

Tracing the Political Economy of the “Microgame”

Rory Manning Graham

The University of Sydney
John Woolley Building
Camperdown, NSW 2050, Sydney, Australia
rory.graham@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

microgames, minigames, genre, form, scale, systems, political economy, serious games

ABSTRACT

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 areas of videogame history, the microgame may also be understood as a remarkably permeable term, imbued with converging ideologies about the value and utility of short form play. This paper traces the history of this pervasive, yet under-examined term across nearly fifty years of commercial games marketing, serious games research and contemporary game development funding. Drawing from conceptual thought on scale in contemporary culture, it positions the microgame as an exemplary way to understand how the aesthetic aims and material limits of games production have historically guided cultural expectations about commercial game design’s systemic minimum.

I first track the term’s history across 1970s wargaming, the serious games of the early 1980s and the term’s use in 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 address this gap, I outline how 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. The microgame’s reliance on these explicit limits and definitional instability further distinguishes the term from the

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

related term “minigame”, which has been consistently defined in commercial videogame discourse. I argue that the microgame should thus be understood as provocatively in tension with a dominant cultural conception of games as a distinctly scalable form.

To further understand the affordances and limits of explicitly small-scale game-making, I 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 within game studies (Dyer-Witthford & De Peuter 2009; Bodi 2024). Considering how videogames fit within broader platform contexts may be particularly useful 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). This broader scalar turn further allows thus allows us to understand the conceptual language of videogame form via the economic conditions of contemporary technoculture.

The paper finally accounts for a present-day invocation of the microgame within Australian games funding. The Australian Centre of the Moving Image (ACMI)’s 2025 callout for microgames to be developed for exhibition in their *Game Worlds* exhibit offers a productive local case study to track the formal commonalities and cultural afterlives of non-educational titles commissioned and framed explicitly as microgames. Situating the microgame in the context of a public arts fund allows us to understand how institutional pressures may inform local games production and further shows the term’s perceived value within non-commercial contexts.

Through tracing the microgame’s complicated history and future, this paper explores how various interdisciplinary conceptions of scale are already embedded in the ways we have come to understand videogame production and play, and their importance to the videogame medium’s entangled commercial and aesthetic contexts. In turn, it argues that the language of scale offers a crucial, yet underexamined way of further understanding how videogames became culturally legible against the ideological backdrop of neoliberalism (Woodcock 2019). Drawing from contemporary theory about scale, systems and software to attend to this widespread, yet definitionally unstable terminology, it revisits the common-sense conceptual terms of digital gaming to further contribute to game studies’ ongoing cultural and material turns (Jayemane 2012; Germaine 2022; Hondroudakis 2024).

REFERENCES

- 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.
- Hanna, Alex and Park, Tina M. 'Against Scale: Provocations and Resistances to Scalar Thinking'. Paper presented at *CSCW '20: Reconsidering Scale and Scaling in CSCW Research (CSCW Workshop '20)*, New York, USA, 2020. https://alex-hanna.com/static/pdf/Against_Scale.pdf.
- 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>.