Theorising immediacy through videogames

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation we propose that videogames are uniquely situated to help us better understand one of twenty-first century capitalism's dominant aesthetic styles: immediacy. Immediacy is marked by flexibility, fluidity, presence, connection, instantaneity and an abundant, eternal now. Building on the framework of cultural critic Kornbluh's acclaimed *Immediacy: or, the Style of Too-late Capitalism* (2024), we consider the close ties between videogames and immediacy. Kornbluh offers immediacy as a diagnostic mode of comprehending the complex and form-resistant affective and aesthetic landscape of contemporary capitalism. While Kornbluh's work is notable for its omnivorous approach to discussing media forms and short close-readings that make compelling connections between form, formlessness, economics and the psyche, videogames are largely ommitted from her analysis. We aim to contribute to Kornbluh's influential theorising by arguing that there are distinctly ludic and playful dimensions to immediacy as a style. We examine two ways that games help us think through ludic dimensions of immediacy—flow and immersion—and further consider how games can shun the cultural stylings of immediacy by reintroducing mediation. Overall, this presentation will not only show the importance of Kornbluh's writing on immediacy in understanding videogames, but also discuss the essential role videogame analysis has in understanding the cultural styles of "too-late capitalism".

First, we supplement Kornbluh's discussion of mediatic flow with a conversation about skill-based flow, using Soderman's *Against Flow* (2021) to consider skill-based flow's relationship to immediacy. We discuss the ludic qualities of flow with

reference to Santa Monica Studio's *God of War* (2018). *God of War's* world is flowing: a constant stream of images without interruption. *God of War's* "oner"-style camera helps to induce skill-based flow by pushing players to continue without the stoppage of a loading screen, resisting any reminder that the play session may end. Like other immediate media, games that employ skill-based flow are often draw-in, engrossing, highly affective, and filled with potential for expression and enjoyment. Using *God of War* as an example, we argue videogames can theorise immediacy and its flowing ideologies in "too-late capitalism": lean-in, addictive, absorptive, interactive and "crisis-continuous" (Kornbluh, 2024, 17)—not challenging but coping.

From fluid metaphor to fluid metaphor, we then turn to immersion, showing how games invite closer affective connection with the player through a ludic form of immersion that Calleja (2011) calls "incorporation", arguing that interactivity and immediacy are heavily intertwined. We discuss how games have historically been positioned in fan, media, and marketing discourses as immersive to the point that they can blur the line between reality and media. An arcade flyer for *Mortal Kombat* (1992) shows Kano and Raiden reaching out of an arcade cabinet to terrorise two teenagers, as we are told the game is "so real it hurts" (Fig. 1). We consider the contemporary evolution of this immersive turn in *Love and Deepspace* (2024): a gacha dating simulator that can reside in the intimate space of the player's mobile phone. Boyfriends in *Deepspace* will leave voicemails and send messages to the player throughout the real-time day, and "reach towards the screen and provide an imaginary abdomen massage" (Harkin, 2025, n.p.). *Deepspace* signifies a proximity to the player that is strong enough to break through the screen's barrier; not "So Real it Hurts" but "So Real it Heals". We discuss how immersion is close and affective, but also a means of quickening circulation and time-space compression (Harvey 1992). As immersive videogames dissolve mediation we not only immerse ourselves in the fictional world, but the fictional world immerses itself in our own.
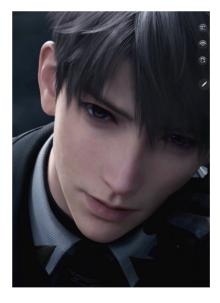

Figure 1: *Mortal Kombat* Arcade Flyer (1992)

Figure 1: *Love and Deepspace* (2024)

Finally, we end the presentation with suggestions for potential directions for critical immediacy and consider how games might also shun the cultural stylings of immediacy by reintroducing mediation. Game designers use complexity, difficulty, distance, scale, confusion, boredom, and indirect interaction to force players to think of the boundaries of the game itself, as well as the mediating systems that are integral to social functioning. Even though Kornbluh (2024, 122) suggests that immediacy is

implicit in the "essential gaming values" of flow and immersion, immediacy is not essential to games. Overall, this presentation will not only show the importance of immediacy for understanding videogames, but also how videogames act as a crucial form to better understand immediacy, mediation and contemporary capitalism while supplementing analyses of other media.

BIO

Heather Blakey is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of Western Australia. Her work examines intersections between technology, intimacy, and the environment in video games, literature, and virtual worlds. She specialises in contemporary aesthetics and affect theory from a Marxist context, and teaches contemporary literature, speculative fiction and media theory at The University of Western Australia.

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Dr Cassandra Barkman is a lecturer in Media & Communications at the University of Melbourne. Her research regards the close textual analysis of videogames, narratology, complex storytelling and pedagogy. She is also a board member for DiGRA Australia and deputy director of the University of Melbourne research initiative MAGPIE (Melbourne Academic Games, Play and Interactive Entertainment).

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