

Playing Less Stupid Games

'We sell play, no games' (Ludic Society)

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$ludic->sell(  
    $games--,  
    $play++  
);
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It is common to think of computer games as analogous to the neo-liberal marketplace where the individual strives for reward and the annihilation of competition.¹ In such a narrative, the market is a game with clear winners and losers. Writing in 1948, Norbert Wiener describes this ultimately as a no-win situation:

'We are involved in the business cycles of boom and failure, in the successions of dictatorship and revolution, in the wars which everyone loses, which are so real a feature of modern times.'²

Although it is an exaggeration to consider the individual game-player as completely ruthless or stupid, there are disturbing tendencies and clear analogies to the callousness of the political, economic and social system in which they play their part. These are tendencies that encourage certain choices in the entertainment game of consumer capitalism - persuading the 'player' to buy certain products, and 'buy into' certain views. Players tend to make 'interpassive' choices from the game interface on offer. If this sounds rather negative, then thankfully, the overall game is more stupid than its constituent parts. Large systems are remarkably inefficient, according to Wiener's cybernetic approach:

'That system which more than all others should contribute to social homeostasis is thrown directly into the hands of those most concerned in the game of power and money, which we have already seen to be one of the chief anti-homeostatic elements in the community. [Tragically] the State is stupider than most of its components'.³

A lack of stupidity is best demonstrated within smaller social groups where relative homeostasis can be discerned. Under such circumstances, the system self-organises into a relatively equitable one. Against this, larger communities protect these interests by privacy, property rights and individualism. The problem is that the larger game seems to lack intelligence and the capacity to learn. The learning aspect is demonstrated in games theory, where strategies and tactics to win, or not lose, the game are developed through experience. This is not a complete strategy but an approximation (according to von Neumann's 'approximate theory') where the player acts with

¹ For instance, by John von Neumann and O. Morgenstern, in their *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944.

² Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (1948), Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2000, p. 159. Although Wiener is writing after the Second World War, recent history also serves to emphasise the point.

³ Ibid. pp. 161-2.

caution to avoid defeat. However, many examples of tactics would demonstrate that caution is only one such tactic and suitable to particular circumstances, and against particular opponents. Thus, to develop a sophisticated playing machine, it would need to adapt its behaviour and tactics according to the particularities of the circumstance (bearing in mind how literal its operations are otherwise). As has been demonstrated in recent world events, without reliable intelligence, a pre-emptive strike based on false information proves disastrous. An intelligent system needs to learn against failures and successes across a series of games and adapt itself accordingly so as not to reproduce exactly the same moves under the same circumstances but to do so against learned criteria of success and failure. Machines can easily be adapted to the rules of the game. But the issue is how they can usefully modified, made better and less stupid? Is 'total conversion' still possible under contemporary conditions?

In questions over the viability of a revolutionary subject (someone who feels they are able to change the larger game), Herbert Marcuse forces together the personal and the political taking into consideration what people do, especially to each other, at all levels as political acts.⁴ To Marcuse, the power of sexuality and desire unsettles the repressive work ethic that sustains capitalism. In Marcuse's terms 'Eros' had to be unleashed and not partial or directed onto normalised objects (such as the opposite sex).⁵ Present reality is enslavement that desire unleashes. Play allows for this.

To play is taken to be a political act and is potentially effective as it opens up what is otherwise repressed – particularly in adulthood. For Félix Guattari too, subjectivity is manufactured following a conservative paradigm: 'Capitalism mobilizes everything to halt the proliferation and the actualization of unconscious potentialities'.⁶ These psychic antagonisms are political – both individual at the level of desire and then collective and social. Capitalism is a repressive system that organises power to hide desire. The failure of social revolutions thus far is accounted for by the observation that they have failed to liberate desire sufficiently well – and replaced one form of repression with another. So what of computer games? Are they made better by the influence of desire, made less repressed and less totalitarian? Perhaps like work, games can never be totally unrepressed, but in play, the subject is somewhat freed from the alien quality of objects: 'While playing, one does not conform to the object'.⁷

Those (like Ludic Society) who wish for a more ludic world use play to explore the possibilities of social transformation. Despite the many failed attempts and glitches so far, total conversion remains a possibility and something still worth playing for.

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⁴ Vincent Geoghegan, *Reason & Eros: The Social Theory of Herbert Marcuse*, London: Pluto 1981.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, from *Eros and Civilisation*, 1972.

⁶ Félix Guattari (1995), *Chaosophy*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, New York: Semiotext[e], 1995, p. 49.

⁷ Herbert Marcuse, from 'On the Philosophical Foundation of the Concept of Labor Economics', in *Telos* 16, 1973, p.14-15.