Is ‘visibility a trap?’: exploring the autonomy of the observer/d in the computer game ‘Gridlocked’.

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Public attempts at observation have widely been regarded as a means of social control, and in recent times there have been consistent efforts to reinforce the relationship between public surveillance and public safety. The notion that many can be controlled by few through panopticism is widely documented, observation and awareness of being watched has become a familiar theme in society. Surveillance is no longer the sole province of law enforcement or employed for the implementation of safety and, arguably, new opportunities for observation have emerged as a social phenomenon through common media such as the television, photography and gaming. Newer and more sophisticated technologies have developed, and accessibility and employment of equipment which can be used for surveillance is commonly utilised and can now be found in the home, principally through webcams. Traditional views of control through observation and surveillance techniques have placed power and autonomy in the hands of the observers, whose visibility to the observed is limited or absent. The observed are usually in a position of weakness as opportunities for surveying the observer are limited as they are unseen: the autonomy lies with the observer. Within this paradigm, power and control remain distant to the observed. Drawing on observations made through use of a self-made computer game which depends on capturing live video of users through a webcam, we explore familiar theories of surveillance and ask whether there are unacknowledged potentialities for autonomy of the observed through entrapment, and being ‘Gridlocked’.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper will explore a range of research which addresses surveillance as a social and cultural phenomenon. This will serve as a backdrop through which to develop further empirical research in greater depth, and at a later date, the autonomy of individuals who participate in a computer game, ‘Gridlocked’. The ludic quality of the game is based around uncertainty and intrigue as to whether participants can be observed by others through being captured by live webcam. Participants have little concept of time or objective in this game, and there are further ludic qualities to be gained in the uncertainty of participation, and a desire perhaps not to become trapped by Timecode.

Webcams might be used for a number of purposes, such a video-conferencing or for making personal films which are then distributed over the Internet. Evidence from websites which aim to share technical information further suggests that webcams can be used as an alternative control to PlayStations or Wii, and as substitutions for a mouse [1]. The capture of live images by webcam from a PC or game console and their incorporation into a game is an emerging application of existing hardware and software tools. However, the incorporation of image into the game often appears to have limited purpose other than to simply place an image of the player into the game interface.

Fig 1. Webpage from BBC Cbeebies, In the Night Garden
When examining participation in this computer game, we will be exploring whether ‘visibility is a trap’ as Foucault [2] has suggested. This could imply that participants experience a sense of entrapment in the game, through the display of their image. Within this paradigm, power is unfairly weighted towards those whose can see others. Moreover, the autonomy of the participant, as both the observer of the game, and an object of observance, having had their image captured, is questionable, and we intend to explore whether there are any unacknowledged potentialities for experiences of entrapment within the confines of this game. Areas which may be considered for further exploration are: a means by which participants can share visual information, to create a sense of visual community (albeit temporarily) or, to offer a means by which autonomy can be understood and pleasure gained in the desire to be ‘trapped’.

Outline

We will concentrate initially on contextualising surveillance within a cultural and temporal paradigm, examining the shift from a modern to a postmodern understanding of the consequences and meanings of surveillance. For this, we begin with Foucault’s modern exposition of the panopticon, as originally conceived by Jeremy Bentham as a means of imposing discipline and creating a central axis of power, and trace the more postmodern understanding of power and control as being fractured and dispersed. Next, surveillance will be contextualised historically, emphasising the growth of social, academic and political interest, and the impact of technology in the development of smaller and more ubiquitous instruments of surveillance. The paper will then explore issues of identity in relation to video and computer games, which will be followed by a detailed description of the game, ‘Gridlocked.’ Finally, we will map an outline of the way in which we intend to conduct further empirical research, suggesting a number of different methods. We will further highlight the positive experience that this alliance of two researchers from different backgrounds has had, which has implications for teaching and learning, in relation to theory and practice.

2. SURVEILLANCE AND THE PANOPTICON: POWER THROUGH VISIBILITY

In the 18th C, Jeremy Bentham conceived of a panopticon as a system of surveillance. It was to work as a means by which individuals within an institution, whether it was a prison, school or in work, could be easily seen, controlled or protected [2]. Panoptic means ‘all embracing, in a single view’ [3] and it was proposed that large groups of individuals be controlled through the shape and construction of a building, at the centre of which would be a tower. Visibility is a crucial concept within panopticism, as the tower would contain a central guard-like figure, believed to be a constant presence. The conceit of this design is that the guard cannot be seen, but that the threat of their presence is enough of a controlling influence over individuals in the rest of the building, who are highly visible to the tower. In these terms, ‘visibility is a trap’ [2].

Fig 2. Illustration of Bentham’s panopticon
Surveillance has a long history, and is at the core of a dense system by which groups and individuals in society are controlled by external forces. At the beginning of the 20th C, in Britain, social surveys, such as those undertaken by Rowntree and Booth on poverty [4] were a means by which the health of the population might be surveyed. While the genesis of these surveys was believed to be altruistic, they also had the added advantage of imposing control, through Welfareism and public health. The Welfare System was conceived of as an organised, collective approach to surveying the population and importantly, groups within populations. Foucault [2] suggested that surveillance and the unequal imposition of power of observers, therefore, need not be confined within buildings, but could be part of a broader spectrum of power aimed at imposing discipline, encompassing everyday activities, and became embedded within the fabric of society. Now, instruments of surveillance, such as CCTV cameras, Personal Identification Numbers and shop loyalty cards [5] litter the social landscape. The way in which surveillance has become rooted within social activity has arguably invaded the personal space of individuals who might have formerly only been identified through the use of a passport, or identity card, or when making a purchase with a credit card. The practice of surveillance has become more visible than in the past, and is embodied in machines which inhabit roadsides, buildings and telephone masts, as well as within the organisation of buildings.

In literature, predicting political and social changes, George Orwell conceived of surveillance and discipline in a totalitarian, dystopian manner, envisaging society as being in the thrall of one central, overarching form of control: the leviathan ‘Big Brother’ [6], and which importantly, infiltrated the minds of the masses as well as disciplining their actions. Now, we understand the television programme, ‘Big Brother’ as a form of entertainment, in which pleasure of audiences might be gained from watching the antics of individuals who are highly visible, but who cannot see those observing them. We might then assume that one of the pleasures of the participants in such an arena is being seen.

In this century, Lyon [5] locates a growing awareness of academic studies of surveillance around a specific date, that of September 11th 2001. The events on this date did not singlehandedly trigger a greater interest in surveillance [5] but perhaps brought into question how, in a society in which surveillance was already fairly prolific, surveillance techniques were unable to prevent such an incident occurring. The integrity and usage of surveillance techniques are subject to some deliberation: in whose interest is surveillance? Originally, Foucault [2] considered the power of panopticism lay in the conceptual presence of visibility, which acted as a deterrent towards crime or unruly behaviour, and Bentham envisaged it as being a utilitarian benefit for the greater good of society. While power could not be ‘seen’, the mere threat of it would be enough to impose a sense of self-control. Control of the self was internalised through the potentiality of being visible. Yet, while public landscapes frequently contain devices such as CCTV cameras, and there are serious issues about the ubiquity of surveillance in relation to personal privacy [3], surveillance embodied by CCTV, for example, fails to act as a deterrent to criminal or violent activities. The threat of visibility which Foucault [2] predicted would act as a deterrent, is largely absent, as is a sense of internalising self-control. Ainley [3] argues that the presence of physical devices impact little on personal behaviour and more profoundly, they suppress wider debate around issues of public behaviour, such as civic unrest and random assault.

There appears to be a shift from a modern understanding of surveillance as enacting control being largely central and encouraging self discipline, to a postmodern understanding of a more ‘flexible’ sense of control dispersed in a more fractured way [7]. Contemporary forms of surveillance, i.e. though CCTV, only provide representation of images, rather than directly which the more traditional panopticon would [7]. Power is mediated and dispersed through representation and can therefore only be applied indirectly. Technological advancement suggests greater opportunities of surveillance for a wider public through the creation of smaller instruments, such as CCTV’s or speed cameras, and as they have become more affordable, home owners are now able to install their own CCTV cameras. However, the increased presence and visibility of instruments for surveillance purposes might well provide an opportunity for transgression in the desire to be seen, rather than obedience.

3. IDENTITY AND COMPUTER GAMES

Another impact of technological advancement is in the computing world, and the development of computer software for gaming is a significant aspect of this paper. Computer use offers a range of possibilities, from exchanges of communication, and opportunities for sharing experiences [8] to online gaming. The increases in personal and wider social interaction provided by technology therefore, has had a profound influence and altered forms of entertainment and creation of pleasure. The popular
social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook aim to provide a public forum for individuals to communicate and share personal information. Second Life aspires to extend the potentialities for communities and identity formation by offering the opportunity for a new virtual life. In the following quotation from Turkle’s [9] seminal work, the potentiality for greater communication and creation of identity both within and between us is proposed.

At one level, the computer is a tool. It helps us write, keep track of our accounts, and communicate with others. Beyond this, the computer offers us both new models of mind and a new medium on which to project our ideas and fantasies. Most recently, the computer has become even more than tool and mirror: We are able to step through the looking glass. We are learning to live in virtual worlds. We may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries, and engineer virtual skyscrapers. But increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well [9].

In this evocative quotation we are introduced to the innovation and extensive employment of computers which offer an infinite range of possibilities, not just in terms of global communication and values to be gained from such contact, but also at a personal level in terms of identity formation. Turkle gives the example of players who engage in MUDs (‘Multi User Domains’) which allow for great flexibility in creating avatars and ‘screen personae’ [9]; the virtual world offers ‘unprecedented’ possibilities for freedom [10] and engagement with fantasy. In these situations, through MUD’s where individuals can create an avatar, they are empowered with genesis and ‘since we have full control over our own image—other people see us in the way we want to be seen’ [10]. While this opens up endless possibilities, and Second Life for example, proposes an empowering alternative, Filiciak [10] suggests that despite the opportunity for entire recreation of virtual identities, many people either use a pseudonym which relates to one of their own personal characteristics, or they take a name from pop culture, ‘It follows then that the presentation of ones own person on the Internet resembles to some extent the user’s real-life identity’ [10]. This suggests that when faced with the apparent freedoms offered through technology, individuals may operate within fairly narrow confines. Moreover, while identity is perceived of as something which changes over time and through different contexts [11], an individual’s sense of self may remain fairly fixed as it contributes to immediate autonomy.

In the next section, we will outline a synopsis of the computer game, ‘Gridlocked’, identifying the role of the participants and delineate the ludic quality of the game.

4. SYNOPSIS OF THE GAME: ‘GRIDLOCKED’

The visual structure of the game simulates a panopticon, substituting prison cells for a revolving wall of video showing computer users captured by webcams. The computer user becomes the observer/guard/game player. Each video clip is seamlessly looped, appearing to the player as continuous live video feed. Once the player gives permission for their webcam to become active, their video image, in real time, will also be included in the wall of video. The player will appear to be locked into the grid, ‘gridlocked’ with no apparent means of escape. The player will discover their entrapment serendipitously. Therefore the player is not only the observer/guard but also appears to be the observed.

Fig 3. Illustration of Bentham’s panopticon
Timecode will be included in each video clip (with randomly allocated starting points between 30 and 10 minutes) counting down to zero. Some video clips will be set at zero and will show a static image of a trapped subject. The game will last up to 30 minutes and as the video clips reach zero they will change from moving image to static image.

The aim of the game is to escape from the grid before the timecode reaches zero. The player will be able to discover oral clues within video clips by rollover. The clues will lead to a small number of simple challenges in order that the participant may stop the timecode from reaching zero, avoiding becoming trapped in the game forever.

Despite some technical difficulties, the game is at a significant prototype stage; the authors are seeking affirmation from the University Ethics Committee to go ahead with the empirical research, but still have a number of outstanding images to capture in order to complete the game.

5. FURTHER RESEARCH

It is our intention to undertake further empirical research for which this paper acts as an initial literature review. In order to understand the pleasures or emotional senses that might be gained from participating in this game, we aim to employ a range of qualitative methods to individuals who have agreed to take part in our study. We envisage asking semi-structured questions around participation of the game and we shall devise a series of questionnaires (which may be distributed as part of the game) to record participation. We intend to explore the emotive possibilities of a computer experience by a further literature review of Affective Computing, focussing in particular on how the game influences emotion. Further research will also be necessary in relation to Ludology.

There is an additional element to this research which is the benefit gained from our alliance as researchers. We have come together from backgrounds of theory and theory and practice. We also hope to contextualise the way in which we work together, and develop a research paper from this, which we feel has strong implications for Learning and Teaching.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are indebted to the skills and tenacity of Matt Leighfield for his help in developing the computer game ‘Gridlocked’ and for his comments on this paper. We would also like to thank Annie Grove-White, Ruth Dineen, Stuart Neil, Kevin Edge and Stephen Thompson for their advice and observations.

7. REFERENCES


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