




VM503
AESTHETICS AND HISTORY
OF NEW MEDIA

WEEK 10 CLASS 1

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Video Games and Computer Holding Power

(from "The Second Self", 1984)

by

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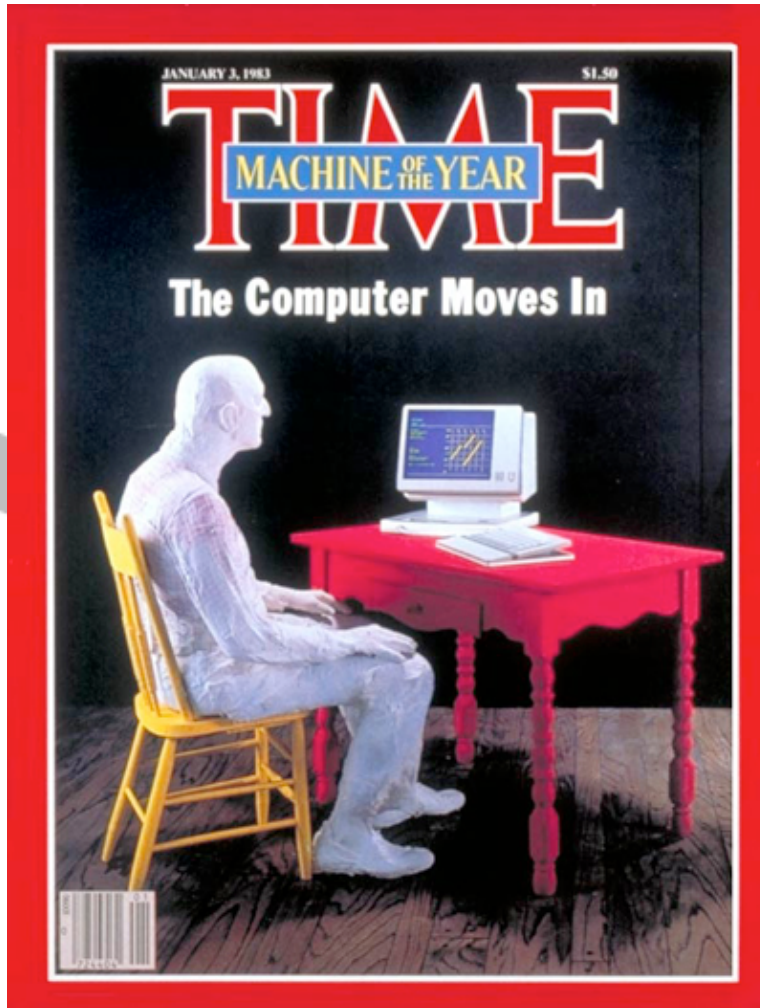
Life on the Screen

The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create. What kinds of personae do we make? What relation do these have to what we have traditionally thought of as the 'whole' person? Are they experienced as expanded self or separate from the self? Do our real-life selves learn lessons from our virtual personae? Are these virtual personae fragments of a coherent real-life personality? How do they communicate with one another? Why are we doing this? Is this a shallow game, a giant waste of time? Is it an expression of identity crisis of the sort we traditionally associate with adolescence? Or ***are we watching the slow emergence of a new, more multiple style of thinking about the mind?*** — Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, 1995.

Video Games

- Turkle observes that *children musing about objects and their nature* (can video games cheat) has given way to *children in contest* (girl playing Asteroids).
- **Reflection** has given way to **domination, ranking, testing, proving oneself.**
- **Metaphysics** has given way to **mastery.**

Computers ...



By **1983** the computer had become so much and so active a part of the everyday that *Time* magazine chose it to fill the role usually given to a Man or Woman of the Year. *Only one other gift of science has been so universally recognized as marking a new era of human life. That was **atomic energy.***

Computer Culture and Video Games

- At the heart of the computer culture is the idea of **constructed**, “rule-governed” worlds.
- Computer culture is a **culture of rules and simulation.**
- Comparison between TV and VG: TV is something you watch. Video games are **something you do**, *something you do to your head*, **a world that you enter**, and, to a certain extent, they are **something you “become.”**
- VGs are **interactive computer microworlds.**
- Skills: **assimilating** large amounts of information about **structure** and **strategy**; generalizing strategies to other games; **learning how to learn**; beyond thinking.*

Video Games ...

- Objects' (representations of objects) behavior is limited only by the programmer's imagination.
- Their liberation from the "real world" allows them to become a more perfect expression of the player's actions.
- All of the action is in a **programmed world**, an **abstract space**; a space where the physical machine and the physical player do not exist.
- Experience is **like inhabiting someone else's mind**.
- In *Pinball* **you act on** the ball. In *Pac-Man* **you are** the mouth. Conversation gives way to **fusion**. *

Video Games ...

- For Jarish, programming holds the “real secrets.” By modifying the code, he (often accidentally/by chance) arrives at exciting changes; he feels cheated when the manufacturers lock the code inside cartridges.
- *“Video games showed me what you could do with computers, what you could program. **They show you what you can do.**”*

Video Games ...

- In **sports** ... player's total **concentration on action** = the sense of *melding body and mind*.
- The **TV** spectator's body is out of the picture; the **sense of immersion** is through **imagination** and **identification**.
- The **entertainment industry** has long believed that the highest payoffs would come from offering the public **media that combine action and imaginative identification**.
- In **VGs**, the polarization between action and imaginative identification breaks down; **people enter them as participants**.

History of Video Games

- **Space Wars:** 1961 - MIT, required massive computers.
- **Pong:** 1973 - by Nolan Bushnell; could be played on TVs.
- **Space Invaders** (Atari, founded by Bushnell) launched VG culture.
- *New generations of computer graphics will allow game characters to have more realistic gestures and facial expressions. New programming techniques offer the hope of creating characters who have more specific and interesting personalities ... so that players' interactions with them **may feel more like a social encounter...***

Turkle

Future VGs

- Woody Allen's *The Kugelmass Episode*, (1977) **fantasized the interactive novel**; when implemented as a VG, the player in control of the character will “not live in a maze, but in a piece of interactive fiction.”
- In circles where people are trying to invent the future of interactive media there seems to be a great divide. *Will the player of the games of the future be in a more complex world than is offered by today's games, but still in a world that is created by someone else? Or will the player be the designer of his or her own game?* (Will) players continue to be “users” of someone else's program or will they be programmers in their own right?

VGs and Simulation

- Children come to the VGs from **a culture increasingly marked by the logic of simulation.**
- VGs offer **a chance to live in simulated, rule-governed worlds.**
- **Dungeons and Dragons** = precursor to VGs: There are no computers in the dungeons. But these **constructed worlds** are *permeated with the spirit of a computer program*. Their **constraints are those imposed by rule systems**, not by physical reality or moral considerations. Time might go backward, people might have superhuman powers, everything is possible. What is required is consistency.

VGs and Simulation ...

- The **reality** of the D and D simulation arises from the **amount of data** .. you can just go on, there are no limits. The game is just in your head, but from that it almost transfers to be real. - Jarish
- The **aesthetic of rule-governed worlds** is passed on through D and D and science fiction *before most children ever meet a computer.*
- Like Narcissus and his reflection, people who work with computers can easily fall in love with the worlds they have constructed or with their performances in the worlds created for them by others. **Involvement with simulated worlds affects relationships with the real one.**

VGs and Simulation ...

- VGs encourage identification with characters but leave little room for playing their roles.
- Role-playing = empathy; understanding, recognition, negotiation, confrontation.
- When you play a VG, you enter into the world of the programmers who made it. You have to do more than identify; you have to act. ID through action has a special kind of hold... Many players seek an altered state.
- As in sport, mental and physical action have to come together.*

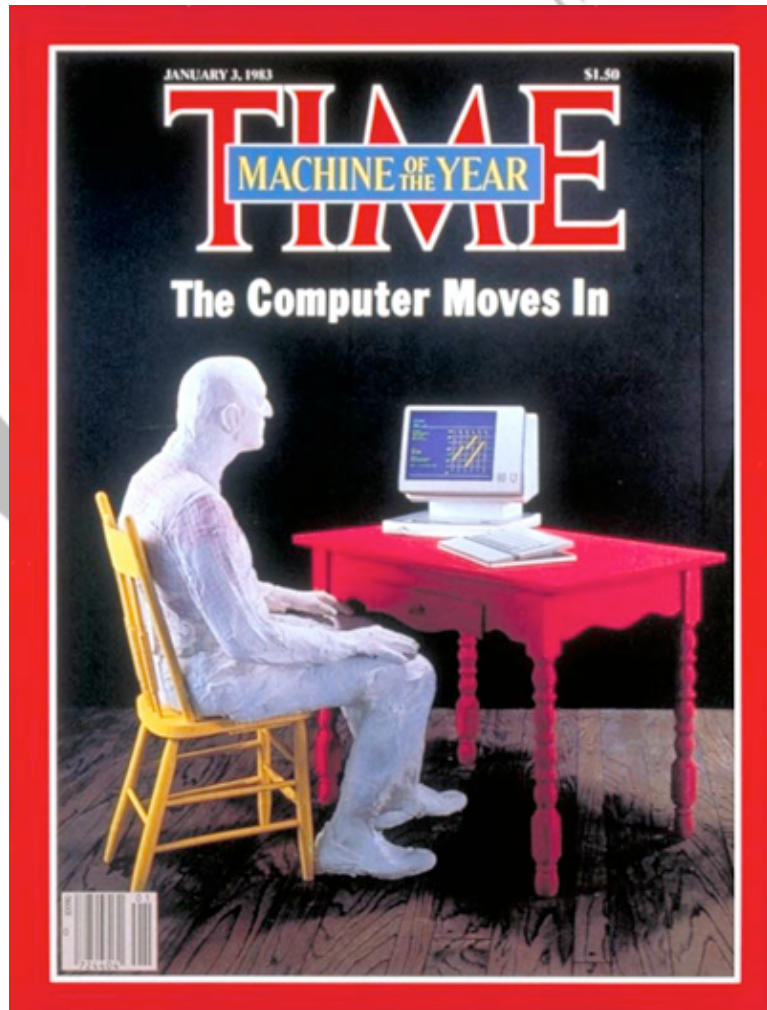
Metaphysical Machines

- When the game skill becomes second nature ... it becomes clear that in a video game there is nothing except **gaining more time**, and, for some players, the idea that but for their growing fatigue, their “human limitations,” **the game could go on forever**.
- Things that give a sense of **contact with the infinite become charged with emotion**... They hold the promise of perfection.
- The greater *the anxiety about being out of control*, the greater the seduction of a material that offers the promise of **perfect response**.

Conclusion

- When children begin to **do their own programming**, they are not deciphering somebody else's mystery. They **become players in their own game, makers of their own mysteries**, and enter into a new relationship with the computer, one in which they begin to experience it as a kind of second self. - Turkle
- **Media was no longer fixed, it was changeable.** -- Rushkoff (on the late 1970s). Analogy between the **limits of packaged software** and the **limits of social and economic codes.** -- Rushkoff (on 2009; see whole article in notes)

Person of the Year



1983



2006

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