

NEW MEDIA, NEW PLEASURES?

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Abstract:

The discourse surrounding new media suggests that they offer experiences and pleasures which older media do not. This paper critically explores this proposition both theoretically and empirically in a small number of households in Ireland and in relation to digital games, DVDs and digital television. It argues that we can only understand the pleasures of new media texts through an examination of user experiences and by investigating the constraints and barriers which surround new media consumption in particular social and cultural contexts. It also suggests that insights from political economy of the media might be usefully employed within cultural studies.

Keywords: digital games, DVDs, digital television, new media, political economy, users

INTRODUCTION

New media proponents – be they marketers, theorists, or practitioners – argue that the formal characteristics of new media enable experiences and pleasures that old media simply do not provide. This paper explores this proposition and reports on the theoretical review and empirical findings of a project undertaken at Dublin City University, Ireland from October 2003 to March 2004.ⁱ

This project conducted a substantial literature review of different theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of pleasure in media and cultural studies. These were used to design a research framework and to establish a ‘checklist’ of core concepts which the literature suggests are key constituents of new media pleasures. The framework and checklist were piloted in a small number of Irish households where discussions focussed on video and computer games, DVDs and digital television and the relationship of these new media to more traditional media.ⁱⁱ

The authors suggest in this paper that the pleasures of new media are heterogeneous and while they are in most cases far from revolutionary in a broader social and political sense, they have facilitated the development of a range of new media production and consumption habits. In addition, one of the most striking findings to emerge from this study was the impact new media are having on people's perception of, and use of, more traditional media like terrestrial analogue television, videos and radio.

Theoretically, the paper argues that political economy of the media and cultural studies have important contributions to make to the study of new media use and are not necessarily mutually exclusive perspectives. Methodologically, the paper argues for multi-method empirical research in order to take account of both the formal characteristics of the media artefact under study and investigate the user experience of these characteristics in particular contexts. Further, the authors found it very useful to compare and contrast new media use both to each other and to more traditional media use. Finally, while pleasure as a concept means different things in different discourses (Fiske, 1987:224), it proved useful as a heuristic through which we could examine how the formal characteristics of new media facilitate and impede user experiences.

APPROACHES TO STUDYING PLEASURE IN TRADITIONAL MEDIA

New media such as video and computer games (digital games), digital versatile disks (DVDs) and digital television are becoming increasingly pervasive in Irish society but are still viewed by many as 'new' and 'novel'.ⁱⁱⁱ It would be simplistic to ascribe the pervasiveness of these new media to the fact that they are digital technologies – this would be to fall prey to a form of technological determinism. It would be equally simplistic to ascribe their success solely to promotion. While advertising and marketing play an important role in bringing new media products to the attention of consumers, these practices can only succeed if consumers themselves find the media and the content they provide desirable and find meaningful ways to incorporate and convert them into their everyday lives. A study of new media should, in our opinion, take account of the specificities of the media artefact and consider how the artefact is adapted, adopted and consumed by users in particular contexts.

The study of media pleasure was once widespread in media studies but theorists generally relied on expert textual analysis of a media text, particularly from a semiotic, feminist and psychological perspective. Conventional textual analysis tries to make visible the latent and inherent meanings and pleasures to be found in a text but this approach can be problematic when applied to new media and is most useful when combined with work which explores how users actually interpret and use the text. Another approach to studying media pleasure is the 'uses and gratifications' approach which focuses on the functions that individual people say particular genre or media play in their lives and within which media enjoyment and entertainment are seen as key (Sherry, 2004). Feminist scholars have applied this approach usefully but the focus is on the individual and not the social and cultural context, as van Zoonen (1994) points out.

Moving beyond these structural/functional methods one finds that in Europe the process by which a medium is translated into a cultural practice by users is often viewed as a process of domestication which involves the appropriation, objectification, incorporation and conversion of a technological artefact into existing social relationships and routines (Aune, 1996, Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002, Mansell and Silverstone, 1996, Silverstone and Haddon, 1996). However, the domestication approach can underplay the role of the producers and the artefact and often says little about individual user pleasures, the focus is more on social relations.

The authors felt that any study of new media must take account of the producer, the technology and the content in the media consumption process, given their role in terms of defining a framework or rules within which certain behaviours and actions are sanctioned and normalised, and others become more difficult (Akrich, 1995, Kerr, 2002, Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003, Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). At the same time it was seen as important to pay attention to the activity and work of the consumer/user around the artefact once it is appropriated into the home. It was with these considerations in mind that the researchers examined alternative methods to studying pleasure in new media and sought to bridge the gap between theoretical approaches which focus merely on production and others which focus merely on consumption.

From the outset it was clear that in a pilot project we would have to be realistic about how much work we could review in the given timescale and thus we decided to focus on work which emphasised the

textual, ideological, social and discursive aspects of pleasure.^{iv} We focused on theoretical and empirical work emerging from cultural and new media studies but each member of the research group also brought their own individual expertise to the project.

The authors found that pleasure remains an important topic of study within cultural studies, but much of this work is concerned with the valorisation of user/audience pleasures and tends to downplay the role of the producer. By contrast, work from a political economic of the media perspective is precisely concerned with the role of the producer and is critical of notions of complete user autonomy in the production of media pleasure and of 'cheap' mass popular pleasures, which it compares unfavourably with more radical and cerebral avant-garde art forms. As Kline et al.'s *Digital Play* (2003) noted, political economy tends to dismiss pleasure as 'mindless entertainment' (2003:41) while cultural studies tends to emphasise the pleasures of media consumption without taking into account the power structures that 'control most of what we watch, listen to and play' (2003:45).

The next section of this paper reviews theories about pleasure from both political economy of the media and cultural studies and reports on how we tried to marry these concerns into a unified framework which we could use to study the construction of new media pleasures in use. Rather than present a complete literature review of work in both areas we will compare and contrast the work of two leading theorists, John Fiske and Nicholas Garnham, whose work we feel sufficiently represents the two alternative approaches to the study of media pleasure. While we are aware that this is necessarily a simplified representation of the arguments made by the different schools of thought, we are confident that it will suffice to offer an insight into what these two theoretical approaches can offer a study which is concerned with the study of new media pleasure.

A Cultural Studies Approach

John Fiske's starting point in his analysis of television consumption (Fiske 1987) is to challenge the concept of the 'mass audience' as something which is constructed by cultural producers/industries, and point to the multiplicity of needs and desires which different people bring to the media. He admits that the cultural industries can exert some, if limited, control over who watches what, and the

meanings and pleasures their products provide, but suggests that the power of audiences as producers of pleasure and meaning is 'considerable.' (1987:313).

For him, media texts are not purveyors of meaning but rather 'provokers' of meaning and he argues that institutionally validated cultural capital (as conceptualized by Pierre Bourdieu) is constantly being opposed and negotiated by users. With regard to cultural resistance Fiske distinguishes between two types, one semiotic and one social. For him, these are crucially linked so that an individual's oppositional and negotiated readings of a text are not inferior to social and collective resistance and may indeed pose a direct challenge to the dominant ideology.

Fiske adopts the concept of 'jouissance' as conceptualised by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973). For Barthes, there are two different types of pleasure produced by a text: *jouissance*, which is an intense physical pleasure operating beyond culture and ideology and *plaisir*, which is a cultural and more 'mundane' pleasure. For Fiske, society is always trying to curb pleasure, particularly *jouissance*, which is regarded as an indulgence and a waste of time. This is exemplified by the long tradition of censorship in the media and the confinement of transgressive pleasures in the severely regulated institution of the carnival (see Bakhtin 1968). Yet he argues that there is always the potential for resistance to the dominant ideology and the censorship of pleasure. For both Fiske and Barthes, one strategy of resistance is to *play* with the text (Fiske 1987). The pleasures which result are a function of, and related to, the viewers' social situations. Thus, for some, pleasure can be found in affirming and conforming to the dominant ideology, while for others it is more in the negotiation or rejection of the dominant.

A Political Economy of the Media Approach

Nicholas Garnham is a well known political economist of the media whose book *Emancipation, the Media and Modernity* (2000) provides an alternative insight into another perspective on media pleasure. The starting point of any reception/audience study, Garnham argues, is a recognition that the media are systems for the economic production and distribution of cultural goods and services, and that this places severe constraints on what can be consumed, by whom and where. Therefore, the process of meaning-making cannot be studied without an examination of how the media constructs

and understands its markets and how this effects both production and consumption. To this he adds the importance of other social structuring factors like class and gender.

Garnham has critiqued Fiske's work, arguing that his dissolution of both text and audience into an 'endless process of ungrounded semiosis which was defined as resistant by fiat' (2000:125) avoided both the issue of the 'impact' of messages and the 'social determination' of interpretative frameworks and behaviour. Importantly, for Garnham, Fiske's work also fails to adequately distinguish between behaviour and action: 'behaviour being habitual and unreflexive while action is consciously intentional' (2000:111). And while the move from a focus on the impact of the media to its 'use' is welcome Garnham warns not to confuse, or equate, use with a simplified notion of an 'active' audience.

For Garnham, the pleasure one finds in media consumption is shaped by both media content and social structuring factors extraneous to the media, such as income, education, gender and age. Thus for him pleasure is not 'free-flowing' or 'freely-defined' by the user but rather 'channelled' and directed by the media. Furthermore, drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, he argues that social factors, like class, act to structure both the economic and cultural resources available to the user and thus her access to particular modes of cultural consumption.

Making a strong call for the need to be able to generalize ones findings, Garnham is highly critical of the overly strong focus on the everyday, the individual and the ethnographic (2000:113) in cultural studies. For him this work fails to adequately deal with the relationship between structure and agency. Further, he argues that such work associates everyday media use with popular culture and pleasure defined in opposition to, and more positively than, elite culture and rational analysis. Such a priori distinctions and evaluations need to be exposed (2000:128).

For Garnham, pleasure is not necessarily good. He questions 'whether all pleasures are "good", much less socially progressive, and argues that the active pursuit of pleasure could be the basis for social control and manipulation as easily as for its liberation,' (2000:134). While Garnham's argument is more refined than the model presented by the Frankfurt school, he still seems to assert that pleasure associated with 'mere entertainment' is 'bad pleasure', i.e. a waste of productive time given that it is

mainly confined to habitual and unreflective behaviour and not extended to conscious and emancipatory action.

Reconciling cultural studies and political economy approaches?

Attempts have been made to reconcile these different perspectives, both in sociology and in new media studies. In the work of Madeline Akrich (1992) and later work by Oudshoorn and Pinch (2003) it is argued that designers anticipate and define the preferences, motives, tastes and competencies of potential users and thus create frameworks for action within which certain behaviours and actions are sanctioned and normalised, and others become more difficult. The concept of the 'script' is used in this work to signal the implicit and explicit intentions which are designed into a technological artefact and act to control or direct user behaviour. Silverstone and Haddon (1996:51) are critical of the suggestion that design is about the 'configuration' of users and they suggest that design should be seen as a process where the user is imagined rather than configured (Cawson et al., 1995). However, more recent work has applied the concept of the script and user configuration usefully in terms of the design of information and communication technologies and content (Oudshoorn et al., 2004, Kerr, 2002, Rommes, 2002).

In our search for some common ground between a political economic and a user-centred perspective within media studies, we found the emerging discourse in game design theory useful. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's book *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals* (2004) theorizes pleasure primarily on the basis of the dichotomy between *game* and *play*. For them, 'meaningful play' develops to a certain extent in response to the producer created rules of the game, but stems to an equally large extent from the players' efforts to resist and interact meaningfully with these rules. Affirmation and resistance are therefore always already inscribed in the process of playing. From Salen and Zimmerman's point of view, society and social groups can be regarded as rule-systems on a larger scale, which explains how meaning is simultaneously constructed individually and determined by the social environment.

Salen and Zimmerman state that 'pleasure is, perhaps, the experience most intrinsic to games' and that there are a variety of pleasures that can include 'any physical, emotional, psychological or

ideological sensation' (2004:330). However, they argue that the opposite of pleasure (e.g. boredom or frustration) is equally important. Drawing on the work of Vygotsky (1976) they point out that play creates demands to act *against* immediate pleasure and that this delayed gratification maximizes or at least increases the potential for pleasure. Pleasure can be created by both submitting to the rules as well as by testing or resisting the limits of rules in the process of play. In summary, Salen and Zimmerman assert that pleasure is an emergent phenomenon, which is contingent on the game designer's ability to create meaningful play at every moment of the game. But they also concede that '[p]leasure is difficult to design because it is an open-ended, multi-faceted and exceedingly complex concept' (2003:355).

These perspectives are valuable in terms of reconciling the focus on the user as outlined in the cultural studies perspective and the focus on the producer as outlined in the political economy of the media perspective. They both validate Fiske's concept of individual pleasures and meaning-making, while also accepting Garnham's view that the producer of a media text has a certain amount of control over the impact of their message. In the final analysis they argue that pleasure is constructed by the user using the artefacts produced by the producer.

THE PLEASURES OF NEW MEDIA

In media studies the pleasure of traditional texts is seen to stem both from an immersion in the fictional world and an appreciation of the textual strategies used to bring this world 'alive'. On a higher level, the breach of certain textual conventions, as well as the use of rhetorical figures of speech and allusions, can be appreciated by proficient readers. However, the old media concept of the 'text' does not fully correspond with new media applications which are often quite dynamic and fluid.

In attempting to identify what distinguishes new media from old media, Lister et al.,(2002:16) note that whereas analogue media 'tend towards being fixed, digital media tend towards a *permanent state of flux*'. Manovich (2001) argues that the 'database' format of many new media texts allows for a different experience every time the user accesses it. It is at this point that Philippe Bootz's (1997) distinction between *texte écrit* (text as written), *texte-a-voir* (text as seen) and *texte lu* (text as read) becomes useful. According to Bootz while there are two tiers in traditional texts: the code (encoding) and the

representation in the reader's mind (decoding), electronic media exhibit a three level structure in which there is a third tier *between* encoding and decoding – the physical manifestation of the user's individual choices (*texte-à-voir*). That this distinction makes sense is foregrounded by the fact that one can, for example, record digital game play sessions, i.e. the material representation of gameplay on the screen, but this does not give one access to the text as read by the user. Our experience would also suggest that while there is potential for many unique experiences, these differences may in fact be minimal, and the variable experiences cannot always be clearly differentiated from the different readings of a traditional text.

Contemporary new media literature continues to struggle with concepts which were central to traditional media studies. This struggle is exemplified by the debate between 'narratologists' and 'ludologists' in digital games studies. While the former argue that there is sufficient continuity between literary texts and digital games to justify narratological analysis, the latter deny this approach, arguing instead that the telling of a coherent story is of less importance to the success of a digital game than it might have been to a traditional novel or film (see Lister et al, 2002 and www.gamestudies.org).

It would appear that many theorists now recognize that narrative is often secondary in digital games to other pleasures. Ted Friedman has argued, in regard to digital games, that '[w]e cannot here talk, as film theory might, about occupying subject positions in our identification with this game [*SimCity*]' . For Friedman, rather, the player must identify 'with the computer itself ... [T]he pleasures of a simulation game come from inhabiting an unfamiliar, alien mental state: from learning to think like a computer' (Friedman 1999, quoted in Lister et al. 2003).

This seems to resonate with the resurgence of a play aesthetic that Marshall (2002) notes in regard to new media: 'In the last decade of the twentieth century, the key insight to permeate the various culture industries, but particularly film and television, is that play is not limited to childhood or sports. [...] The success of video and computer games in the past two decades is that they have been able to translate that pleasure of play [...] into adult entertainment culture' (2002:73).

There is considerable overlap here between theorists of new media and play theorists such as Roger Caillois, who, according to Lister et al. does not 'privilege *paidia* [play] over *ludus* [games]. [...] [E]ven

ludic games need room for improvisation: 'the game consists of the need to find or continue at once a response which is free within the limits set by the rules. This latitude of the player, this margin accorded to his action is essential to the game and partly explains the pleasure which it excites.' (Caillois 1962: 8)' (2003:270). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that 'the pleasure of the game is that the rules are made and remade, transformed and shifted by the players' (Marshall 2002:80).

Collectively, these different theoretical positions seem to indicate that the pleasures of new media texts are manifold, heterogeneous and differ to varying degrees from more traditional media. It is most likely that different users of different media will experience unique combinations of both 'cultural' and 'sensual' pleasure. Indeed it would appear that there is a more opaque process of engagement with new media, which often promotes a more fluid quotient of pleasure(s) for users. Thus, it is not central to the experience of playing a videogame to decode the intertextual references that it encapsulates, but it might add to the pleasure. Similarly, the exertion of control over the way a DVD is viewed might take precedence over the decoding of the various cultural codes that constitute the 'text'.

EXPLORING THE PLEASURES OF NEW MEDIA – INSIGHTS FROM THE PILOT STUDY

Drawing on the literature summarized above and our own experiences with the new media under study, we identified a small number of concepts which kept reoccurring and which we felt were seen as constitutive of, and central to, new media pleasures. These were **control**, **immersion**, **performance**, **intertextuality** and **narrative**. Each of these concepts in themselves are quite complex and seem to offer a variety of positions along a continuum between, for example, being in control and not being in control, and could be combined to produce more complex pleasures. As such, immersion, control and performance are often seen as fundamental to the experience of **play**. In some instances these concepts can combine in such a way that they produce a state which has been described as **flow**.

These concepts are discussed here in conjunction with the findings of the pilot study, thus drawing together the theoretical and empirical elements of the research project. The project assessed the

usefulness of the concepts identified in the previous section through a focus group and both a questionnaire and interviews which were conducted in a small number of households. While the sample is too small to generate any generalisations the data gathered provided interesting insights into our chosen concepts, the linkages between them and the complexities introduced by context.

Play

Play is posited here as a key concept to understand the interaction of users with new media. It is seen as incorporating the concepts of control, immersion and performance, and as being contingent on these other three pleasures. It can thus be seen as a *compound* pleasure, in which the total is greater than the sum of its parts. In other words, play is the unique pleasure experienced when control, immersion and performance are combined.

It would appear from our interviews that play is used as a descriptive term not only in relation to games, but also in relation to both new and old media more generally. For example, interviewees in these households talked about 'playing' a DVD and a video. This draws attention to the fact that 'play' has a variety of meanings in everyday language, even if it is used in a very specific way in the literature presented above.

The close relationship between play and control is recognized by play theorists Avedon and Sutton-Smith, who define play as "an exercise of voluntary control systems" (1971: 7). Specific forms of play can also be regarded in terms of control. Thus, competitive play (in Roger Caillois' terminology: *agôn*) is a struggle for control between two or more players. Games of chance (*alea*) involve the pleasure of relinquishing control to dice or cards. Performative play (*mimicry*) involves taking or losing control of one's own identity, while vertiginous play (*ilinx*) is dependent on the pleasant sensation of losing and subsequently regaining control over one's body and/or senses.

This is reflected by the fact that, for our interviewees, play could take the form of non-transformative play, i.e., playing with the content of a console, PC or mobile game, or it could take the form of transformative play, whereby the player tries to subvert the original goals of the designers by playing with and in some cases transforming the rules and code of the system. The extent to which one could

move from non-transformative to transformative play was related to the type of platform being used and the technical competency of the user. In general, while the potential exists for transformative play, our households were mostly content to play within the rules of the game and engage in non-transformative play. This form of play seemed to represent more Garnham's unreflective habitual use of media than Fiske's more emancipatory or resistant use.

The link between play and immersion is theorised by Johan Huizinga, who stresses the importance of play's separateness in space and time. Thus, play involves both a form of temporal immersion that might be experienced as a loss of time, and a form of spatial immersion that might be experienced as a loss of awareness of one's surroundings. Many games also immerse their players emotionally, which is often experienced as the fear of losing or the exhilaration of winning.

The contested nature of immersion across different media became apparent in an interview with the inhabitants of Household 1. One of the interviewees said that 'I would much prefer to sit reading a book using my own imagination,' and went on to state that they felt that the interactive nature of new media actually interrupts immersion. This interviewee found it 'annoying' when the computer told her to do certain things, such as repeating a level in a digital game.

Performance plays a central role not only in *mimicry*, but also in many games that require specific skills. Typically, the latter are played with others, or even in front of an audience. Players experience the pleasure of performing their skills and the recognition earned through their exercise. Other games cast players in specific roles, challenging them to act according to this role. While this pleasure is traditionally associated with theatrical performances and role-playing games, it is also found in digital games and internet chat-rooms (cf. Turkle 1995).

There was an interesting discussion of different performative aspects of games with a number of children in Household 5. In regard to the skills required to play digital games, the older children pointed out that the youngest 'could not do it properly.' At the same time, they admitted that in some cases they had to invite friends and relatives over to help them when they got 'stuck' in a game. The children seemed quite aware of the different levels of performative competence, and had a very clear sense of

their place in the hierarchy thus established. This was especially evident in the rivalry between the 8-year old male and the 11-year-old female, whose game-playing skills seemed to be on a similar level.

A further aspect of the performative nature of playing games became apparent in the children's 'kinaesthetic performance' observed by the researchers. In strong contrast to the stereotypical image of the 'couch potato' videogame player, there was a high level of movement in the room during game play, with the children jumping around and moving, as it were, in and out of the 'magic circle' established by the TV/console system. At one point, the youngest child seemed very eager to demonstrate his competence by firmly grasping the controller of the videogame console and focusing on the impact of his input on the action on-screen. They also demonstrated their high level of immersion by being oblivious to the researchers' and family members' attempts to get his attention.

Control and Flow

The concept of flow was introduced by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly to describe a state of consciousness, which occurs when the information coming into awareness is congruent with one's own goals and which produces intense feelings of enjoyment and creativity.

The universal precondition for flow is that a person should perceive that there is something for him or her to do, and that he or she is capable of doing it. ... optimal experience requires a balance between the challenges perceived in a given situation and the skills a person brings to it (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 1988:30).

In other words, flow is the experience of hitting the 'sweet spot' between the annoyance of a task that is perceived as trivial, and the frustration of a task that is perceived as too difficult. This is also described as a balance between challenge and competence, or between complexity and boredom. The state of flow requires a combination of immersion and performance but is greater than both. An exercise of control systems that occurs in combination with a high level of immersion thus results in a state of flow. As immersion and control are posited here a part of play, flow can be seen as both an element of play, and a state that can be achieved through play. As in the case of play, the pleasure of flow is seen as greater than the pleasure of control and the pleasure of immersion taken together.

When asked to describe the experience of playing digital games most people used the terms 'feedback', 'interaction', 'control', 'response', and 'competition'. An important aspect of control in new media is the mode of interaction and this includes the remote control, joypad or on-screen menus. Interestingly even those with digital television still saw television as a passive activity compared to digital games:

When you watch TV it's a passive thing. Whereas in a game you are actually physically manipulating, especially with the online stuff coming through now, you are actively engaging in a social event. It's being able to do something you couldn't really do. I was always crap at football, but I can put up Senegal and beat Brazil with some practice. (Household 2, Int. 4. Male, aged 21)

Csikszentmihaly points out that there is a 'paradox of control' involved in states of flow. While the individual experiencing flow will perceive herself as being in control, i.e. capable of fulfilling the task at hand, this control is never total, as this is a precondition for the task to remain challenging. The subject in a state of flow is thus simultaneously in control and out of control. In regard to immersion, Csikszentmihaly points out that the state of flow is characterized by the loss of self-consciousness and the transformation of time. In the interaction with narrative media this loss of self-consciousness can involve identification with the main character of the narrative. But it can also occur in more abstract tasks such as creating a website or playing a game of solitaire. Temporal immersion involves a loss of the sense of time, which might be perceived as a 'transformation' of time – the experience of a flow state may speed up time or slow it down, depending on individual factors.

Typically, control can take place on several levels – in the form of choices a) about the interaction, b) within the interaction and c) about the mode of interaction. While the first kind of control is also found in old media – e.g. choosing a television channel or buying a book – the other two are more closely associated with new media. The control options available within an interaction have been addressed under the label of interactivity – however, it is felt that this concept is too unspecific to accurately describe what takes place between the user and the text (see Kiousis 2002 and Downes and McMillan 2000). Furthermore, the term 'interactivity' must be regarded as a political, rather than a descriptive

term, as it is used by many new media advocates to emphasize the amount of the user's control over the medium, while de-emphasizing the medium's control over the user (see Aarseth 1997).

Not all interviewees viewed digital games on consoles or PC as cultural forms over which one had more control. For a non-game-playing interviewee digital games represented a lack of control, being told what to do, when to proceed and to repeat things because one did not achieve the necessary points to proceed. This powerlessness was also discussed in relation to learning how to navigate and understand digital games and investing enough time in them in order to complete or advance in them.

Interestingly, people varied in their opinions of, and willingness to tolerate, the levels of control offered by new media. For some, digital television offered a greater choice of channels and control over one's viewing pattern where for others the same system and set of choices equated with not enough control. For some, one had to browse too much to find anything of interest, while for others browsing equated with choice and control. For some, repeating the same action over and over in digital games meant a lack of control but for others digital games epitomized greater control over media content. Significantly these findings signal the varying levels at which a state of flow, i.e. the balance between challenge and competence, or between complexity and boredom, is achieved by different people.

Immersion

Immersion is seen as one of the key pleasures of new media by theorists such as Janet Murray (1997), Marie-Laure Ryan (2001), J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999). While Murray conceptualizes immersion as contingent on transformation and agency, Ryan usefully develops a typology of immersion, including spatial, temporal and emotional immersion. Bolter and Grusin focus on the convergences between 'immediacy'/'hypermediacy' and opacity/ transparency to foreground the continuities between old and new media. Arguably, a 'hypermedial' interface, which typically displays different forms of information (textual, pictorial, graphical) simultaneously, is less immersive than an 'immediate' interface such as the cinema screen, which relies on the seamless integration of visuals and sound. However, this simple binary distinction is challenged by complex interfaces such as those of digital role-playing games that require the user to navigate between different menus.

For our interviewees, playing digital games on different platforms and watching digital television and DVDs involved varying levels of immersion:

TV can be mind numbing after a while. Instead of sitting for one hour you end up sitting for ten hours and wondering what have I done this evening.. I tend to watch a lot of rubbish as well, like I end up sitting down and just getting lazy. (Household 1, Int. 2. Male aged 26)

Janet Murray confidently asserts that as a species we evince a universal desire to 'leap out of our everyday life into the pages of a favourite book' (1997:97). Given this, she argues that the 'experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated placed is pleasurable in itself, regardless of the fantasy content' (1997:98). This desire is used by Murray to explain our desire to consume fictional texts, all of which she constructs as immersive to a greater or lesser extent. However, this seems to indicate a problematic conflation of her concepts of transformation with the concept of immersion. Immersion is regarded here as not primarily deriving from taking on someone else's identity, but rather from the 'willing suspension of disbelief' and the resulting 'loss of self'.

In digital games, when a certain level of immersion is joined by a certain level of performance one can achieve an optimal state ('flow'), which one interviewee called being 'in the zone':

You get more involved, as in lose track of time, with PC games than with console games. You would be missing meals, you just get so involved. You'd say, 'its two o'clock, I'll have lunch in an hour, why is it ten o'clock?' that's never happened to me on a console, but it has happened a couple of times on PC. (Household 2, Int. 4. Male, aged 21)

Interestingly, one of the interviewees in Household 1 pointed out that in complex games such as massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), immersion and flow are harder to achieve due to the fact that 'newbies' were often treated unfairly: 'everybody is complaining that you have to go in there and the bigger guys, if they find a weak characters, cause you gain experience with the kill, they just slash you needlessly' This draws attention to the fact that the diminished control of the game designers in MMOGs can result in a sub-optimal game experience for the players. In other words, the fact that the game is dominated by the players makes it harder to create flow and creates a barrier to immersion for new players.

Finally, some of the interviewees in Household 5 pointed out that often shortcomings of the technology itself create barriers to immersion. Among the problems they listed were the speed of internet connections, dirty and broken game disks and DVDs, problems with the configuration of modems and other hardware, sub-optimal graphics and lost passwords. This seems to suggest that technology is sometimes not perceived as enabling by its users, but rather as disabling, which diminishes their immersion and thus the pleasure they derive from using this technology.

Performance and Competition

New media are seen to possess a performative aspect, insofar as they allow for and foster the users' experimentation with alternative identities (Turkle, 1995). This is true for computer games as well as internet chat rooms etc. The pleasure of leaving one's identity behind and taking on someone else's identity is regarded as a key pleasure in digital games, especially when they allow players to take on the roles of personae from successful films such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003). This is also recognized by Janet Murray, who uses the term 'transformation'. The performative aspect has links to old media such as cinema and literature, where the process of 'identification' is believed to work in a similar way.

One of the interviewees in Household 1 provided interesting insights into the process of identification in role-playing games (RPGs). The two cohabitators discussed Interviewee 1's preference to play pen and paper RPGs with people he knows rather than strangers. This led to the suggestion that there is something intimate about the performance of an alternative identity. The preference for digital role-playing games seems to be a result of the desire to act out alternative identities in private rather than in public.

Questioned about his main character in the role-playing game *Gothic*, interviewee 1 exhibited a certain extent of identification with his 'avatar,' changing between first-person and impersonal narration: 'I have learned how to make swords myself, I don't think I have enough yet. You can get into a fight in the village and outside the village.' Asked about the specific pleasures of the game for him, interviewee 1 pointed out the importance of a 'big game world,' 'clear interface' and the fact that "the

characters all do their thing, they are not just standing there waiting for you. They all have hours and way points, they move about and you can find them. You have to go looking for them and stuff.' This seems to suggest that the performativity of games depends to a certain extent on whether the player perceives himself as 'embedded' in the game world, and his actions as meaningful and consequential.

Another performative aspect of new media pertains to the performance of users in a social environment. Research has shown that British teenagers spend considerable time with newly acquired games, in order to be able to 'outperform' their peers (cf. Edge 2003). This aspect of new media might not be limited to digital games, however, as the mastery over technology (e.g. home entertainment systems consisting of multiple components) can be similarly demonstrated, and may well be a source of considerable pleasure for the owners of this technology.

In the households interviewed for this study, interviewees engaged in both intra-personal play, i.e., competing against the computer and themselves, and in both offline and online inter-personal play, i.e. competing against other people. These two levels of play are interlinked and some of our interviewees admitted to practicing against the computer in order to compete at a higher level against other people. One's performance in competition against others was an important element of playing digital games but not for all, as the following quotation shows.

It is maybe me, I am the least competitive person around, but, I would like to see gameplay coming out of something that is not necessarily the whole beating someone or winning someone. (Household 1 Int. 2. Male, aged 26)

For most of the interviewees playing against other people was preferable to playing alone against the machine. Inter-personal play can take place both offline (with multiple controllers connected to a single console) and online (via the internet) and in both social situations both formal and informal rules and regulations apply.

An important aspect of enjoyment in game playing is playing against someone whose skill level is relatively close to one's own. Thus competition is linked to one's performance level or competence and

playing online placed extra pressure on one to perform because online players tended to be very good and one didn't know in advance the other's playing style.

Narrative

It has been pointed out above that many theorists of new media regard narrative as a concept of the past, inseparably linked to the discourse of modernity and linear progress. They posit open spaces and modes of explorative consumption as new models for the reception of, and the interaction with, new media. But then of course, narrative has been declared *passé* innumerable times, and has still emerged again and again in literature and film. As outlined above, the so-called 'narratologists' have met strong resistance in the field of digital games studies, as their attempts to make sense of these new media forms using the terminology of literary and film studies has been conceived as 'theoretical imperialism'.

Our findings reflect this change to a certain extent. Narrative played a less important role in our household's consumption of new media than other factors, although this varied between media. For example, one interviewee had played *Halo* 'at least' four times. While *Halo* can be characterized as a narrative-driven game, the plot certainly ceases to be interesting after playing through the game several times. However, the different difficulty settings and cooperative mode made the game appealing to our interview even after numerous repetitions.

Meanwhile in Household 4 one interviewee felt that stories and plot were important, particularly in single player games.

I think the stories are important actually. I rarely play single player games but one recent game where the story really impressed me was *May Payne II*. In between levels they had cut in comic book scenes in a film noir style. I'd never seen a story done to that level – a cop investigation in a game. You finished a level and you sit back, its real dark with all the thunder in the background. It really drew you in. (Household 4, Int. 6. Male, aged 23)

With DVDs favourite scenes were sometimes re-watched in preference to watching the whole film. People tended to buy DVDs of films they had already seen and liked, but the key selling point of a DVD was less the film itself, but rather to get access to the add-ons and/or restored versions of older films.

There are the extra features in it which give it so much more extra meaning. ... and the fact that you have an archive that is searchable, .. you can just pick the scenes that you want to re-watch. (Household 1, Int. 2. Female, aged 25)

Interestingly, the interviewees in Household 1 pointed out that the extra features sometimes changed their perception of the fictional content of the DVDs. In direct response to the question of whether the extras offer new reading of audiovisual texts both A and B answer in the affirmative:

[T]here is a perfect example that people say all the girls on Sex and the City get on really well, and then I found out after that two of the characters don't get on at all, and it changed the way I viewed the relationship inside the film... we watched Blow, and I watched and didn't know it was a true story. And then after we watched the extras and then I realised that he was a real character and it did happen it became a lot more interesting. (Household 1, Int. 2. Female, aged 25)

While interviewees did have favourite programmes and channels on digital television they often used it as a background medium while they did something else, or they channel surfed/browed while also watching a programme or while someone else in the household watched a programme. Because there were so many channels on digital television one could also view particular programmes over and over again on different channels. This was seen as positive by some and negative by others.

Intertextuality

The appreciation of traditional textual objects, such as novels and films, is dependent to a certain measure on the decoding of intertextual references to other media in these texts. Thus, the pleasure of consuming these texts can be seen to be contingent to a certain extent on the user's ability to identify and decode these allusions. This intertextual element also exists in new media, especially since media

content is increasingly brought to the consumer through different channels simultaneously. The *Pokémon* and *Lord of the Rings* franchises can be seen as primary examples of using the intertextual web for marketing purposes.

P.D. Marshall sees the shift from old to new media primarily in 'the intensification and elaboration of the intertextual matrix (2002:69). The 'elaborately cross-referenced media products' can be seen as 'the industrial responses to the heightened value of both interactivity and play for audiences' (ibid.). For Marshall this is problematic because producers, who use it to resell the same products over and over again, largely control this process.

Intertextuality certainly emerged as an important element of DVD consumption in this project. This was particularly apparent with 'add-on's' where the extensive foregrounding of intertextual details regarding the production of the film is supplied, which ensures value-added 'new pleasures' for the user, while at times also reducing the mystique of special effects. Intertextuality thus emerges as a concept that is both limiting and liberating. The 'intertextual matrix' created by the media industry severely limits the choices of the users, but intertextual references also destabilize and de-authorize the text, thus laying it open for the users' own interpretative strategies.

Intertextuality was discussed at length in the interview with Household 5. In the choice of digital games, references to films and books seemed to play a role. In answer to the question 'Do you like games whose characters you already know from films or television?' interviewee 10 answered:

Yes, because when you haven't seen the movie, you don't know who the characters are. You have to look at the book and find out their names, etc.

However, intertextuality seemed to be unable to make up for a bad game, as exemplified by the brief discussion of the *Harry Potter* game:

Int. 8: I read all [Harry Potter books]. I also saw the films.

Int. 9: Didn't you have a PlayStation 1 *Harry Potter* game? You never really played that.

Int. 8: The graphics are terrible. The faces are square.

In other cases, intertextual references did not even seem to be an incentive to play a certain game at all, as became apparent from the discussion of the *Lord of the Rings* game:

- Int. 9: We got Lord of the Rings for [Int. 8], but she didn't even open it.
- Int. 8: I don't like fighting. I do like Tekken 4, but ...
- Int. 9: She's reading all the [Lord of the Rings] books at the moment.
- Int. 8: Yes. I read to the end of the novel where the world changes and they are all going home...
- Interviewer: Which character in The Lord of the Rings do you like best?
- Int. 8: Legolas. I love him.
- Interviewer: Legolas is one of the characters you can play in the game, isn't that right?
- Int. 8: Yes, but I still didn't want to play.

In the final analysis intertextuality did not play as important a role in these households as we had anticipated. This requires further exploration but may also suggest that the relationship of intertextuality to our other core concepts may need to be rethought.

Summary

The findings of our study indicate that the pleasures of new media are indeed manifold and heterogeneous. While it would be an oversimplification to claim that the pleasures of traditional media are characterized by a lower level of complexity, it seems nevertheless appropriate to conclude that the pleasures of new media cannot be modelled simply by transferring concepts of, e.g., literary and film studies to the realm of new media. Rather, these concepts need to be carefully adapted to reflect the specificities of new media use and the experiences they engender. In order to develop a theory of pleasure in new media, more research needs to be conducted both theoretically and empirically. In particular, the concept of control appears to be under-researched and warrants a more in-depth study. However, we feel that the theoretical overview presented here should prove useful for future investigations into new media and pleasure.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to highlight a more integrated approach to the study of pleasure which recognises both the role of the producer and the user/consumer while at the same time highlighting some key concepts which are seen in the literature as constitutive of, and unique to, new media pleasures.

While we remain confident about the usefulness of our core concepts we are less so about the how the relationship works between them, the potential range of combinations and the uniqueness of these pleasures to new media. Further, while the notion of pleasure may have gone out of fashion and be associated in the minds of many media scholars purely with textual analysis, we feel that it is timely to revisit the concept and to apply other research approaches.

In this context the findings from the empirical work have been insightful and challenged our rather instrumental list of distinct concepts with the messy reality of modern life. A key finding for us relates to the complexity of contemporary multi-media households. Interviewees 'dipped in and out' of media consumption as they negotiated the various demands of everyday life and demonstrated an ability to consume several media simultaneously with varying degrees of attention. Interviewees negotiated the physical and social geography of their households to develop patterns of use and were surprisingly strident in their critique of current new media offerings – recognising that the potential offered by these media was not necessarily matched by current commercial offerings.

While new media offer increased potential for control and play if the content is not appealing, of the right level, and easily accessible, then this potential is not sufficient on its own to grab and hold attention from competing media. At the same time this potential for control is making consumers more demanding of more traditional media and more frustrated with their limitations. For more mature consumers of digital games the potential to play and perform against other people, both offline and online, is a key pleasure.

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Endnotes

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ⁱⁱ The project conducted one focus group with 10 students and conducted ten interviews in five different types of households in the Dublin area.

ⁱⁱⁱ The communications regulator, ComReg, reported that 35 percent of television households have digital TV in the Rep. of Ireland (Dec. 04). Digital television is supplied via cable, MMDS and satellite technologies.

^{iv} A recent special issue of Communication Theory (2004 Vol. 14, No 4) looks at media enjoyment from a cognitive and effects perspective.

