

Tetris is a *really* old computer game. Things have evolved quite a lot since it was invented, in 1984. Most significantly, games today don't just live on computer screens anymore, but they leak out into our actual surroundings and shape our cities and our behaviors. Games aren't a model of the world, they *are* the world.

These days, Kevin Slavin teaches at the MIT Media Lab. Back in the day, he studied art with Thomas Bayrle in Frankfurt and learned how to look at the world in terms of systems. Since then, he has pioneered ways to rethink the technology of “dynamically responsive” game design and founded companies like Area/Code (2005) and AFK Labs (2008). Today, he describes himself as not not an artist.

After his TED Talk about algorithms in 2011, people kept contacting him as an expert in algorithmic decision-making. Usually, he turned them down by saying, “I studied sculpture.” If algorithms interest him, it’s not because he’s a math genius, but because he’s interested in culture, and algorithms make up the stuff of culture—they are the physics of culture.

Digital code and computer algorithms guide and determine most of what happens today: the rise and fall of stock prices, online shopping, flight navigation, weather forecasting—even the ability to take the subway.

Here, for example, is a portion of a subway station vending machine algorithm:

```
public class Test {  
    private final static String order = "crisp";  
    private final static int cashEntered = 100;  
  
    private static boolean first = true;  
  
    public static void main(String[] args) {  
        calculate();  
    }  
  
    private final static int[] coins = { 1, 2, 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, 200 };  
    private final static String[] coinsInPounds = { "1p", "2p", "5p", "10p",  
        "20p", "50p", "£1", "£2" };  
  
    private final static String[] item = { "crisp", "chocolate" };  
    private final static int[] cost = { 50, 75 };  
  
    private static void calculate() {  
        int itemPrice = 0;  
        for (int i = 0; i < item.length; i++) {  
            if (order.equals(item[i])) {  
                itemPrice = cost[i];  
            }  
        }  
    }  
}
```

This all happens on a silicon microchip. It takes only a few seconds, but there is a physics to it all.

An algorithm might be a tiny line of code, it might be invisible to the naked eye, but when it's set loose in a system, it repeats itself so many times that it becomes very very real. So much so, in fact, that there isn't much else out there.

Kevin Slavin presents his work and
joins Thomas Bayrle for a conversation on
April 25th, 2013.