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ON INTERACTIVE MEDIA AND HIDDEN AGENDAS

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In interactive video games we are seeing the first example of a computerized communications technology that is having a socializing effect on the next generation on a mass scale. Already we are seeing letters to newspapers, current affairs reports and research findings deploring the time spent by children in game parlors and the dollars wasted on PacMan. There is a public assumption that video games are somehow harmful and the criticisms are reminiscent of the attacks on television in the sixties. What is at stake here, however, is not the amount of time or money spent on video games but the cultural values and ideologies generated across a range of computerized entertainment systems. Video games are becoming a pervasive and powerful medium within the image culture and together with television and cinema, they are central forces in defining and constructing children's sense of identity, politics and culture.

For many years progressive teachers have argued the importance of student experience as the central component in developing a critical pedagogy. More than seven in ten households in the United States own a Nintendo set and thus video games must be recognized as increasingly dominant force in student experience (Estes and Thomas, 1993). In the same manner as other media messages, interactive video games should be subjected to criticism and analysis with reference to the ideological messages they convey. As educators we have a responsibility to examine, evaluate and where appropriate, critique the socialization offered by the interactive video experiences so beloved by children. Such analysis might focus on the value systems constructed and reinforced by the games; the subject positions offered to the players and the interface between the values of the game world and the values of the school.

The characterization, narrative structure, plot orientation and resolution in video games raise issues about the representation of gender, race and age. Consider for a moment the gender orientation demanded and reinforced by interactive video games. Most of the games offer the player a male point of view and stereotypically masculine things to do. The popular games are strongly marked by overt signs of masculinity: they are action oriented, climax focussed, and control dependent (Fiske, 1987). Structurally the games offer immediate gratification or punishment and narratively they work through metaphors of conquest, domination and control. Certainly the games give children the opportunity to familiarize themselves with interactive technologies but at the same time they also impart very traditional ideas about gender roles. In Super Mario Brothers 3, the latest in the spectacularly successful Nintendo series, the player selects a character to manipulate through seven or more levels of play. If the player chooses Mario, he has to rescue Princess Toadstool from a tribe of evil turtles. The player assumes the role of Mario and along the way must dodge man-eating pot plants and other curious terrors while seizing the opportunity to boost his powers by eating various magic substances. The game offers a male point of view in which the objective is to test the player's powers against a powerful male authority figure. The game ends when the player loses his/her last "life" or tires of slaying the giant or eloping with the princess. In any case, the female, Princess Toadstool, remains in her traditional assigned position of victim or prize. Efforts by game designers to provide for female players range from the half-hearted to the insulting. Toru Irawatani, designer of the video game PacMan, claimed that the game was meant to appeal to female players. He thought the "pretty colors" would "please" and appeal to women.

Equally perturbing as the narrative gender bias is the possibility that the games provide boys with the "basic skills" for the "computer age" that girls will miss out on. Interactive video games develop such skills as comprehension, reasoning, logic, hand/eye coordination, patience, decision-making, and increased confidence (Estes and Nolan, 1993). Research indicates that girls and boys have different relationships with interactive video games. Girls play less often than boys, are less skillful and are less engrossed in the games. This has implications for the development of

computer skills in girls and opens up the possibility of a flow over effect into girls' relationships with other forms of technology (Wajcman, 1981). Sherry Turkle, in her book *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, argues that girls and boys approach the computer differently. Boys are "hard masters" looking for ways to control the simulated world on the screen; girls are "soft masters" more likely to look for ways of accommodating its rules. Most video games are definitely about hard mastery and are therefore more likely to reinforce the social behaviors practiced by the "hard masters." There appears to be a very real danger that interactive video games perpetuate the old stereotypical positions that technology is a male domain and that women operate effectively only within the emotional domain.

Historically, the selection, description and sequence of information and events in a media message have been the sole domain of the author/filmmaker. Today, interactive media give children the power to control the events of the narrative. In practice this reader-power is exercised only within the paradigm of choices provided by the microchip. This paradigm is narrow and exclusive. As discussed earlier it is essentially masculine but it is also by implication white, young and able bodied. Race as an issue is displaced because the characters are rendered in graphic form and ethnic identity is not marked overtly. However, in most cases the characters are not depicted as non-white and are therefore assumed by default to be white. Similarly, all the protagonist characters in the game occupy an indeterminate game space of healthy youth. As with other entertainment media the aged, the differently abled and the infirm are absent. Yet despite the narrowness of the choices offered to the player the sense of control is there: it is a conscious sense and it is a vital part of the pleasure of the activity. In part this is what makes Nintendo's Mario so attractive; he has no definable personality whatsoever -- a completely empty image onto which young players can project their fantasies. The machines produce messages with no definitive meanings and thus open up a space for the player to become author. This aspect of interactive media has enormous potential for fostering creativity, critical decision making and values clarification.

However, when the paradigm of choices offered by the microchip is one or another method of simulated mass murder in various forms, the player as author scenario is more disturbing. This is more noticeable when

comparing modal values advocated by schools and those inherent in interactive video games. Schools advocate modal values antithetical to those of interactive video games. Schools encourage a caring and humane environment and foster the values of team work, mutual support, peaceful problem solving, and delayed gratification. Most interactive video games actively encourage children to adopt aggressive competitive behaviors which value power, individual strength, violent problem solving and instant gratification. The lesson taught in thousands of interactive video games is that there are two options: you are quick or you are dead. Is it possible that regular exposure to this sort of stress-inducing entertainment could be a factor in displays of antisocial behavior? Are the instant decision-making strategies required by the games the appropriate skills for dealing with real life interpersonal interactions and social situations? These are questions that need to be critically debated in education institutions around the world. We cannot rely upon government regulation to ensure that children's exposure to interactive media is "safe" and developmentally appropriate.

POLITICS AND WORLDWIDE COMMUNICATIONS

The degree to which the new information and entertainment systems will be subject to government control is an open question. Internationally the trend is toward deregulation and privatization (Katz, 1987). Driving this movement is economic rationalism with its belief in the necessary link between economics and communications and that policy in the commercial sphere must promote profit and efficiency. Worldwide, communications policies reflect the view that prosperity is linked to the provision of universal, affordable communications systems at home and their export to a global market (Glasner, 1986; Wallerstein, 1987).

Such prosperity can also be linked to the dissemination of Western ideology. The term "one-way flow" has been used to characterize Western industrialized countries' export of communication products and services to the rest of the world (Unesco, 1984). Termed "one-way," because almost all of these exports involve very little trading or importing of comparable goods, these communications exports are unique, in that they not only provide importers with media and their messages, but they also carry with

them Western ideology which is geared toward American attitudes and values. This is an export that cannot be matched by any other commodity in its social and cultural impact on the importing nation.

This one-way flow involves communications hardware, telecommunications systems, media systems and cultural products. Until recently, highly industrialized countries have had little competition in any of these communications areas, but recent trends show that more and more countries throughout the world are trying to compete in the regional markets. This competition originates from an awakening of economic, political and cultural needs within these countries. Particularly, newly industrialized countries have found that not only is a good communications system a national status symbol but it is absolutely essential for economic prosperity (Kolko, 1988).

Today, information and entertainment communications is an industry with two main branches, production and distribution. Ownership of these industries has become increasingly oligopolistic. This is a world-wide phenomenon as transnational business concerns continue to buy up and take over media producers and distributors throughout the world. The "one-way flow" continues as ownership of these dominant media systems tends to originate from the highly industrialized countries, and they include entertainment as well as information production and distribution.

The new interactive media systems will operate worldwide via a common carrier. Thus, messages originating in one country and transmitted to another will be outside the jurisdiction of the receiving country's regulatory laws. Nations may be able to exercise some power over the messages produced within their own boundaries but they will be unable to control information and entertainment services produced and transmitted from other countries. The new communications systems will be answerable only to the consumer.

Joyce Kolko (1988) writes of the problems with consumer-driven interactive media systems:

> But now, as in the past and in all areas, it is capitalism that sets the rules. Technology is therefore often used for purposes distinctly alien to human needs -- for the military, to create unemployment, for the

refinement of control and manipulation of others, and for innumerable other antisocial activities (p. 152).

When the sole control over new interactive media and their messages is market forces and when the bottom line is what the consumers are willing to buy, can we look forward to the day that dial-a-porn becomes visually interactive or cigarette companies sponsor interactive information and entertainment services? The question needs to be asked, are we preparing our children for this new communications age? These are issues which must be addressed through education if we are to ensure that the "information society" is also a society of wisdom, knowledge and care.

EDUCATION FOR TOMORROW'S LITERATE SOCIETY

Education must accompany the integration of these communication systems into our schools, culture and psyche. Educators need to take a fresh look at the "basics" of the classroom curriculum and question its adequacy to deal with the potentials of the new interactive media. A preliminary model might be Lasswell's functionalist formula "Who Says What in Which Channel to Whom with What Effect" with Raymond Williams' amendment "To What Purpose." If we add our own epithet "For Whose Benefit" we have the beginnings of a curriculum model which could be applied to the study of the relationship of the new communication systems to social structures, economics and power. Central to the education of the media literate child is the idea that interactive media is not a neutral means of disseminating information and entertainment. Crucial questions are: who is formulating the information on the screen, on what ideological and political basis are the selections made and for what purpose is the information and entertainment conveyed? When these issues are understood, children will have the power to make informed and ethical decisions about the messages they receive and transmit.

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