

Book Review

Review of *Soft & Cuddly* by Jarett Kobek

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The trail of ink spilled in the name of information literacy reaches back to Paul Zurkowski's 1974 report to the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, a pitch to increase public participation in the information society.¹ That year, Ted Nelson's *Computer Lib* also called for new, revolutionary literacies – the cover cried “You can and must understand computers NOW” above a fist rising from inside a punch card.² In that era, John George Jones, a DIY game developer, was the archetypal information and computer literate. His first game, *Go to Hell*, was released for the ZX Spectrum (an 8-bit personal computer released in Britain in the early 1980s) by a major publisher in 1985, when Jones was only 15. His follow-up game *Soft & Cuddly*, also for the Spectrum, is the subject of Jarett Kobek's identically titled book. Featuring original interviews, archival research, and attentiveness to gaming's material culture, Kobek's book challenges assumptions about technology, openness, and literacy that have seldom been questioned since the days of Zurkowski and Nelson.

Kobek is a keen observer of present conditions. His works on social media (*I Hate the Internet*), late-1980s New York club culture (*The Future Won't Be Long*), and controversial Twitter celebrities (*Do Everything Wrong! XXXTentacion Against the World*) bring historical perspective to recent and seemingly mundane events. In the first nonfiction since the unexpected success of his self-published novel *I Hate the Internet*, Kobek adeptly shows how openness and literacy are conducive to neoliberal virtues like public-private partnerships and self-entrepreneurialism. He considers John George Jones' computer horror games and their platform the ZX Spectrum as historical evidence through which ideological effects can be traced. “The computer and the console are not

¹ Paul G. Zurkowski, *The Information Service Environment Responsibilities and Priorities, Related Paper No. 5* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Libraries and Information Science, National Program for Library and Information Services, November 1974), 27.

² Theodore H. Nelson, *Computer Lib / Dream Machines* (self-published, 1974; 8th printing, 1982).

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ideologically neutral. Like any technology, they carry the prejudices and political leanings of their creators,³ which Kobek interrogates through revelatory digressions into British politics, 1980s corporate game production and popular gaming culture, and software pirates. *Soft & Cuddly* is brief, relatively jargon-free, and provides a careful reading of primary documents such as financial records, contemporary computer magazines, and cassettes.

The hallmark of the Spectrum (“the bestselling computer in British history”⁴) was its openness. It was stocked by big box stores, priced less than competitors, and made it into British classrooms through Margaret Thatcher’s Micros in Schools Scheme, its popularity seemingly unencumbered by numerous production delays and design flaws.⁵ Because it used audio cassettes to run and store data, anyone with blank tapes “who suffered to learn the Spectrum’s quirks could produce a game”⁶ – anyone could be a maker, an entrepreneur, and an information and computer literate.

Kobek’s work acknowledges the agency information technology lent to consumers but does not lose sight of the constant renegotiation with the manufacturer’s original intent. Rather than locate authenticity within consumer or producer, he illustrates how multiple intentions converge to shape and receive media objects. In “Hard Cases: Confronting Bibliographical Difficulty in Eighteenth-Century Texts,” bibliographer and textual critic Michael Suarez suggests something similar; rather than, “*What is the ideal text?*” he asks, “*How did this book come to be the way it is?*” (emphasis original). Suarez’s question can be reformulated here as: How did *Soft & Cuddly* come to be the way that it is?⁷ The game’s incoherent narrative, extreme difficulty, and visual sophistication object to approaches that divorce “text” from the technical limitations, challenges, and accomplishments of its format. Kobek points out it is the first game with a destructible environment, and completing primary objectives without hacking is impossible. Kobek’s almost-bibliographical attention to gameplay and design is what brings us to the game and system’s ideological point of origin, something that content on its own struggles to do.

The treacheries of capitalism and openness are acute when viewed through the lens of material culture. “If you held the physical object in your hand,” Kobek writes, “*Soft & Cuddly* was no different than any album by Alice Cooper. It was...the same medium used

³ Jarett Kobek, *Soft & Cuddly* (Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books, 2016), 111.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷ Suarez’s own footnote here states: “the use of ‘book’ to designate the great diversity of textual forms...is a kind of synecdoche.” Michael Suarez, “Hard Cases: Confronting Bibliographical Difficulty in Eighteenth-Century Texts,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 111, no. 1 (2017): 3.

by pop stars. And you could buy it in the same stores.”⁸ In another passage, Kobek describes how Jones designed his games with a homemade program called *The Palette* which helped transfer his sketches to the Spectrum. *Go to Hell*, published by a fictitious imprint that Kobek traces to Activision, offers “prime evidence of capitalism’s ability to eat anything. We are seeing a multinational corporation commercializing the notebook of a fifteen-year-old.”⁹

Participatory culture is the mechanism by which the Spectrum transmitted neoliberal values, which Kobek follows beyond the Iron Curtain. He identifies numerous variants of Jones’ games made by eastern European programmers on Spectrum clones. The “indifference [of programmers] to the Fall of Communism and to the total reordering of global politics,” Kobek writes, is “the Spectrum working to its full effect,”¹⁰ as a personal propaganda machine.

Kobek’s snarky tone at times strays into unconstructively offensive remarks, as is the case in a critique of Mary Whitehouse’s censorship that is disarmed when he calls her a “scold” guilty of “neutering *Doctor Who* at its creative peak.”¹¹ Such moments add nothing critical and unselfconsciously gesture toward misogyny in gaming culture. By the end, Kobek apparently retreats into nostalgia for “those early days, when production was one person in front of one computer, chugging out code.”¹² Representations of violence, he concludes, never equal violence in the real world, and moral panic around games made by individuals releases industry and its agents from culpability for systemic violence—which today continues in the gentrification of San Francisco and dependency on lax or nonexistent labor and environmental regulations to produce and dispose of hardware.

Zurkowski and Nelson were not alone in celebrating technological developments that dramatically shifted social relations, of which cassette-driven microcomputers are only one example. Also in 1974, Syracuse University’s School of Library Science became the first to rebrand as an information school and the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium gave *The Oregon Trail* its first release. Kobek’s voice joins the chorus of recent criticism against technology and its discontents. By thoroughly situating microcomputer gaming in its historical context, he provides a vital account of technology’s collusion with neoliberalism from which there is much to glean about the limits of openness and literacy.

⁸ Kobek, 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 153.

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