

QUIZ

Games for a Situationist Society

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SIT-REP

Science fiction, like any theory, is based on the question “what if”? This is a text about game mechanics in a science fiction novel, so let’s pretend for a few minutes that Google ushered in a silent relational turn in popular epistemology. Google’s early version of page rank, where the statistical weight of links determines the relevance of their unseen target, is the material realization of concepts like Jacques Derrida’s *differance* and all that wonderful semantic stuff about signifiers harking back to the times of Ferdinand de Saussure. In any information theory, the time component springs from measurable differences, so if there is anything like a story, it stumbles forward along uneven cobbles like a drunkard in the streets of a medieval town.

At least since the advent of social media many users know what it means to create a link to somebody or something. A link on Facebook is a tiny fossil of human attention. Since converting attention to money via advertising still is a popular way to create wealth on the Web, semantics have now materialized as a money-making engine. If there is money to be made with links, popular understanding of relational thinking goes beyond academic circles, down to the gritty basements of search engine optimizers and Chinese click farms. The structure of the network determines the nature of its nodes.

If links are the basic elements of stories, Google and Facebook can be viewed as revenue-generating games making up their own mechanics and optimizing them to their own advantage as they go along. With reference to the Situationists, one of the most influential artist groups of the 1950s and 1960s, one could say that Google and Facebook are on their own permanent auto-*dérives*,

wanderings through self-generated networks. Wherever they turn, there is ever more money to be found. The bank always wins.

After World War II, many intellectuals followed the example of the flaneur as described in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and delved into the dense fabric of everyday urban life, for example Henri Lefebvre with his *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947), Guy Debord (*The Naked City* 1957) or Michel de Certeau with his *L'invention du quotidien* (1980). Those thinkers came from radically different backgrounds, Lefebvre and Debord starting out as Marxists, and de Certeau being a member of the Societas Jesu, but they shared the intention to make their readers more sensitive to their everyday life and its environment, to elevate it from the depths of semi-consciousness.

Debord and de Certeau were both concerned about the relentless expansion of capitalist strategies into every nook and cranny of human existence. In his famous *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord shows reification as an irresistible force subverting all human relations, turning them into services to be bought and dealt with. In the end, the “integrated spectacle” of politics and industry (commentary to *Society of the Spectacle*, 1988) will establish its total hegemony over all capitalist societies. The Society of the Spectacle represents the next generation of totalitarianism after fascism's defeat in World War II: fast, hard, clandestine, subversive, ubiquitous. The language used by Debord is echoed today in popular contemporary critiques of Internet corporations such as in Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* or Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion*.

It is quite ironic that those narratives of the ever-expanding and unstoppable capitalist machinery evoke some of the aspects of “ur-fascism” as identified by Umberto Eco (Eco 1995), putting the individual in the situation of a permanent stage of siege by an overwhelmingly strong and devious enemy, to foment anger and cause some sort of revolutionary action. But those distinctly 20th-century strategies must fail, because the supposed enemies are inscrutable and deliver services most people want and need – at very low prices, if you ignore the opportunity costs. De Certeau made a famous distinction between strategy and tactics, wherein an expansive strategy is the domain of the state, the big organizations and the ruling class. In contrast, tactics are short-term lateral movements as employed by the rebels, the have-nots.

According to de Certeau, strategies can only be deployed successfully, if the driving organization owns the resources and the logistical support to do so. No wonder that contemporary super-corporations like Amazon, Google or Facebook are called “platforms”. Platforms aim for total horizontal and vertical integration and are large enough to provide their own environment. They aim to rely on

themselves in such a way that they don't even need the Internet communications protocol stack to run on. Google, for instance, could easily write and implement its own digital communications protocol if it should want to sideline other oligopolies. Apart from the technical aspects, Google and Facebook as corporations also modify society in order to accommodate themselves. Powerful narratives have the tendency to submit everything to their own dominant logic. At some point, they become indistinguishable from totalitarian ideologies which are game mechanics in their own right. The gamified environment provides security by a certain degree of predictability, but it also replaces life itself by channeling future options for development.

Let's pretend that Google has learned something from the Situationists. Guy Debord and his pranksters championed the *dérive*, walks around the city in order to become aware of its more or less hidden structures and power flows, in order to liberate people from the Spectacle. In 2012, the Spectacle in turn performed a *détournement* – yet another Situationist technique, the modification of popular cultural artifacts to suit one's own ends – by capturing and monetizing the *dérive*: Niantic, then a start-up within Google, launched its first version of Ingress, the first successful situation-based game for smartphones. In 2016, Niantic would launch *Pokémon Go*, which would register 800 million downloads two years later, according to the corporate website. Niantic's core system is called Real World Platform, mixing Augmented Reality with location-based services and marketing.

Debord would have to admit that the Spectacle has now used all available Situationist strategies to further consolidate its power. Corporations keep creeping into the smallest crevices of life in order to monetize the smallest movement of their subjects. It seems as if they have used an avant-garde leftist analysis like Debord's as some sort of dystopian playbook. Mobile networked computing environments have added ever more layers of reification to the physical environment. Its users can access new services, communicate with their friends and escape a cityscape becoming ever more boring with shops closing down due to overwhelming competition from Internet platforms.

The Situationists created the slogan “Ne travaillez jamais!” (Never work!) Today, work itself has become a *dérive*. Uber, the flagship of the so-called Gig Economy, sends self-employed workers with their own cars on their way through the city. The Uber app adds a software service layer to the city, a work version of platforms like Niantic's, accelerating a trend towards atypical work even in the richest countries. Even in Germany, with its still strong industrial base, the share of “atypical work” like temp work and the so-called “minijobs”

in overall dependent work grew from 30,1% in 2003 to 39,6% in 2016 (Hans-Böckler-Stiftung 2019).

The more intelligent and ruthless actors of Internet capitalism have taken the best communications tools and tactics from the avant-garde of 1968 Paris and turned them against their subjects. Situationist corporations have outflanked and outperformed their more conservative counterparts. Facebook and Google sliced and diced traditional mass media business models. Like the famous butcher right out of the *Zhuangzi*, the compilation of Daoist anecdotes, they cut the most juicy – read: profitable – parts out of the slain dinosaurs with an effortlessness even the Emperor himself can only admire. In a democratic society, the Emperor is us, of course.

This, in turn, means that the shrinking traditional corporations keep losing their ground. De Certeau would state that they lose their ability to deploy strategies. Legacy media corporations, for example, are reduced to fiddling with short-term tactics. They can convince old political allies to set up improvised road blocks, around which the new-style Situationist platforms will re-route quickly and even integrate into their business strategies. For instance, German publishers can try to implement their version of an ancillary copyright at EU level via their allies in Germany's CDU-led government, but Google cannot be forced to include their articles in their indices and search results. Any new European search engine would in turn have to negotiate with the publishers and with a high degree of probability be met with demands which would be impossible to accept. Another example would be the European data protection directive GDPR. It creates a very high bureaucratic threshold for newcomers to the market for communications platforms thus protecting the existing oligopoly.

FAIL AND LET FAIL

There are many statistical parameters backing up the narrative of hyper-concentration, oligopoly-building and expansive capitalism. In 2018, for instance, the highest-earning 20% of US households brought in 52% of the country's total income (Schaeffer 2020). The Gini Index measuring income distribution, in other words, economic inequality, rose from 34.6 in 1979 to 41.5 in 2016. In Germany, the Gini Index went up from 29.2 in 1992 to 31.7 in 2015 (World Bank 2020). The share of dependent workers performing “atypical work” like temp work and so-called “minijobs” in Germany augmented from 30.1% in 2003 to 39.6% in 2016. Work has become more fragmented and is embedded in some cases into a sort of network-driven “platform economy”, for example in the

shape of mobility services (Uber, Lyft). In certain areas the highly concentrated Western capitalist economy begins to look like communist-era COMECON, where certain production systems are assigned more or less exclusively to select countries. Software is predominately written in Silicon Valley, cars are produced in Germany and Japan, luxury goods in France, everything else in Mainland China.

Sometimes the hegemonic structure is shaken up a bit, whether by protectionist governments throwing a fit or by natural catastrophes breaking just-in-time supply chains. Or, maybe, one of the big players misses a step like Microsoft losing out to Apple and Google in the market for mobile platforms back in the second half of the 2000s. Swiss economist Patrick Stähler already noted in the early 2000s that the Internet era would be marked by temporary oligopolies (Stähler 2002). Platform capitalism reigns supreme, but its all too human agents tend to fail at some point. It is possible to read Schumpeterian disruption stories as a series of failures. The corporations themselves permanently create the huge inconsistencies, inequalities and other differences which cause them to fall and stumble along. Ruthless dynamic progress might simply be an instance of disparate bricolage. Security and stability are always cited as paramount policy goals but looking at phenomena such as Donald Trump or Brexit, it seems that a certain breed of right-wing politician and their backers have understood that you can't make quick profits in a stable situation. Therefore every aspect of life is now to be held in permanent suspension and every aspect of society turned around quickly in a dizzying movement of spin. German sociologist Ulrich Beck captured this notion early on in the introduction to his book *Risk Society* (1986) in which he compares the state of modern society to an all-crushing juggernaut chariot. As the Coronavirus outbreak in 2019 showed, not even China's highly advanced totalitarian control systems can mitigate the kind of risk which springs from complex networked situations. On the contrary: the more control you apply the higher the impact of the fallout from a "black swan" event.

Accordingly, contemporary working and living feels like a game where the rules are constantly rewritten – mostly to the disadvantage of the weaker members of world society. Maybe sometimes one of the less adroit political or economic players stumbles and falls, but the schadenfreude never lasts too long, because there is no shortage of inept would-be leaders.

THE NORDBERG SCENARIO

So the overall modus operandi of our era is neither the modernist illusion of totalitarian strategy nor the post-modern bricolage but rather a series of accidents. Imagine OJ Simpson in his role as Officer Nordberg in the famous slapstick scene in *The Naked Gun*, where he keeps bumping into things, getting shot, touching the hot oven plate ... only to continue the painful saga in real life later on.

This “Nordberg scenario” is the situation that art, in this case in the form of computer games and literature, is supposed to comment on, make sense of, give structure to, make somehow livable. For my novel *QUIZ* (2018), I invented a game which is as autopoietic as the risk-based situationism of contemporary society itself.

*QUIZ*⁷ leading female protagonist Susanne is on a business trip to Kyoto where she falls out with her group of colleagues and wanders through a cluster of department stores. In one of those sophisticated shops she comes across the Quiz Machine, a device the size of a cigarette box. The networked Quiz Machine is supplied with geolocation capabilities and an array of sensors allowing it to scan and make sense of its environment and generate multiple-choice questions from it that its owner has to answer by choosing one of the four given options. No points are awarded. If a question is answered, the machine simply invents the next one, often based on the user’s immediate environment.

The Quiz Machine structures reality “on the go”. It follows the path of locative games like René Bauer’s *sniff_jazzbox* or *wardrive* (2009), wherein iPhone software picks up the names of surrounding wireless LAN networks, turning them into NPCs; or Niantic’s *Ingress* (2013) and *Pokémon Go* (2016), with the distinction that it doesn’t run on a smartphone. The Quiz Machine originally isn’t part of a larger business model. It is sold in a store, and that’s it. Perhaps that is the most unrealistic part of the story. Later on, the Quiz Machine becomes part of a live TV show linked to third-party betting applications – a development not looked upon kindly by its Japanese inventor, game developer superstar Shigeru Moriyama.

When it comes to game mechanics, the Quiz Machine’s user interface is extremely simple, reduced to something barely more complicated than a roll of dice. But it can only be so simple because it uses the most modern technology available in order to reduce the world’s complexity down to four options in a multiple-choice quiz. While other locative games aim to add another layer to reality to make it more enticing and generate profits, the Quiz Machine takes reality as it is and transforms it into questions along the way. Augmented Reality systems require complex hardware and software in order to add a new logic to reali-

ty, but the Quiz Machine works the other way round. Its complex logic predates the game itself: it is its precondition. Paradoxically, the Quiz Machine is powered by reality while Augmented Reality games invite us to consume a simplified version of it.

RECUPERATING SITUATIONS

The Quiz Machine is a single proprietary piece of hardware. It operates autonomously on the edge of the Internet, i.e. it is not a dumb front-end to a data center. It uses Internet communications protocol standards, at the same time eschewing any form of interpersonal communications between individual Quiz Machine owners. To Shigeru Moriyama, it wouldn't make sense to run its software on a smartphone, because it has to work independently from powerful operating system platforms like Apple's iOS or Google's Android. Moriyama aims to disembed Quiz Machine users from their usual environment, whether physical or networked.

In that sense, the Quiz Machine is a Situationist game. It simulates a drift (*dérive*) and turns objects it comes across into components of its own game mechanics (*détournement*). Every multiple-choice quiz creates a new situation. All the user has to do is to decide which button to push. It generates a "situation" which forces the user's attention to concentrate on the "here and now". Time and space are contracted into a peak decision moment. In Situationist lore, the situation was a construct, an idea, that should make people free and let them shed the shackles of the "Spectacle", the mind-numbing all-encompassing media complex installed by the capitalist elite.

Chief Situationist Guy Debord always feared that the Spectacle would co-opt and assimilate Situationism itself. In a certain sense, it acted as a phantomatic mirror-object entangled with Situationism, providing its negative. But this idea would only work if Situationism could stay independent, instigate some sort of left-wing libertarian revolution and overwhelm the corporate media complex. After the famous French riots in May 1968, Debord realized that his historical moment had passed. He amended his definition of the Spectacle twice, adapting it to the then-new conditions of mediatized capitalism.

Situationism could be perceived as a set of tactics against the distributed totalitarian powers of mediated industrialized capitalism. Guy Debord was up against intertwined large post-WWII systems in both state and industry, the dreaded military-industrial complex giving birth to the huge bureaucracies needed for planning, coordination and deployment of demanding collective technical

undertakings such as nuclear weapons or Moon shots. The fitting narrative for this kind of society would be Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* cycle - or any Soviet five-year plan.

But already in 1994, the year when Debord put an end to his life, those big machines were being dismantled from within. The Soviet Union had collapsed and with it the model of an all-encompassing superstrategy. In the USA, the Clinton administration switched to an Internet-based paradigm of production with Joseph Schumpeter and Marshall McLuhan as patron saints. In the era of the Internet start-up, Debord's "situations" were superseded by "disruptive events", business plans were made for the moment and the *dérive* was repackaged as GPS-tracked digital nomadism. Shareholder value driven corporate culture punishes every CEO trying to enact some kind of long-term planning – exceptions like Steve Bezos are rare. Twenty years later, right-wing groups appropriated what was left of 1990s disruptive trolling culture in order to bring about feats like Donald Trump's presidency or Brexit. Situationism triumphed, but in the hands of corporations and oligarchs who had the means to pull it off. In his seminal text on "ubiquitous literature", German cultural scientist Holger Schulze writes: "Trolling, faking and teasing have been regarded as attributes of hacker ethics since the dawn of digital antiquity. But over the last years, the sardonic con game has mutated from harmless online prank into a violent existential threat: women, non-white and marginalized members of society are threatened with death just for fun." (Schulze 2020: 72, author's translation)

In the pivotal scene of *QUIZ*, Shigeru Moriyama apologizes publicly for having invented the Quiz Machine. It reduces, so he argues, the world's complexity down to a multiple-choice quiz, which is wrong, because "real" questions are supposed to be open. Moriyama implores his audience to think long and hard about the very nature of questions, not only from a philosophical point of view but also in terms of what it means to establish new neuronal pathways in one's own brain or the role questions might play in the context of information theory.

Those are clearly projects which ought to have an impact in the long run. Moriyama seems to be quite unsure of what will come of it, but he knows that a power structure based on Situationist techniques could not be challenged or changed by Situationist tactics. The best outcome would be a stalemate. Therefore, Moriyama does not challenge the Quiz Machine itself but its user interface and its simplistic game mechanics. He encourages his fans to ditch the pseudozén Quiz moments in favor of rigorous long-term thinking. At the same time, he leaves them alone and offers no credible alternative. Long-term thinking – or strategy, to paraphrase de Certeau – remains the domain of the powerful. Powerless individuals lack the resources to implement long-term thinking. But de Cer-

teau's remedy for the powerless to fall back on tactics for defense doesn't work if a resourceful and wealthy adversary is optimized for achievement.

According to Holger Schulze, ubiquitous literature is fast, sticky and dumb (Schulze 2020). The Quiz Machine as a networked digital device, an artifact of digital poetry, would fall into this category, too. Eventually, new weak ties would coagulate in this primal soup of networked text in the mind of the reader. A new logic would emerge, which could take the form of a conspiracy theory, reproducible knowledge or even friendship. But it wouldn't be enough. Autopoiesis and algorithms are no replacement for the tedious task of building and managing an advanced society or simply organizing human interest by way of founding and maintaining a political party, a trade union or a cooperative that survives the latest fad. After 40 years of Thatcherism, the formerly powerful structures of trade unions and social democracy have fallen into disrepair in almost every country.

Given the fact that short-term focused governments and corporations are prone to fail, it is tempting to try to wait the worst of them out. Shigeru Moriyama tries to point out that tactical use of technology alone won't save humanity, not even on the level of providing basic entertainment. Moriyama's attitude is unusual for a member of the higher circle of technology innovators in so far as he admits to having made a mistake that is not totally obvious to his customers. In breaking the ranks and his story on purpose, he gives everybody the opportunity to assess the situation in a broader context. If game mechanics and narratives serve oppressive purposes, it is the creative person's duty to interrupt them. Whether by modifying the dominant game mechanics or by stopping gaming altogether.

All this is, of course, fictional material. But if both theory and science fiction are based on the question "What if ...?", it might be worth investigating Shigeru Moriyama's thoughts about the nature and form of questions. At least "What if ...?" is an open question – and will remain so forever. It is the most basic of game mechanics. So maybe it is the act of asking open questions which enables us to keep stumbling along our paths, however crooked they might be.

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