Transforming Audiences: Technicity and Identity in the Age of User-Generated Content

Jon Dovey

Based on research undertaken with Helen W Kennedy as part of the *Game Cultures* book project.

This paper describes an institutional and cultural landscape that calls for a highly developed account of technicity in order to produce difference and diversity in digital media users rather than homogeneity and dominance. As technologies of communication and creativity become more deeply embedded into the fabric of our every day lives understanding subjectivity becomes a matter of understanding people's individual relation to technics as much as understanding class, race, gender and sexuality. The paper is based on two small-scale ethnographies with game designers and players that originally generated our thinking about dominant styles of technology use. These accounts of technicity begin to allow us to see power differentials at work in the emerging participatory cultures of Web 2.0.

1 Context: Web 2.0 and the Invisible User

We are in the grip of a second dot.com boom this time generated by the shiny promise of Web 2.0. Operations like WikiPedia, MySpace, Flickr, YouTube, Technorati, Digg are the poster stars for the new media era of user generated content when we will all be enjoined to be creatives in order to have a voice, a place and space in the new knowledge based digital economies.

Web 2.0 is defined by Co-creativity and the idea of an equivalence or mutuality in the power relationship in the generative process.

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales:
'Its going to be a part of everyday life – creating and sharing media will be a thing that normal people will do all the time, every day, and it doesn't seem strange.'

Matt Mullenweg of WordPress:
'Now you see people with no technical ability creating really amazing sites reaching audiences they would never have imagined reaching.'

Caterina Fake and Stewart Butterfield of Flickr:

‘Whats changed is expanding on that theme of communication and personal publishing and making it available to millions of people who don’t have technical skills.’

Here the technology becomes invisible, the new era of technologically mediated self expression will be delivered by us, by ‘people who don’t have technical skills,’ ‘by people with no technical ability’ .As usual technophilia strives to make technics invisible, that is to say the actual flesh / computer interface is somehow becomes a transparent two way membrane rather than an experience structured discursively.

I want to argue that differential systems of power are not effaced but are frequently re inscribed in both the configurative processes of software design and development and the processes of content production. Power is operative all the time – in for instance Tim O Reilly’s recent call for a blogging code of conduct that resisted the disproportionate aggression in blog based comms that was made in direct response to grotesque online sexual harassment and abuse. Debates like this make if clear that although the reality of Web 2.00 is diverse and extraordinary the culture of technologically mediated communications can be disproportionately dominated by potty-mouthed men with hostile attitudes. Conditions of access to technology, lack of access – will be generative of identities that may occupy liminal zones who do not identify themselves as part of a dominant hegemony.

This is Bill Gates in March of this year (2007) at the Microsoft CEOs conference:

> ‘In 1997, the theme of CEO Summit was "Corporate Transformation for Friction Free Capitalism." Today, in a world where we have access to virtually unlimited information at our fingertips, global supply chains, international markets that operate 24 hours a day and communication tools that enable us to move data around the world instantly have brought us a lot closer to a world of friction free-capitalism than many people thought possible back then. (http://blog.tmcnet.com/blog/tom-keating/technology-and-science/gates-the-dawning-of-the-age-of-frictionfree-innovation.asp)’ (my itals)

The idea of the Friction Free world drives from Ted Lewis 1997 book The Friction Free Economy –

The whole idea of the friction free economy is that somehow digital rationalization replaces the Newtonian physics and Keynsian economics with the seamless mathematical abstraction of chaos theory.

Our project is concerned to re insert the grains of friction (and pearl producing) sand into the picture – we want to argue that the development of the idea of technicity is crucial to the field because it makes it possible for us to reintroduce

embodied individual subjects into the debate, and crucially to talk precisely about the messy obdurate granularity of power relations that the friction free technophiliacs elide.

2 What is Technicity?

The relationship between technology and modernity has been a continuing thread within critical theory ever since Marx. Contemporary considerations of our relations with machines and associated reflections on modernity have cast technology with a lead role in the history of Western metaphysics. The point is that the current moment makes these concerns unavoidable, irresistible and implacable in their insistence. The contemporary interpenetration of technics into human communicative spaces prompts a profound reconsideration of human subjectivity. According to Steigler (1998:4) for Heidegger ' the history of being is nothing but its inscription in technicity.' Moreover his reading of Heidegger emphasises the generative nature of technics, or tekhne the Greek word defined by Aristotle as ' the bringing of something into being' (Stiegler 1998:9). Heidegger wrote that tekhne 'reveals whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie there before us' (Stiegler 1998:9) – it is as much a process of revelation as manufacture. Stiegler concludes the introduction to his book on Heidegger with:

> 'There is today a conjunction between the question of technics and the question of time, one made evident by the speed of technical evolution, by the ruptures in temporalization … that this evolution provokes, and by the processes of deterritorialization accompanying it. It is a conjunction that calls for a new consideration of technicity. ' (Stiegler 1998:17 his ital.)

For Stiegler this will involve a metaphysical understanding of our new kinships with what he calls 'organized inorganic beings'.

The significant aspect of our use of the term 'technicity' is to encapsulate, the connections between an identity based on certain types of attitude, practices, preferences, a cultural habitus, and the importance of technology as a critical aspect of the construction of that identity. To be subjects within the privileged twenty-first century first world is to be increasingly caught up in a network of technically and mechanically mediated relationships with others who share, to varying degrees, the same attitude/tastes, pleasures and preferences.

This notion of technical virtuosity, of a particular easy adoption of and facility with technology, is a fundamental aspect of the contemporary ideal subject within the technosphere. This historical moment produces technological competence as a key marker for success as a participant in the modern culture. A focus on technicity will also enable us to emphasise the ways in which particular kinds of identity are privileged.

To summarise: -

Technicity comes to stand for those aspects of our identities that are formed through technological differentiation.

Understanding technicity enables us to understand the connections between an identity based on certain types of attitude, practices, preferences, etc and the importance of technology as a critical aspect of the construction of that identity.

A focus on technicity will also enable us to emphasise the ways in which particular kinds of technicity are privileged.

3 Case Study 1 Biographies of Technicity

Our analysis of the dominant technicities was prompted by my own findings in a Pivotal Games case study, based on ten in depth interviews with a cross section of the studio's employees. The astonishing similarities that emerged in our case studies suggested a biographical evolution of a creative programmers' sensibility in their accounts of early encounters with computers and games. This sensibility is characterised by a fascination with how things work 'under the bonnet' so to speak, combined with a fascination with the creative possibilities of the computer as a manipulation machine. Both of these characteristics are linked to an interest and facility with mathematics. For several of our respondents the computer as game play entertainment quickly became the computer as creative tool as young boys began to explore beyond the boundaries of the software provided.

These common experiences of early games described by one our respondents as ' magical things of wonderment' opened up a field of technical and creative expression that has become a key part of the professional identity of these game developers. They share nostalgia for early games based not just on experiences of being a consumer of a new product but in the real possibilities that this consumption opened up for becoming a producer. These key figures were able to intervene in the processes of technological innovation and development by altering, extending and manipulating the technology in unexpected, playful and often illegitimate ways.

A second dominant narrative in the Pivotal developers' accounts of the evolution of their tastes was a common experience, particularly amongst senior members of the team, of fantasy role play 'table top' games such as Dungeons and Dragons. Four of the ten respondents – significantly all senior figures within the company both in age and authority - expressed strong childhood and adolescent attachment to paper gaming, to the mathematically systematised pass-time of role play gaming, fantasy and Dungeons and Dragons. Table top role play games, pleasures in engineering or maths, a fascination with the manipulation of systems, these are all aspects of a particular technicity which has been very

dominant within the games industry and which helps us understand why we get the games we get. We could call the consistency of taste, sensibility, aptitudes and propensities that I identify in the game developers as a 'dominant technicity'.

However the question remains as to what we mean by 'dominant' in this context? Just that they are common tendencies shared by a lot of men who love computer technology? I want to stress that dominance implies power. As we have argued above, dominance inevitably produces resistance, those who do not fit the hegemonic mould become differentiated and excluded as 'the other' - before being identified as the next new trend – as a new source of production and consumption in the entertainment and leisure industry's hunger for innovation. If a particular group is dominant then we can be sure that there are other stories, identities and creative processes that get written out of the discourse of dominance –'technicities' are never fixed, never completely determined, but are contested and negotiated, technicities are a 'becoming' in themselves produced through our daily encounters with technology and our ever shifting tastes, desires, pleasures and competencies. Most technicities only become 'visible' as part of the mainstream when they are susceptible to market commodification.
The emergence here of a dominant strain of technicity within game production has not happened by accident – it has happened because this group does important work in the system of production of symbolic goods, cultural and economic capital.

Access to the kind of experiences which enable these dominant version technological competences to develop remain mitigated by other social and cultural barriers. Any celebration of the role technology might play in the reconfiguration of axes of difference has to be attentive to how the 'digital divide' operates globally, how socialization and education play a part in directing particular groups away from an interest in science, technology or mathematics. There is a long history of interest in the ways in which these factors determine the construction of gender and racial difference in access to technological prowess. Alterity is alive and well in contemporary technoculture and alterity itself is productive of specific forms of technicity that find their expression in a heterogeneous range of tastes and practices.

4 Case Study 2 : Lord of the Rings: Intermediality and Technicity

This case study is based on observations and conversations made during a research workshop which we ran in February 2004 in which we compared the experiences of playing a Lord of the Rings board game, a Lord of the Rings computer game and watching a Lord of the Rings film. We recruited eight young people between the ages of 12 – 16 as our co investigators. Because we have also been interested in researching differently gendered game play we set up an all female and all male group. However Gender turned out to be the least important factor in gameplay pleasures and aptitudes - what was important was familiarity, expertise, as well as the important issue of playing with others who have a shared 'technicity'. Technicity also emerged us a useful clue into

understanding the different pleasures discovered by our participants in their experience of intermedial storyworlds.

Thinking about the different 'technicities' of our players therefore becomes a way of understanding apparent inconsistencies. Sixteen-year-old SP for instance was in fact the most experienced computer game player amongst the girls group – this might explain her comment that playing the computer game in co-op mode was rather difficult when paired with a less experienced player.

'Sometimes it was a bit more of a hinder 'cause you needed to check where the other person was, how they were doing, and if they needed to get the life, they needed to go and get it, as oppose to working together to win successfully.'

On the other hand SP was in fact the only participant who had read the novel of 'Lord of the Rings', so her previous cultural exposure might explain her excellent analysis of the game narrative as just 'pure events that happen', or of the board game as ' just an outline of the characters and locations but what they do is not based on the story so much'. Here we can see a particular combination of taste (for fantasy literature) and technicity (as computer gamer) informing an 'expert' commentary on gameplay and story.

Similarly amongst the boys the social performance of play was mediated through particular kinds of taste and technicity producing particular kinds of expertise. JF for instance, through his gameplay, viewing and commentary, identified himself as an expert gamer with a very sophisticated grasp of rule sets and game strategies. Here he is discussing what he is thinking about in computer game play,

'Yeah you're also thinking about what you'd do in the later level compared to what you've managed to do now, so if you had low health and you're playing cooperative you'd think more about making the player with more health walk ahead and maybe protect you, and you talk about how to get across obstacles such as drawbridges and how you'd go about that with enemies around, would you try and make the drawbridge go down fighting the enemies or would you kill all the enemies first and then make the drawbridge go down.'

JS on the other hand has a completely different play style , at one point in the computer game play he identified a 'jump back' move that appealed to his more subversive sense of play; when in co – op mode with JF he repeatedly made the 'jump back' move for his own amusement, much to the irritation of JF. 'Play' is not the same thing for two players in the same game.

'Technicity' can therefore be seen as a key marker of a subject's ability to exercise the flexible repertoire of interpretive responses demanded by increasingly intermedial cultural landscapes. It emerged as a key way to explain the variability of responses to the experiences on offer.

5 Conclusions/ Directions for Future Research

Impact of differentiation

Power and value: which way is the right way to participate in our contemporary technosphere – which technicities will be valued and 'exploited' and which will be demeaned or overlooked in the search for new ways to capitalize on contemporary technoliteracy in general?

Within education this issue is of vital importance as how these technicities are addressed, nurtured, squashed will have immensely important effect on how future generations view themselves in relation to dominant notions of expertise and cultural authority.

With or against the grain

Public Service broadcasters need ways of understanding technicity in order to promote user generated content (and specifically a remit to enable access to these processes) What is clear is that specific technicities are being recognised as potentially useful to PSB such as the BBC in the UK where there is an ongoing scuffle to exploit the potentials of co-creative media – however this will fail if the assumption of audience/user engagement is that we are all equally or similarly technically competent or creative, The engagement of a 'public' has to be on the basis of an understanding the profoundly different technicities that are in play,

Bibliography

Dovey J & Kennedy H W 'Game Cultures' Open University Press 2006

Dovey J & Kennedy H W 'From Margin to Center: Biographies of Technicity and the Construction of Hegemonic Games Culture in Players' Realm: Studies on the Culture of Videogames and Gaming ed Williams P and Heide Smith J McFarlane Press 2007 pp 131-153

Dovey, J & Kennedy, HW 'Playing the Ring' in 'Branding the Ring' ed Mathijs E Wallflower Press/ Columbia 2006

Lanchester, John 'A Bigger Bang' from The Guardian Weekend 04.11.06 pp17 – 36

Stiegler, Bernard 1998 Time and Technics 1 trans Richard Beardsworth & George Collins Stanford University Press Stanford (orig. 1994 Galilee)