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Gamevironments from the perspective of an actant. ChatGPT (prompt: "gameenvironments").

10th Anniversary Issue

Gamevironments Revisited

an elucidation of the gulf between the theorised connections between communities, environments and things, and the experience of those connections. I note that some parts of the network need to be actively *unimagined* for the system to be sustained, and that as researchers we should pay heed not only to what is connected, but to how those connections are or are not *felt*. To this end, *alienation* will be an important concept. This critical engagement with Radde-Antweiler’s concept is done chiefly through putting other theorists into conversation with each other, with some limited use of examples that would be potential applications of this approach, such as GamerGate. First, though, I expand on the concept of gameenvironments and Radde-Antweiler’s 2024 update.

Gameenvironments Then and Now

The portmanteau title of both the concept and this journal, *gameenvironments*, stresses the fundamental inextricability of games and gaming from their broader environments (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, and Zeiler 2014). This 2014 theorisation lays out two levels for analysis: the technical and the cultural environments of games and gaming. It advocates an actor-centred approach whereby researchers must attend to not only those actors *directly* a part of the gaming activity (e.g., the player or players), but also those less directly involved. Each affects the other in a rhizomatic network of actors, and so arbitrarily looking only at the game itself, or at those directly involved in its playing, will always be lacking crucial cultural context.

Radde-Antweiler’s (2024) critical revision of the concept in this issue takes into account the theoretical advances made over the last decade. Two points in her revision are key. The first is the shift from actors to actants. Agency is exerted not only by human actors, but also by nonhuman actants, such as data, hardware,

software, and so on. We should not examine the technical context of a game on a separated level, as in the 2014 version, but with equal salience given to all actants. The second point is a methodological one, that gameenvironments can be analysed as *communicative figurations* (Hepp and Hasebrink 2018). These figurations consist of a thematic framing, within which the researcher identifies the constellation of actants and the communicative practices between them.

This helps gameenvironments to be operationalizable within a context of *deep gametisation*. Radde-Antweiler (2024) outlines deep gametisation as not only the omnipresence of digital games within societies, but also its reciprocal causality. That is, games are not only a *product* of society, but a more fundamental, constitutive and inextricable *part of it*.

Two Theories of Community

Perhaps the most well-known theory in this regard is Benedict Anderson’s (1983) concept of the *imagined community*. This is not actually a definition of community per se. Rather it leverages the idea of community to define, as the title states, the origin and spread of nationalism and the nation-state as a concept. *Community* is actually a term taken for granted in Anderson’s concept here. Nonetheless, its influence amongst thinkers of community means it bears examination.

Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1983, 6). He unpacks each of the key terms here:

"It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. ... In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." (1983, 6)

"The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind." (1983, 7)

"It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm." (ibid.)

"Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings." (ibid.)

His elaboration of the term *community* here is interesting in the context of being imagined: the effect of community is the perception of "deep, horizontal comradeship" (ibid.) with those who are also interpolated as part of the same group of people. Where a community can be (self-)identified, Anderson assumes not only some kind of commonality, but comradeship.

Gamevironments is then a concept that does two things to community here. First, it helps to stress a point that Anderson makes clear throughout his book, that underpinning these imaginings is necessarily a technosocial infrastructure that frames the connections between people who never have and never will know of one another. For example, national newspapers which frame issues around the world with

themselves to be in and identify with a community. They identify four elements that contribute to a *sense of community*:

“The first element is *membership*. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is *influence*, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: *integration and fulfillment of needs*. This is the feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is *shared emotional connection*, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences. ... Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together.” (McMillan and Chavis 1986, 9)

Here also the gameenvironments concept encourages us to broaden our understanding of community to, if not include, rely on much more extensive networks of actants. For example, with the third element, *integration and fulfillment of needs*, we must ask what those needs are and how they arose.

In Torill Elvira Mortensen’s (2018, 799) important article on Gamergate, she observes that, while some gamergaters (especially high-profile ones) are wealthy and privileged, many “are unemployed, very young, undereducation, or have social problems. They often speak about themselves as undesirable and express the opinion that if games change, they will lose the only thing that holds value to them.” In other words, Gamergate can be understood as a community insofar as it fulfils the material and social needs of many disposed people particularly in the USA. Arguably, the continuing non-fulfilment of these needs led many of the same demographic as gamergaters into the alt-right, the Trump campaign and conspiracy communities like

QAnon (Bezio 2018, Peckford 2020, Mortensen and Sihvonen 2020, Schoppmeier 2019, Massanari 2020).

This is not to say that Barack Obama is to blame for Gamergate. But it is to say that broader social and material conditions – therefore including both seemingly unrelated human and nonhuman actants – can play a significant role in the impetus for the formation of a community and the engine behind its maintenance as a community, even if its outward form shifts and morphs with events. Gameenvironments as a concept urges us to engage with these broader actants and to see their part in the object of study.

These are only two theories of community, albeit prominent ones. But already we see what gameenvironments as a framework demands: approaching the object of study holistically. And, while this revised concept does insist on *nonhuman* actants as well as human, in contrast to the original formulation (Radde-Antweiler, Waltemathe, and Zeiler 2014), that is not the only change. What is made particularly clear with the GamerGate example is what Radde-Antweiler terms the *deep gametisation* of society. *Deep gametisation* is construed as a specific part of *deep mediatisation*, which refers to not only the fact that society is increasingly saturated with media, but that it is increasingly *founded on* and *shaped by* media (Couldry and Hepp 2017). Digital games don't simply reflect and represent facets of society, they *shape* society. From GamerGate providing a blueprint for the rise of the alt-right to some of today's biggest and many prestigious TV series now being based on digital games (e.g., *The Last of Us* (2013-2020) and the *Fallout* series (1997-2018)), from the Catholic church looking to a blasphemous game series to help restore an iconic sacred space to the production of game consoles bolstering demand for cobalt from mines in the DRC, digital games are increasingly shaping the world.

10) writes in *The Society of the Spectacle* how “the reigning economic system is a vicious circle of isolation. ... From automobiles to television, the goods that the spectacular system chooses to produce also serve it as weapons for constantly reinforcing the conditions that engender ‘lonely crowds’.” Debord observes how all of this innovative technology that appears to connect the world together more than ever is paradoxically also more isolating. The automobile allows one’s social circle to expand far beyond their immediate surroundings, no longer reliant on slow travel by horseback or fast but temporally and spatially limited public transit like trains. But it also allows for that travel to be conducted shuttered away alone in a box, scarcely having to talk to another living person between A and B.

Debord’s observation holds true today. Radde-Antweiler (2024, 16) brings up briefly the notion of *datafication*, “the representation of social life through computerized data produced by media devices and their underlying software and infrastructure” (Kołodziejska et al. 2023, 201), but does not develop it further. For me, datafication is at the centre of gameenvironments, not only because of how it contributes to deep gametisation as a part of deep mediatisation, but also because of how datafication shapes the *quality* of subjective and intersubjective experiences of communities.

How these digital infrastructures shape the us and the world is vital in a time of deep mediatisation, gametisation and datafication, because the *deep* means that they are not only omnipresent, but foundational and constitutive of our very subjectivity, inextricable from ourselves and our mode of being in the world. That reliance and inextricability also makes these infrastructures supremely vulnerable to manipulation by misanthropic interests such as capital.

Steinmann describes. In slightly less hyperbolic terms, many tech writers have talked of a *dying, ruined or broken* internet (Zitron 2021, Brereton 2023, Lewis 2023, Lopatto 2023, Sato 2023).

Michael Steinmann describes this in Marxist terms as *alienation*:

“As a structural condition, alienation first and foremost plays out in the incongruence of the purposes that are involved in data production. Following Marx, I assume that in producing personal data, agents seek to assert the reality of their existence (humans are real through the reality of the objects they use), participate in inter-personal and social relations, and achieve the recognition of others. At the same time, their data become resources for someone else. While agents create data, they actually work, or better: someone else considers what they do as valuable work.” (Steinmann 2022, 99)

Datafication broadens our network of actants our enormously. My conversation with a friend now becomes mediated through a digital platform owned by a company like Meta, who harvests data from both me and my interlocutor (if not by using the content of the chat specifically, because chat apps are now often end-to-end encrypted, then at least by my patterns of usage). This data is stored somewhere, processed by other actants within the company, and possibly also distributed or sold to third parties who in turn store and process that data. This data may go on to be used to make decisions by any of these parties, or to train large language models (LLMs), which we may then encounter in the form of chatbots on online shops, helping us with programming problems in ChatGPT, or as a virtual companion on our phones. A cosy conversation with a close friend has a million digital ears listening in and taking notes. Cumulatively, these digital ears distort and distract from that assertion and recognition of the reality of existence Steinmann notes.

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