NPC and Me

How to become a Non-Player Character

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As everyday life and game mechanics converge in ever new digital media remixes, like Augmented Reality or the "Internet of Things", it might pay off to have a look at some of the concepts derived from computer game design. One of them is the Non-Player Character (NPC), a more or less complex actor controlled by more or less simple software routines. NPCs are often the most interesting part of the game, shaping interaction between the user and the rest of the game mechanics. But, however autonomous NPCs might appear, they are always an integral part of the system, driving the narrative and producing options.

The first real NPCs were the four ghosts of Pac Man: Shadow ("Blinky"), Speedy ("Pinky"), Bashful ("Inky") and Pokey ("Clyde"), each with its own individual motion patterns and governed by simple algorithms. Today, in a gamified society, we are all increasingly following them in their tracks – like spectres, as Jacques Derrida (1993) might have put it, of our own humanistic ideals.

In this short essay, two topics at the interface of games and society shall be discussed from the perspective of an NPC. First there is the seamless integration of everyday life with game mechanics, an integration that makes it increasingly difficult to draw distinctions between the former and the latter – distinctions that, none the less need to be drawn. Secondly, I am going to take a pointer from old-fashioned cybernetics and political science in order to suggest how certain noxious aspects of life's blending with the wrong kind of games can be remedied.

In a contemporary living environment a host of organic and anorganic companions like animals, robots or software agents join the humans. Some of the companions are acting, part of time just like an NPC governed by a tight set of rules and staying mostly within their clearly defined computing environments. But they also appear on mobile devices and on specialized hardware, like the Tama-

gotchi from a bygone age and thereby are more visible in the physical world. At the same time, their presence is obscured as well as sustained by an ongoing drive for the quantification and gamification of work and the rest of everyday life, which harks back to Frederick Winslow Taylor's (1911) endeavors in the 19th century.

Quantification and gamification are both deeply ingrained in the production methods of industrialism, where time and output are permanently measured. Because they are still asserting dominance over large swaths of everyday life in the presumably disruptive digital workspace this intensifies the perception of structural continuities between industrial and post-industrial societies. Even more so, quantification has entered the private life of a growing number of people via mobile gaming and sports apps. Sports are one of the main driving forces in the gamification of society as a whole, where the success of government policies is permanently measured in countless country rankings.

Command, control and quantification mechanisms have been around for a long time, but now they spread everywhere with the help of cheap networked computer systems and powerful databases. Recently much has been made of the Chinese government's plan to introduce some kind of a "social credit system" linked up with databases kept by national online shopping conglomerates. But this compares to what liberal western societies have historically been doing with their intransparent credit scoring methods or revenue services, which use specialized social web crawlers to identify tax evasion and work similarly towards the same end, ensuring the citizen-consumer's conformity. At the same time, dreary economics invade even the most escapist game worlds via built-in profit-optimizing microtransaction schemes – money presenting itself as the lowest common denominator of all possible realities.

The permanent quantification of his or her actions enmeshes the user with a host of feedback cycles where the user appears to the contemporary social researcher, as one "actor" within a "network" of others, be it animals or machines. Actor-Network Theory (ANT), one of the leading current paradigms in social sciences, levels the playing field (Latour 2005), thus lending some support to the ongoing tendency of cross-penetration of computer game logic and the quantification and evaluation techniques of everyday life. People and their products are enmeshed with each other and connected by a certain logic, which may or may not be equivalent to game mechanics. In such a neutralized and flattened environment, one could ask whether there still is a difference between a scripted human call center agent and a customer service bot running on a weak AI system via Facebook. To a certain extent, we have all become Non-Player Characters, at least temporarily, because only as NPCs can we interface with the other actors

and continue functioning in a system where division of labor means sharing work with other human agents and more or less autonomous machine actors.

In this all-encompassing totalitarian context, everybody has become a Pac-Man ghost or a Tamagotchi, even the President of the United States! It's the age of the developers. Everybody has to develop and represent his or her skills and personas and because everything in this flat environment floats on the surface, everybody has to appear as an interface to something else. The ongoing crisis of representation in modern societies, as already stated by Deleuze (1968), doesn't stem from inadequate representation but from an inflationary presence of the same, slowly destroying the notion of representativity itself. If everything is an interface, a gateway to something else, then everything is a representative element without substance. You never know who's in charge and who's just a pawn. This gives rise to a phenomenon one could call Network Paranoia, a turbocharged version of the mechanisms described in Umberto Eco's (1989) conspiracy theory novel "Foucault's Pendulum". While this may simply sound like the dreaded empty signifier from classical postmodern thought, the notion is as old as human dreams of artificial intelligence.

Take the old example of the mechanical turk from 18th century Austria, a chess player hidden within a machine pretending to be an artificial intelligence avant la lettre, while in reality nothing other than a cleverly disguised set of manipulators set in motion by a small man hidden within its casing. Firstly it has to be stated that the mechanical "turk", whatever its nature might be, is not autonomous but acting for the benefit of its owner. This always has to be kept in mind in arguments about contemporary AIs and politically relevant algorithms, as for instance in discussions about what is shown under what circumstances in a Facebook feed. Secondly, there's always the question of "Who is backing whom?" or "Who is really in charge of all this?" – leading down the rabbit hole right into the aforementioned Network Paranoia. Of course, people could use ANT methods to trace back power structures and re-engineer them, especially on the Internet, which is after all a controlled environment naturally presenting itself as a dynamic laboratory condition. But time is often lacking, as are other vital resources needed for this task.

As long as Network Paranoia is perceived as a game, it is harmless, but when it seeps into politics, it becomes a different issue: paranoia and conspiracy theories bloom, and the situation gets dangerous. Game metaphors in politics always signal dangerous developments – a dangerous transgression is taking place. One only has to think of the term "Game Theory" as used by John von Neumann and

others in the context of nuclear war technology, or of "The Great Game" as a moniker for ruthless colonial power politics in 19th century Asia.

Where game metaphors and game mechanics seep into the command and control structures of society, the suggestion lingers that nothing is serious or meaningful. In the cited cases of Game Theory or the Great Game they might have been used to create a distance between the ruling class and the unspeakable actions perpetuated by it. What's left is a simple axiom: If it hurts, it isn't a game anymore.

In a democracy, the resulting pain can express itself by creating an atmosphere as described by the British political scientist Colin Crouch (2008) in his book "Postdemocracy". Where the ruling oligarchy increasingly insulates people from meaningful mechanism of power, replacing and undermining working forms of representation with ever more pseudo-direct questionnaires and referenda about pointless side issues, the real decision-making is made by kitchen cabinets and corporate lobbyists. The Internet acts as a living metaphor for this, as it was supposed to be all about cutting out the middleman, but it has only replaced the old local middlemen with new transnational power brokers in an ever-ongoing process of power concentration.

This process could already be perceived in the 1960s when US political scientist Karl Wolfgang Deutsch (1969: 196) wrote about the "Nerves of Government," and how important it would be to keep individuals "in the loop", literally, to preserve their ability to give meaningful feedback to the manifold command and control cycles in which they are trapped. Deutsch wrote that human dignity and integrity can only be secured in the future when people are given the opportunity to learn and increase their knowledge on their own terms, and even then there would be no guarantee for self-sufficiency. In the 1950s Norbert Wiener, founder of Cybernetics had already written: "Let us remember that the automatic machine, whatever we think of any feelings it may or may not have, is the precise economic equivalent of slave labor. "Any labor which competes with slave labor must accept the economic conditions of slave labor." (Wiener 1954: 162) In an age where all the promises of automation from the early days of cybernetics and artificial intelligence finally seem to come to fruition, it is hard to counter the forces of alienation turbocharged by the networked oligarchy.

A Non-Player Character is not out of the loop, but he has no meaningful way of changing its workings, as he is neither the programmer of the game nor his boss. Often, he's not even a gamer, but somebody who has casually agreed to the terms and conditions by clicking "OK". The NPC has no opportunity to give feedback to most of the systems he's strapped into, even if it is the NPC who

keeps them running. The difference between the NPC and the traditional alienated man of the industrial age, as described in Marxist classics, may not only be the degree to which the NPC is integrated into increasingly more feedback loops without really being able to engage in them and growing so weak that the most basic acts of resistance like sabotage or joining an organization like a worker's party or a trade union become unthinkable. The decisive force creating an NPC lies hidden within the myriads of immaterial processes shaping its everyday life. Whereas the direct brutality of factory life is so simple that the relationships of power are direct and out in the open, whereas Network Paranoia tends to obscure them in the digital economy. The NPC doesn't really know how computers work; NPCs just supervise or operate them. Whether they still have a well-paid job or not isn't down to their knowledge or wits but rather up to fate.

Of course, most people in industrialized countries are not NPCs all of the time. Often people let themselves sink back into NPC status because it is more convenient to do so. Games and gamified consumer electronics play a vital part in this. The less people understand the tools they are surrounding themselves with, the more responsibility lies with the creators of those systems, including developers, who play a crucial role in creating opportunities for digital self-help by writing free and open source software (FOSS) and educating people so they become well-informed consumers. DIY computing and transparency about algorithms can empower some people to at least claim a little dignity. If the NPC's existence is dominated by scripts, it must be able to rewrite a minimum of them to gain some degree of freedom.

So why might it pay off to use the NPC as a metaphor or as a perspective on contemporary phenomena of alienation? First of all, NPCs are the most important interfaces to a game or a gamified system, so determining their status and studying their behavior makes sense for both social scientists and game designers - even if they work against the notion of people as NPCs. Secondly, as an NPC is determined by game mechanics, its internal logic can be re-engineered within the framework of Actor-Network Theory, reviving this paradigm's productive initial impulse. But in order to follow through with this, one has to first accept oneself as an NPC, to analyze and reconstruct the network of people and tools creating the games of science, and the hurtful breaks separating those games from naked life. It might also serve as an exercise in humility.

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