

## **CHILDREN'S SOFTWARE, MEDIA FETISHISM, AND THE SPECIAL EFFECT**

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In two decades, computer games have moved from a fringe domain of hackers and enthusiasts into the position of a major entertainment industry (Sheff 1993). In 1992, Nintendo was more profitable than Microsoft, IBM, Apple, or all major movie studios combined. Industry growth has continued to be strong as the Internet boom has been fueling PC purchases.

Software for young children, which is only one small cut of the overall entertainment software pie, has followed a similar trajectory. The early years were dominated by small-scale developers who shared an educational and research orientation. In the past five years or so, the children's software sector has been going through massive mergers and acquisitions. Traditional toy and media companies such as Disney, Mattel, Lucas, and Lego now dominate, and independent developers can't succeed without the backing of one of these corporations.

Children's software is now available at your local Wal Mart and Costco at bargain discounts. Production value is almost always high, featuring beautiful artwork, professional voice talent, and sometimes even 3D computer graphics. As it's gone mainstream, the social networks around children's software have expanded and changed quite dramatically at all layers of production, distribution, marketing, and consumption.

What I want to do here is look at one ethnographic slice which cross cuts these different layers and describes some of the impetus behind the industry expansion through the case of one children's software title.

But first some of the framing issues.

Much of the ethnographic work on media consumption focuses on the ways in which people make sense of media in their local life worlds, media that are produced at sites that are geographically, culturally, and socially distant. These studies have challenged the privileged position of the text and the psychological bias in the field, by suggesting the multiplicity of possible readings and the influence of local context.

Elsewhere I have similarly described the unexpected maneuvers of game players as they creatively appropriate the content and functionality of shrink-wrapped products, looking at local lifeworlds as the meaningful context in which a text is interpreted (Ito 1996; Ito 1997; Ito 1998). Here I draw from this material but have a somewhat different focus. I want to look at how production and consumption share heterogeneous social networks that span geographic distance. I am interested, for this presentation, less in the settings geographically local to child consumers, such as schools and homes, and more in the networks of mass media and commodity capitalism that cross cut these localities in various ways, and which construct their own contexts and robust ties that span geographic and social distance. But they are nonetheless concrete and specific.

In taking this focus, I want to stress material relations rather than media representation per se. It is obviously crucial to look at representations of say, violence, gender, or educational content, how they are interpreted and taken up by children, and how they reference other domains and media. But I want to look past representational content for the moment to the material discursive domains of commodity capitalism that are often invisible to consumers. I am trying to

locate media content in concrete material and social networks that produce, disseminate, and play into these representations.

As a culturalist appropriation of Marx's commodity fetishism (Marx 1976), and drawing from Debord's notion of spectacle (Debord 1995), I've been using the term media fetishism to remind myself that the power of media lies not only its representational content. In looking at representations that often actively erase everyday social and cultural realities, media fetishism is a reminder of the material relations, technologies, and labor that produces any such artifact.

Media are powerful not only because of the force of their representational imagery but also because they embody social relations. They are a measure of what people take to be valuable and what kind of content gets disseminated on a mass scale. Media not only represent, they tie people's interests together.

For my case, I'll be drawing from ethnographic material on both consumption and production of children's software. On the consumption side, I draw from fieldwork at a network of after school clubs, where kids play with software with undergraduate tutors. I was part of a large research team collecting video data as well as fieldnotes and interviews. On the production side, I draw from the games themselves and interviews with people involved in the children's software industry.

My case focuses on a piece of software called the Magic School Bus Explores the Human Body, which was in frequent use at one of the clubs that I was observing at.

The game has popular characters that are licensed from an existing TV and book series produced by the mainstream educational publisher, Scholastic. And it is distributed and backed by Microsoft as their primary kids' line. The Magic School Bus series has been growing steadily and now has 7 titles.

The storyline is that you and a busload of kids have been minaturized and are travelling through the body of another kid, learning about different body functions along the way. The game has high production value, with beautiful animations and artwork and characters developed from the TV and book series

You can click around and explore a scene in an open ended fashion, and are rewarded with brief, funky animations, like a pencil flying across the room or a blob morphing into a hamburger. Clicking on certain key parts of the scene triggers one of the embedded educational activities or arcade type games, or you may be sent to a different part of the body and a different scene to explore.

With a game like MSB, the attention grabbing sounds and graphics are central to its appeal. The game was very popular at the club, and seemed to catch the attention of the kids as they wandered around.

The undergraduates, in their fieldnotes on the game are generally appreciative, and especially comment on the cool graphics. The kids too orient primarily to the special effects, like the animations, graphics, and the funny sounds. The full screen animations that form the transitions between the different parts of the body often draw appreciative "EEEW"s as they watch the tiny bus drop into a puddle of stomach goo, or fly down a sticky esophagus. "This is the fun part. This is fun. Watch," insists one kid as he initiates the opening animation. The kids engage with the explicit educational content grudgingly, like when an undergraduate points out that those flying things are actually red blood cells, or asks a question about some body function.

Not I want to zoom in on the interactional details from the video record. In the tapes where kids are engaging together with the exploratory scenes, observers will be constantly leaning in and pointing at things to click on. In this sequence, Peter is in control of the mouse, with two onlookers, Chris and Brad.

*C = Chris*

*P = Peter*

*B = Brad*

- 1 C: Get that - get that thing. Get that one candy bar. Get the candy bar. Get the candy. Get the candy bar. Get the small chocolate thing. (Leans in and points). Awww. You should've got it. It's funny.
- 2 B: Get that one. (Leans in and points.) This one's funny.
- 3 C: Oh, get that one thing. Right here.
- 4 P: (Clicks on blob that turns into a hamburger with an audible yawn.)
- 5 B: Oh yeah. Cool.
- 6 C: Get that chocolate thing. Hit it.
- 7 P: (Hits blob that turns into a chocolate bar.)
- 8 B: What's that green thing?

The interactional dynamic basically consists of highly repetitive pointing and commanding from the onlookers: Get that, get that, get that one candy bar, get the candy bar, get the candy bar, get the small chocolate thing, get that one thing, right here, get that chocolate thing, hit it. This stream of talk is punctuated by appreciative exclamations, oh yeah, cool, this one's funny, as they activate the small animations.

The kids rarely tire of this mode of clicking on animated objects, and will revisit areas to show particularly cool animations to other kids. So they really do get engaged with these small scale special effects, and it captures their attention and interest for long periods of time.

One of the activities in MSB, which involves a simple painting program, is particularly notable as an embodiment of the logic of the interactive special effect. After selecting a body part, the player can squirt, splat, or stamp blobs and shapes onto the canvas, accompanied by appropriately gross bodily noises.

*UG=Undergraduate*

*R=Ralph*

19 UG: What else is there that you could do?  
20 R: Nothing.  
21 UG: Is that the last one?  
22 R: Yeah.  
23 UG: Are you sure?  
24 R: Yeah.  
25 UG: How do you know that?  
26 R: (Goes back to the farting noise, and hits it repeatedly.) It's my favorite. The tongue. Watch.  
27 UG: Are there any more?  
28 R: Oh yeah. The finger. (Clicks repeatedly, making more gross noises.)  
29 UG: Eww.  
30 R: Ewww. Look.  
31 UG: Are there any more after the finger? Let's see. Muscles. Whoa.  
32 R: I want to go to the finger again.  
33 UG: Why don't we go back and explore the body.  
34 R: Okay. I know why. I know why. Cause you didn't like the sounds.  
35 UG: No, the sounds were great.  
36 R: I don't want to play any more.

Here's a brief transcript from a very long sequence of a kid playing with this part of the game.

The undergraduate and the kid are basically making their way through each tool and experimenting with the different sounds. The undergraduate is with the kid through all of this, emitting appreciative wows and eeews along the way. But after he's made it through all the tools and wants to go back and click repeatedly on the farting and splatting tools, she tries to get him to move on back to the main storyline. Ralph then suggests that she is discouraging him from playing with gross sounds because she doesn't approve. He decides that he would rather stop playing rather than return to the more educational sections of the game.

What's common across these interactions, and many others in the video record, are the ways in which kids engage in an intense but relatively fleeting way in

these spectacular pleasures that have little relation to the educational content of the game. In contrast to other modes of interaction that I observed around game play, these interactions instantiate relations with the very local content of the game special effects, at the expense of making sense of the game in terms of other areas of kids lives or experience. By contrast, in a game like SimCity 2000, I often observed kids and undergraduates engaging in extended conversations about how the simulated city is similar or different from the city in which they live, or how things such as population density and traffic are interrelated. When kids are engaging with the special effects of a game, these kinds of conversations are strikingly missing and most of what you hear are various appreciative exclamations – cool, awesome, wow, alright – and simple procedural comments.

We can consider engagement with special effects as a way for kids to get a lot for very little effort. They have to do little else than point and click, to release a cacophony of sound and visual effects. And while kids do a lot more than play with special effects when they engage with educational software, the logic of the special effect is *one* powerful and ubiquitous component of current entertainment software.

I could possibly end my analysis here, bemoaning the state of software these days and advocating for content that guides children away from eye candy and repetitive twitch play and towards the more nutritious fare of robust storylines, problem solving skills, or well, any kind of reflective thinking at all..

But I should also zoom out from the individual child and consider how childrens' game play is part of the broader fabric of their social lives outside of their interactions with the games. Spectacle tends to bind children closely to the imaginings of a game, and can become a mechanism to shut out interpersonal interactions and geographically local accountabilities. For many kids, engaging with the special effects of a game is a way to ignore accountabilities to educational content both at the club and at school. Educationally-minded

undergraduate tutors seem to have a natural urge to call kids away from special effects and into conversation and interaction.

I should also note how special effects in children's software reference other genres, especially action media, and the gendered implications of these references. I could point to a case study of SimCity 2000, where boys seem particularly intent on the disasters functions that allow them to wipe out an entire city with a few mouse clicks (Ito 1997).

At this point, if I had the time to do all of this right, I might have done a decent job of describing particular elements of a mass media text and their relation to the life worlds of some kids.

But in conclusion, I want to try to make good on my promise and sketch some of the production consumptive relations instantiated through high-end consumer titles of this sort.

In my discussion with game developers, many commented on the growth of graphic arts budgets. Compared to the early years, where programming was the primary trade of computer game development, currently, gaming products will generally have three or more times more artists than programmers. And for children's titles that are released as part of a series, corporations often reuse the same underlying technology and settings, and plug in different graphics, sounds and story lines to produce a new title. Even in a game like SimCity, which is currently in its fourth incarnation, you see the same basic game being re-released with fancier and fancier graphics and larger and larger budgets. The original simCity was the work of a long programmer while SimCity 3000 employed a cast of dozens.

The atomized consciousness of a player engaging with a special effect is a small consumer moment attached to a large productive apparatus. Whether in

movies or computer games, special effects are what drive budgets, and bring in large audiences. This is indicative of a particular kind of industry maturation, where a growing consumer base supports larger production budgets, but also increases investor risk, driving the push towards sure hit products, sequels, formulaic content, and guaranteed crowd pleasers. Special effects also weed out independent developers who don't have the budgets to compete in production value.

Diverse sites of consumption and production are enlisted in a series of imaginings that are self referential, self reinforcing and resource intensive, often at the expense of other domains of cultural production, and at the expense of consumer experiences that may enhance their geographically local relationships. As a consumer moment, engagement with a special effects is usually a lightweight, fleeting pleasure that might be quickly shared with others and commented on, but does little to build interpersonal relations beyond these simple exchanges. But the sedimentation and repetition of these small consumer moments can have staggering effects as they become part of the apparatus of a growing media industry.

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