Review: *Homebrew Gaming and the Beginnings of Vernacular Digitality*, by Melanie Swalwell. 2021. MIT Press. xvi + 256 pp.

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Academic discussions on independent game development have largely focused on specific cultural centres, often neglecting local developments beyond countries like Japan and the United States. Melanie Swalwell's book *Homebrew Gaming and the Beginnings of Vernacular Digitality* (2021) looks to trace the lineage of independent game-making by using the sample area of Australasia and collecting oral histories from people who made and played games throughout the 1980s using microcomputers. Her work is largely informed by local testimony about programming in the period. Moreover, Swalwell explores people's understanding and use of computers at the time as a part of an overall cultural heritage that has remained neglected because of the connection between digital artefacts and the disposability culture of modern capitalism. Her book spans seven chapters, with documents and physical artefacts including flyers and contemporary advertisements supporting informants' experiences. She argues that the beginnings of homebrew development reflect more on local cultural history and was dependent on factors such as technology, access to technology, and the cultural objects of their time. It is a narrative of "global rhetoric" (p. 14) that Swalwell very convincingly rejects in favour of an approach that relies on the accounts of the people who were there at the time.

Before exploring her informants' accounts, however, Swalwell introduces the philosophical underpinnings of her approach in Chapter 1 and 2, based largely on the work of Michel de Certeau but particularly his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) and his work with his collaborators, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol, in *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol. 2: Living and Cooking* (De Certeau et al., 1998). This is an apt point of reference as it allows Swalwell to trace the connections between De Certeau's history of "normal" life as well as his theories on consumption and his attention to what "consumers actually *make* and *do* with products" (1984, p. 49, emphasis in the original).

Using De Certeau and his collaborators' writing as a framework allows Swalwell to explore the parallel between cooking as "an analogy for users' experimentation" (p. 50) with microcomputers at the time, contextualising the use of terminals in everyday life. The term "homebrew" already has its origins in food and beverage production, something Swalwell points out when considering and defining her use of the term at the book's outset. The analogy of food preparation seems an unorthodox way to discuss how people use technology to make games when divorced from its original definition. However, it is successful at discussing game development in conjunction with how their makers used public, communal space more generally at the time and the parallels these practical uses had with consumerism. Swalwell's approach considers and reframes culture by the way people actively used their time, rather than the passive possession of the products they had. Beyond this broad metaphor for the application and use of technology, Swalwell finds a parallel in following a recipe when cooking and learning the rules of computer programming, altering the steps as one sees fit. The connection to cooking is more convincing here and is telling of the instinctive practice the author sees in many of her informants—a "learning by doing" (p. 68).

If these initial chapters establishing the framework are the proverbial appetiser, then, the main course arrives in Chapter 3, where Swalwell introduces the microcomputer as a facet of everyday life for her informants. She begins by establishing where users were able to access computer technology. Due to size constraints, it was typical for microcomputers to be used in the home, but several public spaces are included in her informants' interviews too: "the local pub (bar), the computer store, and the news agency" (p. 57) serving as access to programming. The requirement of a computer to be plugged into a screen also meant that, within the home, the computer was often plugged into "the family television set" (p. 57). This made the object a significant part of everyday life for families that invested in one. Swalwell emphasises the "luckiness" of families that could have a dedicated computer room, implying the financial barriers that families would surely run up against buying a computer at the time.

The later parts of Chapter 3 and then Chapter 4 continue to explore the theme of access. Despite Swalwell not explicitly addressing the financial barriers, she does directly tackle the gendered access to computers at the time. This covers both the number of women in her sample of informants and the anecdotal evidence they provide about why they think women and girls did not have access to microcomputers like their male counterparts did. This section of Chapter 3 highlights some of the complex attitudes surrounding access to computer technology, as well as the practice of programming itself, but is not entirely successful as an exploration or critique of those attitudes beyond the contributions of her informants. It is useful first-hand accounting for scholars researching gender in this context, but could have been developed further by

considering gendered access issues in the same depth that the utility and practical uses of computers are explored.

The book also continues its exploration of marginalisation in independent development later in Chapter 6, by litigating the idea that homebrew games tended to be clones. Swalwell's informants offer their perspectives on the creative success of these projects, as well as their motivations for making them, through interviews. This conversational technique allows her subjects to elaborate on their unique experiences and encourages understanding of their anecdotal insight into their methods and motivations. For some, the satisfaction of producing an operational digital game was enough, but for others, it was a commercial enterprise, with varying degrees of success.

Many of these accounts emphasise the fun and creativity game-makers derived from programming, divorcing the act of programming from the work contexts that many other accounts of game creation tend to focus on. This dovetails quite aptly with Swalwell's thesis statement, exploring the ways in which computers were actually used at the time, and the ways in which this is particular to her Australasian context. Despite refuting the idea that homebrew gaming revolved around "cloning" established titles, it transpires in many of these interviews that inspiration for developers came from playing games in other settings and from the desire to recreate gameplay or concepts on their personal computers. The concept of ownership in these cases is complex and copyright laws come part-and-parcel with the topic of software "clones." However, Swalwell successfully argues that the creativity and ingenuity of people in the homebrew community was required to adapt elements of established games to hardware more readily available locally.

This attitude is noticeable in the motivations of users to modify the hardware of their computers too. This is discussed in Chapter 5 as a broad overview of "the cultural practices of repair and improvement" (p. 142) as a further example of the microcomputer user and a "producer" of technology. This extends to an understanding of the role of computers as tools to "tinker and create" (p. 146), foregrounding a much under-studied period of cultural history that still has connections with modern computer culture.

Chapter 6 and 7 successfully draw connections between the homebrew community's hardware modding culture and modern microcomputers like the Raspberry Pi. This culminates in the notion that local advances and attitudes to microcomputer modification have lent to a larger whole in the industry today. These two chapters also raise complex questions about authorship, with some of Swalwell's informants contrasting modern independent development to what was often the work of a single person in the microcomputer era, likening this auteurism to books. Comparisons like that can be reductive, and it does not seem to be the stance of Swalwell herself that games are akin to other media,

not least because she writes of the legacy of games as cyclical rather than linear. The experience of her informants reflects this, with contemporary mobile gaming culture allowing some of them to re-enter the development world as homebrew developers in an international market.

If games are to be considered in a broader cultural history, as Swalwell establishes with her initial thesis, we need to be able to understand how playing and making games operate as part of a "normal" life. *Homebrew Gaming and the Beginnings of Vernacular Digitality* is persuasive in its goal of exploring how hobby computer culture has informed modern attitudes and reflected local exterior cultural factors with insightful interviews and thoughtful commentary. It will be a great resource for games historians and humanities scholars alike in understanding how digitality forms part of every-day life for Australasian people.

References

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