ABSTRACT

This paper offers a social history of funfairs and arcades in mid-20th century urban England. Critiquing existing histories of games for often neglecting players and the specific locales in which games are played, it draws on both new cinema history and cultural studies’ conception of ‘radical contextualism’ to outline what the paper describes as a game’s ludosity. Ludosity, the paper proposes, condition or quality of game experience as shaped by a range of agents, institutions and contexts. Utilising mass observation records, it offers a detailed analysis of the ways in which social interactions influenced ludic experiences of pinball tables and crane machines and posits that games history needs to centre players in order to fully conceptualize games in history.

KEYWORDS

Games history; social history; arcades; pinball; cultural studies.

INTRODUCTION

Fun fairs and amusement arcades mushroomed in England’s cities during the 1930s and 40s, to the extent that The Guardian described a ‘fun fair craze’ (‘The Fun Fair Craze’, 1938, p.8). The Daily Mail, the mouthpiece of middle-England, breathlessly portrayed the sights and sounds of these new spaces:

Click, click, click! The ball runs down the table, bounces against springs, falls into a slot, is shot back again. Bells ring. Lights appears.

On a picturesque background figures dance to the evolutions of a rising score . . . A crowd gathers round, for the games as fascinating to watch as to play. (Crofton, 1939, p.10)

In blending the mechanical and electrical systems with the social experiences specific to the English urban milieus, this description hints at the overarching and interconnected arguments
presented in this paper. I introduce the term ludosity, the condition or quality of a game, the sensations, emotions and physiological experiences engendered by a game, as constituted by its broader social and cultural contexts.

The paper first outlines the four dominant games history approaches: cultural history, platform studies, material and heritage histories, and media archaeology. Though offering useful perspectives on broader cultural meanings, what is missing in much of this work is an engagement with social history influences and methods, particularly the meanings of games to those participating in them. Alongside this, the nature of games is discussed, paying attention to the value and limitations of frame analysis, particularly its struggles to capture the broader social and cultural contexts. Instead, utilising Lawrence Grossberg’s description of as cultural studies’ ‘radical contextualism’ (1997), I propose that histories offer a useful space to study the relationship between micro and macro, and how this shapes a game’s ludosity.

The paper then focuses on the meanings, values and interactions of several London amusement arcades, building on social history and new cinema history, positing an approach I describe as new games history. Drawing on mass observation archives, I define the specific locales and experiences of players in several London arcades in the late-1930s to the mid-1940s. The paper first explores the sights, sounds, textures and promotional techniques used in the arcade, describing how the machines operated, their displays, and the broader environment of the arcade itself. I then turn to the social relationships and interactions between people in the arcade itself, including players and staff. Focusing on conversations, exchanges and other social interactions, the analysis seeks to uncover meanings that existed beyond the rules-based systems built into the machines themselves. In analysing how players, attendants and proprietors communicated and interacted, the paper reveals key tensions which in turn point to broader social tensions specific to British society.
ARCADE KNOWLEDGE

Games history has emerged as a key site of scholarship in game and media studies (see Wade & Webber, 2016), travelling a long way from Aphra Kerr’s suggestion that ‘a good social history of digital games remains to be written’ (2006, p.20), even if I will shortly problematize what the social in social history means. There is now a plethora of excellent histories countering the digi-Whiggish and determinist approaches that focused on incremental ‘improvements’ from one platform and ‘generation’ to another (Therrien, 2012, p.26). Scholars have embraced Kerr’s suggestion that a social history of games ‘would focus less on dates and inventors and more on struggles and uncertainties’ (2006, p.20), and debates about appropriate theories and methods remain at the forefront. Such developments have consequently shaped our understanding of the histories of our digital ludic-capitalist present.

Four dominant approaches have emerged: cultural history, platform studies, material and heritage histories, and media archaeology. They share more in common than might nominally be suggested, and I suspect many authors might feel comfortable working across these labels, but there is enough variance, drawing on diverse intellectual legacies, that we should take seriously their differences. Cultural histories analyse how videogames were understood, usually in fictional and non-fictional textual representations, assessing the meanings, values and ideologies associated with games (Newman, 2017). Platform Studies have addressed the relationship between hardware and software, ‘text’ and machine, investigating the affordances of ‘underlying computer systems that support creative work’ (Bogost & Montfort, 2009). Material and heritage histories are interested in the physical artefacts of gaming cultures, alongside their upkeep and archiving (Newman, 2012; Guins, 2014). Finally, “archaeologies” of gaming have sought to evaluate ‘aspects of media that would otherwise escape the discourse of cultural history’ (Ernst, 2011, p.240), stressing ‘multiple
potential pathways, technological dead ends, lost histories, circuitous routes, and alternative conceptions’ (Apperley and Parikka, 2018, p.4).

‘The arcade’ has provided fruitful case studies. Erkki Huhtamo (2005) offered an early intervention and demonstration of the value of archaeological pre-history approaches to ‘video’ games, an approach that has since incorporated electric shock games (Parisi, 2013) and sounds of penny arcades (Collins, 2016). Elsewhere, and drawing on heritage studies, maintenance and archiving is an important contribution to material histories (Guins, 2014). Platform studies successfully consider how arcade games have been reworked as ‘ports’ on home consoles, addressing the materiality of each (Gazzard, 2014; Montfort & Bogost, 2009). Finally, cultural histories have analysed how the ‘metaphysics’ (Skolnik & Conway, 2017) and discourses of 1970s and ‘80s arcades cultures shaped gaming culture, particularly in relation to gender and class (Newman, 2017; Kocurek, 2012; 2015). There is much to be celebrated: their input serves as an important reminder that the pleasures, discourses and meanings of videogames did not miraculously appear in the countercultures and MIT Laboratories of 1950s and ‘60s America, and there are clear attempts to locate meaning beyond the machines themselves.

This work has been especially successful in maintaining that games reveal something about the broader societies that produce them. In relation to my case study, pinball and other mechanical entertainments, there is an agreement that arcades of the twentieth century tell us something about the era in which they were produced. Huhtamo suggests that pinball machines parodied the mechanised work of Taylorism (2005), and Kocurek describes pinball as being the Fordist entertainment par excellence in which players are introduced to ‘modernist values’ (2012, p.201). In so doing she draws on an argument presented by Warren Susman who argues that ‘the pinball machine was the ideal toy of the machine age’ (2012, p.201). These are valuable insights that this paper will build upon later.
Hitherto, then, game histories have done much to foreground questions of broader political, economic and cultural meanings, but the participants, and the specific social contexts in which those participants interact with games, have tended to be obscured. When historians have focused on placing players into history, as Alex Wade (2016) and Alan Meade’s creative and innovative *Arcade Tales* project have done, it reveals important and valuable insights that might otherwise have gone unseen, but such analysis remains at best emergent. That is not to say that other scholars have lacked a sense that players are important. Carl Therrien has stressed the value and potential of oral histories (2012, p.26), for instance. Likewise, in their archaeological critique of platform studies, Apperley and Parikka wonder the degree to which ‘the practices of the users of platforms form and inform the platform studies archive?’ (2015, p.6). The same evaluation, however, can be made of much media archelogy, where players and users of technology haunt the archives but are never fully constituted or described.

Related issues are reproduced in cultural histories. Cultural historians have drawn on newspaper and magazine articles (Nooney, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2015; Gazzard, 2014), popular and academic non-fiction reports (Newman, 2017), fictional texts like films, television shows and comics (Kocurek, 2015), other associated paratexts and the trade press. There are clear and evident advantages to consulting these documents, not least the way they can rebuild key discourses that circulate around emergent technologies. But the limitations of such sources can have follow-on effects into the analysis itself. This can best be identified in Kocurek’s 2012 essay and subsequent monograph where she offers a ‘phenomenological tour of an imagined golden era arcade’ (2012, p.189). I do not pick this essay because it is egregious: she presents a sophisticated analysis of the representations and meanings of arcade cultures and videogames which does much to explain contemporary video game culture. Users of these spaces, however, are generally reconstructed from the most explicitly visible: those featured in the press or other popular and fictionalised accounts, especially those attached to Twin Galaxies or other
competitive scenes. Bluntly put, imagined ‘composite’ arcades do not exist, cannot be meaningfully experienced, and though we might be able to make generalised claims about what an ‘arcade’ might look like, in so doing more is lost than is potentially gained. Specificity, in fact, is lost, and as Lisa Gitelman claims when it comes to offering histories of technology, ‘specificity is key’ (2006, p.8).

Kerr’s suggestion that a social history of games should focus on ‘struggles and uncertainties’ has certainly been met, but social history here appears to have lost its incisiveness, foregoing its stress on histories ‘from below’ (Thompson, 1966). Part of the issue here is the slippiness and convergence of ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ history, where, despite developing from their own epistemological traditions, they have increasingly come to be used interchangeably (Joyce, 2010). Roger Chartier’s pithy description of history moving from the ‘social history of culture to the cultural history of society’ captures some of the broader trends seen in history that are reproduced in a lot of games histories (in Burke, 2008: 77). A social history of games, then, would also be concerned with how individuals and groups understood games, experienced games, and made meaning out of games in contexts not of their own choosing.

While a game’s rules and mechanism can be passed down through history, the feelings, meanings and emotions facilitated by the game cannot (Crawford, 2012, p.6). Understanding the way participants interact and interpret games is vital, and the nature of games continues to be a hotly discussed topic. Certainly, what is clear is that they offer a type of condition or quality which generate certain dispositions, emotions and experiences (Juul, 2008: p.57; Bateman, 2015: 404). Naming these experiences, however, is not simple. Reverting to concept of ‘play’ makes a priori judgements about pleasures, values and meanings (Malaby, 2007, p.96). More significantly, how we contextualize and make sense of those attitudes and experiences is trickier than might first be assumed (Stenros, 2014). The productive debates
about the nature of the ‘magic circle’ show (Consalvo, 2009; Crawford, 2012; Juul, 2008; Stenros, 2014) that the relationship between the game rules, the psychological and social boundaries facilitated by game participants and broader society are harder to pin down. Players and observers can build different meanings, values and ideas about games, rooted in social networks which fundamentally inform and alter both attitudes and experience (Harper, 2013; Montola, 2012; Giddings, 2009; Crawford, 2012; Thorhauge, 2013; Jakobsson, 2007).

Consequently, there has been a phenomenological turn in game studies, usually drawing on Goffman’s frame analysis (Deterding, 2018; Consalvo, 2009; Skolnik & Conway, 2017; Lin & Sun, 2011). Frames help theorize how players and other participants make sense of, respond to, rationalize and organise games, to answering the question, “what is going on here?” (Goffman, 1974: 8) These insights assist in evaluating how games are navigated by participants, but they are less helpful when looking to capture other aspects of experience. Frames assess the pre-conditions for how affect is processed into emotion, but they stumble when it comes to capturing the psychological and physiological thrills that certainly some games experienced in certain ways engender. They do not capture the materiality of a game or its inputs as experienced by participants (Taylor, 2009, p.332), as the emergent work on haptic media studies considers (Parisi, 2018), nor, more generally, the sights, sounds and smells that surround games.

Moreover, dramaturgical approaches are less applicable when it comes to addressing ‘where frames come from’ (Crawford, 2012, p.30), a point which Goffman was only too aware (1974, p.13). The meaning of games, as T.L. Taylor describes, emerges from a ‘dynamic process’ of ‘interrelations’ (2009, p.332) as agents, organisations and cultural fields seek to shape, manage and direct the meanings, values and experiences of games, sometimes successfully and sometimes less so, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict. Whether through rulebooks and guides, paratextual networks and promotional cultures, communities
and social networks, architecture, space and place, or broader legal, political and cultural discourses. Critically, such contexts are shaped by conflicts, compromises and other political negotiations. The difficulty of capturing such skirmishes is often, somewhat understandably, reproduced in many contemporary ethnographies that are concerned with how game worlds are navigated. Game histories, conversely, have done a good job of capturing those contexts but often fail to capture the micro interactions of experience.

One way of bridging this gap between the micro and macro is to think about what Lawrence Grossberg describes as cultural studies’ ‘radical contextualism’ (1997). Drawing on Stuart Hall, who was likewise influenced by social history (Hall, 1980), for Grossberg culture ‘does not exist outside apart from the forces of the context that constitute it as what it is. Obviously, context is not merely background but the very conditions of possibility of something’ (1997, p.255). Here, classical cultural studies approaches see all micro-interactions as being shaped by the broader historical and political contexts where they operate. Given the advantages afforded by temporal distance, games histories provide a unique opportunity for examining the meaning of games alongside the meaning of broader structures.

**LUDOSITY AND A NEW GAMES HISTORY?**

In blending these concerns – radically contextualised meanings, sensations, emotions and pleasures of games – this paper introduces the term *ludosity*, an abstract noun, to describe the condition or quality of game participation. The need for a single term is partly a matter of practical linguistics: there is no noun for ludic in English, and as an adjective, the quality of being part of a game requires a noun to make sense, usually something like ‘the ludic experience’ or Bernard Suit’s ‘lusory attitude’ (1978). ‘Ludosity’ responds to a need for a single term that has specificity and functionality, allowing us to efficiently capture a broader set of discussions and debates. Of course, a desire for aesthetics always plays a role in the creation of new terminology, but there is also value in drawing upon created words as
possibilities for rethinking, sidestepping existing problematics. It moves beyond thinking about
the ludic experience of a set of game rules, a term that always flirts with the ahistorical, to a
more holistic term that encompasses a broader set of affective, material and physiological
sensations. Ludosity, moreover, requires us to think about specific contexts, the interactions
and intersections between a variety of agents and institutions seeking to shape the condition
engendered by a game, alongside the broader political terrains those skirmishes take place.

When it comes to historicizing ludosity, though not offering readymade solutions,
methodological and theoretical insights can be gleaned from existing social histories. A
successful field in which audiences and specificity has been prioritised is film history. Since
the 1990s, historians have deliberately moved away from aesthetic studies of texts or political
economies that prioritise auteurs and studio systems, to an interest in the microhistories of local
promotion and dissemination, reception and consumption (Jancovich, Faire & Stubbings, 2003;
Maltby, Biltereyst & Meers, 2011). Using underexplored archival materials, new cinema
histories, as they have been called, explore cinema’s past ‘as a site of social and cultural
exchange’, exploring the activities of ‘film distribution and exhibition, the legal and political
discourses that craft cinema’s profile in public life, and the social and cultural histories of
specific cinema audiences’ (Maltby, 2011, p.3). Importantly for arcades, new cinema histories
establish that promotion was often highly dependent on theatre owners and managers running
campaigns and promotions for local audiences. Local identities, cinema architecture, regional
geographies, operating in broader local and national social, political, regulative and economic
contexts, could all influence the reception of these texts. Audiences generated different
meanings and experiences, changing from one cinema space to the next, even in the same town.

Applying these approaches to the history of games opens important avenues. A new
games history might focus on the study of local and named arcades, game and rental shops or
other spaces where games were played, bought and sold; it might focus on specific players and
their experiences; or it might examine oral histories of consoles and the specific familial or friendship meanings attached to them. Wade has come closest to fulfilling what this new games history might look like (2016), and as he demonstrates, the ludosity of a game encountered for the first time on a family holiday at Southend-on-Sea will radically differ to, say, a group of friends playing the same game in Tokyo’s Akihabara district.

More fundamentally, social histories provide well-honed methodologies and approaches when trying to understand a games history ‘from below’. National and local governmental archives, letters and diaries, and a variety of other written and audio-visual archives, all provide a surprisingly underutilised collection of sources hitherto underexplored by games historians. This paper draws on the Mass Observation Archive (MO), for instance, and their study of fun fairs in the 1940s. MO grew out of a desire to understand the pleasures and cultures of the urban working classes (see Hubble, 2006), and have become a key feature of contemporary British social, film and media history (Downs, 2011; Litherland, 2018; Örnebring, 2007; Richards and Sheridan, 1987). Critically, the MO is a significant institution in the history of audience research, albeit one that is usually excluded in general histories of this subject (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003), testing novel ethnographical approaches that shaped British cultural studies.

This paper is based on MO records, supplemented with national and industry press reports. Observers visited a Fulham arcade in 1939, four London arcades in 1940 – The Sports Garden, Amusement Arcade, Jubilee Joy Arcade, and Oxford Street Sports Arcade – in the Oxford Street, Regent Street, and Bond Street area, and then revisited the area in 1943 and 1946. MO accounts require care and interrogation: observers usually came from a middle-class and observed the habits and practices of the urban working-class, interpreting practices they did not necessarily understand. A good example is the shame and ‘sheepish . . . manner’ observers read into men and boys using a peepshow (‘Sports Garden’, 18/8/1940, MO,
SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). It could be the case that they were ashamed of using the machine in public, but there is also every possibility that the observers projected their own anxieties and feelings towards these practices onto these users. Despite these limitations, however, the sources offer detailed geographical and social descriptions of how players interacted not just with machines, but with the arcade space, its staff and other players, and hints at the broader emotions, qualities and conditions that these games engendered. The records do a particularly good job of capturing the details – cigarette ash at the end of cigarettes, furtive glances, overheard conversations, giggles – that do so much to tell us about pinball tables and crane machine’s ludosity in these spaces.

“ARTIFICIAL ATMOSPHERE”

The broader environment of exhibitions and sideshows are important for contextualising the ludosity of early mechanical entertainments. Arcade proprietors, managers and staff created visual and auditory experiences for players, promoted and displayed machines in specific ways, partly in response to broader legal, commercial and political pressures. This section seeks to reconstruct the local geographic, sensory and architectural milieus in which they were played (Guins, 2004; Gazzard, 2016) while also understanding the broader discursive, political and cultural ‘lines of articulation’ that shaped those spaces (Grossberg, 1997, p.258).

Emerging from the street performers (Benson, 1983, p.65), penny arcades (Huhtamo, 2016;), world’s fair (Nasaw, 1993; Schweizer, Hollengreen, & Rouse, 2014), and seaside and fairground side shows (Kane, 2013), mechanical and electrical amusement arcades expanded as a popular entertainment in Britain’s cities in the 1930s. By 1939 there were more than 250 arcades and “saloons” in London (Crofton, 1939, p.10), levelling out to about 69 during the height of the war in 1942 (‘Fun Fairs Turn Away the Child Gamblers’, 1942, p.3). In London, dozens had clustered in specific, central areas of the city, with ‘Oxford Street, Regent Street,
and Bond Street . . . [becoming] a district of exhibitions, fun fairs, and side shows of all kind’

The London funfairs, sports gardens and arcades were sensorially stimulating and a
puncture in the rhythms of everyday life. *The Guardian* attempted to capture the environment,
describing how the ‘lights glare, players frown, and as the evening wanes a smoke haze’ (The
Fun Fair Craze, 1938, p.8). They featured a variety of mechanical entertainments and
amusements, including, ‘peep shows, rifle ranges, palmists, photographers, punch ball,
dodgems, rifle range, skittles’ (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/40, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). Arcades varied in size, but London’s larger spaces consisted of either ‘a
main promenade’ (‘Sports Garden’, 18/8/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A) or a ‘long hall’ which
‘usually open[ed] to the street set out with rows of “cranes”’ (‘Oxford Street Funfairs’,
3/8/1946, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,E). To entice passing trade, many placed exciting attractions
at the entrance of the arcades, including a ‘weighing machine’ and an ‘ice cream bar’ (‘Oxford
Street Funfairs’, 3/8/1946, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,E). Other promotional devices were used to
garner the attention of passers-by on the street. Mass observers at the Sports Garden, for
instance, complained that ‘music was blaring from a radiogram’ (‘Sports Garden’, 2/9/1940,
MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A), and at the Amusement Arcade on Edgware Road ‘music glared out
into the street’ (‘Amusement Arcade’, 18/8/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A).

Pinball tables were ‘the most popular machines and form[ed] the backbone’ of the
arcades (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/40, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). London arcades
contained an average of 30 machines, with at least 100,000 in total across the country (Crofton,
1939, p.10). Having developed from bagatelle and other billiards style games via a series of
technical innovations in the early- to mid-1930s, by the early 1940s tables were ‘electrically
operated’, and when the ball hit pins it lit up ‘the score upon the vertical plate at the back, on
which is represented a variety of scenes with figures or objects which appear to move when the
light behind them goes off” (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/40, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). Figures represented an assortment of sports and entertainments, particularly those linked to images of modernist symbols of the era (see Horrall, 2001). These included ‘Ice skating; fishing; shooting; swimming; races between speedboats, horses, racing cars; traffic lights; dances’ (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). After pinball, electrical cranes were the second most popular machines. Not unlike crane games of British seaside arcades (Downs, 2011), they featured a claw that could be moved by the player and then capture a prize.

The game extended beyond the mechanical properties of the machines, and proprietors and attendants as forms of promotions to help generate a competitive spirit among players. Hand-written ‘High Score Boards’ were produced on paper scattered around the arcade itself (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). Signs also served a legal purpose. The shifting legal conditions for mechanical and electrical amusements created often-confused legislation, reluctance by police to intervene, and arcade proprietor’s misinterpretation and misunderstanding of the laws. ‘There was at the time,’ David Miers suggests, ‘a widespread but erroneous assumption…that a ticket placed on or above a machine saying “for amusement only” thereby rendered its use under any conditions lawful’ (2003, p.133). To counter the illegality of offering cash prizes, ‘gifts’ were offered, including ‘watches, clocks, cigarettes and cigarette lighters and cases, shaving materials’ cigarette packets, bakelite salt and pepper pots, sugar castors, combs, match box covers, ashtrays etc’ (‘Oxford Street Funfairs’, 3/8/1946, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,E). While prizes were not supposed to be paid in cash, and multiple signs reiterated that gambling was not permitted, one observer claimed this was not always the case, having been paid in cash himself instead of a packet of cigarettes (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A).
Debates about the legality of arcades were also matched by anxieties regarding ‘Americanisation’. Though machines in London came from both Britain and American manufacturers, American imports had several distinct advantages. Britain was able to keep up with innovations and catering for British and European tastes, like soccer, but the quality of the tables often did not match those from Chicago (Sevarg, 1933b). Coupled with the strong exchange rate with the dollar, British manufactures faced stiff competition with their American counterparts (Sevarg, 1933a). As such, many of the technical and electrical innovations found in British arcades were on machines produced in Chicago. The arcades were therefore understood as part of a broader mass, global popular entertainment, linked to Hollywood movies, recorded popular music and other ‘Americanised’ cultural forms. As Adrian Horn suggests, the popularity of American products was ultimately always ‘set against a background of intellectual hostility toward the feared effects of American cultural intrusions’ (Horn, 2009:14).

Illegality and Americanisation co-mingled to create a general fear about the supposed degeneracy produced in and by the arcades, particularly with regards to children and the working class. Links to Chicago conjured images of organise crime and the mob, and these discourses were reproduced in the British popular press. Gangs were rumoured to have interests in the machines, (‘London Gang Leader Murdered: Fight Over ‘Rackets’ Rule’, 1939, p.1), or were seen to be ‘meeting-places for gangs…rowdies mainly interested in plotting thefts, robberies, assaults (Humphreys, 1953, p.3). Even without the explicit threat of organized crime, the quasi-gambling, noise and smoke meant that they were often described as ‘plague spots’ and ‘tens of temptation’ (‘Fun Fairs Turn Away the Child Gamblers’, 1942, p.3). Many arcade proprietors themselves described the work they were undertaking to keep the arcades safe, clean and free of under-16s (Rymer in ‘Fun Fairs Turn Away the Child Gamblers’,1942, p.3). When speaking to observers, proprietors were keen to offer their own specific forms of
distinction that separated ‘fun fairs’ from ‘sports arcades’, though the observers seemed cynical in these separations (‘Oxford Street Funfairs’, 3/8/1946, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,E).

Taken together, the sounds of machines blending with the loud recorded popular music, the mist of smoke as players chain smoked their prizes, and the glare of bright lighting meant that the observers lamented the ‘artificial atmosphere’ (‘General Impressions’, 18/8/40, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). Given this environment – ‘artificiality’ meeting potential criminality – it is unsurprising that the fairs and arcades were understood as part of a broader set of anxieties about the ‘candy floss’ culture of mechanised, Americanised popular culture. In turn, the way the British urban arcades were designed, promoted, and understood by players, all radically informed the ludosity of the machines by players.

“YOU’VE GOT A LOT OF WINNERS HERE”

Like much British culture, there was an overt class dynamic in the arcades, and mass observers understood the regular clientele as working-class. Moving away from simple demography, observer’s descriptions were often inflected with a class judgement about individual’s qualities, in part linked to way they conceptualised the broader locales atmospheres described above. One player, for example, was described as a ‘small, sly person and seemed to chain smoke most of the time he was in the saloon’ (Shepards Bush [sic], 14/7/1943, SxMOA1,2,16,1,D). This ‘sly’ player was compared to a more ‘respectable’ attendant, who was described as ‘a typical example of the better type of the D – youth group, the type that social workers call a “rough diamond” (Shepards Bush [sic], 14/7/1943, SxMOA1,2,16,1,D). Though less visible, owners and proprietors also played an important role in the arcades. In one account observers witnessed an exchange between the attendant and someone they assumed to be the proprietor:

A fat, bowler-hatted man-about-town was talking at the entrance to one of the attendants. Both were laughing. The bowler-hatted man pushed his hat to the back of his head, stuck his hands in his pockets and swung
up onto his toes and down again. They turned and went into the Arcade.

(‘Amusement Arcade’, 18/8/1940, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A)

The early arcades were also an important space in which gendered gaming terrains were (re)produced. In the Daily Mail, John Crofton's heuristic reflection that in pin-table saloons and amusement arcades ‘men outnumber women players by at least ten to one in most places’ (1939, p.10) is somewhat supported by records made by mass observers, who saw ‘very few women during the survey’ (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). An hour at the Sports Garden found 3 out of the 23 players were women, and the Oxford St. Sports Arcade and Amusement Arcade recorded no women at all.

Where women did enter the arcade their attitudes to the machines was noticeably different to men’s. In one instance, a middle-class woman of about 55, accompanied by a younger woman of about 25, claimed, ‘You must come here, Look! this is what I like most’, before leaving quickly having not played (‘Sports Garden’, 18/8/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). Perhaps visiting, and looking at the machines, of a predominantly working-class, ‘dangerous’ space produced a frisson of excitement. More generally, women’s participation stressed amusement and titillation over winning, reminiscent of the way women are socialized to see their bodies as unsporting or uncompetitive (Young, 1990). In another incident, a woman of 45, accompanied by a man of 35 and a girl of 16, was recorded thus:

She giggled and turned to M 35 D: “Come on, Bert. Let’s ‘ave a go at this” She tried her luck at throwing darts through rings stuck on a cloth, so that she could win some “gift”. But she giggled so much all her darts went wide . . . . When she had finished she said, with a sigh, mock-seriously, “Well, that’s that. No luck this time. We’ll ‘ave to be going, I suppose” (‘Sports Garden’, 2/9/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A).
Women’s presence, then, apparently broke the social etiquette of masculine stoicism and competition which was otherwise displayed by male players, a dynamic that was reproduced in video game arcades later in the century (Skolnik & Conway, 2017). In fact, the small number of women who entered were the only ones in which the machines ‘seemed to evince anything like excitement’ (‘Amusement Arcade’, 18/8/1940, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A).

In comparison, and despite being called a ‘fun fair’, many men approached the machines with a stoic and even work-like attitude (Amusement Arcade’, 18/8/1940, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A), supporting Malaby’s argument that not all games generate a playful experience (2007). As discussed, an attraction for many people in the arcades was the offering of small prizes, frequently in the form of cigarettes. Arcades were used to ‘win’ cheaper cigarettes than were available at retail: an observer claimed, ‘undoubtedly many of [the players] rely upon the machines for their supply of cigarettes’ (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/40, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). Another posited that, ‘the regular players get to know their machines, and probably win more than they spend’ (‘Report on Amusement Places’, 16/02/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). The advertised cost of cigarettes equivalent to those that could be won in the machines was 8d (‘Rhodian cigarettes advertisement’, 1940, p.5), and each turn on a machine cost 1d. Participants that felt they could game the system in this way expressed a nonchalant attitude, and the scene of men coming and going for the express purpose of winning was neatly captured thus:

Four working class men, cigarettes hanging out of the corner of their mouths, stood round a machine which picked up packets of Rhodian or Ardath straight cut cigarettes. One tried 3 successive times (3 pennies) and then got a packet of Rhodians which he pocketed [sic], shrugged his shoulders and said “Come on, boys”. They all walked out. Another man…took their place, after changing 6d from one of the attendants.
He put in 4d before he got a packet. The attendant watched him with a smile. (‘Amusement Arcade’, 18/8/1940, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A)

The ambiguity of the attendant who watched with a smile raises questions: what, exactly, was he smiling at and why? Was it friendly? Mocking? Competitive? Ludosity, at least, was shaped by these small interactions while revealing broader social and economic tensions. Receiving a high score on a game of pinball or successfully operating a claw machine was not simply about personal pride, making it onto the winner’ posters pasted on the arcade walls, nor simply about shaving a few pence off the price of a packet of fags: in a very real sense they served as a low-level struggle for financial profit. Intrigued about this dynamic, the observers asked follow-up questions to the attendant:

Obs: “You’ve got a lot of winners here this afternoon, haven’t you?

Attndt: “We always do have here”

Obs: Oh. I’ve watched that chap up there during the last few minutes. He’s won twice.

Attndt: “Oh, yes. They come in and pick up some particular machine. You can’t stop them.

Obs. “You mean they get to know how to play on a particular table”

Attndt: “Oh, yes!”

Obs: “How many, that is, what proportion of winners do you get?”

Attndt: “Well, we reckon to pay out a packet of cigarettes for every 6d we take. You can’t make much money that way, but we have to do it. If we didn’t wouldn’t make much money at all. You can go into some
places and spend 2/6 without winning anything. (‘Oxford St. Sports Arcade’, 14/2/1940, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A)

Understanding the economic organisation of arcades and fairs is important. Most pintables were owned by a ‘small number of firms and individuals’ who either similarly operated saloons or leased them to ‘clubs or public-house licensees’ (Crofton, 1939, p.10). The owner and lessee split profits, with the owner paying ‘for the cost of upkeep and repairs’ and the lessee ‘the cost of prizes’ (Crofton, 1939, p.10). It is unlikely that proprietors were losing money on their machines, but there were also clear tensions attached to the game around questions of profitably, and a type of micro-conflict between player and proprietor. Put another way, the arcades offered a space where working-class men could ‘win’ in a broader capitalist system that often denied them structural victories.

“YOU AREN’T MEANT TO WIN”: SCIENCE, MYTH AND MAGIC

The struggle between players, attendants and proprietors outlined above can to be further radically contextualised by thinking about the social structures in which these roles were performed. Ultimately, these social roles and relationships influenced the arcade machines’ ludosity in multifaceted ways and understanding this ludosity is equally revealing in helping to make sense of how people experienced those structures.

As well as stressing the potentially ‘degrading’ environment of the arcades, journalistic, legal and legislative, and popular discourses also stressed, to some degree or another, concerns, anxieties or even amusement about the fundamental nature of the machines. At the core was an ambiguity about whether mechanical amusements were skill based, games of chance, or, insofar as the machine itself was rigged and/or staff rigged machines in order to not give prizes, fixed. Debates and discussions were similarly expressed on the arcade floors among players and attendants. In so doing, such conversations allowed for playful and nuanced discussions and critiques of capitalist structures relating to urban, mid-20th century life.
On the one hand, many of the games, particularly the claw and pinball machines, were understood to be expressions of skill, testing the hand-eye coordination of its players. As we have seen, some players apparently felt that arcades offered a better financial return for cigarettes than merely buying them over the counter, suggesting such beliefs were held by some. An article in *The Guardian* likewise proposed something similar:

The best tables to-day depend not on gravity but on electro-magnetic induction: the balls become magnetised as they connect with the bumpers and game can last twice as long…This, [the players] would have you know, is an art; they even insert their penny with an air. (‘The Fun Fair Craze’, 1938, p.8)

Conversely, there was a deeply and widely held suspicion of the arcade machines, a misgiving that partly continued a modernist inclination to ‘grant agency to technology’ (Gitelman, 2006: 2). Many players believed that the machines were heavily tampered with by staff to restrict the number of prizes rewarded. Exasperated, one player turned to his companion and declared, ‘You aren’t meant to win’. He continued:

We found we could get the knack of the machines after a bit . . . . But the minute they find you doing that, they alter the mechanism. I got to know a chap that worked there, and he told me they kept a very sharp eye on people to see whether they were getting the stuff out or not, and if they did, he’d be sent round to adjust the machine so as to make it more difficult. I’ve never won anything here; they fix it so that you can’t. (‘Oxford Street Fairground’, 3/8/1946, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,E).

Upon the mass observer discussing the accusation with a member of the arcade staff, an interesting moment transpired: ‘a girl attendant . . . puts about a shillings worth into the machine, in order to demonstrate that you can win something if you understand the machine’
Yet despite her best efforts and confidence, ‘each time the fingers grasped one of the prizes, it invariably dropped it’ (‘Oxford Street Fairground’, 3 Aug. 1946, MO, SxMOA1/2/16/1E). The ambiguity reproduced by the attendant’s failure here is worthy of further consideration, particularly when contextualised as part of a broader set of class relations described above.

The British class system was undergoing a series of transformations during the interwar period. Indeed, the relationship between work and play has been long noted by theorists and historians of sport and leisure, and comparable arguments have been put forward for understanding the role of computer games in contemporary culture (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p.26; Kocurek, 2012, p.189). Huhtamo explains that mechanical machines of early arcades served as ‘fantasies and parodies’ of modernist ‘rationalized ideology of office work’ and the ‘linking of the human with the machine’ (2005, p. 6). This is important but is further complicated when we consider the specific social conditions and interactions in the London arcades. The class factions, articulated in the specific roles given to players, attendants and proprietors, reproduced many of the tensions that emerged in the Fordist work environment. The attendant, the most visible type of arcade worker in the MO notes, whose role was reminiscent of two emergent and connected roles in Fordist and modernist economic and technological organisation: the clerk and the electrical engineer.

Firstly, the clerk. In his influential account of interwar-Britain, Ross McKibbin argues work was characterised by an ever growing ‘bureaucratic management, itself highly stratified and physically divorced from the workplace’ (1998, p.137). In Fordist models of production, workers had fewer interactions with management and instead ‘their contacts with the “office” tended to be with junior clerical staff who stood proxy for employers’ (1998, p.137). The ever-present ‘uniformed attendant walking up and down’ (‘Sports Garden’, 18/8/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A), managing and policing the floor, played a similar role, standing in as
proxy and manager for the proprietors, particularly in the tensions around prizes and profitability as demonstrated both by the wry smile and attempts to nullify critiques of machine tampering. In reproducing the social position of clerks, the attendant also reproduced a suspicion about the machines. While not seeking to overemphasize ‘the degree of hostility to management or employers’, McKibbin suggests there was ‘a pervasive suspicion’ of managers and clerks and ‘the economic system “they” operated’ (1998, p.139).

Secondly, the electrical engineer. Modernism’s expanding technological and communicative technologies, incorporating cinema, radio, early television, and telephones, had ‘fostered a new class of managers of machines and techniques; prominent among them were electrical professionals’ (Marvin, 1988, p.9). The funfair and attendants and workers did not match the social standing of the engineers attached to, say, the General Post Office (Bruton, 2012). Their labour, however, was prominent, frequently “doing” something to the ‘inside of the machines’ (‘Sports Garden’, 2/9/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A). In so doing, they displayed a form knowledge and mastery about how the machines operated, and had access to the ‘backstage’ mechanics, magnets and electrics that remained hidden and, at some level, mysterious. The clandestine nature of the work chimed with the role of the engineer. According to Carolyn Marvin, the new class of machine operators and professionals stood in for modern, ‘scientific’ and rational subjects, with the ‘express mission . . . to kill magic and myth’, but in the process were ‘deeply implicated in the production of both’ (Marvin, 1988, p.56).

The magic and myth of the arcade machines was further complicated by a longer continuity that these spaces had with sideshows and world’s fairs. One arcade featured palm readers (‘Sports Garden’, 2/9/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A), fortune tellers (‘Amusement Arcade’, 18/8/1940, MO, SxMOA1,2,16,1,A), and the surrounding London areas continued other exhibitions, sideshows and performances of ‘the strangest show that you have ever seen’ (‘Oxford Street Exhibitions’, 18/5/1946, MO, SxMOA1/2/16/1E). Describing the exhibits
made popular by P.T. Barnum, Neil Harris suggests that it did not matter whether audiences believed the stories they were being told, audiences ‘delighted in debate’. He continues, ‘amusement and deceit could coexist; people would come to see something they suspected might be an exaggeration or even a masquerade’ (1981, p.62). In a popular British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio comedy of the era, two low level East End crooks, Morris and Dudley Grosvenor, joked about the apparent implicit understanding players had about the machine’s duplicitous nature: ‘They know they’re out to be fleeced. And they know that we’re going to fleece ‘em. Don’t they’ (SxMs72/30). ‘Confidence and authenticity,’ as Matt Houlbrook described of the era, ‘were increasingly prominent yet precarious values,’ (2016, p.4), and a variety of cultural forms, ranging from escapology to film to professional wrestling (Litherland, 2018), illustrated the relationship between modernism and ‘fakery’. Arcades and the machines in them facilitated a similar set of cultural meanings, pleasures and tensions.

In blending the role of clerks, engineers, and carnival barkers, and the broader economic and social contexts in which those roles were constituted, the relationship between player and attendant significantly shaped the ludosity of the games. Clerks and engineers were seen to be the visible managers of powerful forces that shaped the everyday lives of the urban working-classes. These social roles were indicative of a system that many were ambivalent towards, an ambivalence that could easily tip over into deep distrust. On the other hand, the fairground, and the entertainments and cultural forms that emerged from these spaces, including arcades and videogames, created a space in which that distrust could be explored. They allowed for the interrogation of pleasures and tensions about ‘truth’ and ‘deception’ implicit in modernism’s expansion in urban spaces like London, could play out. Interactions on the arcade floor, therefore, shaped the experience of the machines in ways specific to London in this period.
CONCLUSION

The history of games is a blossoming area of scholarship, but this paper contends that work needs to pay closer attention to the methods, archives and approaches developed in social history. Excavating the meanings, pleasures and specific contexts in which games operate ‘from below’ is not necessarily easy, but it is vital if we are to fully understand the history of mechanical, electrical and digital games. In introducing the term ludosity, I am interested in considering the sensations, the feelings and the emotions that are engendered by game participation. It seeks to sidestep the debates around the relationship between, say, the magic circle and Goffmanian dramaturgy by thinking about the relationship between those experiences and how these relate to broader political, economic and social structures. As such, a new games history, borrowing from the new cinema histories, needs to focus on the specific locales. Moreover, it needs to draw on the radical contextualism cultural studies offers by blending the micro-interactions of ethnography with the macro, placing those experiences in broader social, political and cultural contexts.

Historicizing ludosity can moreover help reveal how broader social changes were articulated and comprehended. In this paper, I have outlined the way games were used to explore the tensions around modernity, for example, but also how those tensions in turn impacted the fundamental experience of the games on the arcade floor. Further work might consider the different conditions or qualities a single game might engender over time, writing a history of capitalism through the various ludosities produced by the game Monopoly, perhaps. Though this is an important project for Game Studies, it also poses intriguing questions for social history and the history of emotions more broadly. We have long known that games reveal something about the societies that produce them, but in exploring the micro interactions and meanings we can explore how those structures were felt, experienced and explored in the everyday lives of participants.
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