

Playing With Theory: videogames, the technological imaginary and a new media studies

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Towards the completion of our book, *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, we were faced with the problem of how to conclude a wide ranging and theoretically eclectic text. One more-or-less serious suggestion was that we write a collective 'Manifesto for New Media Studies'. If we had pursued this idea what follows might well have been my manifesto demand.

Video Games Must Be Central to New Media Studies

This paper's argument is premised on two observations. Neither should prove too controversial at a conference on computer games.

The first is that computer and video games have been marginalised or trivialised by the various theoretical discourses addressing computer-based media, discourses that may now be seen as constituting a 'New Media Studies'. These discourses include Computer-Mediated Communication, Cultural and Media Studies and Cyberculture.

The second observation is that, contrary to this marginalisation, the video game is in fact a crucial historical factor in the development of computer media.

The game *Spacewar!* is a useful example - designed and played by the pioneering computer students at MIT in the early 1960s, it is widely recognised as not only one of the first computer games, but also a key milestone in the development of interactive computer use, and hence in personal, popular computer media as we understand them today:

Ready or not, computers are coming to the people. That's good news, maybe the best since psychedelics'.
Stewart Brand, on watching *Spacewar!* at the Stanford AI Lab in the early 1970s (quoted in Ceruzzi, 1999: 64)

Alluquere Roseanne Stone's book *The War of Technology and Desire at the Close of the Mechanical Age* is a key text in the study of Cyberculture. For her, *Spacewar!* marks a paradigm shift in the development of computing - from computers as tools to computers as arenas for social experience. As interactive computer media *Spacewar!* promised new kinds of media experience - dialogues or conversations with and through computer networks, or even a new public theatre. This conception of the possibilities of computer media resonates through Cyberculture and Computer-Mediated Communication discourses.

However, the enthusiasm for *Spacewar!*'s paradigmatic status is tempered by its status as a game - and a shoot-'em-up game at that. *Spacewar!* serves as a salient example of the discursive ambivalence which surrounds computer and video games. For Stone, whilst this particular computer game indicates the beginning of the virtual age, it simultaneously carries the seeds of this virtual age's possible destruction. As a shoot-'em-up game drawing on popular science fiction to animate simple graphics and physics with a cartoon violence rather than any narrative or communicative experience, it offers 'no particular redeeming virtue...'. For Stone, *Spacewar!*'s lineage - popular videogames - hold all the thrill [...] of chopping up Abel Gance's *Napoleon* to insert commercials for TV viewing' (Stone 1995: 26).

I want to argue that this ambivalence towards, or anxiety over, the commercial computer or video game within theories of new media is not oversight or incidental, but structural - symptomatic even.

Video games should be studied as new media then, not only for their own historical and developmental significance, but also - for the analytical and critical purchase they offer

- firstly for the study of new media technologies and texts more generally, and secondly,
- for the theoretical discourses that take new media as their object of study.

To explore material and discursive agency of games as computer media, I will address the much-mentioned - but rarely defined - term, the technological imaginary.

The Technological Imaginary

The notion of the 'Imaginary' originates in psychoanalytical theory and has migrated to the study of culture and technology via film theory. On its most general level the technological imaginary refers to a notion of a popular or collective imagination about technologies. It does not mean 'fantasy' or 'illusion' in any straightforward way, but rather

a realm of images, representations, ideas and intuitions of fulfilment, of wholeness and completeness that human beings, in their fragmented and incomplete selves, desire to become (Lister et al, 2002).

Technologies or a technologised future, are cast in the role of an ideal other - manifesting all that is whole and complete, and superceding all that is imperfect and unsatisfactory in the contemporary world.

Kevin Robins has mounted a sustained critical assault on certain cyberculture discourses as precisely such a technological imaginary. Examining theories of cyberspace and virtual reality as alternative, autonomous realms to the real world OR as ideal spaces for disembodied communication, he concludes that this Imaginary is ideological, a diversion from, or masking of, the real world and its material problems and conflicts. Dreams of virtual reality and virtual community in the early 1990s, he argues, released themselves from consideration of the real world of power structures, historical and social change, economics and politics. They privilege instead notions of new online public spheres, characterised by immateriality, disembodiment, progressive identity politics, and an absence of commercial or governmental influence.

What is psychically compelling about [these technologies - and the 'cyberspace vision'] is their capacity to provide a certain security and protection against the frightful world and against the fear that inhabits our bodies. They provide the means to distance and detach ourselves from what is fear provoking in the world and in ourselves (Robins 1996: 12).

Again it is important to stress that the technological imaginary is not mere illusion. For Robins the cyberspace imaginary has ramifications for how we understand and develop technologies and how we address them politically. Taking this further we might argue that the imaginary in this sense though intangible, is real - it has real effects - it informs and inflects technological research, consumer expectations, and government policies.

If we return to *Spacewar!*, the workings of the Imaginary become clear: the ideal and utopian aspects of computer media are established as a new virtual realm, divided off from (and set in opposition to) other aspects - notably the violent content, the ostensibly trivial pleasures of computer game play, and of course *Spacewar!*'s numerous and highly successful commercial progeny, from shoot-'em-ups to the diversity of the videogame as it is played today.

This repression leads to a profound misunderstanding of both the historical development of new media technologies and texts, and of the discursive and symbolic construction of cyberspace itself.

Famously, William Gibson got his idea for a fictional cyberspace watching children immersed in playing video games in an arcade. This is not an insignificant anecdote. I would argue that in important ways, cyberspace - as an idea and as a set of images - originates in videogames and has been developed and sustained through the popular, everyday consumption of games and related popular texts.

For example, at around the same time that *Neuromancer* was published, the Disney film *Tron* visualised a sophisticated world simulated within a computer. The two texts bear some comparison. The glowing grids and geometries of both Gibson's cyberspace and *Tron*'s computer space are inspired by arcade graphics of the late 70s. The premise of each - that computer users are locked so closely into cybernetic feedback loops with computer

technology that computer space is actually entered - is inspired by the anxious yet exhilarating experience of losing oneself in a computer game, of losing any absolute sense of where the player ends and the technology begins. Both texts dramatise this immersion as a dangerous adventure, *Tron*, moreover, presents a cyberspace that is fundamentally ludic.

Throughout the development and popularisation of computer-based media, aspects of this cyberspace imaginary has operated as a framework for the development of actual VR or networked applications, as well as academic theories. New media have been conceptualised, dramatised and aestheticised by the video game.

We begin to see then that utopian cyberculture establishment of a fictive or ideological virtual world, is effected through the discursive splitting off from 'cyberspace' an Imaginary transcendent realm of the new and fluid, repressing its material existence and development as popular commercial new media.

Talk of the repressed would suggest we return to the psychoanalytical origins of the Imaginary as a concept. In psychoanalytical terms, the Imaginary is founded in self-loss, lack, or alienation. In Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, for example, the infant subject has a profoundly ambivalent relationship to an imaginary image (in this case its own reflection): it loves the coherence of identity and body the image offers, but hates it precisely because it is separate from the subject.

This radical oscillation between contrary emotions in respect to the same object characterises all of the relationships of the imaginary order (Silverman 1983: 158).

Claudia Springer has applied such ideas to the study of cyberpunk literature, films and comics. She reads images of cyborgs and cybernetics in precisely these terms: the Imaginary as ambivalent and contradictory. In these popular narratives, dreams of transcending the body and identity are set against the embodied nature of eroticism and gender divisions. They are shot through with a fascination for, and revulsion against, both the body and technology.

So - to follow through this analogy with psychoanalytical theory, if the coherence and autonomy of the cyberspace imaginary is not stable or complete, but anxious and ambivalent, founded on separation and alienation, then we should not be surprised if it is haunted by the negative terms through which it is established.

What repressed material do video games return, then, to the technological imaginary of cyberspace? Video game play is rooted in the everyday and the here-and-now - and so in studying them it is hard to ignore the commercial cultural economy, the imbrication of new media with old, and the embodied, social, gendered uses and practices of videogame play.

However, video games can be distinguished from popular science fiction literature and films, despite their intertextual relationships. For although, as I have argued, games have developed and sustained images and concepts of cyberspace - they are in one crucial sense not imaginary at all. To play a video game is to materially engage with computer hardware and software as technology and as media, to bring digital spaces and dramas into existence, to realise, navigate and interact with them. Video game play functions on a number of semiotic, even cybernetic, levels: the science fiction symbolism, the simulations of physics and conflict, the interaction - through the software - with the computer itself.

Video games are a window onto a new kind of intimacy with machines that is characteristic of the nascent computer culture. The special relationship that players form with video games has elements that are common to interactions with other kinds of computers. The holding power of video games, their almost hypnotic fascination, is computer holding power (Turkle 1984: 60).

Cultural and Media Studies has a tendency to assert the continuities of video games with existing electronic and visual media such as television and cinema and their economic and ideological contexts - or even with other domestic technologies such as dishwashers and microwaves.

Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyberculture offer conceptual tools for studying the specificity and excitement of interactive computer media - but do so in denial of the kinds of historical and cultural contextualisation facilitated by media studies.

Video games sit between these converging discourses of the study of new media, and worry at them all.

I will refer briefly to the more recent game *Syndicate Wars* to sum up some of these points and to call for a fundamentally anxious New Media Studies. The game is characterised by generic cyberpunk mise-en-scene of an authoritarian and violent urban future, populated by cyborgs. As a game it presents an architectural cyberspace to explore in frantic and violent bursts of narrative. To study and play such a game is to play with the future (and the present) in three inter-related ways:

1. in the sense of playing with popular media images and scenarios of a speculative near future;
2. in the sense of playing with computer technology and software algorithms, in the here-and-now of course, but always suggesting an unfolding of a technological future;
3. and - importantly... playing with the future in the sense of playing out and aestheticising anxieties and excitement about technological and cultural change.

This third sense overlaps the first two - the Imaginary and the materiality of play are inseparable.

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