COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

Technology and Popular Culture

October 16, 1992

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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"Technology and Popular Culture"

Friday, October 16, 1992
3:00 - 4:30
Killian Hall, Building 14
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Speakers:

Henry Jenkins
MIT Literature Department

Mary Fuller
MIT Literature Department

Lynn Spigel
Critical Studies, Cinema and Television
University of Southern California

Sherry Turkle
MIT Science, Technology, and Society Program

Respondent: Rosalind Williams
MIT Writing and Humanistic Studies Progra,

Moderator: Philip Khoury
Dean of MIT Humanities and Social Science

Overview: In recent years, the study of popular culture has emerged as a central topic in the humanities and social sciences. This session of the Communications forum, part of a two-day conference organized by the M.I.T. Cultural Studies Project, examined some of the ways which new technologies have entered into and shaped the culture of ordinary life. Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller explored the surprising continuities between computer games and a genre of narrative that emerged in Shakespeare's era. They presented a collaborative talk entitled "Nintendo and Renaissance New World Narrative." Lynn Spigel, a noted media scholar, examined television's evolving treatment of a key theme in a paper entitled "From the Home Theater to the Voyage: Ideas of Domestic Space on American Television, 1950-1970." Sherry Turkle, Professor of Sociology in the STS Program at M.I.T. and author of a pioneering book about the cultural impact of the computer, The Second Self, offered further reflections on the relations between human identity and computers in a talk entitled "Reconstructing the Self in Virtual Reality." These papers are attached.

Rosalind Williams, the respondent, has published widely on technology and cultural experience in the modern era. She found a link among the papers presented, citing the transformation of linguistic analysis into spatial analysis. Williams noted that the first two speakers talked about actual movement through space, while Spigel described the household space and Turkle then described a "virtual" space in which identities are created. While cultural geographers think about real space, these papers focused on technological space where the borders of the self are. Williams used Stockdale's quote from the recent Vice Presidential debate - "Who am I and what am I doing here?" - to illustrate the pervasive sense of dislocation which goes back at least 500 years to the dawn of capitalism, as boundary conditions have continually shifted. As the recent debate over Columbus has shown, there are still questions: was this discovery or invasion? In fact, Columbus was looking for new trade routes and his search was impelled by earlier reorganizations of space due to the expropriation of land from the peasantry. Williams continued that the grand theme of capitalism has centered on depriving people of their space, creating a mobile work force as well as such problems as homelessness. She concluded that capitalism should not be seen as an all-purpose "fall guy"; rather, it has created a dialectical process by cutting old connections and creating new ones.

A lively question and answer period followed. One member of the audience expressed concern that neither Spigel nor Williams addressed issues of race, notably the mobilization of people of color. She asked what kind of a space is being created if it is only for white, middle class, heterosexuals. She suggested that Spigel, in particular, address the portrayal of black women on television and the stereotypes such portrayals perpetuate. Spigel responded that she had thought about adding this to her paper but had decided to focus on the more mainstream feminist issues raised by women in the 1950's who often had to choose between privilege and autonomy. Another member of the audience asked Turkle what property of MUDs makes it a game. Turkle

responded that the anonymity provided by the technology allows players more freedom and creativity to view otherwise complex issues of identity as a game. Finally, a member of the audience asked Jenkins if he saw parallels between Nintendo and Shakespeare. Jenkins was leary about such a connection, arguing that space in theater is static while Nintendo continually recreates space. Turkle added that the parts most like theater involve the processes of interpreting and playing a role. She added further the effects of space on the interpretation of roles, citing the many experiments that have been tried by theater companies and workshops to relocate Shakespearean plays in time and place.

WORK IN PROGRESS

NINTENDO AND NEW WORLD NARRATIVES

by Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller

MF: We want to start by telling you two stories.

HJ: Here's the first.   Princess Toadstool is kidnapped by the
savage king Koopa. Two brave brothers, Mario and Luigi, depart on
a series of adventures to rescue her. Mario and Luigi, simple men
of humble beginnings (in fact, Italian-American plumbers), cross a
vast unexplored space, encountering strange creatures, struggling
against an inhospitable landscape, before finally confronting and
besting the monarch and his minions in a life and death struggle.
In the process, the Super Mario Brothers not only restore the
princess to her people but also exert control over this strange new
world and its curious resources.
MF: My story is really a collection of stories, which I can
probably evoke for you in some form just by mentioning a few key
words: Walter Raleigh -- Roanoke -- the Lost Colony -- Virginia
Dare. Or Jamestown -- John Smith --Pocahontas -- John Rolfe. I
want to draw for the moment not on the complexities and
particularities but on what is simple and popular, what can be
evoked as an indistinct impression -- the saleable, inaccurate,
recurrent myth of the captive princess and her rescuers, (Virginia
Dare, the first child born at what was to become the "Lost Colony,"
Pocahontas, a genuine princess who became a candidate for rescue --
or kidnapping -- thanks to her own gesture of rescuing John
Smith,himself both a hero of humble origins and a kind of princess
in drag, who represents his whole career as a repeated experience
of captivity and rescue by women, or for that matter, Virginia
itself as personified by English apologists for colonization.)
Nintendo's Princess Toadstool and Mario brothers is a cognate
version of this story.
HJ: Since we announced the subject of our paper as Nintendo and
New World narratives, people have been asking us the obvious
question -- what do these seemingly disparate topics have to do
with each other? What kind of meaningful connections can be drawn
between them? In many ways, the question is the same one posed by
this conference: what can an interdisciplinary approach contribute
to our knowledge and understanding of popular culture? what is the
payoff of a dialogue between post modern and early modern studies?
MF: Although we opened with the alluring narratives of Princess
Toadstool,Pocahontas and Virginia Dare (or of Mario, Luigi, and
John Smith) in fact, we want to get at another shared concern in
our material which seems to underlie these more memorable fictions
in a constitutive way.   Both the terms of our title involve
explorations of space: the physical space navigated, mapped and
mastered by European voyagers and travellers in the 16th and 17th
centuries, and the fictional, digitally-projected space traversed,
mapped and mastered by players of Nintendo video games. Simply
put, we want to argue that the movement in space which the rescue
plot seems to motivate is itself the point, the topic and the goal,

and that this shift in emphasis from narrativity to geography produces features which make Nintendo and New World narratives in some ways strikingly similar to each other and different from many other kinds of texts.

The answer to Henry's second set of questions -- what is the payoff of this kind of dialogue -- is a bit harder. What is the aim of this kind of collaboration, and what kind of methodology and theoretical justification can it adopt? The path between Henry's concerns and my own is not a well-travelled one. And so this paper is confessedly and intentionally itself exploratory. We hope it will chart some possibilities of dialogue and communication between disparate professional spaces which we inhabit.

HJ: The paper is the result of a series of conversations which we've been having over the four years since we came to MIT, conversations which began hesitatingly in efforts for each of us to understand the other's area of specialization but which have grown in frequency and intensity as we began to locate points of contact between our work. We hope that this paper will reflect the process of that exchange as much as its product, that it will open questions for future discussion rather than provide answers for immediate consumption. As Mary has suggested, it represents in part our response to a shared, significant difficulty, that traditional tools of narrative analysis did not seems adequate to the particular character of the works we were each engaged in studying.

MF: For this paper, the New World documents I have in mind are ones like Columbus's Diario, or Walter Ralegh's Discoverie of the large, rich and beautiful empire of Guiana, or John Smith's True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia; that is, chronologically structured narratives of voyage and exploration, from ships' logs to more elaborate texts. When I began to read this material, I expected these narratives of travel to and return from another world to assume different kind of structure than, in fact, I found -- a romance or quest motif, the ironic contrasts of Utopian fiction, at least an overt "theme." These expectations were frustrated. One literary critic complains that the travel journal underwent no sustained development as a literary form, but conforms more or less consistently to a formulaic pattern: "The abstract reads, we sailed, did and saw this and this, suffered and were saved or lost, made such and such encounters with the savages, hungered, thirsted, and were storm worn, but some among us came home." Part of the problem lies outside the texts, in that practical strategies diverge from the demands of narrative coherence: the same critic complains that the carefully prepared climax of Jacques Cartier's Brief Recit is spoiled when Cartier decides to sail for home instead of waiting for a long anticipated Indian attack. Reading the voyage narratives from the perspective of conventional narrative expectations is an experience of almost unremitting frustration. Yet these texts, if they are not conventional narratives, are equally clearly not transparent records of an experience which itself demands no commentary. On the contrary. And so one wants first, to find a way of characterizing their structure and its shaping imperatives on its own terms and second, to account for

their reception, their uses and pleasures for audiences then and now. Because this is material that was produced and printed in extraordinary quantity.

HJ: By the end of 1990, Nintendo estimated that one out of three homes in the United States would have a Nintendo system. My household was one of them, and I wanted to know more about how we might discuss these phenomenally popular games as cultural artifacts, perhaps as popular narratives, and as a new media for mass communication. As I discovered when asked to review two recent books on Nintendo, the accounts of it currently being given seemed to be missing any serious discussion of the particularity of Nintendo as a means of organizing cultural experience, what it meant to be playing the games rather than watching or reading them. Plot didn't seem to be a central feature of Nintendo's sales pitch. Ads talked about interactivity rather than characterization ("Nintendo gives you power to choose") and about atmospheres rather than story lines ("awesome graphics"). Nintendo, a 100-year old playing card company little known outside Japan, revitalized the declining American video game market by moving from the simple, abstracted spaces of Pong or Pac-Man to create an ever-changing and visually fascinating arena for play. Nintendo struck me as an emergent form of spatialized narrative whose central feature is its constant presentation of spectacular spaces (or "worlds," to use the game parlance). Its landscapes dwarf characters who serve in turn primarily as vehicles for players to move through these remarkable places. Once immersed in playing, we don't really care whether we rescue Princess Toadstool or not; all that matters is staying alive long enough to move between levels, to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen.

In Nintendo's narratives, characters play a minimal role, displaying traits which are largely capacities for action: typically, fighting skills, modes of transportation, pre-established goals, plot functions. Activity drains away the characters' strength, as measured by an ever-shifting graph at the top of the screen, but it cannot build character, since these figures lack even the most minimal interiority. Similarly, plot is transformed into a generic atmosphere -- a haunted house, a subterranean cavern, a futuristic cityscape, an icy wilderness -- which the player can explore. Playing time unfolds in a fixed and arbitrary fashion with no responsiveness to the psychological time of the characters, sometimes flowing too slow to facilitate player interest and blocking the advance of the plot action, other times moving so fast that we can't react quickly enough to new situations or the clock runs out before we complete our goals. Exposition occurs primarily at the introduction and closing of games: for instances, the opening of SUPER MARIO WORLD reminds us that the Princess has once again been kidnapped. The game's conclusion displays the reunion of Princess and champion and a kind of victory tour over the lands Mario has conquered. But these sequences are canned: players can not control or intervene in them. Often, a player simply flashes past this exposition to get into the heart of the action. These framing stories with their often arbitrary narrative goals play little role in the actual experience of the games, as plot gives way quickly to a more flexible period of

spatial exploration. Though plot structures (kidnapping and rescue, pursuit and capture, street fighting, invassion and defense) are highly repetitive, repeated from game to game and over and over within the game with little variety -- one reason these games have been harshly criticized by educational authorities -- what never loses its interest is the promise of moving into the next space, of mastering these worlds and making them your own playground. So while the child's play is framed by a kind of narrative logic, it remains largely uncontrolled by its dictates. MF: The appetite for encountering a succession of new spaces which Nintendo feeds is of course central to New World narratives -- and, I would imagine, shared to a great extent both by those who travelled and wrote and by their audiences, especially later ones. John Smith's strategy of successively exploring and mapping all the rivers around Jamestown contrasted with the Virginia Company's desire to impose grander, more recognizable, and more goal-oriented trajectories on the travels of the colonists: to find a gold mine, a passage to China, or Ralegh's Lost Colony. These ultimate objectives, held as they are in suspension, enable Smith's presence in Virginia and his day-by-day progress through the natural and human geography of the Chesapeake. This configuration is a common one. Voyages and narratives which set out in search of a significant, motivating goal have a strong tendency to defer it, replacing arrival at that goal (and the consequent shift to another kind of activity) with a particularized account of the travel itself, and what was seen and done. Even goal-driven narratives like those of Ralegh or Columbus at best only offer dubious signs of proximity in place of arrival -- at China, El Dorado, the town of the Amazons -- phenomena which, interpreted, erroneously suggest it is just over the horizon, to be deferred to some later date. Columbus "got there" only retrospectively, when the thing to be found had been redefined by hindsight.

Rhetorical as well as documentary goals bear on the narratives. That is, Walter Ralegh wants to find El Dorado, and he also wants to produce a narrative that will stimulate interest in Guiana and persuade Elizabeth to restore him to favor. The imperative which operates on his text, however -- as on many others -- is less that of shaping a coherent plot or theme than of providing a kind ofcompleteness, a (doubtless, loaded) inventory of what was done and seen, one which at once provides both an alternate, more diffuse kind of justification for the discovery and motives and informational resources for a repeat performance. Ralph Lane, one of the Roanoke governors, notes that the particularity of his account is "to the end it may appear to you ... that there wanted no great good will ... to have perfected this discovery" -- of a rumored mine the company never set out towards. Even in the Discoverie of Guiana, a text whose teleology is announced in the title, the actual search for Guiana, the narrative concomitants of searching for something, get lost in a welter of details, of events and places which have little to do with El Dorado but which occupied the days of the voyage. The sequenced inventories of places and events replace, defer, and attest to an authentic and exculpating desire for goals the voyages almost invariably failedto reach.

Crucial, as well, in structuring these narratives is the reciprocal relation of space and time. Movement in space typically generates the narrative -- Smith writes primarily about the times he is in motion, not the times he is sitting in Jamestown -- which is in turn organized by elapsed time (sequences of dates) and also determined by it. Henry mentioned that "characters" in Nintendo can be described less in terms of learning and transformation than in terms of resources gradually expended in the course of the game. This sense of a trajectory dictated not by change or crisis but by expenditure, the gradual running-out of a fixed quantity of time or resources, is an almost universal feature of the narratives I study because it was the unavoidable nature of the voyages and colonial experiments they document. Many documents record the consequences of poorly managing resources -- the season for sailing passing as one sits wind boundin an English harbor, a crew mutinying at the idea of sailing beyond Ireland, food running out in the middle of the winter or the middle of the ocean (this one, over and over), having to write home hypothetical accounts of the treasures you would discover if you had better boats, or more food, or it were not so late in the year. These documents end not because some resolution or conclusion has been achieved but because something has run out. To give another example, John Smith's ability to trade for corn to feed a starving colony was unarguably more critical than the story about the rescue of the Lost Colony which the Virginia Company tried to impose on him, or the story about Pocahontas which he recounted 16 years after the event and six years after her death.

HJ: Though we've noted the experimental nature of this paper's juxtapositions, there is, in fact, a precedent for them in Michel De Certeau's work in successive books on New World discourse (Heterodoxy) and on the politics of consumption in contemporary popular culture (The Practice of Everyday Life and more centrally, in his largely neglected essay on "Spatial Stories." While we are claiming space as organizing principle for two kinds of narrative, as what makes them different from e.g. novels, De Certeau lays out grand claim for spatial relations as central organizing principle of all narratives: "Every story is a travel story -- a spatial practice." Our cultural need for narrative can be linked to our search for believable, memorable and primitive spaces while stories are told to account for our current possession or desire for territory. De Certeau argues that stories are centrally concerned with "the relationship between the frontier and the bridge, that is, between a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority." He continues: "The story endlessly marks out frontiers. It multiplies them, but in terms of interactions among characters -- things, animals, human beings." Plot actions, he argues, involve the process of appropriation and displacement of space, a struggle for possession and control over the frontier or journeys across the bridges which link two spaces together. Such terms will, of course, be familiar to anyone who has thought about the discovery and colonization of America. Yet, Nintendo also enacts a constant struggle along the lines that separate known and unknown spaces -- the line of the frontier -- which is where the player encounters dangerous creatures and brutal savages, where we fight for

possession and control over the story world. The frontier here is apt to be technological and urban rather than primitive and pastorial (or as in the Mario Brothers games, a strange mix of the two) but then, Mary's settlers were also mapping their adventures on spaces already occupied by someone else's culture. The frontier line is literalized through the breakdown of story space into a series of screens. The narrative space is not all visible at once. One must push towards the edge of the screen to bring more space into view. The games also often create a series of goal posts which not only mark our progress through the game space but also determine our dominance over it. Once you've mastered a particular space, moved past its goal post, you can ressume play at that point no matter the outcome of a particular round. Even in the absence of such a mechanism, increased understanding of the geography, biology and physics of the different worlds makes it easy to return quickly to the same spot and move further into the frontier.

A related feature of the games are warpzones -- secret passages which, like de Certeau's bridges, accelerate one's movement through the narrative geography and bring two or more worlds together. Knowledge about warpzones, passwords, and other game secrets are key items of social exchange between game players. More to the point, they have become important aspects of the economic exchange between game companies and players. Nintendo engages in a playful yet lucrative form of "insider trading," selling secret tips about traversing the game space to consumers either through 1-900 hotlines or through subscriptions to Nintendo Power magazine, which markets detailed maps of the many worlds and levels of popular games and tips for coping with the local flora and fauna or crossing difficult terrain. Here, the prose comes close to the tone and character of the New World narratives Mary is discussing: "Wide channels of ice are bordered by icy cliffs. Atop the cliffs are trees that can cause a lot of damage if you're not careful." In most cases, however, the game company withholds crucial information and the final stage of the game remains unmapped and undocumented. Players must still venture into an unfamiliar and uncharted space to confront unknown perils if they wish to master the game.

MF: The particularities of the voyage narratives also served practical purposes -- printed books like Richard Hakluyt's collection of voyage narratives were routinely carried by ships on voyages of trade and settlement outside Europe. One might describe a shift in the center of value from things to be discovered to information about the terrain covered en route. This information itself becomes an object of value, to be accumulated, withheld from circulation, given out strategically. When Hakluyt describes the capture of the Portuguese carrack Madre de Deus in 1592, among its spins was a 1590 treatise on China in Latin, found "enclosed in a case of sweet cedar-wood, and lapped up almost an hundred fold in fine calicut-cloth, as though it had been some incomparable jewel" (Principal Navigations 1598-1600, II: 88). Columbus and Smith withhold information on true distance travelled from the rest of the party; Francis Drake is restrained from making charts or descriptions of his voyage; the Spanish Casade Contracion and the Dutch East India Co.'s hydrographic office became bureaucratic

instruments of centralized control and censorship of geographical information. Control over cartography and chorography by the early modern state, the ways information circulated or didn't and the different guises in which it appeared are all topics which have received recent attention both from geographers and from students of the Renaissance.

HJ: When I watch my son playing Nintendo, I watch him play the part of an explorer and a colonist, taking a harsh new world and bringing it under his symbolic control, and that story seems strangely familiar. De Certeau reminds us that one traditional function of narratives is to define a people's relation to their spaces, to justify their claims upon a certain geography. Cultures endlessly repeat the narratives of their founding as a way of justifying the iroccupation of space. What is interesting about Nintendo is that it allows people to enact through play an older narrative which can no longer be enacted in reality -- a constant struggle for possession of desirable spaces, the constantly shifting and unstable frontier between controlled and uncontrolled space, the need to venture onto unmapped terrain and to confront its primitive inhabitants. This holds true for all players. For children, it further offers the image of personal autonomy and bodily control which contrasts with their own subordinate position within the social formation.

MF: The Victorian editor Edward Arber writes in his preface to The Three Earliest English Books on America that in them "One is able ... to look out on the New world as its Discoverers and first explorers looked upon it. Nowadays, this Globe has but few geographical mysteries; and it is losing its romance as fast as it is losing its wild beasts. In the following texts, however, the Wonderment of its Discovery in all its freshness, is preserved, as in amber, for all time." And if late nineteenth century editions of American voyage narratives offered readers like Virginia Woolf a vicarious experience, America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries famously offered to the unlanded or disenfranchised youth of England an alternate arena of possible advancement and acquisition. Advertised in some documents as a place where a young man's hands could be his lands, offering unique opportunities for social and economic mobility, at other moments America offers to England a place where potentially subversive elements -- heterodox ministers or "masterless men" -- can be sent, where the backbreaking labor that subdues the body will necessarily lead to a conformity of the exhausted spirit. The theory contemporaneous with the voyage, as well as the writings of colonists represents America ambiguously as a place of acquiring mastery and of being mastered.

The time-honored representation of the English voyages has been aconfident, masculine "thrust outwards" and expansion of, among other things, an enlightened English government and world-view, benign rule. The prestige which the voyages retrospectively acquired under Victoria was solidified by accounts which linked territorial expansion to the flowering of literary achievement represented, especially, by Shakespeare (also Marlowe, Sidney, and others). In contrast to this celebratory reception, the mastery of children playing Nintendo is valued only within restricted circles,

and largely trivialized, if not stigmatized, within the larger culture. So the jolt of our juxtaposition is not only chronological and generic but also of what is canonical with what is trivial. But if, as we argue, Nintendo plays out in virtual space the same narrative of mastering new territory which these earlier texts repeatedly record, it has also recently been argued by Jeffrey Knapp that Renaissance England was preoccupied with its own littleness, insularity, and triviality -- and by me, that England's early voyages and settlements were characterized less by mastery and success than by forms of incompetence, failure, and incomprehension. It is difficult to locate unambiguously in these narratives either what is masterful, prestigious, monumental, or what is trivial, disgraceful, and subordinate. Though our two subjects have acquired different cultural meanings, they are in important ways fundamentally the same narrative, the same kind of experience, one real, the other simulated.

HJ: Our purpose in talking about Nintendo next to these older texts is not to make a claim about direct causal links between the two traditions nor to borrow cultural authority for Nintendo by brushing it against works with a more prestigious status. A comparison against periods minimally allows us to think more creatively about forms of narrative which privilege space over characterization or plot development, not as aberrations or failures to conform to aesthetic norms but as part of an alternative tradition of "spatial stories," a different way of organizing narratives which must be examined and evaluated according to their own cultural logic. Since all ways of organizing narratives also presuppose ways of organizing social and cultural experience, there are ideological implications as well in seeing Nintendo games as sharing a logic of spatial exploration and conquest with these earlier works. Nintendo not only allows players to identify with the founding myths of the American nation but to restage them, to bring them into the sphere of direct social experience. If ideology is at work in Nintendo games (and rather obviously, it is), ideology works not through character identification but rather through role playing. Nintendo takes children and their own needs to master their social space and turns them into virtual colonists driven by a desire to master and control digital space.

Just as the earlier narratives play a specific role in relation to the economic and cultural imperialism of Renaissance Europe, Nintendo games must also be positioned against the backdrop of a new and more complicated phase of economic and cultural imperialism. Critical theorists have often over-simplified this issue: American-based multi-nationals dump their cultural goods on the rest of the world, producing an international culture which erases indigenous cultural traditions. In this scenario, cultural power flows in one direction, from the west to the east -- terms which provide a sharp reminder of how present a Renaissance geography still is, reaching Japan by travelling east, locating direction in relationship to the old world and not the new. Nintendo's success complicates a uni-directional model, suggesting ways that the appropriation and rewriting of these cultural goods may become an alternative source of cultural and economic power.

Nintendo's much disputed bid to purchase the Seattle Mariners represented a public acknowledgement of the increasingly central role of Japanese popular culture in defining how Americans play. Japan's longtime adaption, appropriation and reconstruction of western cultural traditions enables it to sell its cultural goods in the American marketplace, much as in another age, British pop stars ruled the American music scene. What exactly is the cultural status of a Nintendo game, based partially on American generic traditions or adopted from specific western texts, drawing some of its most compelling iconography from Japanese graphic art, manufactured by Japanese corporations for sale to both Japanese and American marketplaces? What are the lines of economic and cultural influence when we see Bugs Bunny, Hulk Hogan and Bart Simpson existing side-by-side with Samurai, Sumo wrestlers and Mecha-men? Does Nintendo's recycling of the myth of the American New World, combined with its own indigenous myths of global conquest and empire building, represent Asia's absorption of our national imaginary or does it participate in a dialogic relationship with the west, an intermixing of different cultural traditions which insures their broader circulation and consumption? In this new re-discovery of the New World, who is the colonizer and who the colonist?

From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age: Women's Memories and Fifties
Television

Lynn Spigel

The question that I want to deal with in this essay originated as a
pedagogical problem. In my senior level course on television history, I
regularly assign a term paper that asks students to define and research a
topic of their choice. The open-endedness of this assignment leaves plenty
of room for the imagination, but it also makes for some rather "generic"
topics. Every year, one of these topics is the changing role of women on
television. And every year, my students set out to prove that female
characters have changed for the better and that these changes reflect
progress in the wider society. Knowing that these papers usually score in
the C range, I warn students against this topic or ask them to reconsider
their aims. But despite my warnings, women (and to a lesser degree, men)
in my classes produce a rather predictable teleological historical narrative
that derides the fifties and traces the "progress" of contemporary society
and culture.

Why do so many undergraduates want to write this paper? The more
jaded among us are probably thinking the popularity of this topic can be
traced to those shady research companies that sell readymade essays to
desperate students. But, I prefer a less cynical explanation, and would
instead like to consider some of the reasons why this particular topic
speaks to the concerns of so many female undergraduates. Indeed, these
students' desire to write this paper--even with the clear and present danger

of a bad grade--suggests to me the stubbornness of a particular way of thinking about the past that television itself promotes and perpetuates.

Let me leave the question of the undergraduate population aside for a moment in order to show how this historical sensibility works on our television screens. The example comes from a 1987 episode of Kate and Allie, which features two sketches that parody female characters of vintage sitcoms: Lucy Ricardo and Ethel Mertz (from I Love Lucy) and Mary Richards and Rhoda Morgenstern (from The Mary Tyler Moore Show). The sketches respectively poke fun at the stereotypical fifties housewife and the equally stereotypical "new woman" working girl of the 1970s. In the Lucy segment, Kate and Allie clean the house in their tidy hoop skirt dresses and scheme to deceive their husbands. In the Mary segment, the women occupy a replica set of Mary Richard's single girl flat while chatting about co-workers and sex (a clearly liberated topic). In each case, the cartoonish masquerade renders both versions of femininity outdated and even absurd.

Like other forms of contemporary television, this episode is full of intertextual references to television history, but I use this specific case to demonstrate the way television remembers itself--the type of popular history it depicts. Like my undergraduate students, this program compares the past with the present, suggesting that women have indeed "come a long way" on television, and by extension, in the culture at large. For in contrast to Lucy and Ethel and Mary and Rhoda, Kate and Allie appear to be "newer women" who mark the enlightenment of our time by alluding to the "dark ages" of old TV.

In fact, beyond the individual text, television more generally promotes this kind of historical consciousness because it constantly juxtaposes present-day programs with re-runs from the past. Historians

tend to isolate periods of television--the "Golden Age," the "Vast Wasteland," "The Turn toward Relevance," and so forth. Such periodizations are based on programs that are representative of prime-time network production during specific moments of television history. But they ignore television's overall institutional practices, particularly in this case its local scheduling flows and syndication packages. For that reason, these periodizations begin to collapse as conceptual categories once we recognize that audiences at any one period in television history are potentially interpreting new shows within the context of the syndicated reruns that surround them on the local schedule. Indeed, as postmodern theories of the medium have suggested, television continually recycles the past and recontextualizes it to form a new present.

The advent of the nostalgia network is perhaps the best case in point. The popularity of Nick at Nite's reruns probably has less to do with the universal appeal of TV art--its ability to last through generations--than with the network's strategies of recontextualization. Nickelodeon created a new reception context for old re-runs by repackaging them through a camp sensibility. In a recent series of promos, for example, vintage sitcom star Dick Van Dyke informs us of the network's mission to preserve our "television heritage" by airing such indispensable texts as Mr. Ed and F Troop. Other promos include such spots as "Night of the Living Gabors," featuring historic TV episodes that feature the now campy femininity of the Gabor sisters; satires of Donna Reed as TV's perfect sacrificing mother, and mockeries of Mary Tyler Moore's new woman role as Mary Richards and her previous houswife role as Laura Petrie in The Dick Van Dyke Show (1961-1966). In an even grander gesture of this historical sensibility, Nickelodeon co-produced its own situation comedy, Hi Honey, I'm Home (1991-1992),

which details the fantastic exploits of the Nielsens, a fifties sitcom family who were taken out of rerun on the local TV schedule and relocated to a real-life nineties suburban neighborhood (a postmodern conceit if there ever was one). The Nielsons, who appear in vintage black and white and are appropriately attired in campy sitcom garb, can't quite get the hang of modern living, particularly since their neighbor Elaine is a divorced single mother who continually slips into monologues about women's liberation and derides Honey for her "housewifey" ways. Such tongue-in-cheek programs and promotional ads speak to a young, TV literate generation by constructing a vision of the past that implicitly suggests the "progress" of contemporary culture. And, as Nick at Nites' programs and promos imply, the women of fifties television are to be viewed by today's generation through the screen of its distance from the past--through its more "hip" attitudes and more "hip" culture.

Thus, both in its individual texts and in its institutional strategies of syndication, television recontextualizes the past in terms of contemporary uses and perspectives. Indeed, like my students, television engages in a kind of historical consciousness that remembers the past in order to believe in the progress of the present.

Of course, on one level, this sense of history isn't simply "wrong." There have been real changes for women in the last four decades. However, such enlightenment notions are based as much on forgetting about the past as upon remembering it. As historians have widely noted, progress in history is often uneven: in the case of women, it refers largely to white middle-class women who benefited most from the women's movement, while women of color have seen less gain. In addition, such teleological narratives celebrate women's strides in the present at the expense of

undercutting their agency in the past. As feminist historians such as Elaine Tyler May have suggested, women in the fifties were not simply passive dupes of patriarchy; instead they made rational choices based on available options at the time, and they often expressed discontent with their roles.[1]

Then too, despite popular wisdom, fifties television was not based on a simple consensus ideology. Historians and fans of television will recall the endless plots on situation comedies that revolved around middle-class housewives who chose between privilege and autonomy on a weekly basis. For example, Lucy Ricardo (I Love Lucy, 1951-1957) endlessly tried to get out of the house and into the work force, and even the more idealized dramas such as Father Knows Best (1954-1963) questioned their own assumptions about gender roles in plots that worked through tensions about women's place.[2] Moreover, a good number of the programs on fifties television featured working-class woman and women of color such as the Jewish Molly Goldberg (The Goldbergs, 1952-1956), the Norwegian Marta Hansen (Mama, 1949-1956), the blue collar Alice Kramden and Peg Riley (The Honeymooners, 1955-1956 and The Life of Riley, 1949 and 1953-1957); the black housewife Sapphire (Amos 'n' Andy, 1951-1953) and the black maid Beulah (Beulah, 1950-1953). Although many of these programs had highly stereotypical characters (and some were challenged at the time of their initial broadcasts), for better or worse, they formed part of our "television heritage," a part that Nick at Nite and other syndication outlets often exclude from our view of the cultural past.

This process of exclusion, then, creates an image of the past that is highly one-dimensional, an image that has no doubt helped to shape the historical consciousness of my students. In fact, as I want to show, although I regularly discuss programs such as Beulah or The Goldbergs in my

class, my students still go on to construct teleological histories that exclude these images of ethnicity, race and class difference in order to show a more simple "progression" of women from middle-class housewives to liberated professionals. In fact, to my great frustration, even while my students have a great deal of counter-information about the past, and even while they demonstrate this knowledge in exams and quizzes, when left to their own devices they still return to a way of thinking that looks more like the evening line-up on Nick at Nite than the topics on my classroom syllabus.

But, this is not to say my students are simply "bad girls" who haven't learned their lessons. Instead, I believe they are caught between two ways of thinking about the past--one properly "academic" and the other conventionally "popular." As opposed to the more inclusive and exhaustive approach of professional history, the histories told in the texts of popular culture are selective and they simplify the complexity of historical events. This process of simplification isn't a matter of intellectual deficiencies. It isn't that people are incapable of dealing with the more complex situations that professional historians study. Rather, this way of thinking about the past has a logic and purpose of its own.

This historical sensibility can be considered by way of the concept of popular memory. Popular memory, as I use the term here, is history for the present; it is a mode of historical consciousness that speaks to the concerns and needs of contemporary life. Popular memory is a form of storytelling through which people make sense of their own lives and culture. In this regard, it diverges from official, professional history (by which I mean those histories deemed legitimate by schools, museums, text book publishers and other arbiters of social knowledge). Whereas official history

typically masks its own storytelling mechanisms, popular memory acknowledges its subjective and selective status. As in the parodic vision of the Kate and Allie episode or the campy images of Nick at Nite, this form of storytelling is less concerned with historical "accuracy" than it is with the uses that memory has for the present. Rather than implicitly proposing a divide between fiction and science (the central concern that underlies the texts of professional history), popular memory self-consciously mixes these modes together, and often in a self-reflexive way. For this reason, it would be foolhardy to judge it by the standards of official history. Popular memory does not set out to find "objective," "accurate" pictures of the past. Instead, it aims to discover a past that makes the present more tolerable. Indeed, as I want to show in this essay, the undergraduates in my classes had a particular vision of the fifties that glossed over historical contradictions in order to present a simplified portrait of the fifties' housewife--a portrait that made contemporary struggles in women's lives seem less difficult.

The opposition I am suggesting between popular and official pasts, however, is not absolute. As Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright have argued, popular memory is intimately connected to the more dominant perceptions of history that circulate in a society, and to think otherwise "is to risk treating 'the popular' as if it were wholly unified, fully achieved and therefore capable of sustaining a memory wholly apart from the dominant constructions of the past."[3] Indeed, the enlightenment models used by my undergraduate students can also be found in the more official, text-book versions of women's history. Then too, popular memories are often constructed and disseminated by dominant social institutions such as television, to the point where such memories become what Britain's popular

memory group has called "dominant memories." For this reason, the term "popular memory" should not be understood in terms of transcendental consciousness; instead, popular memory is imbricated in knowledge circulated by dominant social institutions.

Furthermore, just as popular memory is dependent upon more official pasts, professional history is bound up in the larger stories that the society tells about its past. Historians have long debated the divide between science and fiction that professional history strives towards. As contemporary critical historiographers such as Hayden White have argued, the narrative aims of official history make it subject to storytelling mechanisms that simplify the past to make it accessible to people in the present.[4] And as Dominick La Capra adds, facts and fictions are intimately intertwined in any historical account because the documentary record is not a neutral record of facts, but is itself already "textually processed" by the culture in which it is produced.[5] Thus, memory and history are not mutually exclusive domains. Still, as I want to argue, they have different uses and different goals. The question for analysis isn't whether or not popular memory has "ideological effects"--since all history does--but what kinds of effects it aims to have. Why is it popular to remember the past in this way in the first place?

In order to explore this question, I returned to my undergraduate students in the hopes of discovering some clues as to why they construct historical narratives about television that affirm the present by glossing over the complexity of the past. I did this research at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where most students are from the Midwest. The majority of the students were white, came from the suburbs, and were nineteen to twenty-one years old. About a forth of the students were rural

Midwesterners, and about the same number were from urban areas (especially Chicago and New York). Very few of the students had taken a women's studies course at the University. I conducted six oral history sessions with about fifteeen women in each that ran for about an hour. I also conducted two hour long sessions in which a total of seventy undergraduate women wrote five page essays on what they thought women's lives were like in the fifties and were then asked to reflect on their basis for knowledge about that decade. The point of this study was not to produce generalizable data, but rather to open up a dialogue about the whole relationship of history to memory, as well as television's place within that. Many of the students knew me as their TV professor, so understandably many also knew that I was probably fishing around for information on how television helped form their vision of the past. But again, my point wasn't to erase myself or to fool them into being "objective" research subjects; instead I wanted to see how our conversations went, and I also wanted to see how I could use this dialogue as a point of intervention between my own status as a professional media historian and the popular texts that I teach.

Although I had assumed that the students' narratives (both written and oral) would present highly generic, stereotypical images of fifties housewives, I was somewhat overwhelmed by the incredible conformity of the images they had. Poodle skirts, ponytails, pointy eyeglasses were mentioned time and time again. Typical descriptions from the written essays read as follows:

> Women in the 1950s could be described as much more passive than the women of today. I imagine women working in the home as homemakers....The goal of women was to find the "perfect man" and

settle down with him....I think back to the television show <u>Leave It to Beaver</u> and imagine life for women as being similar to June Cleavers'.

In the 1950s, women were very different than they are today. Most women were not expected to go to college and make something of their lives....It is easy to see from shows like <u>Donna Reed</u>, <u>Father Knows Best</u>, and <u>Leave It to Beaver</u> that the mother was a supermom who got up early in the morning to fix breakfast and make her kids lunches, clean the house, and help solve problems.

I would say that women in the 1950s wore more plain styles than today. The mental image I get of the fifties is the happy Cunningham family on <u>Happy Days</u>. I can just see Joni in her long black poodle skirt and her pink cardigan....I guess then <u>Laverne and Shirley</u> would be another vote for the Joni look.

Women in the fifties were very different than the women of today....When one pictures a typical woman in the fifties, one's thoughts tend to be geared toward a woman like Marion Cunningham from <u>Happy Days</u> or Mrs. Cleaver from <u>Leave It to Beaver</u>. Women in the fifties wore big poof skirts, tight sweaters, polyester pants.

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These comments are symptomatic of other student essays and discussions on a number of levels. First, although I did not ask the women to compare the fifties to the nineties, their primary mode for thinking about the past

was through comparison with the present--a situation that suggests the past was relevant to the students insofar as it was pertinent to their own lives. In making the past relevant, they also engaged in a process of familiarization; they made sense of the past by describing it in terms of a repertoire of images with which they were acquainted. And, as the above examples suggest, the women used television as their key source of familiarization. It was through television that these women claimed to know most about the fifties.

As the above examples show, many women used actual fifties reruns and nostalgia shows like Happy Days interchangeably, and in fact many had trouble differentiating between them. Nostalgia shows, of course, aim to make the past more familiar by imposing a present-day logic on it. Through their paradoxical status as a "contemporary past," these programs encourage people to think about previous decades as a safe place that can be known and mastered. Indeed, one woman even said that she felt the nostalgia shows were better historical sources than the actual reruns from the fifties because "they take the epitome of everything from the fifties and put it into one show, whereas programs like Leave It to Beaver...just seem old. There isn't anything characteristic of...the fifties [whereas in] Happy Days...they don't miss a thing." Nostalgia shows, thus, did the work of familiarization for the students, allowing them to remember only those details that seemed useful for the present.

At this point in my research, I felt that I had spent a good deal of time to discover a fairly obvious point: television serves as one of our culture's primary sources for historical consciousness. The next logical conclusion, drawn by so many critics of the medium, would be that television caused these women to have a skewed sense of their own past; it

was television's "fault," so to speak, that these women had highly stereotyped notions about their heritage. However, I discovered something different. While it is true that these women used television as a key source for thinking about the past, they were in fact very self-critical of the fact that so many of their memories came from television. Indeed, even while they spoke at length about the fifties, they often reflected on the inadequacy of their sources. One women claimed:

> I am not exactly sure of the things that I have just cited, I could be entirely wrong. What I know about the fifties woman is what I have taken directly from the television screen. I based a lot, or most, of my knowledge on June Cleaver

Another stated:

> Most of my ideas, I admit, came from television. Shows like Leave it to Beaver, My Three Sons, and Lucy are just a few examples. Perhaps it is [because of] TV that all of my opinions or a lot of them are stereotypical....It is amazing how TV has shaped my idea of women throughout time.

Still another admitted:

> To know [these things] would be impossible. I can only spew out the rhetoric that has been spat at me for twenty-one years through various mediums...Seeing is believing for us. Therefore, old TV sitcoms that ran in the fifties like The Donna Reed Show or Father

Knows Best have given me this info.

And one women even said:

> While I am aware that the Cleavers were not the typical family, it is
> their image that projects itself into my head upon mention of the
> 1950s....Okay, okay, I admit it, born and raised in the seventies I am a
> true product of the TV age. My perceptions of days past are based on
> re-runs!

More specifically, several women noted that the images they had from
television were quite exclusive to the lives of middle-class white women
and in that regard said little about the diversity of female experience in the
past. Others acknowledged that even middle-class white women were not
all like the TV image. Some argued that family pictures and stories help
shape their ideas and serve as a kind of "reality" test for the images on TV.
For example, one woman claimed, "It's hard for me think those shows are
real as far as a real portrayal of the fifties because my grandmother she
always told me that she had no time for social life. She was busy cleaning
and sending my dad to work." Another said, "I saw photo albums and no one
was happy. They are real pictures so I tend to side with them." Thus, as
John Nerone has argued, the personal past can serve as a critical tool for
analyzing a social memory circulated by dominant institutions like
television. In addition, Nerone shows how a memory that belongs to a
specific social group--such as an ethnic group--can be used by people to
challenge a dominant social memory.[6] In this case, students from rural
areas typically used their group identity as rural Americans to contest the

urban and suburban images of women on fifties TV. For instance, when talking about 1950s programs, one woman explained, "I thought that's how people in the cities may have lived. I lived very far from any towns...so when I grew up I thought that's what women in the cities did." Another woman commented, "I think it depends on rural or urban communities too. I don't think rural women were as--able to go to the beauty parlor that often." Thus, while these women believed that TV's images might have reflected part of our national past, they used their own regional and personal memories to contest the dominant social memory that television constructs.

In general, then, the women were quite self-conscious about their use of television as a primary source of knowledge for the fifties. They almost all agreed that the past of which they spoke was largely fictional and open to question. But, still, they continued to believe that the present was better than the past. And their stories almost all suggested that women had come a long way since June Cleaver and Marion Cunningham. In essence, then, they used evidence about the past that they themselves deemed faulty in order to make truth claims about progress in the present. Again, I would suggest that historical accuracy was not finally what mattered in the stories that they told. Instead, these women were engaging in a mode of popular memory that simplifies the past in order to affirm the present. In this regard, the storytelling mechanism in which they engaged might be considered to be one of disavowal. In other words, these students seemed to disavow their disbelief in television in order to legitimate the idea that women's lives had been substantially improved since the fifties.

Almost all students agreed that we were now living in an age of enlightenment where women have more choice and more career opportunity. Within this construction of the present, the past served as a comparative

index by which people could measure their relative liberation. In this regard, television re-runs and nostalgia shows might well have served the purpose of legitimation because they provide us with pictures of women whose lives were markedly less free than our own. In fact, when I asked the students in one session if the stereotypical depiction of women in TV reruns made them angry, one woman said, "No, I think it's something to laugh at now...take it for what it was, its not that way now." Another claimed: It kinda makes you glad you are alive today and not back then." Television, thus, served as a central form of legitimating progress in the present.

I use the word legitimation here with some trepidation because it's a loaded term. It suggests that these women are in some way busy justifying their own oppression, implicitly condoning contemporary sexism by affirming their culture's progress. In some instances I do think that is the case. In fact, for some women, faith in progress seemed to close off the need for a feminist movement in the present. Numerous women constructed stories that put the women's movement squarely in the past tense, implicitly justifying the backlash against feminism that was part and parcel of Reagan and Bush's America. One woman claimed: "Women overcame the feminist movement in the seventies and eighties. I think women realized they don't have to be like men to be equals, thus, femininity is coming back into style along with a career and a family." The word "overcame" seems particularly interesting here since this woman spoke as if women's gains were won despite of rather than because of women's political movements. Moreover, as with many students in the sessions, this woman tended to speak as if all women shared the same common goal for a career coupled with a heterosexual marriage. This idea of "having it all," as many students put it, was continually put forward as the solution to what

the students perceived as a prior kind of anti-feminine feminism that they associated with the 1970s women's movement. One student even used the term "ball-buster dyke" to describe the stereotypical feminist of the past who hadn't come to terms with her feminine self. Although this statement was the most extreme, many students seemed complicit with backlash discourses that have pitted femininity against feminism, and I think for this reason, many were wary of using the word feminism to describe their views and values.[7]

As the above discussion already suggests, thinking about the past also sometimes turned to a nostalgic longing for the "good old days" when girls were girls and boys were boys. One woman said:

> The fifties is my favorite time and if I could have lived at any moment in time, it would have been then. The young women did not have the worries that we have today of being a "career woman" and "a good mother" at the same time. Housewives in the fifties may have been upset at their roles in society, but they did not know anything else so I think they were content.

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Another woman claimed:

I listened to her [my grandmother] for over two hours about her
stories of when she used to clean the house, watch TV, and take care
of the children while my grandfather brought home the money. Life
seemed a lot more easy-going forty years ago, especially for women.

In statements such as these, nostalgia served to legitimate sexism by
making it tolerable and even preferable to the confusing events of
present-day life.

But still, even when students nostalgically remembered the past as a
better place, they typically mixed this nostalgia with a firm belief in future
progress. Indeed, in a quite paradoxical way, nostalgia was brought into the
service of a distinct teleology which might be called a "future/past
perfect." In other words, the students often rendered the future as a more
perfect past where women could enjoy the privileges of stylish clothes,
romance, luxury housing, and other personal privileges (all values that they
associated with the fifties) and still have the personal freedom,
intelligence, political power and discretionary income of the ideal post-
feminist woman. Nostalgia in this regard is not the opposite of progress,
but rather its partner. Like the idea of progress, nostalgia works to
simplify history into a time-line of events that lead somewhere better. For
these women, the idea of having it all was rendered through this mixture of
nostalgic longing and progressive faith in a brighter future.

Thus, the process of thinking historically led these women to some
quite ambiguous and contradictory statements. While they legitimated
contemporary sexism through the idea of historical progress, their nostalgia
for a better past also forced them to consider the constraints of their own
present. In this regard, the gaps and inconsistences in their logic often

seemed to lead them beyond their own assertions into what often appeared to be hesitations, stumblings, uncertainties. Many of the students in fact recognized that their statements about history were inconsistent. In this way, even while they seemed to embrace the backlash around them, the whole process of thinking historically also allowed many students to reconsider and to critique the sexism of the present. By comparing their contemporary lives to an imaginary past of poodle skirts and pointy glasses, these women might in some way have been opening up possibilities for thinking about change. Indeed, when considering their lives in terms of the simplified images of fifties television, numerous students criticized the inequities of their own time. For example, one woman claimed:

> I think women were probably happier in the 1950s although more equal today. I'm not putting down equality, but women still are not fully equal and the fifties women's lives were less complicated. Most women who work today have to work and still have the main responsibility for the children.

For these women, the dark ages are over, but the golden age is still to come.

It is difficult, at best, to reconcile the ideas of progress and nostalgia that run through so many of the students' narratives with my own understanding of feminist history and my own relative discomfort with enlightenment models. But again, that would be to judge popular memory by the standards of a more official, professional history. That would be, I think, to misunderstand the storytelling mechanisms at work in popular memory and the reasons why people remember in the first place. Popular memory is bound up with its use-value in the present. It provides people

with a way of making sense of an alienating and imperfect world. It operates as an often self-acknowledged fiction, a strategy for <u>believing</u> in what people themselves often seem to <u>know</u> isn't so. Within this, television seems to have a tenuous position. Its dual status as entertainment and information places the knowledge it distributes somewhere between fiction and science, between memory and history. At least in the case of the students in this study, that ambiguity is not lost. For them, television serves less as a document than as a dialogue. It allows people to tell stories about an ephemeral American past--stories that recast and redress the concerns of contemporary life.

For my part, the question that the study raises doubles back on my original problem--the dialogue between myself and my students. In my opening passage, I displaced my teaching problem on to my students, chiding them for writing bad papers and punishing them with a C grade for not learning the lessons of feminist cultural history. But, finally, the problem is back in my lap, and I suppose in the laps of many of us who teach the history of popular culture. It seems likely that my students are symptomatic of a larger tendency to use television re-runs and nostalgia programs as a source for popular memory. Indeed, the stories about the past that are heard most loudy and consistently are those broadcast on our national media. Although it would be hasty to assume that veiwers are simply duped by these television images (indeed my students clearly understood that television is not an accurate picture of the past), alternative histories and counter-memories are still typically excluded from the mass media, and for this reason they are often erased from consciousness. Moreover, as I mentioned early on, television even erases its own past; it selects only a few programs for syndication and leaves out

countless others.

In distinction to such exclusions, professional history demands the opposite response--inclusion. But this academic impulse to simply know and teach it all isn't always that simple. For example, when <u>Amos 'n' Andy</u> was taken off the air in 1966, this came after a long struggle among the NAACP to cancel the show for its racist portrayals. Sometimes, then, exclusion and simplification aren't simply "ideological" tools forged in favor of producing a consensus view of the past. Sometimes, as in the case of <u>Amos 'n' Andy</u>'s network cancellation, exclusion of the past is in dialogue with the continuing hurts of the present. In this light, the desire in professional history to "include" often becomes highly problematic. What do your students do, for example, when you show them <u>Amos 'n' Andy</u> in the classroom? Is this an occasion for continued racism among students (as I think it often is), or is it a moment of discovery for them (as I think it can also be)?

Aside from such ethical dilemmas involved in teaching the history of popular culture, there is also another problem I would like to conclude with here, a problem that might be called the persistence of memory over history. Let me clarify this point with an example. Often after I read this paper at conferences, people ask me in essence why I'm not a better a teacher. Why don't I teach away these students' misconceptions about the past? Why don't I show them all the programs on early television, tell them more about womens' pasts, and thus give them a better sense of history? This question presupposes that academic history can cure students, that it can deliver them from the likes of Nick at Nite. But in practice, the problem is much more stubborn than this. For as I mentioned early on, popular memories of the past have a way of asserting themselves in spite of the history lessons

learned in educational institutions. This popular past is, I believe, popular because it speaks to the concerns of the present in a way that professional histories often don't. It offers people ways to use the past in the context of everyday life, perhaps because the version of the past it offers is simple and open to application as a "moral" lesson.

But my point, once again, is not to blame my students for embracing a reductive picture of historical events. Nor do I want to blame the texts of popular culture that engage their historical imaginations. Instead, I would suggest that we cannot simply "correct" popular memory by teaching it away. Indeed, we need to stop thinking that television or movies or comic books are simply wrong or "ideological" and that professional/official history is in some way a scientific antidote to such trivial misconceptions. Rather than deriding the popular and returning to a more "legitimate" historical/cultural canon (as the cultural literacy advocates would suggest), we need to examine the relationships between popular memory and professional history. We need to understand why popular versions of the past are so persistent and so appealing, even among people who "know" differently. Moreover, we need to consider how our own teaching can explore the relationships between popular memory and professional history. In this regard, we particularly need to confront our own imbrication in the popular memories that circulate in the world in which we live. To what extent is our "professional" historical text informed by these popular narratives? How does our desire for progress and how does our nostalgia for the past help to shape the historical narratives that we write?

In this study, for example, I clearly had a big stake in wanting my students desire the feminism of my own youth. Indeed, the parameters of this research was based on what might well be my own nostalgia for a

feminist movement that many of today's college women reject. For me, the sticky problem in this study is my blanket assumption that my students should desire feminism (which I no doubt associate with the "Golden Age" of my own University experience) in the face of a student population who consider feminism to be part of the "dark ages" of seventies TV. In this sense, the professional historian is always embroiled in her own desires and her own sense of what should constitute the future. The historian is not immune to the nostalgia and enlightenment thinking that constitute our more popular versions of history. For this reason, we need to consider each as part of a more intertwined social dynamic. By bringing popular memory into a dialectical tension with professional history, we might find a way to explicate the biases and blind spots of both.

Notes
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[1] Elaine Tyler May, Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era (new York: Basic Books, 1988).

2 For episodes of <u>Father Knows Best</u> that engage themes of women's challenge to the housewife role see <u>Betty, Girl Engineer</u> and <u>Margaret's Vacation.</u>

3 Michael Bommes and Patrick Wright, " 'Charms of Residence': The Public and the Past," <u>Studies in History Writing and Politics</u> , ed. Richard Johnson, et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1982) 225. In this passage, Bommes and Wright are considering the reasons Michel Foucault abandoned the notion of popular memory in his later work. Although Bommes and Wright expose the problems with the notion of the "popular," they attempt to resuscitate its usefulness as an area for critical debate.

4 See, for example, Hayden White, <u>Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism</u> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978). More generally, within the academy there is an expanding field of critical historiography (represented by White, Michel de Certeau and Dominick La Capra among others), which addresses issues of narrativity, scientism, subjectivity and objectivity, and relationships between official and popular history. Historians and media critics are becoming increasingly interested in questions of culture and memory. The term "popular memory" is associated with Michel Foucault's discussions of the subject in which he particularly considered the role of film in presenting memories of World War II and the Popular Front. See the interview with the <u>Cahiers du Cinema</u> reprinted in <u>Edinburgh Magazine</u> 2 (1977): 19-25. This issue of <u>Edinburgh Magazine</u> also includes other discussions of popular memory. In the states and abroad, there is now a

growing interest in the relationship between memory and history. See, for example, Richard Johnson et al., eds., Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics (London: Hutchinson, 1982); David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (New York: Cambridge UP, 1985); David Thelan, ed., Memory and American History (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990). Studies of memory and history that specifically concentrate on the role of memory in popular representations of the past include George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989); Michael Frisch, A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History (New York: New York State UP, 1990); and Communication 11 (1989), which is a special issue entitled "Social Memory." In addition, the movement toward "public history," which includes community-based projects as well as an interest in institutions such as museums and tourist traps, has emerged as an important direction of historical investigation. Many of these writings are particularly interested in the politics of memory and include an implicit and/or explicit critique of traditional historiographical methods that have left community members out of the process of writing their own history. For examples see Frisch; Susan Porter, et al. eds., Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1986); and such journals as Radical History, History Workshop and the International Journal of Oral History. My previous work on this subject includes the role of popular memory in musical revivals and in nostaligic returns to children's culture. See Lynn Spigel, "Communicating with the Dead: Elvis as Medium," Camera Obscura 23 (May 1991):177-24; and Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins,

"Same Bat Channel/Different Bat Times: Mass Culture and Popular Memory," The Many Lives of the Batman: Critical Approaches to a Superhero and His Media, ed. William Urrichio and Roberta Pearson (New York: Routledge, 1991) 117-48.

5 Dominick La Capra, History and Criticism (Ithaca: Cornel UP, 1985):34-35.

6 John Nerone, "Social Memory and Professional History" Communication 11 (1989):89-104.

7 For an interesting discussion of the pedagogical problems entailed in teaching feminism and the way students think about it in relation to femininity see Charlotte Brunsdon, "Pedagogies of the Feminine: Feminist Teaching and Women's Genres," Screen 32:4 (Fall 1992): 364-381.

Reconstructing the Self in Virtual Reality

Sherry Turkle

1. Introduction: Technology and the Self

I have studied the experiences of individuals as they work with personal computers for over a decade. This work underscores that people use computers not only to get things done but as materials for thinking through and working through important personal issues. Paramount among these is that set of issues that Erik Erikson captured under the rubric "identity." In this regard, I have stressed how the machine can serve as a kind of mirror of the mind, what I called a "second self."

Let me give an example of what I mean by talking about the young woman, Deborah, who gave me the idea for that phrase "the second self." It was Deborah, a fifth-grader, who said to me: "When you program a computer you put a little piece of your mind into the computer's mind and you come to see yourself differently."

Deborah first used computers when she was eleven and her school was part of an experimental computer program. At that point, both she and her teachers recall her as insecure, withdrawn, out of control. She was already involved with a crowd that was smoking, drinking, using drugs.

Deborah was shown how to draw pictures on the computer by giving commands to move a screen cursor.   At the beginning of Deborah's participation in the computer project, she spent most of her time trying to get as much of her teacher's attention as possible, refusing to do anything on her own. A breakthrough came when Deborah decided to restrict the commands she could give to the computer. She made a rule that she would allow herself only one turning command -- a right turn of thirty degrees. Once she had her rule, Deborah got down to serious work. She drew flowers and rabbits and stars and abstract designs, everything built up from right turns of thirty degrees.

Weeks later, Deborah was the master of her thirty-degrees world and she began to come out of it to experiment with a less restricted geometry. Her mathematical learning had taken a leap forward. But she had accomplished something much more important.

Before she met the computer Deborah didn't think about her problems -- with food, with truancy, with tantrums, with drugs -- in terms of control. She thought that other people were good and she was bad "by nature." Her computer experience provided categories more useful to her than good or bad: things could be in or out of control. The thirty-degrees world not only suggested that control was an issue, it presented a strategy for dealing with one's lack of control: make a rule, make a safe place, experiment within it.

Deborah is a good example for thinking about how rich and varied are the experiences of people and computers. She presents a dramatic example of how technology can enter into the construction of identity. Deborah was doing this at the moment of adolescence but of course,

no handle cranks or gear turns to graduate us from dealing with issues of identity after we pass

through adolescence. Engagement with computational technology facilitates a series of "second

chances" for grownups to work and rework questions about the self.

The headline for my remarks today is that what was true of individuals working alone with a

computer -- the ability of the machine to serve as a material for working through issues about

the self -- is raised to a higher power when people use computers to communicate with other

people. Over this past summer, I worked with Amy Bruckman, a graduate student at the MIT

Media Laboratory, exploring such a computer environement, a particularly evocative

communications environment known as Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs.

I shall begin by describing the MUD environment and a few of its inhabitants in order to provide

material for two contrasts in how technology supports constructions and reconstructions of

identity.

First, I want to contrast a person alone with a computer -- the model of Deborah -- with people

using the computer to communicate with other people as they do on the MUDs. In the first case

I tend to see people using comptuers to work through identity issues that center around control

and mastery; in the second, there is more room to use the control provided by the computer in

the service of developing a greater capacity for collaboration with others and for intimacy.

Second, I want to contrast people playing role playing games without the computer with people

playing roles in computer-mediated virtual worlds. Here one dramatic contrast is in how the

computer serves as what I call an "evocative object." Role playing without a computer mediated virtual world prompts reflection on individual issues. In the presence of an ongoing virtual society such as a MUD, the focus is on larger social and cultural themes as well.

2. Role Playing Games

In an interactive game designed to be the world of the Star Trek fantasy, large numbers of players spend up to 80 hours a week partcipating in intergalactic exploration and wars. They have casual and romantic sex. They fall in love and get married. They attend rituals and celebrations.

In another, more loosely structured game, each player creates a character or several characters, specifying their genders and other physical and psychological attributes. The characters need not be human and there are more than two genders. All interactions take place "in character." Beyond this, players are invited to help build the computer world itself. Using a relatively simple programming language, they can make a "room" in the game space where they can set the stage and define the rules. That is, they make objects in the computer world and specify how they work. "This is more real than my life," says a character who turns out to be a man playing a woman who is pretending to be a man. In this game, the rules of social interaction are built, not received.

Both the first and second games, TrekMuse and LambdaMoo are examples of MUDs. At most recent count, there were 207 multi-user games based on thirteen different kinds of software on

the internet. Here I am using the term "MUD" to refer to all the varous kinds.

In the MUDs, the projections of self are engaged in a resolutely postmodern context. There are parallel narratives in the different rooms of the MUD; one can move forward or backward in time. The cultures of Tolkein, and Madonna coexist and interact. Authorship is not only displaced from a solitary voice, it is exploded. The MUDs are authored by their players, thousands of people in all, often hundreds of people at a time, all logged on from different places. And the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to "try out" new ones.

In this, MUDs have much in common with traditional role playing games, for example, the role playing games played by Julee, a nineteen year old who has dropped out of Yale after her freshman year. Part of the reason for her leaving college is that she is in an increasingly turbulent relationship with her mother, a devout Catholic, who turned away from her daughter when she discovered that she had had an abortion the summer before beginning college.

From Julee's point of view, her mother has chosen to deny her existence. When asked about her most important experience playing role playing games, Julee described a game in which she had been assigned to play a mother facing a conflict with her daughter. Indeed, in the game, the script says that the daughter is going to betray, even kill, the mother.

In the role playing game, played over a weekend on the BU campus, Julee and her "daughter" talked for hours: Why might the daughter have joined her mother's opponents, how could they

stay true to their relationship and the game as it had been written? Huddled in a corner of an empty BU classroom, Julee was having the conversation that her mother had not been willing to have with her. In the end, Julee's character chose to ignore her loyalty to her team in order to preserve her daughter's life.

Clearly, Julee projected feelings about her "real" mother's choice onto her experience of the game, but more was going on than a simple reenactment. Julee was able to reexperience a familiar situation in a setting where she could examine it, do something new with it, and revise her relationship towards it.

Julee's experience stands in contrast to images of role playing games that are prevalent in the popular culture. A first popular image portrays role playing games as depressing and dangerous environments. It is captured in the urban legend which describes an emotionally troubled student disappearing and commiting suicide during a game of Dungeons and Dragons. Another popular image, and one that has been supported by some academic writing on role playing games, turns them into places of escape. Players are seen as leaving their "real" lives and problems behind to lose themselves in the game space. Julee's story belies both stereotypes. For her the game is psychologically constructive rather than destructive. And she uses it not for escape but as a vehicle for engaging in a significant dialogue with important events and relationships in her "real" life.

Role playing games are able to serve in this evocative capacity precisely because they are not simple escapes from the real to the unreal, but because they stand betwixt and between, both in

and not in real life. But in the final analysis, what puts Julee's game most firmly in the category of game is that it had an end point. The weekend was over and so was the game.

MUDs present a far more complicated case. In a certain sense, they don't have to end. Their boundaries are more fuzzy; the routine of playing them becomes part of their players' real lives.

In them, the boundaries between role and self are blurred to the point that players can use the role to work on the self. As one experienced player put it, "you are the character and you are not the character both at the same time." And "you are who you pretend to be." This ambiguity contributes to the games' ability to be a place in which to address issues of identity and intimacy. They take the possibilities that Julee found in role playing games and raise them to a higher power.

3. Virtual Realities: Role Playing to a Higher Power

The notion "you are who you pretend to be" has a mythic resonance. The Pygmalion story endures because it speaks to a powerful fantasy: that we are not limited by our histories, that we can be recreated or can recreate ourselves. In the real world, we are thrilled by stories of self transformation. Madonna is our modern Eliza Doolittle; Ivana Trump is the object of morbid fascination. But of course, for most people recreations are difficult. Virtual worlds provide environments for experiences that may be hard to come by in the real.

Peter is a twenty-three year old Physics graduate students at the University of Massachusetts.

His life revolves around his work in the laboratory and his plans for a life in science. He says that his only friend is his roommate, another student whom he describes as being even more reclusive than he. This circumscribed, almost monastic life does not represent a radical departure for Peter. He has had heart trouble since he was a child; his health is delicate, one small rebellion, a ski trip when he first came up to Boston, put him in the hospital for three weeks. His response has been to circumscribe his world. Peter has never travelled, never been out of the country. He lives life in a small compass.

In an interview with Peter he immediately made it clear why he plays on MUDs: "I do it so I can talk to people." He is logged on for at least forty hours a week, but it is hard to call what he does "playing" a game. He spends his time on the MUDs constructing a life that in only a seeming paradox is more expansive than his own. He tells us with delight that the MUD he frequents most often is physically located on a computer in Germany.

> And I started talking to them [the inhabitants of the MUD] and
> they're like, 'This costs so many and so many Deutschmarks.'
> And I'm like, 'what are Deutschmarks? Where is this place
> located? And they say: 'Don't you know, this is Germany.'

It is from MUDs that Peter has learned what he knows of politics, of economics, of the differences between capitalism and welfare state socialism. He revels in the differences between the styles of Americans and Europeans on the MUDs (he tells us that "the European players are less shy") and in the thrill of speaking to a player in Norway who can see the Northern lights.

On the MUD, Peter shapes a character, Achilles, who is his ideal self. Life in a U Mass dorm put him in modest and unaesthetic circumstances. Yet the room he inhabits on the MUD is elegant, romantic, out of a Ralph Lauren ad.

Peter's story illustrates several aspects of the relationship of MUDding and identity. First, the MUD serves as a kind of Rorschach inkblot, a projection of fantasy. Second, unlike a Rorschach, it does not stay on a page. It is part of Peter's everyday life. Beyond expanding his social reach, MUDs have brought Peter the only romance and intimacy he has ever known. At a social event held in virtual space, a "wedding" of two regular players on his favorite Germany-based MUD, Peter met Winterlight, one of the three female players. Peter who has known little success with women, was able to charm this most desirable and sought after player. Their encounter led to a courtship in which he as tender and romantic, chivalrous and poetic. One is reminded of Cyrano who could only speak his beautiful words in another's voice. It is Achilles, Peter's character on the Mud, who can create the magic and win the girl.

While Deborah's experience of technology and the self (where she was one on one with the computer) centered on issues of identity that were supported by control and mastery, Peter's experience (where the computer is a mediator to a reality shared with other people) takes the MUDs environment and puts its structures in the service of the development of intimacy.

What about the contrast between Peter and Julee? What can we say about the difference between role playing games in the corridors of BU and on computer virtual worlds?

Julee and Peter both appropriate games to remake the self. Their games, however, are evocative for different reasons. Julee's role playing has the powerful quality of real-time psychodrama, but on the other hand Peter's game is ongoing and provides him with anonymity, invisibility, and potential multiplicity. Ongoing: He can play it as much as he wants, all day if he wants, every day if he chooses as he often does. There are always people logged on to the game; there is always someone to talk to or something to do. Anonymous: Once Peter creates his character, that is his only identity on the game. His character need not have his gender or share any recognizable feature with him. He can be who he wants and play with no concern that "he," Peter, will be held accountable in "real life" for his characters actions, quarrels, or relationships. The degree to which he brings the game into his real life is his choice. Invisible: The created character can have any physical description and will be responded to as a function of that description. The plain can experience the self presentation of great beauty; the nerdy can be elegant; the obese can be slender. Multiplicity: Peter can create several characters, playing out and playing with different aspects of his self. An ongoing game, an anonymous personae, physical invisibility, and the possibility to be not one but many, these are the qualities at the root of the holding power and evocative potential of MUDs as places in which to work on the issue of identity. Faced with the notion that "you are what you pretend to be," Peter can only hope that it is true for he is playing his ideal self.

4. In Conclusion: MUDs as Evocative Objects

In sum, I have presented two contrasts.

First, when people form a relationship with their computer, they tend to work through identity issues that center around control and mastery. When the computer is used as a mediator to other people, the issues focus more directly on intimacy.

Second, when role playing games move onto a sustained virtual space, the change implies a greater integration of the "game" into real life and a more structured social and cultural world around the game itself. The development of these virtual cultures is of signal importance: it makes the game a very special kind of evocative object.

In The Second Self I called the personal computer an evocative object because it provoked self-reflection and stimulated thought. It led to reevaluations and reconsiderations of things taken for granted, for example, about the nature of intelligence, free will, and our notions of what is alive. And I found that the computer did this not just because it presented people with ideas as did traditional philosophy, but because it presented them with experiences, an ongoing culture of personal computing that provoked a new philosophy in everyday life.

I would now want to say and say even more sharply that the same kind of process is taking place around computer-mediated communications in virtual realities such as MUDs. But that the emphasis of the new discourse, self reflection and thought is not on individual issues but on larger social and cultural ones.

To make this point I conclude with a dramatic example: the novel and altogether compelling discourse that surrounds "gender swapping" in virtual reality.

In our research, Amy Bruckman and I met men who were playing the roles of women and women playing the roles of men on the MUDs, a practice known as "gender swapping." As these people talked to us about swapping genders, they certainly gave us reason to believe that they were working through individual issues that had to do with accepting the feminine or the masculine in their own personalities. But as they "gender swapped," they were doing something else as well, something that transcended the level of individual personality and its special dynamics. Through first-hand experiences, people were forming theories about the way gender structures human interactions. In the ongoing culture of MUDs, these issues are discussed both within the space of the games and in a discussion group on USENET called "rec.games.mud."

Discussion on USENET about gender swapping has dealt with how female characters are besieged with attention, sexual advances, and unrequested offers of assistance which imply that women can't do things by themselves. It has dealt with the question of whether women who are consistently treated as incompetent may start to believe it. Men playing women have remarked that other male players sometimes expect sexual favors in return for technical assistance. In this case, offering technical help, like picking up the check at dinner, is being used to purchase rather than win a woman's regard. While this can be subtle and sometimes overlooked in real life, when it happens in MUDs it is blatant, directly experienced by most, and openly discussed. When this happens, the MUDs become an evocative object. I could not fail but be impressed by the quality of the discussion of gender swapping among MUD players. During the summer I found myself many times wishing that the Senators who participated in the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings had had the privilege of some virtual "gender swapping." MUDding throws issues of the impact of gender on human relations into high relief. Fundamental to its impact

is the fact that it allows people to experience rather than merely observe what it feels like to be the opposite gender or to have no gender at all. Here I have talked about MUDs as evocative objects for thinking about gender. But there are similar stories to tell about discussions of violence, property, and privacy.

There is a lot of excitement about virtual reality. People seem to get all fired up about a future in which we don gloves and masks and bodysuits and explore virtual space and sensuality. From my point of view I feel great excitement about where we are in the present. In the text-based virtual realities that exist today, people are exploring, constructing, and reconstructing their identities. They are doing this in an environment infused with a constructionist ethos of "Build something, be someone." And they are creating communities that have become privileged contexts for thinking about social, cultural, and ethical dilemmas.

Watch for a nascent culture of virtual reality that is paradoxically a culture of the concrete, placing new saliency on the notion that you become what you play, argue about, and build.