# The ambivalence of the flexible 'gamer habitus': learning to habituate oneself to constant re-habituation

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## ABSTRACT
Many computer games are now subject to periodic updates that have, amongst their aims, balancing out aspects of the game that give rise to gameplay strategies that are deemed to lead to 'unhealthy' metagames. In the attempt to optimize and facilitate desirable forms of player engagement, gameplay mechanics are changed, with some moves, units, characters, etc being 'buffed' and others 'nerfed'.

The point of departure for this presentation does not lie, however, in metagames *per se*, but to theorize the ways in which the players themselves adapt to changes in a climate of such updates and the social-cultural significance of this adaptation. Players sometimes have to rework their previous gameplay strategies in quite fundamental ways, to alter approaches to playing that may have already become embodied and internalized through repetition. Such a change, involving the player's wilful bringing to consciousness of embodied practices in order to transform them, can be understood from the starting point of existing work on 'gamer habitus' (Crawford 2012, Kirkpatrick 2012).[1]

Building on Bourdieu's (1977 [1972]) notion of 'habitus', 'gamer habitus' has been defined as 'the socially acquired, embodied dispositions that ensure someone knows how to respond to a computer game' (Kirkpatrick 2012, 19) that is attained through experience. It has been framed more widely than the tacit knowledge needed to do well in any particular game; it gets at the dispositions and competences that enable individuals to be able to make sense of computer games in general. However, it is necessary to recognize that divisions need to be drawn between genres and hardware in terms of the very different embodied skills that are practiced and internalized by players. Gamer habitus is in need of further theorization in this respect.

For Wendy Chun, our media matter most when they seem not to matter at all, that is, when they have moved from the new to the habitual. Chun pointed out that '[t]he update is central to disrupting and establishing context and habituation, to creating new habits of dependency' (2016, 2). Proceeding from this insight, I propose that gamer habitus can actually be productively explored not as a particular set of concretized features or characteristics that can be identified with the embodied competence required for a genre

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of games, such as real-time strategy games, but primarily through its flexibility or adaptability. That is to say, there are varieties of gamer habitus that are geared towards the very disruption that Chun mentions: they are defined by their adaptability. Gamer habitus in this sense is a means of habituating oneself to constant *re-habituation*: games represent opportunities for intensive skill acquisition in which the practices become naturalized and embodied, then brought to consciousness and wilfully reworked as games update (or as player aims and playstyles change), then naturalized again, and so on.

What then is the social significance of this flexibility or adaptability? I advance that it is ambivalent between at least three possibilities and that this ambivalence is in need of further exploration. Firstly, flexibility has connotations of precarious labour. Computer usage itself involves 'cognitive multitasking – rapidly alternating between different kinds of attention, problem solving and other cognitive skills' (Manovich 2001, 210). The 'streamlined person' has to be adaptable, flexible and resilient enough to cope with the succession of changes they will encounter (Kirkpatrick 2015, 28). Indeed, 'hipster' management theorists Beck and Mitchell (2004) have also argued that 'the content of games, be it carjacking or dragonslaying, is merely the occasion for intensive skill acquisition in multitasking, flexible role play, risk evaluation, persistence in the face of setbacks, inventive problem solving, and rapid decision making - all precisely what corporate employers claim to want'. However, the streamlined individual cannot easily gain a sense of their own persistent identity; their identity is more about making themselves adaptable to the present conditions (Kirkpatrick 2013). Further, such individuals often only wish to do well in specific projects and to be functional in the present, to play the game well today rather than to use the future as a long-term reference point for meaning-making and the edification of the self (Kirkpatrick 2013, 25). This attitude can manifest as a competitive, even ruthless attitude to work and to play. Along similar lines, gamers 'will not learn for learning's sake', say Carstens and Beck (2005, 24) – a view that echoes Foucault's theorization of contemporary individuals as wanting to maintain a 'sort of homeostasis' (Foucault 2003, 246), which is to say, to survive. In other words, the flexible, streamlined individual potentially loses a more imaginative engagement with the game – in terms of radically thinking about how it could have been otherwise – due to their immediate fixation on how to accord themselves with the game.

Secondly, 'flexibility' can be linked to the variability of play itself. 'Flexibility' is a word that can abound with positive connotations. Towards the end of his wide-ranging study of play, Sutton-Smith (2001 [1997], 221) opined that 'it is the variability of the play phenomena which most impresses the present author' and endorsed Stephen Jay Gould's view of evolution, which positions variability as more crucial than precise adaptation (1996, 44). This lead Sutton-Smith to conclude that '[p]recise adaptation, with each part finely honed to perform a definite function in an optimal way, can only lead to blind alleys, dead ends, and extinction…The key is flexibility, not admirable precision' (ibid.).

Thirdly, flexibility and malleability have been seen as central to political projects of producing subjectivities that are resistant to power, to resisting the subject being formed in a discrete way, to the critical project of refusing the subjectivities that are imposed upon us (Foucault 1982, 216). Catherine Malabou, for example, has repeatedly underscored the 'ontological anteriority of fashioning over essence' (2012, 91) in her work on the concept of 'plasticity'. 'Plasticity', for her, is another name for Foucault's 'transsubjectivation' (Malabou and Vahanian 2008, 5), a process in which there is a sublation of the difference between the self and itself that produces a new self (Foucault 2005, 214). It is a method for resisting the ossification of power relations.

I do not believe that we should commit, at the outset, to identifying the significance of players constantly reworking their gameplay practices with any one of these three possibilities. What is required is sensitively conducted empirical research on particular contexts of gameplay practices in order to test the theoretical backbone sketched out here. This presentation, however, only seeks to set out the foundations upon which such research may be done later and to gesture at the complexity of the imbrication of three possibilities. The empirical work would hopefully elucidate our understanding of the fixity and malleability of various different kinds of gamer 'habitus' – their 'concrete' characteristics and features – and also the extent to which they may be subsumed under the umbrella of habituation to a constant re-habituation. This latter question will in turn say something about two further issues: first, the significance and relationality of these kinds of gamer habitus in a broader ecology of digital skills and dispositions; second, the ways in which distinct kinds of flexibility may be an effect of power and/or a means of resisting power.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Becoming competent at computer games may be especially revealing as to the way in which we acquire a 'habitus', which is in part due to the speed with which we attain gamic competence, owing to the analytical learning cycle afforded by computer games (Arsenault and Perron 2009) and the fast feedback loops involved.