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ARTICLES

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In 'Out of Time: Reflections on the Programming Life', Ellen Ullman writes that a senior (male) engineer once asked her why she left full-time engineering for consulting. She replied that she found the engineering culture very 'teenage-boy puerile'. The engineer replied to the effect that such loss of talent was too bad. She continues:

> I felt immense gratitude at this unexpected opening. I opened my mouth to go on, to explore the reasons for the cult of the boy engineer....But immediately we were interrupted. The company was about to have an interdivisional water-balloon fight. For weeks, the entire organization had been engaged in the design of intricate devices for the delivery of rubberized inflatable containers filled with fluid. Work had all but stopped....The engineer joined the planning with great enthusiasm.... (Ullman, 1995, p140).

The 'play principle' has had a mixed press, from this kind of account of masculine infantilism to more positive views. From Dada onwards a sub-text in twentieth century culture, the play principle underwent a revival in the sixties with Situationism and Marcuse's attempt to merge Schiller, Marx and Freud in a progressive, 'erotic' cultural mélange for an economically carefree (though atomically threatened) post-fascist West (Marcuse, 1974). In this positive view of play, it may be seen not as something children or young animals do to prepare them for the tasks of adult life but as something which exists for its own sake. You play because it's fun to play.

Toles defines play as:

> a free-standing activity that is differentiated from ordinary life by virtue of its being 'not serious' (that is, not instrumental in purpose) but at the same time absorbing the player utterly and intensely. No material profit or interest derives from play, which proceeds within its own boundaries of time and space according to rules fixed in advance (Toles, 1985, p. 211; see Caillois, 1979; Huizinga, 1950).

This view should be differentiated from the concept of disalienation of the early Marx, which seems to be predicated on a notion of making instrumental work itself satisfying. It is closer to the notion of the realm of freedom of the later Marx (when he realized that true freedom lies outside of the realm of necessity rather than in its transformation into a disalienated process). (Marx, 1975, pp. 322-334; 1959, p. 820.)

Since the 1960s, the oil crisis, unemployment and the resurgence of the Right have conspired to resuscitate instrumental rationality (together with the performance and reality principles) and to marginalize issues of pleasure and play, reinforcing once more a (masculine) work ethic which was fleetingly questioned in the Sixties. This reinstatement was regardless of the glaring ideological fissures in the work ethic itself: work is supposed to be a good thing, yet you have to be paid to do it and you're supposed to be glad when you retire. On the other hand, nothing is supposed to be

worse than unemployment. (And to make sure that's the case, life is made as difficult as possible for the unemployed.) The stigma of unemployment — whereby even socially and ecologically damaging work is considered better than doing nothing — arguably derives in great part from the guilt and masochism inherited from Puritanism. The work ethic expresses a culture of domination.

The contemporary reinforcement of the work ethic may be traced also to a combination of enhanced female involvement in the work force and the replacement of human labour by technology, a dual phenomenon which —since traditional work and welfare structures based on the concept of full (male) employment and the 'family wage' have been retained — has greatly increased job insecurity for almost everyone. ('No collar workers' may enjoy a culture indistinguishable from that of young college nerds, but if they work twice as many hours a week as people who wear collars it's not a bad trade-off for the employer.) Contemporary capitalism has consistently resisted any radical proposals for the reduction of the working week to reflect a more balanced gender structure in the work-force, despite the pressures placed on family life by two parents working full time. Similarly, it has insisted on the retention of the old welfare structures, in spite of the absurdity of requiring the unemployed to be available for jobs that in many cases does not exist.

This is not to mention the associated though tacit downgrading of domestic work — the feminist movement has placed such a low priority on the rights of 'homemakers' that the employment/income monopoly has not been seriously questioned, notwithstanding the many absurdities and poverty traps to which it gives rise. In the industrial sphere the feminist movement has in many ways helped to shore up rather than undermine the culture of domination — just as the censorious and humourless dogmatism of some branches of academic feminism mirrors the authoritarian, patriarchal culture of domination that the movement supposedly critiques. (In some ways, it might be said, half a revolution is worse than no revolution at all.)

On the face of it, cybernetic developments seem to offer a means of undermining industrial solemnity and re-inserting play into social reality (the informality of e-mail, the anarchic nature of the Web, the growth of video/computer games, virtual reality and interactive art installations). In one reading, this might be seen as undermining the culture of Puritan seriousness, domination and instrumental rationality — in short, the work ethic — which has hitherto characterized industrial society.

When we look at the burgeoning of games, however, whether of the arcade, home video or home computer variety—there is a considerable overlap between the issues involved in the various kinds of games—the situation seems more problematic. For McLuhan:

> Games...are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism. Both games and technologies are counter-irritants or ways of adjusting to the stress of the specialized actions that occur in any social group ... Games are a sort of artificial paradise like Disneyland, or some Utopian vision by which we interpret and complete the meaning of our daily lives (McLuhan quoted in Provenzo, 1991, pp. 28-30).

The question at issue is the effect that the convergence of games with technology has on games — and by extension on the play principle, which arguably becomes integrated into the performance principle as a means of reinforcing the culture of 'necessity' and instrumentality.

Another way of looking at the situation is to see contemporary cybernetic developments — exemplified in the image of the cyborg which represents the integration of humanity with the machine rather than the subordination of the machine to the service of humanity — as a sham mode of liberation to disguise the new forms of unfreedom in contemporary society. In this view, computer games might be seen as a means of reinforcing structures of male bonding and domination in patriarchal, industrial society. Just as play has been transformed into regimented 'sport' in the twentieth century, so it has also been transformed into controlled and delineated 'games'. Suggesting that children are trapped in micro-worlds created by programmers, Provenzo notes that children he interviewed wanted to be able to define the characters in the games they played, to shape their power and construct their settings. He argues that video games such as Nintendo, characterized by pre-

programmed characters as well as media-saturated images, present little opportunity to experiment or toy with ideas: 'the child has almost no potential to reshape the game and its instrumental logic' (Provenzo, pp. 48, 95, 137).

On the other hand, it should be noted that the makers of a contemporary computer game, 'Quake', have released its programming language, Quake C, to the public as a means of allowing players to intervene in the structure of the game. The field of interactive art, as well as opening up wide areas of enquiry of a philosophical and sociological nature, and bringing to the fore (in new ways) old issues of identity and relationship, also seems to offer enhanced possibilities for participation in the art work whereby the hitherto-passive 'spectator' becomes part of a co-operative process of discovery with the artist. At the same time, the artist is freed from the constraints of the traditional gallery system by the prospects opened up for self-publication on the Net. On the negative side, electronic art suffers from a tendency towards formalism and the loss of creativity in technical complexity (see O'Brien, 1995 and 1996).

Some critics cite the violence and machismo of the man/machine 'interface' — particularly manifest in computer/video games and the preponderance of virtual tanks, fighter aircraft, martial arts and other macho phenomena in arcade games — as merely an adaptation of the culture of domination (scopophilia and 'dominant specularity') in a new technological form. Video games in the view of Martin Klein largely focus around 'oral sadomasochistic fantasies of the fear of engulfment' (Klein paraphrased by Provenzo, p. 56). Citing the distinction between stimulation and catharsis theory in regard to television (see Dominick, 1984, p.138), Provenzo notes that results from research suggest that, at least on a short-term basis, video games increase the aggressive behaviour of their players (Provenzo, pp. 65-70).

On the other hand, psychologists such as Bettelheim argue that children have a need to exorcise their aggressions through symbolic play (Provenzo, p. 89). Greenfield believes that the most harmful aspect of violent video games may be the fact that they are solitary in nature. Video games in her view are valuable in that they teach important life skills such as learning to deal with multiple interacting variables (1984, p. 93, 103). Other observers note the teaching of eye-hand co-ordination, the introduction to necessary computer skills, stress-relief and perhaps catharsis in a release of hostile feelings (Toles, 1985, p. 209).

Malone distinguishes toys from tools in that toys — for example computer games — are systems used for their own sake with no external goals and should be difficult, while tools — for example, programming languages — are systems used to achieve external goals and should be as easy as possible to use (Malone, 1981, p. 268). One might correlate this with the freedom/necessity dichotomy mentioned already, although Haddon points out that early computer magazines presented games playing as an acceptable activity — a source of relaxation in the midst of programming (Haddon, 1988, p. 59). Thus, far from representing a realm of freedom outside of the dictates of necessity, games in this view might be seen as simply reinforcing the culture of 'necessity' and domination.

On the negative side, Toles notes that use of video games helps to embed into our consciousness their assumptions on such issues as xenophobia, the evilness of the enemy, and the preference for destruction —without responsibility — over diplomacy (Toles, 1985, pp. 221-222). Some research suggests that girls go to video arcades as guests whose main function is to admire the performance of their boyfriends:

> In an informal survey of a video arcade located in a suburban Pittsburgh shopping mall, Kiesler and colleagues counted 175 players of which only 30 were girls. While girls occasionally played together in groups, the remainder was with boys. No girls were reported as playing the games by themselves (Provenzo, pp. 61-62; see Kiesler et al, 1983, p. 42).

In a survey of the top ten video games of the time (*Nintendo Power*, 1989, p. 82), six of the games involved women being rescued (Provenzo, pp. 77, 96). When asked what he thought of the character April in the game 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles', a six-year old boy described her as being 'pretty boring. She doesn't do that much. All she does is get kidnapped' (Provenzo, p. 115). More recent games include active female characters in an effort to get around charges of gender-stereotyping, but incorporating female characters in violent roles raises the same kinds of issues as

have been recently raised by the incorporation of female soldiers in US army training. A recent (1996) catalogue advertises a game for PlayStation called 'Tomb Raider', featuring on the cover a stereotypical female with large breasts and tiny shorts — but brandishing guns in both hands. The catalogue also advertises a PlayStation game 'Return Fire' with the admonition to 'Demolish, devastate and destroy — it's a wipe out!' Regarding 'Tunnel B1', the player is told: 'Your mission is to destroy the crazed tyrant who possesses the ultimate terror weapon—and the madness to use it.' The PC CD game 'MAX' is advertised as: 'Ultimate control, total customization, advanced battlefield strategy...' (*Game*, 1996, pp. 7, 14, 23). The TV show *Gamesmaster* (with an associated Web site) promotes macho-nerdism in 'tongue-in-cheek' fashion: *Gamesmaster: The Official Book* describes the action game 'Body Blows' as the 'best beat-'em-up on the Amiga' (Diamond, 1993, p. 10).

In the negative view that cites the sexism and machismo of video games, they are seen as encouraging violent action and tending to foster a 'de-individuated' state whereby responsibility may be lessened — a state that is functional for military purposes. Indeed, the US armed services use video games bearing some similarity to arcade games to help soldiers refine their battle skills and military obedience: 'the contemporary emphasis on computer simulation and technologically mediated warfare increases the opportunities for soldiers of all ranks to deny any personal responsibility for their actions' (Provenzo, pp. 215-219, 221).

The line between play and war seems to become thinner all the time. Robbins and Levidow in their article 'Soldier, Cyborg, Citizen' call the Gulf War of the early 1990s the 'Nintendo war' — a war which involved home audiences in an often compulsive way. At the same time, computer simulation facilitated the detachment of seeing from feeling on the part of the military. They point out that in the development of interactive simulation technology, some innovators alternate between the design of military and entertainment versions (Robins and Levidow, 1995, pp. 106-109).

> The Gulf massacre brought home to us the role of high-tech systems in mass psychopathology....electronic systems constituted a paranoiac environment: mediating an omnipotence phantasy, they converted internal threats into thing-like enemies, symbolizing rage at our bodily limitations (pp. 111-112).

While Baghdad may have replaced Moscow as the devil's home in the American view, the paranoid process is the same. Toles describes an eighties' game called 'Communist Mutants from Space':

> As swarms of Marxists from the planet Rooskie attack the Earth, the player is enjoined to keep the planet safe for democracy and the free enterprise system. Commie mutants, hatched from a Mother Creature filled with irradiated vodka, try to enslave the planet as the player fights them off (Toles, 1985, pp. 210-211; see Freedberg, 1983, p. 7).

The traditional critique of the filmic audience's 'gaze' focussed on the 'look' of the active (male) figure at the passive (female) figure on the screen. Nichols, however, argues that masculine fascination with the (ultimately illusory) control of simulated interactions has replaced masculine voyeurism. Engagement with process, rather than representations, becomes the fetish object. The fascination lies in the subordination of volition to the constraints of the system, a system that however has strictly limited parameters (Nichols, 1988, pp. 31-32). In an analysis of arcade games, Toles notes that since the machine provides a fixed programme and pace whereby a limited degree of initiative is allowed on the player's part, conformity to the programme is necessary in order to achieve a large score (Toles, 1985, p. 208). This raises the issue whether the 'sadistic' look has been replaced by 'masochistic' subordination in cybernetic culture (but perhaps masochism is itself really the basic issue — see, e.g. Silverman, 1979) .

In her account of the image of the cyborg in contemporary culture, Springer cites the argument of Klaus Theweleit that fascist males have never developed an identity, and thus devote all their energy to keeping up an edifice of selfhood. In order to protect themselves from women who represent the weakness they despise in themselves, they 'encase themselves in body armour, both literally and figuratively. The machine body becomes the ideal tool for ego maintenance' (Springer, 1991, p. 317; see Theweleit, 1987, 1989). The Gulf War with its tanks, planes and precision

missiles was fought essentially to maintain oil supplies and thereby preserve the pre-eminence of the most powerful fetish in western culture — the automobile — which simultaneously operates as male body armour, womb, feminized technology, phallic symbol and sexual facilitator. If — as is sometimes argued — the computer is replacing the car as primary fetish, this may not be the liberation from a polluting and wasteful automobile culture that one might imagine. Rather it may represent a tightening of masculine control in 'real life' warfare — where women happily participate — in which burning and burying the enemy alive are seen as normal, and where computer games prepare people for the robotic desensitization necessary for modern warfare and the dominance of western industrialism (every bit as effectively as the fascist-style training of the American military).

In this view, new technology may be seen not as a mode of liberation from patriarchal hierarchy and gender limitations but as a means of reinforcing masculine domination and control. Toys which come alive —harmlessly in the computer-animated film *Toy Story* and horrifically in any number of science fiction films about 'the revolt of the machine', represent the threat of a technology which seems to take on a life which in some subtle way it is draining from ourselves. (In a recent 'real life' evocation of such paranoia, there were reports from the US of 'cabbage patch' dolls which, programmed to consume plastic food, end up eating the hair of their child owners.) ('Voracious Doll', 1997.)

Less harmfully, Naoka Tosa's 3-D computer-animated digital puppet Neurobaby reacts with virtual 'emotions' to the sound of a person's voice (Graves,1993, p. 39). (Unlike a real baby, it has the advantage that you can turn it off when you want to go out.) Japanese workers apparently greet their robotic colleagues, without tongue in cheek, with a routine 'good morning'. On playing with Benny, a virtual dog some friends had recently 'adopted' from the 'Dogz' package, I was scolded for having teased it — I had repeatedly pulled its virtual food-bowl away before it could eat its dinner — and warned that I would be to blame if its behaviour deteriorated. The Enlightenment view of animals as machines is reversed — computer programmes become our pets. In some strange way the emotions that digital puppets like Neurobaby and Benny evoke seem every bit as valid as the feelings evinced by 'real' children and animals.

It is widely agreed that the urbanization and technologization of society have led to a loss of affect in human relations (personally, I find some old Hollywood films almost unwatchable due to the cliched emotional intensity of the characters). In contemporary culture, where Gates and Spielberg reign supreme, affect has been replaced by effect. We have been 'bored' — and it is kind of fun. We channel our libido into work rather than relationships, and are comforted by the illusion of socialization offered by drink, drugs and games. (Turkle argues that for many people, what is being pursued in the video game is an altered state, a 'second self' rather than just a score — Turkle quoted in Provenzo, 1991, p. 22.)

Virtual relationships, the only relationships we can really have, are in an ultimate sense auto-erotic. (But perhaps all relationships are auto-erotic in the end.) The prospect of social utopia has been replaced by a controlled, illusory and exploitative substitute where ecstasy — release from ego-bondage — is sold like any other commodity. The only 'real' emotional relationships we have are with toys — machines and their virtual contents. Social autism, with the ultimate promise of teledildonics or techno-onanism, is perhaps the final twist of the screw of commodity fetishism — we relate to things as if they were people and people as if they were things. The promise of technology to subvert hierarchies, gender limitations and role playing, and 'dominator culture' in general, has been largely forgotten in the invisible (to adults) world of video and computer games — a situation which only a truly radical questioning of the role of technology in capitalist industrial society can ever begin to shift.

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