Book Review

DIGITAL GAMES BETWEEN THE TENSIONS OF CULTURE, CREATIVITY AND INDUSTRY

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Kerr, A. (2017). *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era.* New York: Routledge, 228 pages, ISBN: 9780415858861.

People working in the games industry and researchers in this field probably know that it is not easy to reach comprehensive global data and analysis of the digital games industry. The first reason is the complex structure of the industry since it depends on many variables such as national and regional policies, cities, investments, incentives or the organizational strategies in political, economic, social and cultural aspects. The second reason, on the other hand, is related to finding an objective and independent statistics of the digital games industry. Apart from that, academic studies on the digital games industry mostly focus on the content of digital games and rarely on the structure of the industry or game workers' experiences. The absence of these studies in the literature is reasonably foreseeable considering the rapidly changing and transforming nature of technology and the difficulty to find long-term research funding for scholars.

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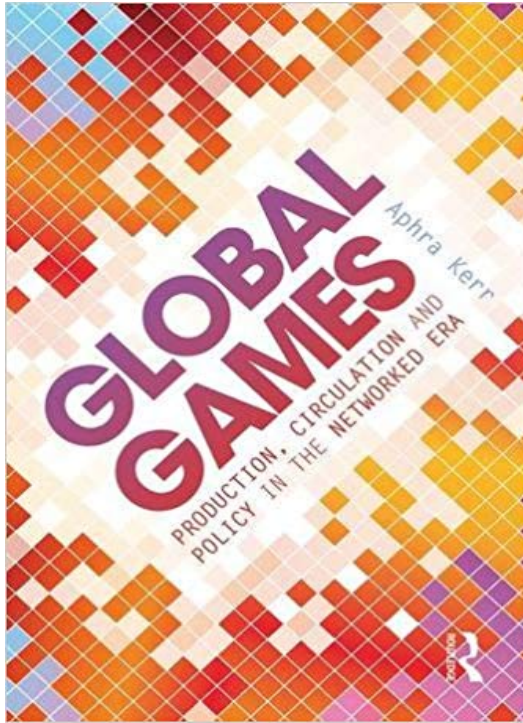
Aphra Kerr is one of the most significant scholars who studies media and technology, especially games and play. Kerr has contributed to this field with her researches and publications for more than 15 years. In 2006, Kerr published her first book on digital games *"The Business and Culture of Digital Games: Gamework/Gameplay"*, which she often referred to and discussed in her latest book *"Global Games"* (2017).

Global Games is an empirical study that has 10 years of research background and a very rich methodology, which I would prefer to read more for the details, including interviews with workers, virtual ethnographies in online games and analyses of the industry-related documents. As the title suggests, Kerr analyzes the political, economic, social and cultural factors such as the policies and the different technical, individual and organizational aspects shaping the production and circulation practices in the global digital games industry.

The book provides detailed information on primary and secondary data from almost all around the world regarding the digital games industry. As a researcher studying the digital games industry in Turkey, I believe the data and the analysis provide a broad approach for both the scholars in the field and people working in the industry. More importantly, Kerr's book leads readers to think about the basic approaches and main discussions concerning almost all digital game researchers.

One of those discussions is about whether digital games should be categorized within the cultural or the creative industry. Kerr prefers situating the digital games industry within the cultural industry category (p. 6). The roots of the culture industry go back to the Frankfurt School theorists. In 1947, Horkheimer and Adorno originally used the term in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) "to refer to industrially produced commercial entertainment -broadcasting, film, publishing, recorded music- as distinct from the subsidised "arts" -visual and performing arts, museums and galleries" (Galloway and Dunlop, 2007, p. 18). The term "culture industry" was coined to highlight the industrialization, standardization and commodification of culture, while

the term "creative industries" originated in the 20th century to highlight the economic contribution of these industries to national income (p. 178).

In the 1990s, creative industries arose as a discourse and an instrument of policy (Banks and O'Connor, 2009, p. 365). In the UK Government's *2001 Creative Industries Mapping Document*, creative industries were defined as "those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property" (DCMS, 2016, p. 3).

Kerr considers the UK definition of creative industries to be very large and unwieldy, and that it would be useful to distinguish between the companies producing software and the ones creating aesthetic and interactive contents or texts (p. 179). Consistently, she follows the European cultural industries approach which has most recently been developed by Hesmondalgh (2013), Bustamante (2004), Miège (2011) and Garnham (2000) to pay attention to the structure of the industry and the imbalances of power between companies (p. 4). On the one hand, the term "cultural industries" has been criticized mainly due to boundary problems, what the term "culture" includes and excludes (Smith and McKinlay, 2009, p. 4) or due to its problematic connotations of art and politics (Banks and O'Connor, 2009, p. 365). On the other hand, there are similar criticisms toward the term "creativity" and the relationship between creative industries and economy.

The terms "cultural industries" and "creative industries" are sometimes used interchangeably. Although there are continuities between the cultural and creative industries, Cunningham argues that the term "creative industries" highlights the "new economy" and its associated characteristics. And considering the interactivity, convergence, customization, collaboration and networks as the key factors, the technological and organizational innovation enables new relationships with customers and the public that do not rely on 'mass' models of centralized media production and real-time public consumption (Cunningham, 2002, pp. 58- 59).

Kerr explains the reason for situating the games industry within the cultural industry category and underlines the importance of collaboration for cultural production and variable commodity forms. Kerr also mentions that the creative industry approach foregrounds the economic aspects, whereas the cultural industry category is more engaged with both cultural and economic roles of these industries (p. 6). It is quite intriguing that according to Banks and O'Connor, the key anxiety about these terms is that they represent a shift from cultural to economic priorities. They state

that although in some cases it may have been so, "this was not necessarily an attempt to bolster the oppositions between culture and economics as but more a question of the correct articulation between these two 'moments' of contemporary cultural production" (Banks and O'Connor, 2009, p. 367).

There are also other terms in the literature such as "cultural and creative industries" (CCI), also mentioned by Kerr, which can be considered as an attempt to mediate between the critical term "culture industry" and the policy of creative industries (p. 178). Especially when it comes to digital games, the discussions about the terms point out the tensions between culture, creativity and industry and what these terms represent (p. 179). We may also add technology to these tensions since how to approach and situate technology constitutes one of the main debates. Kerr (p. 14) considers technology, which is not neutral and can be either inclusive or exclusive, as one factor to understand the innovation process that is, in the meanwhile, as equally important as other business-related, political, legal and cultural factors. Thus, according to this approach, the digital games industry is not determined by technology. This tension is further explained in the book; moreover, Kerr discusses the structure of the games industry, how it should be categorized and if it is really global in the second chapter.

Kerr in fact adds a question mark after "global games". As researches indicate, the largest markets of digital games are in North America, Western Europe and in some parts of Asia (p. 177), and a few highly competitive dominant companies are mostly located in North America, Japan and now in China, all of which shape the terms and conditions of access to the market (p. 104). In other words, the top companies are all active in both the publishing and distribution processes, and act as the key gatekeepers in the flow of global games (p. 63). Additionally, the companies' activities are often shaped by local and national policies or laws as well as local cultures and tastes. Thus, according to the author, the companies adopt the discourse of globalization while acting locally (p. 200). Kerr argues that the games industry works hard to enforce a range of boundaries regarding the market, regions, contents, and etc. despite the discourse of globality adopted by some of the largest media and game companies. While some companies operate transnationally, only a few are global despite the discourse of globality; therefore, Kerr suggests that in many instances the use of the terms "international" or "transnational" are more appropriate than the term "global" (p. 194). The study demonstrates that the digital games industry, especially mobile games, is rapidly growing. It also questions different kinds of labor including developers, players

or community managers. I believe Kerr's study presents striking findings about labor, workers and their working conditions. She mentions that community managers, who are basically responsible for monitoring and managing player behaviors, perform emotional labor while trying to remain calm and helpful but end up finding themselves in emotionally charged online contexts (p. 122)[1]. Similarly, different kinds of immaterial labor are in question for player-generated contents as players directly or indirectly generate economic value by content modifications and broadcasts of gameplay (p. 130). In relation to the dependence of the sector, working conditions and the productive nature of gameplay in an economic and social sense, Kerr explores the emergence of "games as a service" rather than a product, which means that production never ends. However, Kerr underlines that it is important to realize that the market and other contextual factors are ever present, shaping what developers and players do (p. 190).

The study reveals that from high paid programmers to lower paid community management and quality assurance workers, game workers, mostly performing their dream jobs, have precarious working lives. On one hand, they enjoy their work, and on the other hand, they are exploited until they eventually burn out or leave. Those who lack significant levels of financial, cultural, social and gaming capital find it hard to gain entry, and those who do eventually leave when caring and other responsibilities emerge (pp. 104- 105).

Kerr's research proves that in the games industry, employment is highly uncertain and unequal, and lacks diversity. Unlike what I expected, the top 10 US-based game companies have been involved in court cases over unpaid royalties, worker contracts and working hours within the past ten years. Not surprisingly, data shows that the games industry has still been dominated by young, male, white heterosexuals whereas female workers are most likely to be found in supportive roles rather than in core development roles (pp. 192- 193). It is understood that the stigma associated with being a "gamer" or the passion for games, which is important in the recruitment process and is promoted in job advertisements, and the work/life balance is strongly related to the lack of diversity (pp. 98- 99). In the digital games industry as one of the industries that requires creative/cultural work, the use of affective terms such as "passion" or "love" for motivation and self-realization through work are actually very

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[1] An earlier study of Kerr (2016) named "Recruitment, Work, and Identity in Community Management: Passion, Precarity, and Play" provides more detailed and broad information about the work of online community managers in the digital games industry.

common. Miya Tokumitsu (2015) conducts a brief discussion on this issue through the popular "do what you love" mantra and how this conceals socio-economic inequalities. If we look at the digital games industry from a few steps back, it is seen that the production and circulation activities are shaped by different social, cultural, economic and political factors. In this context, by borrowing Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of spatialisation[2], Kerr explains how these factors influence the games industry and the location of production or industry-related events in the fifth chapter of the book. Besides the companies, there are different factors underlined in this chapter such as governments, regional and national policies, taxes, cities, trade associations, investments, and incubation centers or programs.

Moreover, the most interesting part is where Kerr (p. 172) mentions that some developers without significant reputation or track record develop virtual and networked forms of production by necessity, and some communities, collectives, clusters and scenes that are not purely driven by the formal market keep emerging. These communities, underground events or informal meetings, such as festivals where creative individuals come together temporarily, seem important for some game developers. Especially for those whose carriers are individualized as they rely on virtual, informal face-to-face socialization in order to exchange ideas or get feedback on their projects. In other words, we can say that new translocal and virtual production networks are emerging, and they can provide sociability, support and feedback for some game developers; although Kerr reminds that network sociality can be a cruel space for those who are trying to challenge dominant forms and practices. Yet, I think alternative networks are promising in the context of "getting together", which is essential for collectivity required for both creating independent games and better working conditions.

In conclusion, *Global Games* provides a multi-layered political, economic and sociological analysis of the games industry over the past decade. The book presents a detailed and broad information about the production and circulation practices in the games industry from different countries, markets, companies and game workers. The last but not the least, I believe it represents a foundation for researchers to explore the tensions between culture, industry, technology and creativity that leads the main discussions in digital games studies.

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[2] In Kerr's article named "The spatialisation of the digital games industry: Lessons from Ireland" (2012), a broader explanation of the concept can be found.

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