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Communication as Conscience

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I write (bits of) this article (at a time) from the standpoint of discomfort and unease. Of what I see as a troubling trend of diminishing joy in games scholarship and shared playful experiences. I don't think it's merely nostalgia.

Speaking of nostalgia, how many folks remember that famous “Summer of Pokémon Go” in 2016? Using mobile devices, those partaking in this Augmented Reality game were able to explore physical places, compete to catch Pokémon, and find a fun community while potentially killing time in the most unlikely places (such as a doctor's office). As that summer wore on, however, there were a troubling number of reports that kids playing these location-based mobile games, specifically Black kids in typically white neighborhoods, were being harassed by those who objected to their presence in these so-called public spaces.¹ What examples like this make clear is that when games are conceptualized, made, and played, they are still not “done.” They are social objects, the meanings of which are continuously constructed. As scholars of Communication, I regard our role as including the perspective of conscience—whether you call it morality, ethics, or shared norms and values. Our contribution to society in the form of conscience for our everyday mediatized lives is increasingly important and must be foregrounded.

Largely unaware that there was/is a better way to play, there is a layer of transactional absurdity that those just beginning to experience screens and games must endure. To start even the simplest of online games aimed at my preschooler, for example, someone could spend time entering in profile information, getting a persona (which may be fun or not), downloading updates, and so on. Then, the learning curve. My preschooler, meanwhile, contents himself with the tactile media of LEGO/Duplo, while I long for the comparative simplicity of a Commodore 64 or any number of cartridge-based games. Playing Duck Hunt on the Nintendo Entertainment System at my friend's house never needed an email account.

I don't think I'm being melodramatic. Having carried out research projects on games and gamers for the last 20 years, the nature of my research has changed. Our collective privacy has been eroded. On an intellectual and existential level, I had to make sense of game communities that I enjoyed studying morphing into engagement farms: clicks to be logged, eyeballs to be tracked, and moments to be monetized. Especially in the last 10 years, my focus on the role of ethics in the study of digital

¹ Omari Akil, “Warning: Pokemon GO Is a Death Sentence If You Are a Black Man.,” *DAYONE—A New Perspective* (blog), July 13, 2016, <https://medium.com/dayone-a-new-perspective/warning-pokemon-go-is-a-death-sentence-if-you-are-a-black-man-acacb4bdae7f>.

media was and continues to be an effort to push back on the ravages of what Shoshana Zuboff calls “Surveillance Capitalism,” most recently in her book by the same title.²

The research questions have changed to follow suit, as game design/development has embraced datafication as its dominant mode of player engagement.

Is it in the spirit of digital inclusion if it’s predatory by design?

In search of (disciplinary) place

A dear mentor once said to me, Communication, like Anthropology, were “dog’s breakfast disciplines.”³ As a first-generation college student who was both racialized and minoritized, I found reassurance in his words. Part of why I was lured away from a major in Computer Science was that both Communication and Anthropology seemed to welcome me and my chaotic self. My awkward plurality was welcome. It counted, and therefore I counted. Not really my “whole” self as yet, but more so than what had previously been offered to me while majoring in traditional STEM (Science Technology Engineering Math) disciplines.

To this day, I attribute much of my interdisciplinarity to the ultimately administratively coincidental fact that my Communication school was housed in a Faculty of Applied Science, and the math and coding courses I took readily transferred to what ended up being a double-major in Honors Communication and Anthropology, with Co-operative Education and a Certificate in Liberal Arts. It bears mentioning that in between all of this, key people, both currently living and not, played an essential role in my education about what discipline and belonging truly meant. These individuals ranged from my Calculus professor who believed in me enough to have me review course textbooks but also encouraged me to withdraw the semester I was sexually assaulted; to my Communication stats teaching assistant who sat together and cried with me in the Sociology/Anthropology common room; to my Anthropology professor who confirmed when someone important in the field was being an elitist bully. I mention these bureaucratic sleights of hand at this point, because I want to assert that these events were, in retrospect, primary and pivotal in my overall education, with disciplinary affinity being really a secondary happenstance

² Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile, 2019).

³ Being in Canada at the time, “dog’s breakfast” is an old British slang term that means “a confused mess or mixture.” It is the author’s hope that this turn of phrase may gain more traction in the United States as a benefit of reading this article: Keith Wagstaff, “A Dog’s Breakfast’ Explained for Everyone Confused by That CNN Alert,” *Mashable*, December 27, 2017, <https://mashable.com/article/dogs-breakfast-cnn-trump-middle-east>.

to the story I wanted to tell. Adding to this hodgepodge, and later enhancing the projects I would later pursue in graduate study, was my love of games. Consequently, games and Game Studies being my academic “Island of Misfit Toys” has been both glue and springboard to my research agenda for decades.

Stories of survival. Of existing despite. Of persisting because. I want to be in a scholarly community that welcomes us in all our messiness. That sees our messiness as worthy of study, and stronger for it. For me and others who were “searching,” that place was Communication.

Extensions of us

Communication scholarship has come to play an essential role in multidisciplinary research and development in digital society. These days, my interests focus on the study of games particularly due to its ability to herald an emergent issue in digital communities years before other forms of media show evidence of those same emergent issues. In examining the evolution of communication research into games and culture as a basis for discussion, I trace the path of games as a medium of communication and its increased datafication as well as what that has meant for “authenticity” in game design, players, and developers. Looking into the future, the data used to train machine learning algorithms for games specifically and necessarily must coincide with an increase in the role of ethics, privacy, and policy expertise in the co-constitution of our shared extended realities. I therefore look at the specific contribution Communication stands to make in performing the role of Conscience that can help us answer the question of “should we” alongside the persistent questions surrounding “can we?”

It is imperative that we remember the place of humanity in the meaning-making endeavor.

Hyperspecialization and ethical reconvergence

For ethics to be folded into many layers of design and development, programs need to take a longer-term view, with steady and sustainable support. It cannot be the afterthought, and also the first to be cut in projects, which is often the case. In ways that are both constructive and also frustrating when it comes to multisectoral collaboration, Academic time horizons tend to be longer (5+ years). The idea of long-term in industry is 1-2 years, and collaborative projects have an arc of 3 years or so. Staffing a project of graduate students, for example, necessitates the longer view if one considers the amount of time and attention needed on a specific project coinciding with the training of just the doctoral students potentially involved. Having

managed the expectations among Academia, Industry, and Government, the major distinction is that intellectual projects run in terms of decades.

Over the last 10+ years, concerns of data and ethics have gradually come to occupy a larger portion of my 20+ year research agenda concerning games, particularly as the practices and technological imperatives have moved towards predatory and extractive models. We can see this dynamic in not only the gamification of ecommerce, but in the leisure-oriented games for people of all ages, including children, with or without their consent.⁴ As mobility data adds richness in experience, the datafication and informatization of digital games⁵ increases the risk for those implicated ethical considerations from cradle to grave (and beyond, as we see with deepfakes/AI). In tandem with the data-driven, we must also strive for an ethics-driven design mindset. Ethics training is more than a tickbox oriented around regulation and compliance, and the investment in bringing matters of conscience back into STEM must be deliberate, specific, and sustained. An education foregrounding ethics must play in tandem with law, tempering the temptation to adhere to merely what is “legal” lest it permit us to slide into tyranny. After all, maintaining neutrality often assumes a level playing field and not an automobile shifted into neutral on an incline. History and current events show us clearly that our guide in the future should not be limited to what is merely legal, given the number of atrocities committed in the past and present that may be permissible by law.

My teaching and research goals unify around the purpose of bringing many fields, such as STEM disciplines, into a more constant conversation with a multidisciplinary ethics, informed through the humanistic and social sciences. In service, to help those who are underserved embrace the messiness and confusion from which my own intellectual tools were forged.

I hope there are more who join me in creating and holding space—for all those who continue in search of place.

⁴ Florence M. Chee, Nicholas T. Taylor, and Suzanne de Castell, “Re-Mediating Research Ethics: End-User License Agreements in Online Games,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 32, no. 6 (2012): 497–506, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467612469074>.

⁵ Peter A. Chow-White, Florence Chee, and Richard K. Smith, “Data Mining User Generated Content: Transforming Play and Leisure in Online Social Gaming into Business Analytics,” September 12, 2011, available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1926437> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1926437>.

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