities, the emphasis on grants and fund-raising, etc.)' (2018, p. 13). Scholars of games and play will already be acutely aware of how these forces shape the conditions of possibility for in(ter)disciplinary research and pedagogy. But how can we most effectively work within - and perhaps reshape - those conditions?

Our aim in this symposium is to foster a collaborative approach in response to a series of questions, or 'provocations', that have occupied thinking about play, the digital, and computer games. Whilst game studies and the digital humanities are known for their championing of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches to their objects of study, we also ask: 1) whether the ethos of 'indisciplinarity' can help us break new ground; and 2) whether and in which ways it is possible to be self-critical about the conditions under which in(ter)disciplinary exchange takes place.

Academics from various departments at King's College London will engage with each other, with scholars and game designers from ITU Copenhagen and Abertay University, and with an international mix of participants, in a one day symposium at King's College London in a critical

spirit of 'indiscipline' to overturn the disciplinary presuppositions behind four 'provocations' pertaining to digital play.

Methodology

We will adopt an experimental methodology, departing from the standard conference format. The symposium will be structured around a series of four 'provocations' steered by invited participants, which will be tailored to elicit debate and catalyse collaborations. The provocations will consist of a few contentious claims that summarise the debate in an area of enquiry relevant to digital play, and which may be responded to from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

Provocations
The four provocations/strands will be on (there will be some changes to their formulation):

1. Contemporary forms and rhetorics of play following digitisation

There has long been a fear that computer games 'represent impoverished cultural and sensory environments' (Provenzo, 1991, p. 97). However, the 'rationalisation' (Feenberg & Grimes, 2009) associated with digital play does not mean that the subversive potential of play is under threat. Indeed, to hold that there is something essential being lost in an age of digital play would be to hold to the idea that there can be degrees of fidelity to an ideal kind of authentic, autotelic play – such an idea cannot but be a normalising conception of play that limits it even as it tries to preserve it.

Chair: tbc
Participants: tbc

2. Gameplay and life writing/biography

For many scholars, digital games are interesting to the extent that they undercut the notion of the 'deep' autonomous and agential individual subject bodied forth in classical auto/biography and life writing. There is, however, much to be learned from attempts to develop forms of life writing adequate to experiences of digital play, addressing gaming culture as a site where the inhuman rhythms of technocapitalism syncopate with those of biography and biology.

Arguing that videogame researchers should pay more attention to biography might seem retrograde or perverse. Many of us are drawn to digital games precisely because they undercut they notion of the 'deep' autonomous and agential individual bodied forth in classical biography. Digital gameplay involves timescales quite different from those auto/biography and life writing have traditionally dealt in. Real time games essentially require players to act without thinking, eliciting split second responses and implicating players in posthuman assemblages. Play is often formidably repetitive, habit-forming and even addictive.

Moreover, when biography and games do cross paths, it is often in the attempt to domesticate gameplay. Autobiographical games are presented by broadsheet journalists as proof that the medium has come of age; coffee table books celebrating canonical developers fit games into the auteurist 'great men' model of media history, crediting singular individuals with pushing the medium 'forward' – often in ways that pander to consumer nostalgia and reinforce the industry's narratives of generational succession. Gaming becomes valid, here, to the extent that it can be reconciled with the traditional humanist imperatives of biography as a vehicle for considered retrospective narratives in which authors account for past actions, trace the development of tastes and opinions, and imbue experience with meaning.

Insofar as many scholars of life writing and auto/biography are interested in interrogating and historicizing these imperatives, however, they have much to gain from critical work on games and play. As a site where the inhuman

rhythms of technocapitalism syncopate with those of biography and biology, videogame culture should be of interest to anyone interested in emerging conceptions of subjectivity and identity. While a range of more experimental auto/biographical games are exploring this syncopation, I am particularly interested in critical and historical texts which attempt to develop forms of life writing adequate to experiences of digital play. Published in 1983, David Sudnow's Pilgrim in the Microworld, a forensically attentive phenomenological account of the musicologist's obsession with Atari's Breakout, offers an early example of such writing. Laine Nooney's account of Roberta Williams' career is a more recent attempt to trouble the conventions of videogame history using an approach Nooney frames as "media speleology" rather than "media archaeology", presenting the historian/biographer as a spelunker groping around in a dark cavern (while also, of course, riffing on the German word for games and play). In Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux's Metagaming, meanwhile, Narcissa Wright's spoken word autobiographical poetry - which addresses her experiences of learning to speedrun Ocarina of Time on an obscure Chinese variant of the Nintendo 64 while negotiating gender dysphoria, repetitive strain injury and transphobic abuse - provides a lens on the entanglement of hardware and software, biology, identity and biography, language and law. The call for contributions to the recent 'Lost Histories Jam' meanwhile, argued that in a context where 'people who make and talk about games are presumed to be working from the same set of references' first-hand histories have a valuable role to play in affirming the specificity and strangeness of situated play.

Chair: Rob Gallagher
Participants: tbc

3. Habit and practice in digital play

Players sediment involuntary habits given that they are 'inhabited' by the game during play, but they also construct their own habits through conscious and reflexive awareness of their own play. It is mistaken, however, to impugn agency only to the latter and not to the former. In a historical moment characterised by neoliberal individualisation, where self-control almost invariably signifies a practical kind of self-fashioning geared towards enhancing one's career or image, the capacity to relinquish control stands as a conspicuous possible alternative to such forms of self-entrainment. In a sense, agency may lie more in the player's ability to *lose* themselves in a game than to consciously use the game to construct themselves.

Chair: Feng Zhu
Participants: tbc

4. Ecologies of play and computer games

There are a diverse range of ecological approaches to the study of digital games. However, ecological approaches to play that involve the refusal of subject-object dichotomies lead 'inevitably [to] a narcissistic (or collectively, speciesist) enterprise' (Chang, 2018).

At present, ecological approaches to digital games are as diverse as they are divergent. Starting from the "ground up", Timothy Morton (2010) suggests, 'ecology seems earthly, pedestrian'; there is an understandable connection between 'eco'-thinking and the planetary biome. Accepting this, it is reasonable that Alenda Chang's (2018) ecological approach to game studies stresses the potential of game design to impact on players' perceptions of their role within the eco-system. However, Chang's ecological understanding of games stands at odds with that of Jonas Linderoth (2007) and Betty Li Meldgaard (2012) who have both suggested how ecological theories of perception can provide us with an understanding of games. They suggest a mutual relationship between player and game as environmental stimulus provided on-screen forms part of the response of the player. We can push ecological

thinking even further, pushing more explicitly against the restrictions of subject and object. Justyna Janik (2018) attempts this by referencing Karen Barad's theory of intra-actions in "which agency is not something that actants have and can use, but rather a dynamic force that happens between them". Janik is suggesting a co-operative relationship between a supposed player and game. However, it is noteworthy that, following Barad's writing to the letter, 'intra-activity' precludes the existence of 'things'; they suggest, rather that things are only ever apparent, ever re-emerging out of phenomena (Barad, 2007). It is fascinating, then, that to translate Barad's ideas to game studies, scholars may feel the need to relate their work to more classical, representational ontological notions. In this context, is it possible for an ecological thinking to prevail in which we defy subject-object dichotomies or is this attempt at thinking beyond the human, as Chang (2018) suggests, 'inevitably a narcissistic (or collectively, speciesist) enterprise?'

Alenda Y. Chang (2018) "Surface Tensions: Environmental Narcissism in the Age of Man", Media Fields Journal no. 13.
Michiel Kamp (2014) "Musical Ecologies in Video Games", Philos. Technol. no. 27
Salen, Katie (2008) "Toward an Ecology of Gaming." The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning. Edited by Katie Salen. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
Michael Nitsche (2008) *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Chair: Conor McKeown
Participants: tbc

Provisional Schedule

Registration 9:30 (tea/coffee registration)

Introduction 9:45-10:00

Keynote 1 10:00-10:45

Provocation 1 11:00-12:00

Lunch 12:00-13:00

Provocation 2 13:00-14:00

Break 1 14:00-14:15 (tea/coffee afternoon 1)

Provocation 3 14:15-15:15

Break 2 15:15-15:30 (tea/coffee afternoon 2)

Provocation 4 15:30-16:30

Break 3 16:30-16:45

Keynote 2 16:45-17:30

The symposium will take place in the iconic Edmund Safra Lecture Theatre and refreshments will be provided in the Great Hall outside it.

Background

The symposium aims to position King's DDH as a forum for innovative approaches to the study and teaching of digital play. DDH is about to launch its first module centred on digital games, and is considering expanding its programme in this direction. It will showcase the range of research into digital play already underway at King's and foster cross-departmental collaboration by bringing together staff and PhD students from departments such as the Digital Humanities, English, Culture Media & Creative Industries, and Informatics.

It will also build connections with two other institutions that have particularly strong international reputations in the area of game studies: the IT University of Copenhagen and Abertay University, strengthening the faculty's standing in this increasingly important field.

The symposium will present two secured keynotes from leading figures in this area, who head some of the most vibrant research going on worldwide. Espen Aarseth is the Head of Research at the Center for Computer Games Research [http://game.itu.dk] at the IT University of Copenhagen. He is also director for the Games Program there, and has visited DDH in 2018 to understand potential for collaborations. The second keynote, William Huber, is President of the Digital Games Research Association (2016-present), and Head of the Centre for Excellence in Game Education at Abertay University.

References

Braidotti, R. (2018). A theoretical framework for the critical posthumanities. *Theory, Culture & Society.*

Feenberg, A., & Grimes, S. M. (2009). Rationalizing Play: A Critical Theory of Digital Gaming. *The Information Society*(25), 105-118.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (1995). Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture. *Art Bulletin, LXXXVII*(4), 540-544.

Provenzo, E. F. J. (1991). *Video Kids - making sense of Nintendo.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Rancière, J. (2008). Jacques Rancière and Interdisciplinarity: An Interview with Marie-Aude Baronian and Mireille Rosello. *Art & Ideas: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods 2, 2*(1).