Video games, cognitive capital, the cognitariat, and the dream factory’s seedy streets: patrolling the citizenry of LA Noire

by Dennis Broe and Ken Cohen in conversation

- Dennis Broe’s current book, Globalizing America’s Dark Art: Class, Crime and International Film Noir is forthcoming from Palgrave-Macmillan. His previous book was Film Noir, American Workers and Postwar Hollywood.
- Kenrick Cohen earned a Masters of Arts in Media Arts in 2011 (LIU Brooklyn) and is currently an MFA student. A gamer since the Atari 2600, he’s played the different styles of games but prefers Madden, the Uncharted series and LA Noire to RPGs and MMORPGs. He’s a television producer and writer when not gaming.
- LA Noire (Rockstar, 2011) is a videogame that garnered attention not only because of its specific setting in late 1940s Los Angeles but because of its use of technology – detailed motion capture of more than 400 actors for use throughout the game. LA Noire follows the story of a WWII veteran who returns to LA and becomes a city police officer, moving up the ranks as he closes cases involving arson, serial killers and corruption.

D: The first area that I wanted to talk about, in fact something that I thought made LA Noire interesting as a game, is the driving that you have to do in the course of solving a case. As we discovered, it’s difficult. But also there is the “free drive” mode, where you can drive through the streets of LA without being on a case, and there is a good deal of care taken to accurately reproduce the topography of Central Los Angeles circa 1947.

K: And that’s pre-freeway L.A., which is important because you have to drive on the city streets – you can’t just take a shortcut using a freeway.

D: Right. That also means you’re driving through neighborhoods, which is before this major thing [the freeway system] which essentially destroyed many of the neighborhoods in L.A. and shifted them. (And led the U.S. into its current carbon emissions problem.) The detail of storefronts and street signs is fascinating, but I want to make a couple of points about that. One is that we don’t get a sense of the “neighborhood.” What we get is superficial details – advertisements, the kind of place markers that place us in ’47 L.A. but without giving us the idea of “neighborhoods.” These neighborhoods you’re driving through were a part of the landscape of the L.A. noir films of the ’40s and ’50s where what you were seeing were the flophouses, the trailer parks, the actual neighborhood. They figured prominently in, for example, a long walking sequence through a besieged section of Bunker Hill in Kiss Me Deadly (1955, Robert Aldrich) and in the extended description of the trailer park lifestyle featured in Cry Danger (1951, Robert Parrish). In the game, you don’t see it so much. You see the advertising signs and a lot of accurate detail of storefronts, but not much visual recollection of what made neighborhoods and collective.

K: The detail that they [the game designers] provided was surface detail rather than the gritty detail that you would really want to see and think, “Okay, well, I know Echo Park was like this in the 40s” – but we don’t even go to Echo Park (a heavily Latino section of the city) in the game.

D: Neither do you see what ethnic group(s) lived in these neighborhoods and what patterns were a part of their life. What I want to suggest is that what the game player is doing is surveilling the streets you drive. For me – in my book, Film Noir, American Workers and Postwar Hollywood, and in my other writing – I’ve distinguished U.S. film noir as having a first period of 1945-50 and the second period of 1950-55, with the first period featuring [predominantly] the outside-the-law character and the second being the police procedural. What the game highlights is totally the police procedural, and that necessitates a certain kind of mindset. Part of this mindset is that you’re patrolling the neighborhood rather than being a part of it, whereas film noirs, such as Cry Danger (1951) and Kiss Me Deadly (1955) tended to be, at least partially, from the point-of-view of the outside-the-law protagonist. The game is about domestic surveillance, or that is one thing it’s about. However, a lot of the historical places we went to, the Intolerance set for example, were very interesting.

K: But I think that’s window dressing. I agree with you about the surveillance because it seems to me like the panopticon or an open version of it, where people are moving around in a fishbowl and you have plainclothes detectives driving unmarked cars in the surveillance. But at the same time, this is the advent of the walkie-talkies and two-way radios on a mass scale, so you have the guards able to communicate between the cars, and the surveillance is ratcheted up even more. There are many, many eyes watching, leading into the present era of surveillance with closed-circuit television on city streets and the NYPD about to adopt spy cameras mounted in their sunglasses. The setting also is like the panopticon in that Los Angeles is a place people come to but often don’t leave, so they are in a sense trapped inside what appears to be a very open fishbowl.
D: I'll throw one thing on top of that. One of the main features in a film like Armored Car Robbery (1950), where the police procedural element dominates, a feature that really marked these films, was the call going out over the radio and from the police station, the APB (All Points Bulletin).

K: The game reflects what television became a little later in Jack Webb and radio and later television show Dragnet (1951-59), the dictionary-definition of "police procedural," strong-arm tactics by the police and a focus on interrogation. Dragnet was television as surveillance. This is a game as surveillance. You're always being looked at by someone and it just keeps going and going.

D: Essentially, neighborhoods are being patrolled for control. In the film noirs, you did get to see neighborhoods that subsequently disappeared. You go to LA now and if you look at the Bunker Hill section, it's completely corporatized. The Bonaventure Hotel, which Fredric Jameson wrote about, is there. The only places where you can see these neighborhoods is in film noirs from the 40s. You see something of it here, but not quite what we want to see. Or it doesn't break the pattern of the game as a military instructional video.

K: The "free drive" mode enhances the game experience with a number of individual side missions. For example, you might have a robbery in a jewelry store unrelated to the main narrative that you have to go "take care of." The call goes out on the radio and you have the option of pressing a button on your controller to go to that place and then you have to shoot the "bad guys." There are many of these side missions all over the "open world" of LA in the game.

D: Right, and we should say too that there is a lot of shooting. We were watching a YouTube video from the end of the game. The player who made the video had killed a hundred people as an LA cop in the game.

K: That was a trophy, which is a common reward in contemporary games for your accomplishments. The game, then, considered killing a hundred people an accomplishment. In a war game, you get a hundred headshots (killings) and you get a trophy for that.

D: A second feature of this game, which seems to be a major difference from other games, is that a key portion of this game has to do with character recognition — interrogation of characters — and searching for clues that you acquire to help you solve the case. Then you have to evaluate whether or not the clue is helpful and where it is most effective in the interrogations. This game's major innovation lies in the interrogation of the suspects (400 actors were used to provide facial expressions for the game), so recognition of emotional states becomes important in evaluating witnesses. On the plus side, the game has more interaction than is standard in terms of character; but I understand that all gamers don't like this. In fact an experienced gamer told us, "I'm sick of talking to people. I wanna go back to killing them."

On the negative side, as with the driving through the neighborhoods and streets, even though the characters seem to be real, interaction with them always takes the form of interrogation. That is, interaction is based around control. It is simply "Are they telling you the truth about the murder or not?" You are not interacting with them as persons but only as witnesses or potential suspects. Such interrogation also represents the law as cold and objective, concerned only with what happened, whereas film noir is concerned with more than just what happened; it is concerned with characters' subjectivity. I just finished writing about Le jour se leve, the French beginning of what would be called film noir in 1939, and it's about a character flashing back and is entirely concerned with his subjectivity. The noir period of 1945-50 really focused on this. The subjectivity of the noir films, as Paul Arthur points out, was replaced by the objectivity of the police procedural. This game follows that pattern.

K: In layman's terms, it's the difference between facts and truth. The game wants just the facts while noir is usually concerned with the truth, in a broad sense.

D: Yes, as the theme is developed in what I now consider to be an early noir, Renoir's film The Crime of Monsieur Lang, the difference between the law and justice — that gap. I don't think we see that gap so much here. Although the game features multiple characters, it has a "just the facts, ma'am" approach to them.

The third thing I wanted to talk about is the importance of narrative. Narrative is much more complicated and complex in this game. I'm not an expert in these games but it seems that rather than collecting items, you're collecting elements of a story. It's a fairly complex story about Cole Phelps [the central character] moving up from Patrolman, to where I thought it would have ended in Homicide, but he gets busted back down and then he finishes in Arson. That adds complexity. Also, the game does expose some corruption on the police force and some corruption in terms of municipal development at the time. And it focuses on the crucial idea of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is a big part of what's going on — and what the game suggests is a big part of crime in LA — soldiers being released back onto the streets, which has a current flavor in terms of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

K: One of the non-police main characters is Dr. Harlan Fontaine, a psychiatrist who treats PTSD and its symptoms in numerous veterans. He turns out to be the main villain due to his involvement in land schemes, as well as reprogramming minor characters Manchurian-Candidate-style in a variety of nefarious political machinations. He's got this innocent public face and like every great villain, he ends up being the devil himself.

D: The game does some placing of a generalized scheme of corruption in Los Angeles in the 1940s: the development corporation builds houses but also burns houses down. There's also the serial killer, the Werewolf, whose identity (spoiler alert) is discovered by the police but can't be made public because of his relation to a high-ranking politician. The finale in the LA sewers recalls a crucial noir, He Walked by Night (1948) and, spoiler alert again, makes it difficult to have a sequel to LA Noire. He Walked by Night was the transition film to the police procedural, in which the climactic chase in the sewers is filmed from the point-of-view of the killer, as the audience is aligned with the outside-the-law character and not the police, and future iterations would no longer view the fugitive sympathetically.

K: In LA Noire, there's no change of perspective.
K: The fear.

D: That goes along with what Toby Miller mentions in his article on the university and electronic games[1]. He says that in the U.S. Army’s videogame America’s Army, the player can never “sympathize” with anyone outside their unit. That’s another key idea in LA Noire—never to be sympathizing with anyone outside the police department. Now, there could be corrupt cops but in general, we are aligned with the police force for better or worse.

K: And the corrupt cops are just as bad as the criminals. When you’re with Phelps, he supposedly has a higher moral authority within the game to ferret out the corruption.

D: I want to make one point about where the narrative goes: this game is based on an L.A. Confidential view of Los Angeles. Like that film, it still unfortunately uses what Barthes calls inoculation—that is, the idea of exposing some corruption in order to let the major corruption continue.[2] For example, we do get some idea of what the L.A. land grab is, what’s going on, but we don’t get an idea of how the city is really being remade. We also get some idea of corrupt cops. But one thing the game does not touch is the situation between the police department and the neighborhoods, in particular Latino communities, which is about to surface as a crucial issue, or black communities. I remember in the game one African-American male is being interrogated and he’s an honest guy, you trust him and you might read that as “honest,” but underneath it may be he’s completely terrified—the game doesn’t care whether you read that or not. This game is set in 1947, midway between the Zoot Suit Riots,[3] which the LAPD joined and participated in, and a 1951 incident called Bloody Christmas,[4] which entailed another beating of a Latino, with no hint of this tension. (Spoiler alert again). Even Roy Earle’s presentation at the funeral tells the truth about Phelps, though Earle (one of Phelps’ ex-partners in the game) is a corrupt cop. So there’s a strange discourse: Phelps is correctly eulogized and, as you said, he’s the member of the police force we can trust. Again, that’s inoculation.

K: But trust only goes so far because the Phelps character is willing to go beyond what normal protocol would say that you can do to accomplish things. Based on the flashback backstory of his time as an Army lieutenant on Okinawa, he committed a war crime yet rationalized it as "war, for the greater good"; other platoon members argued with him at the time. But he still committed a war crime, no matter how you look at it. And here he is, “a war hero,” going quickly up the ranks of the LAPD in part due to his “decision-making ability.” So you have to wonder if the game wants you to believe that war crimes may pay dividends.

D: Likewise, Jack Kelso, an investigator from the District Attorney’s office and Phelps’ fellow officer in the Army, also doesn’t follow procedure. That gets into another area that’s just coming into film noir at this point, via multiple adaptations of Mickey Spillane (I, the Jury-1953, for example). Noir features not the sympathetic outside-the-law character but the vigilante cop, who goes beyond the legal bounds of the law in order to do his job better and whose own reckless use of the law is now validated, a big part of L.A. noir lore.

K: Along with the vigilante cop and the outside-the-law character is another protagonist in noir, as you’ve written about, the returning veteran with all of his emotional baggage. How does that figure resonate in the game?

D: That was a subseries of the noir film, the returning veteran. Those films were generally done by mostly left directors in very interesting ways: Mankiewicz’s Somewhere in the Night(1946), Curtis Bernhardt’s High Wall (1947) and there were a few more, like Bogart played a returning vet in Dead Reckoning (1947), and they have memory disorders. To me, that is brought on by the trauma of the war. Or sometimes it’s brought on not by the trauma of the war but by returning to the homefront and finding an atomized homefront, as their relationships break down, when during the war you actually had more collective relationships. LA Noire doesn’t pick that up at all.

K: Let’s talk for a minute about the globalization of the game. LA Noire was developed over the course of several years by an Australian game company, Team Bondi, before being published by Rockstar Games, the U.S. publisher of such bestsellers as Red Dead Redemption and the Grand Theft Auto series. It’s unique that a non-American company would be creating a game based on such a short time period and specific place. It seems to me that the surface details are right, the lingo of the time is right, like “putting the Broderick on him.” It’s a fairly good representation of the verbal and visual record of the time. Game companies are all over the world, designing games that are set in other places than those studios – like Ubisoft Montreal doing the Assassin’s Creed series set in the Middle East in the Middle Ages and Renaissance Italy, a company in Romania designing boxing games for the Wii and other platforms – so it’s interesting how that globalization aspect works.

D: There’s a kind of global and local to look at here. Globally, the streets of L.A. have a mythic significance, thus a team in Australia can use the Internet to do this fairly meticulous reconstruction, and it can reach a level of having slang, argot, that kind of thing. But what it misses, again, is the real feel of a neighborhood, of the tangible aspects of neighborhood culture in 40s L.A., other than the commodified culture of signs and movie marquees reflexively advertising The Big Sleep and The Lady from Shanghai. The markers are not deep cultural markers but very superficial. So you have a global knowledge base that is locally impoverished, which I think goes along with our dialectic examination of the game.

K: My last notion is that there is a difference between contemporary “games” and the grander sort of “interactive experience.” Let me set the stage. In Uncharted 2: Among Thieves, Nathan Drake is an Indiana Jones-like adventurer who is searching for the lost treasure of Shangri-La in the Himalayas. He’s arrived at another of the many tests, or puzzles that function as skill tests in this series, an underground cavern that is enormous beyond any scope I can describe. It’s huge. Gargantuan. Hundreds of yards long and deeper than that. Drake has to do all these tricky little things to get from one side to the other, pick up an object and return. It takes hours to learn the right combinations – but you don’t feel like it’s a game because all around you is what looks like a set from a Raiders film or a Bond film. I have a projector and a 46” television so the comparison is apt, that these viewing options make the game look like more than a game, ratcheting it up to a theatrical experience. It’s not a game anymore. I’m in that vast cavern with Drake, feeling the vertigo with him and the fear.
D: And LA Noire is attempting to do that, too.

K: Right. These aren’t traditional games like Pac-Man or even Super Mario World. They’re more immersive and cinematic than traditional games.

D: Relating to your point, Jonathan Beller discusses the “Attention Economy.”[4] He deals with how visual media grabs and retains attention and how this cinematic and now internet system works. We’ve talked a little about attention grabbing in terms of the military-industrial complex, where, as Miller points out, this attention is then focused as a training ground for indoctrination, training, and recruiting.

K: He uses the example from the film The Last Starfighter (1986) and how the military “borrowed” the title from the game to give their recruitment caché.

D: If we apply Miller’s point, LA Noire is the domestic equivalent of the military’s occupying foreign countries, in terms of patrolling domestic streets. In addition, as more and more countries outlaw actual war games, these virtual games have taken on a new importance for purposes of training. You pointed out an article to me recently that there will soon be drone flights in U.S. domestic airspace.

K: Yes, simulators and simulation. The most popular games for the Xbox and PlayStation 3 are war games: the Call of Duty series and Battleground series. Call of Duty 3 came out the same week as Uncharted 3 and sold three times as many game units, amounting to a billion dollars in sales. In a week. Worldwide.

D: That’s amazing. And when you think of how far we’ve come from, say, the brilliant sequence at the beginning of Born on the Fourth of July (1992), with the two kids on Long Island growing up and playing soldier as a part of maturation, to how people now are continually socialized to be playing these games at all ages and hours of the day all around the country, the intensification is extraordinary.

I think that where LA Noire fits into the military-industrial-entertainment complex is that it’s training for domestic action. It trains you in how to look at a neighborhood, how to interrogate a neighborhood, how to drive through it in order to get immediately what you want out of it and then leave. The streets of L.A. here are occupied territory. It’s the gamer who is the occupier, in a sense.

K: Usually in the games like Call of Duty that we were talking about, you don’t interact with the people you’re “supposed to be” shooting. You shoot them from a distance and never talk to them at all.

D: That’s the Dragnet perspective where everyone is a suspect. Not a person, not a worker but a suspect. Let’s look again at the game being an immersive experience. Beller, in talking about the Attention Economy, has this to say:

“The new commodity being sold in the Attention Economy is productive power. The cinematic century posited that looking could be treated as a value-producing labor. The digital age presupposes it.”

So it costs a certain amount to buy the game and then you’re immersed in it—but I also think it’s training for the Attention Economy. That is, I think it’s training you in how to evaluate something. We can talk about how (commercial Hollywood) cinema was about grabbing your attention and keeping it for a while and now it’s much wider in terms of attention-grabbing. Now, grabbing attention and keeping it generates profit directly. That’s what [sites like] Facebook are about, what its impending offering as a public company (IPO) which could value it at $100 billion will be about.

K: YouTube, with one-to-five-minute videos, speaks to a short attention span, but then you watch ten or twenty of them in a row so you’re watching the equivalent of a full-length film but the attention is more scattered and malleable.

D: So how might we see the game as contributing to or fitting into the Attention Economy? To this idea of producing its own value by grabbing attention?

K: Practically, there’s a number of different ways. Some games now will sell product placements within the game and, for example, driving games have a high replay value. Every time you cross the finish line on a lap, you’ll see the giant Bridgestone sign right there. A game company will have product placements in their games, of course, to break even financially before the game ships but also to make the experience for the player more “real,” serving the same purpose as the surface detail in Dragnet.

In the Uncharted series, there are five difficulty settings. You play it through the first time and get a few of the rewards. Finally a hundred hours later, you play it through at the highest difficulty and maybe you have all the rewards. And if not, you may feel compelled to spend another 20-30 hours going through it again. Sometimes you get the books that you have to buy separately from the game, which are an extra twenty dollars on top of the sixty-to-seventy for the game itself.

D: Can we say also that what it’s doing is training you in a particular way of looking, of clicking-on, of interacting quickly—essentially like the Hollywood action film—of scanning a shot to get what you need from it and then your attention goes elsewhere. So it reinforces what a lot of the Internet does, as well as its predecessor, the cinema, in the action cutting in the Hollywood summer blockbuster. It furthers the idea of quickly draining the shot, the game interaction, the Internet screen of all meaning and then moving on to the next thing. Attention no longer is the precondition for reflection, it is now its opposite. It’s something where there’s a shiny object in front of you, you spot the shiny object, you make it a trophy, and then you get onto the next shiny object.
Let’s talk about another term mentioned in relation to cognitive capital, the cognitariat, which includes game producers and how they drive gaming. One side drives the war simulations, like the ones at the University of Southern California, while another side drives Zynga games on Facebook. It’s the same cognitariat broken up into a lot of small groups.

D: The other thing about the cognitariat is that that phrase often doesn’t include the people who make the game, and they need to be included in these discussions. The production of the game, as we’re just finding out with Apple now, may be farmed out to third world production centers in China, for example, because there’s an awful lot of work in terms of the modeling that went into this. An awful lot of that work is a kind of outsourced grunt work. Not just coding but all of the things that need to go into producing the games, and the unbelievable number of shots that are in this game. But that cognitariat isn’t usually talked about because of the class differences so that you have, as Naomi Klein relates in *No Logo*, the case of a woman in the Philippines who makes computers but can’t use one.

K: Along those lines, I read about an “underground economy” of teens and twenty-somethings in Asian countries who go to Internet cafes, using several computers at the same time, playing *World of Warcraft or some other massive multiplayer online roleplaying game* (MMORPG), mining the game elements to then sell to the hardcore gamers in the West for cash. That’s another form of a cognitariat based on global inequality, which, instead of being able to enjoy the game, is forced to find loopholes in the economy that they can exploit.

D: Very often, the cognitariat is not discussed at the level you’re describing but more along a privileged upper level and that’s the problem and the need for re-voicing that term.

Notes

1. Miller, Toby. “For Fun, For Profit, For Empire: the University and Electronic Games” in *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital*
2. Barthes in *Mythologies* (translated by Annette Lavers, London, Paladin, 1972) gives many examples of the way inoculation is used to maintain power, perhaps most prominently is the state’s acknowledging of political scandals to divert citizens away from any examination of the systemic frauds of the state and in the current Wall Street’s “fessing up” to its “shortcomings” as a way of making sure that no actual structural changes occur.

3. These were a series of riots in 1943 between white sailors and Marines stationed throughout the city and Latino youths recognizable by their zoot suits. The riots were a class eruption in LA in which Mexican immigrant laborers attempted to assert a new visibility. The LAPD in some limited cases joined the white service men but more generally looked the other way, and allowed the beatings to the Latino workers to occur. (See Mark Reisler, *By the sweat of their brow: Mexican immigrant labor in the United States, 1900-1940* Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1976).


5. See Peters and Bulut reference footnote 1.