Fuel, Fatigue, Fashion: Towards a Media Ecology of Game Industry Conventions

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ABSTRACT

This presentation provisionally reports on qualitative fieldwork at games industry conventions in the Southeast United States. Such conventions offer compelling glimpses into how regional games industries pitch game production to aspirational and existing workers, player communities, and partners in government, education, and adjacent industries. Adopting a media ecological approach which begins with indexes of the mundane artifacts and practices that make up a given context, we offer a critical consideration of three such artifacts that stood out to us during our fieldwork: cargo shorts, soda cans, and massage chairs. Situating each artifact culturally, historically, and within the context of this convention itself, we reveal a set of insights regarding the ways game production --and games workers--are envisioned and enacted during a particularly tumultuous time for the industry.

Keywords

Conventions; games industries; labour; media ecology; qualitative fieldwork

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Industry conferences occupy a liminal space in gaming culture: part professional networking event, part fan convention, and increasingly, part esports tournament. Such events certainly include "the" annual Game Developers Conference (GDC) in San Francisco, but also similar conventions in regions where the games industry has set up shop. They provide opportunities—largely ignored in gaming scholarship, though given apt attention by games journalists—in which we might watch the dynamic and frequently contentious interactions between games industries and communities play out. Such opportunities are particularly useful given the public reckoning that North American and European games industries (overwhelmingly white and cis-male) have faced recently for incidences of sexual harassment and violence, labour unrest, and race- and gender-based marginalization.

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The project we report on here asks: what might we learn from walking the floors of these events, in which games organizations, alongside partners in formal education, government, and adjacent industries, present themselves to the public and to each other?

Our means of reporting on our preliminary fieldwork is informed by Matthew Fuller's articulation of "media ecology" (2007). Like Fuller, we are interested here in considering some of the mundane artifacts that constitute the particular media ecology of games industry conventions. This means we are less interested in understanding what attendees *say* about the games industry; such insider perspectives are readily available (see Kerr, 2017; O'Donnell, 2014, among many others). Our attention is on the spatial and temporal arrangements of technologies, bodies, and practices that animate these events, and what these compositions might say about contemporary games industries. Drawing from Fuller's vividly rendered list of the technologies that constitute pirate radio, alongside Mahli-Ann Butt's (2018) account of alcohol consumption at GDC, and Emma Vossen's (2018) analysis of the "gamer dress," we critically consider some technologies that caught our attention during fieldwork at a mid-size industry convention in the Southeast US. Our incomplete inventory currently includes *cargo shorts*, *soda cans*, and *massage chairs*.

Cargo shorts. These were ubiquitous at the event, worn exclusively by white men. If the absence of pockets in women's clothing can be seen as a textile/tactile emblem of the fashion industry's sexism, we might characterize the abundance of pockets as emblematic of white, middle-class masculine technicity. Like countless other masculinized media, cargo shorts arrived via the military (Baer, 2016), and serve as mobile storage devices for any number of other portable technologies: flash drives, keys, smartphones, snack bars, earbuds, chargers. They are aggressively functional, performing masculine practicality in a way that signals the wearer's disregard for the feminizing dictates of fashion. As garments worn at a professional networking event, they signal that their wearer prioritizes his gear, his intimacy with technics, over his appearance.

Soda cans. Mountain Dew released its "Amp Game Fuel" line of carbonated energy drinks around the time of our fieldwork. Occupying a booth in a high-traffic area at the event, two female employees offered samples while extolling the cognitive and physiological benefits of the drink. During our tasting, what stood out was the hyper-engineered can itself: large, with a notably pebbled surface and a resealable lid. As a device designed "by gamers, for gamers," the can materializes a gendered gaming body in very particular ways. Playing (or programming) without pause for long periods (the large format), the drinker removes his hand from his controller or keyboard, his palms moist with sweat (the pebbled texture), reaching for the liquid technology that will replenish his "alertness" and "accuracy" (Wallace, 2018). Without breaking his gaze from the screen, he flicks the drink closed (resealable lid) and puts it back down. The can does not so much insinuate itself into this cybernetic circuit of intensive gaming, as imagines it.

Massage chairs. If cargo shorts are portable storage media for mobile technomasculine bodies, and Game Fuel cans replenish bodies during intensive play, the massage chair stations we observed were there to recalibrate broken bodies. Positioned prominently at the top of the escalators leading into the main hall, and staffed by physical therapy students from a local university, these stations signaled the games industry's concern for workers' well-being. At a time of heightened labour unrest, when excessive burnout is routinely cited among the arduous conditions facing game workers, these massage chairs--and the workers operating them--perform a highly symbolic kind of care: yes, this industry will grind you down, but it will build you back up. In this logic, the

solution to endless crunch is not to be found in worker organization; it is through incorporating technologies of care, and their attendant forms of labour, into the totalizing machineries of game production.

Clearly, this list of some of the "compositional fragments" (Fuller, p. 16) making up a games industry convention is far more evocative than exhaustive. Our intention is to test out a media ecological approach to such contexts, rather than to make definitive claims about the cultural politics of games industries. In doing so, we hope to offer fresh insights into how these liminal events construct the 'games worker', materially and discursively, during tumultuous times.

Citations and References

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