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Game Patch - the Son of Scratch

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Plug-ins and Patches as Hacker Art

When I first became aware of the game patch phenomenon, not such a longtime ago, it felt almost preordained - it just had to happen. Not because of the will of some transcendental "dungeon master", presiding over the gaming arena that is the contemporary world, but rather because of the logic of media. In the 90's, electronic games have grown Big. From a slightly suspicious intruder and a challenger to mainstreammedia, like the cinema and broadcast television, the game industry has developed into a full-blown sector of today's commercial media landscape, constantly conquering new territory.

Not only have electronic games gained popularity among new age groups -their breakthrough in the old people's home seems only a matter of time- they have also become an internalized model for an interactive relationship with the media, influencing other forms of computerized and computer-mediated communication. Although they will not (at least in the foreseeable future) have enough power to render traditional one-way media totally obsolete, their very ubiquity is having a powerful effect on the cultural imaginaries of the late 20th century.

On the other hand, drawing a sharp distinction between the kind of new media relationship represented by computer gaming and the "passive" experiences provided by cinema and television would mean overstating the issue. After all, electronic gaming may have been invented by computer hackers, technical whiz-kids and hippie entrepreneurs, but especially in the 90's it has been absorbed by the worlds of big business and venture capitalism. Integration, consolidation, expansion - these are the magic formulas today's game producers and distributors invoke.

Although the game industry tries hard to maintain the impression that computer gaming constitutes "a people's technology which encourages andenables participation by all who wish to participate" (to quote GillianSkirrow's words from her pioneering study "Hellivision: an analysis of video games", 1986), it is becoming more and more evident that such a position constitutes a fabrication and, above all, an ideology. Playing a computer game may involve the player differently than watching a movie or a television program, but seeing it automatically as more empowering, liberating - or addictive - could hardly be accepted without qualifications.

Perhaps some forms of networked multiuser role-playing games notwithstanding, the game-playing experience is irrevocably linked to an "apparatus", a pre-fabricated system regulating the relationship(s) between the player(s) and the system (including both the game software and the hardware) and, above all, defining the limits of the interaction. The game playing experience may allow for considerable liberties to explore virtual worlds, adopt different personalities, make decisions and discover secrets, but in the end these are just carefully tested and calculated parameters, the main criteria of which are economical.

If a game is too simple, it may not create a sufficiently strong bond with the player, risking to fail on the marketplace. If it is extremelydifficult, it may fail as well, although

it probably sells longer as the buzz around it spreads and also provides possibilities for the secondary marketplace of gaming guides, fan magazines and other kinds of paraphernalia. It is essential that the player is made to feel part of a network which is both internal (the ties with the world of the game) and external (the ties with other players, newsgroups, helplines,fan-clubs, secondary texts).

The game patch phenomenon might be easily interpreted as a highly heterogeneous body of reactions against the growing uniformity and calculation that have come to dominate the industrial game culture in recent years. Although most players are and will be satisfied if the supply of commercially available software and hardware meet their needsfor fast diversion, action, romance and fantasy, and even occasional intellectual challenges, there are those who seem to be harking back tothe days when gaming with some justification could be labelled a "people's technology". This goes hand in hand with the growing awareness of gaming history, as evidenced by the popularity of emulators of many forgotten games, future classics, perhaps.

Yet, at best, this is only a partial explanation. The reality is much more complex. The game patch phenomenon cannot simply be dispensed withas being a nostalgic and, in the end, a Quixotian attempt to revive a mythical "golden age" when gaming was spontaneous and social and the games were designed and modified by the gamers themselves, rather than faceless corporations. Although some game patch artists show signs of such a consciousness, incorporating references to cherished early classics, such as Space Invaders or Pac-Man, into their creations, there are others for whom history hardly matters, at least on a conscious level.

Another way of assessing the game patch is too see it as the latest manifestation of "tactical media", a new way of "talking back to the media", of engaging in a creative/destructive conversation with the activities and the products of industrial media culture. Tactical media has a long history going back to John Heartfield's political photomontages of the 1920's and 30's, to the actions and the "detournement" cultivated by the Situationists in the 1960's and the 70's, to the various forms of "public art" and "appropriation art" in the 1970's and 80's, to Web "hacktivism" in the 90's.

In spite of obvious differences in approach, all these movements have sought out ways of penetrating the dominant forms of media culture, appropriating its tools and its products, modifying its output and hurling the mut(il)ated creations back onto the public arena of mainstream media. The seams are left visible - instead of beating an illusion with another illusion, the aim is to make the cracks in the facade visible, to focus attention on the manifold processes looking for an outlet behind the ideologies of uniformity.

The tidal wave of "scratch video", particularly in the UK in the early 80's, provides a useful case study. Inspired by access to new tools, aswell as by a strained cultural atmosphere, the early years of the Thatcher-Reagan era, young videomakers began to "scratch" the surface of broadcast television, trying to reveal those discourses which had been hidden behind the media coverage, but were, nevertheless, an essential part of the overall picture. Groups like Gorilla Tapes and Duvet Brothers grabbed the recently introduced possibility of taping TVprograms with a VCR, and manipulated them in the editing studio (usually a public access video workshop).

The scratch video makers used the "repeat-edit" and other video tricks to turn Reagan's and Thatcher's media images into stuttering marionettes that acted like aliens or lunatics and said things which were the opposite of the official protocol, but close, so one suspected, to the thoughts that really crossed their minds. Scratch video was simultaneously a reaction to the ubiquitous television environment, a tactical attack against its role as the mouthpiece of conservative politics, and a new way of personal expression, of asserting one presence in the egotistic world of media.

Of course, it all ended up in a failure. The main problem was access. Broadcast television ignored scratch video until it had been cleaned off its political content and turned into a new "refreshing" stylistic formula for music videos, comedy programs and hamburger commercials. After this had happened, which did not take long, scratch video makers began to receive commissions and their style was adopted (as one style among many) by TV professionals. Scratch video was co-opted by the veryinstitution it had attempted to undermine. Scratch features also survived in video art, but neutralized and "sublimated" by museum and gallery walls.

Does this "instructive" example increase our understanding of the game patch phenomenon? There are both similarities and differences. Both scratch and patch have to do with access to new tools (video recording and editing; computer programming) by outsiders (TV spectators; game players) with the aim of subverting the existing relationship between subjects and media. Where scratch video attacked the false transparencyof broadcast television, its pretented but not actual openness, the

imbalance between the spectators and the world of TV, the motives of the game patch artists are more subtle and varied; there is no game patch movement, only individuals. The situation is less clearly polarized. After all, electronic games may be ubiquitous, but they never purported to be a broadcast (mass) medium.

A game patch artist may be motivated by ideological concerns, an urge to re-assert the role of the player as a (co)creator, or to subvert theprevailing gender relations, particularly the depiction of women as game characters. Yet the political determination should not be overemphasized. Humour and parody are important motives; the game patchartists don't seem to believe in the politically correct position of suppressing pleasure (neither did the scratch video makers!). Demonstrating a sense of mastery by being able to dabble creatively with the source code is an important aspect of the game patch experience as well, providing a link with the hacker mentality which has, in one form or another, been a part and a companion of the historyof electronic gaming from the outset.

This observation points out another difference between the cultural roles of broadcast television and electronic gaming in relation to their subjects. Television has been a distant medium from the beginning; its familiarity and spontaneity were simulated even during its early "live" years. The home audience was always watching somethingfrom a distance; you could not really have a conversation with your favourite TV star. Games have never been distant in the same sense; they became known as a form of pastime, essentially as technological toys. The contact with games has been tactile, familiar, informal. Instead of attacking a frightening monstrous alien, the game patch artist is really playing a(nother) game with a partner s/he knows, loves and, perhaps, hates.

The position of game patch art is not without its contradictions. Unlike scratch video, it has a promising channel of distribution at itsdisposal, the Internet (already used by game companies to distribute "patches" to their officially released games). Yet, as any form of appropriation art, game patch art will have to deal with issues of copyright and intellectual property on its way to wider attention. How will it react? Will it develop into a kind of media guerrilla activity,operating on the terrain between the legal and the illegal, or will it become a "civilized", law-abiding genre, perhaps sponsored by major game companies, and contributing to future game development? Will it change our notion of art?

It is too early to tell. Yet having said this much, the game patch phenomenon still feels almost preordained to me - somehow it just had to happen.

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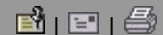
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