

Now You're Playing with Graphics Processing Power: Nvidia and the Discursive Pleasure of Artificial Intelligence

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INTRODUCTION

In a 2017 interview with Andrew Nusca, Nvidia Ceo Jensen Huang was asked about the origins of the Fortune 500 company that business journalists and investors are describing as the leader of a new 'industrial revolution'. In response, Huang cited Nvidia's origins in two predictions about the gaming industry:

[we] "observed that video games were simultaneously one of the most computationally challenging problems and would have incredibly high sales volume. Those two conditions don't happen very often. Video games was our killer app—a flywheel to reach large markets funding huge R&D to solve massive computational problems (para. 16).

By bringing Huang's flywheel metaphor into conversation with research on ludo-economics (Giddings & Harvey 2018) and post-Fordist production (Kline et al. 2003), this paper will provide a political economic analysis (Kerr 2017; Rella 2024) of Nvidia and its relationship with masculine modes of technicity (Dovey & Kennedy 2006) prevalent in PC gaming subcultures (Consalvo & Paul 2019). Ludo-economics, according to Giddings and Harvey (2018), can be understood as a 'primary heuristic' for understanding the cultural economy of neoliberal late capitalism – a cultural economy that is reimagining gaming industries as an integral component of a larger 'flywheel' driving the development of Artificial Intelligence data center infrastructure.

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This paper will begin by describing the theories and methods being used. Then it will trace the development of the flywheel metaphor through the company's corporate communications history, which is interwoven with the development of custom gaming rigs that provided faster framerates for players, and the sociotechnical construction of exclusionary competitive gaming spaces that are neither public nor neutral (Dovey & Kennedy 2006). Nvidia coins the term 'graphics-processing unit' in 1999 (Witt 2025, 69-70), for example, as a way of differentiating their products from 'graphics accelerators', like the 3Dfx Voodoo card. This shift in marketing, which was initially done to appeal to hardware reviewers writing for PC magazines and websites, introduced the concept of the GPU to the broader public. By 2017 GPUs were beginning to supersede gaming as a central focus of Nvidia's marketing, transforming the chip into a metaphorical 'shovel' for investors seeking to capitalize on the 'Artificial Intelligence gold rush'. Finally, the paper will connect the flywheel metaphor to critical game studies research on technicity (Keogh 2016), exclusivity (Consalvo & Paul 2019, 70) and the post-Fordist intersection of marketing, technology, and culture (Kline et al. 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2023) will be used to examine press releases, earnings reports, interviews, podcasts and YouTube videos released by the company between 1999 and 2025. Specific attention will be placed on a shift in branding that begins to take shape in 2015, which involves a transition from gaming to Artificial Intelligence infrastructure, on the one hand, and an increased focus on Jensen Huang's cult of personality, on the other. This cult of personality is exemplified by the discursive rise of Huang's Law, which is a new paradigm for measuring the exponential growth of Artificial Intelligence using GPUs (Witt 2025, 69), and a string of interviews with high profile podcasters, like Cleo Abram (2025) and Joe Rogan (2025).

CONTRIBUTIONS TO GAME STUDIES SCHOLARSHIP

By bringing the flywheel metaphor into conversation with critical game studies research, this paper will make several contributions to interdisciplinary scholarship. On a cultural studies level, it will connect the discursive pleasure that the metaphor invokes to masculine modes of technicity prevalent in high-end PC gaming cultures (Dovey & Kennedy 2006, 15; Paul & Consalvo 2019, 70). On a political economic level, it will bring the metaphor into conversation with research on ludo-economics for the purposes of conceptualizing Nvidia's approach to the manipulation of investor sentiment as playful means of 'overclocking' late capitalism. And on a theoretical level, it will outline material and immaterial contradictions implicit in the flywheel metaphor as a means of opening avenues for critical game studies research on masculinity, machine learning and sustainability. In other words, this presentation will present Nvidia's adaptation of the flywheel metaphor as a vital case study for understanding the unsustainable development of data center infrastructures that are neither public nor neutral.

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