The Discursive Past, Present and Future of the Microgame

Rory Manning Graham
The University of Sydney
rgra0649@uni.sydney.edu.au

Keywords

microgames, minigames, scale, game production studies, serious games

INTRODUCTION

The first game released in Nintendo's Warioware series received a different title for each regional market: *Made in Wario* (Nintendo R&D1 2003) in Japan, *Warioware, Inc.: Minigame Mania* in Europe and Australia, and *Warioware, Inc.: Mega Microgame$* in the USA. The American release's adoption of the term "microgame" to describe the short, simple and referential collection of minigames neatly codified a mode of intentionally small-scale game design that persists throughout a range of videogame contexts today (Wardrip-Fruin 2020; Goldberg 2025). When read across different fields of videogame history, the microgame also appears to be a remarkably permeable term, imbued with conflicting expectations and ideologies about value, form and the cultural role of digital play. This paper explores this pervasive, yet little-examined term over nearly fifty years of commercial games marketing, serious games research and game development funding. In doing so, it positions the microgame as an exemplary way to understand the aesthetic aims, operational logics and material limits of games production alongside broader conceptual thought on scale and systematicity in contemporary technoculture.

I first provide a brief history of the term across 1970s tabletop gaming, serious games and commercial videogame criticism. Prior scholarship on microgames is concentrated within the field of serious games and has largely sought to demonstrate the import and efficacy of microgames as a training tool for students and workers (Semmel et al. 1981; Lukosch et al. 2016; Rahmadi et al. 2021). While this offers a valuable working definition for microgames within the long use of videogames in professional settings, little has been done to track the cultural function of the term itself, or how such an understanding may also relate to other efforts to define, develop and sell microgames (Gredler 1996). To open the microgame up for further interdisciplinary consideration, I address the term's different definitions and use cases in marketing materials, its role as design terminology, as well as the entanglements and distinctions between microgames and the broader term "minigame". I argue that these disparate attempts to conceptualise and sell microgames converge in their shared preoccupation with the management and presentation of strictly limited spatial, technological, financial and temporal resources. By discussing how real-world processes of game production and play may problematise a microgame's intended function, I show how this discursive focus may offer a rich historical intersection between games production studies and the study of gaming culture.

To further understand the affordances and limits of explicitly small-scale game-making, I also read these entangled histories alongside interdisciplinary scholarship on knowledge production, new media and contemporary capitalism. This is achieved via Clifford Siskin's (2016, p.1) understanding of the system as the dominant "genre" of modern knowledge and Zachary Horton's (2023) positioning of scale as crucial

mediator of disciplinary thought. Such conceptual vantages offer a novel vantage to consider how cultural efforts to stabilise games at the "micro" scale may be underpinned by the same cultural logics and material constraints of contemporary capitalism that have long been interrogated in game studies (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter 2009; Bodi 2024). My specific focus on the ideological implications of small-scale game-making further questions the role of videogames within broader platform contexts, which may be particularly relevant as games researchers begin to interrogate the surge in popularity of games hosted as "mini-apps" within social media platform WeChat (Zhang et al. 2021; Wang et al. 2023).

I finally offer a preliminary discussion of the microgame's discursive role in Australian games funding. I use the Australian Centre of the Moving Image (ACMI)'s 2025 callout for microgames to be developed for exhibition in their forthcoming Game Worlds exhibition as an invaluable local case study to track the formal commonalities, technical differences, and cultural afterlives of non-educational titles that have been commissioned and framed explicitly as microgames.

Through tracing the microgame's complicated history and future, this paper argues that the language of scale offers a crucial, yet underexamined way of making the history of videogames culturally legible. As it draws from contemporary theory about scale, systems and software to attend to this widespread, yet definitionally unstable terminology, it further seeks to contribute to game studies' ongoing cultural and material turns (Jayemane 2012; Germaine 2022; Hondroudakis 2024).

BIO
Rory Manning Graham (he/him) is a PhD student in Media and Communications at the University of Sydney, supervised by Mark R Johnson and Chris Chesher. His research explores the concept of scale in media discourse and the ways scalar language mediate cultural thought about video games across aesthetic, commercial and educational contexts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ACMI. 2025. "ACMI Microgames Commission". Accessed 26 August, 2025. https://www.acmi.net.au/collection-preservation/commissions/microgame/

Bódi, Bettina. 2024. "The Duality of Cozy Games: Cozy Agency, Neoliberalism, and Affect". *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies* 11, no. 1: 51–64. https://doi.org/10.18778/2391-8551.11.04.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig De Peuter. 2009. *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press.

Germaine, Chloé, and Paul Wake, eds. 2023. *Material Game Studies: A Philosophy of Analogue Play*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

Goldberg, Harold. 2025. "The Year's Most Addictive Mobile Game Is Delightfully Absurd: Critic's Pick." *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/23/arts/what-the-clash-review.html

Gredler, M.E. 1996. Educational games and simulations: A technology in search of a research paradigm. In Jonassen, D.H. (Ed.), *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology*, 521-539. New York: MacMillan.

Hondroudakis, Geoff. 2024. "The Philosophy of Scale: Levels, Layers, and Abstract Domains". *XCOAX: Class of X 2024*. https://doi.org/10.34626/2024_xcoax/classof24_007.

Horton, Zachary. 2023. "Scale". In *Handbook of the Anthropocene: Humans between Heritage and Future*, edited by Nathanaël Wallenhorst and Christoph Wulf. London, UK: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25910-4.

Jayemane, Darshana. 2012. "Game Studies" Material Turn". *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 9, no. 1. https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.145.

Lukosch, Heide, Shalini Kurapati, Daan Groen, and Alexander Verbraeck. 2016. "Microgames for Situated Learning: A Case Study in Interdependent Planning". *Simulation & Gaming* 47, no. 3: 346–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878116635468.

Nintendo R&D1. 2003. メイド イン ワリオ: *Made in Wario.* Game Boy Advance. Nintendo.

Rahmadi, Imam Fitri, Zsolt Lavicza, and Tony Houghton. 2021. "Defining Microgames in Education Context". *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (iJET)* 16, no. 22: 4–16. https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v16i22.20929.

Semmel, Melvyn I., Stanley Varnhagen, and Scott McCann. 1981. "Microgames: An Application of Microcomputers for Training Personnel Who Work with Handicapped Children". *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children* 4, no. 3: 27–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/088840648100400303.

Siskin, Clifford. 2016. *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Wang, Chaozheng, Haochuan Lu, Cuiyun Gao, Zongjie Li, Ting Xiong, and Yuetang Deng. 2023. "A Unified Framework for Mini-Game Testing: Experience on WeChat". *Proceedings of the 31st ACM Joint European Software Engineering Conference and Symposium on the Foundations of Software Engineering*, ACM, 30 November, 1623–34. https://doi.org/10.1145/3611643.3613868.

Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. 2020. *How Pac-Man Eats*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.

Zhang, Yue, Bayan Turkistani, Allen Yuqing Yang, Chaoshun Zuo, and Zhiqiang Lin. 2021. "A Measurement Study of Wechat Mini-Apps". *Proceedings of the ACM on Measurement and Analysis of Computing Systems* 5, no. 2 (2021): 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1145/3460081.