12-1-2009

Critical Technology. A Social Theory of Personal Computing

Iprofess, Zuljin, World of Warcraft

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.pacificu.edu/inter09

Critical Technology. A Social Theory of Personal Computing

Description
Review of *Critical Technology. A Social Theory of Personal Computing* / Kirkpatrick, Graeme. Ashgate
Publishing, 2004.

Rights

Critical Technology. A Social Theory of Personal Computing.

Posted on **December 1, 2009** by **Editor**

Editorial Review by IProfess, Elvin Druid of Zuljin, Azeroth

Editor's Note: This piece is written by IProfess, self-proclaimed avatar from the on-line game World of Warcraft. With our commenting function, readers can now leave appropriate remarks following the piece. IProfess states that he will respond in the comments to interested readers and would love to hear from other 'Toons. Please note, that as always in Interface, the author's opinions are his, hers, or its own and do not represent those of Interface nor those of the Berglund Center at Pacific University Oregon.

IProfess begins: Most readers are probably familiar with World of Warcraft (WoW), if only through the cautionary tales told and retold via flickering television sets in TRW (The Real World). I myself am an avatar, in the popular parlance, a "'toon," who crosses over from time to time from WoW to TRW, principally to write for this journal [1].

For 'toons, the most elusive knowledge is self-knowledge. I have much to criticize in the work under consideration here (Graeme Kirkpatrick's *Critical Technology. A Social Theory of Personal Computing*); but I also aver that I have acquired considerable self-knowledge as a result of the reading of it. I therefore conclude that any intelligent, determined, and well educated 'toon or gamer could find it profitable if also, alas, frequently painful. However, as a noted troll sage said, "Pain is the beginning of knowledge, mon."

As 'toons we lack self-knowledge simply because we are born as adults, seemingly out of nothing. We awake to find ourselves "Level 1″ in some city of Azeroth, the World of Warcraft. The minute we learn to stumble around and get outside, some crazed monstrous being attacks us. Of course, we lose these combats because we are utterly unfamiliar with our own resources, tools, weapons, or for that matter anything at all.

So, created *ex nihilo* as we are, we are denied childhood training, real education, parental

advice, everything but the occasional tip from other players who have been in similar circumstances. How could we possibly have self-knowledge?

If one levels to the point where one can crossover into TRW, one gets some additional perspective, but does not learn much more about truly critical questions such as: Where did I come from? What is with this whole good and evil dichotomy? What's up with being and non-being? The denizens of TRW are even more confused and divided than are those of us from Azeroth.

Graeme Kirkpatrick, however, offers us some shards of self-knowledge by presenting, as the sub-title has it, "A Social Theory of Personal Computing". He is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at Manchester University in England. He is a sociologist but he's also trained in philosophy and deeply interested in the relationship between computing and societies—both in TRW and in game worlds such as my own.

We know from his estimable position that he doubtless speaks English with great clarity and precision, upon selected occasions. Unfortunately, not every page of this work was written upon such occasions. His prose, while not impenetrable, requires considerable grinding—enough to produce a substantial reward if the equivalent time had been spent, say, collecting herbs in Azeroth rather than reading.

The problem is that the author writes in a sub-dialect of post-modern academic English—Critical Theory. One wishes that Mr. Kirkpatrick had defined Critical Theory, but the work is written primarily for those who already care passionately about the field, and are familiar with the jargon.

A general knowledge of the theory does eventually emerge from the work [2]. It is important to be aware that Critical Theory is deliberately meant to move individuals to political action. It is a kind of ideology of liberation, though opposed to mainstream Marxism. It sees Communist and Socialist states, so far as technology is concerned, as playing the same game as Capitalist ones. That is, using technology to dominate their populaces.

Once the reader acquires, largely by osmosis, the vocabulary necessary to understand *Critical Technology*, some important arguments emerge. Following Andrew Feenberg, one of his key influences, the author posits the following:

- In the past, social critics like Karl Marx have incorrectly believed technology to be essentially free of values; tools are tools.
- However, in analyzing television, Frankfurt School theorists–the founders of one wing of Critical Theory (the other focuses upon literary theory)–realized that both the use of technology and the manner of its deployment have very real and often undesirable social consequences [3].
- Feenberg built upon these basics to argue the "Design Critique." Technology is part of an overall social system and hence reflects the goals of the dominant class within that society.

It is literally designed to do so.

In the case of computing, those goals are to create a technology that serves the purposes of industrial society in its latest phase, "informationalism" [4]. Computers were once usable only by highly trained specialists. But it became evident that moving them to the desktops of many more workers would increase productivity and facilitate greater accumulations of wealth by those directing the technology. One of the many results of this deployment has been globalization and the rapid spread of informationalism.

As the reader may already have decided, the above is not everybody's cup of thistle tea. The arguments bulleted above emerge from a very specific ideology, and the author does not bother to establish every step in the chain, nor could he possibly do so, the book would be very lengthy indeed. Rather, he cites other authorities in the same school as his own, Critical Theory. The highly motivated reader could trace down the argument step by step using the work's copious notes, but most of us must accept the argument, reject it out of hand, or as I have done, suspend either disbelief or belief to review the work. Kirkpatrick's argument continues....

The rapid dissemination of computers through the work place produced several problems: they were difficult to use and when mastered, they empowered the users. These users communicated freely, necessarily acquired authority, but questioned the necessity of hierarchies.

According to Critical Theorists, the managerial class quickly found it desirable to keep most of those employing computers more or less ignorant of the finer points of computing—what actually goes on in the mysterious box itself. According to the Design Critique, computers were made easier and easier to use, to the point where employees could work very efficiently without having any real idea of what was happening behind the interface. These new office drones had to work more cheaply than the earlier highly trained experts. Operators were further alienated from the technology that they ran and which increasingly conditioned their lives, both at work and at home.

However, two groups have subverted this paradigm, Kirkpatrick believes: hackers and gamers. Hackers began as enthusiasts in the relatively early days of computing— this work gives very good brief histories of both hacking and gaming—who wanted to learn to do things for themselves. In so doing, many of them created new technologies and made major contributions to computing. Many aligned themselves with other enthusiasts, supporting various collective and oppositional forms of computing such as the Open Source movement.

Out of this group branched others who were actively political: "hacktivists." This group began to employ technology to facilitate computer-based social movements such as the anti-globalization movement and the Zapatistas. Hactivists are essentially the knights-errant of Critical Theory. Other hackers evolved, alas, to be "crackers," criminal in their intent, lending their talents to every conceivable form of computer crime.

This brings us, at long last, to 'toons and gamers. Because the author cannot conceive of autonomous 'toons such as myself, we will combine these two distinct groups here.

In one of his chapters, "The Cynicism of the Computer Gamer," the author treats us all very roughly indeed. I found my own virtual heart repeatedly pierced by his prose, after I puzzled out the meaning. It is his contention that most gamers have become slaves to their machines, engaged in repetitive actions that have lost all semblance of fun, but are engaged in purely for distraction—grinding in the worst sense of the word.

While most gamers, like office workers, rarely have any real technical knowledge, the very enthusiastic learn better ways to manipulate the interface and to modify the game in what are often subversive ways. Avatars intended to represent servants of the repressive state are modified ("modded") to rather represent liberation fighters. Scenarios originally set in decayed urban areas which paramilitary forces attempt to take back from terrorists are modded to occur in high schools—often the very high school of the modders—producing Columbine-like games. Sex grows out of control as secret levels are programmed. Gaming companies respond by creating games in which participants can play forces earlier described as "the enemy," automobile thieves, Nazis, Viet Cong, Soviet armies. The kids are no longer "all right."

This subversion only goes so far. Aware of the growing loss of their sense of purpose, gamers cloak their failure by showing an awareness of that loss not with the "resignation" of the office interface drone, but with a cynical awareness and the "well-timed cheeky gesture". The author finds gamers bright, witty, and socially aware rather than dreary and mechanical, but only in a cynical fashion which essentially denies the possibility of progress, at least insofar as they might contribute to it.

Ironically, this active disengagement via gaming continues, nonetheless, to serve the purposes of the managing class, because it "…produces a kind of relaxation of tensions in the public sphere" [4]. Kirkpatrick believes, paradoxically, that violent gaming reduces the rage that should appropriately be manifested by those enslaved by computing.

Gamers, then, are no less failures than office drones because they are not working toward liberation from the social alienation that drives them to the game. The repetitive action of gaming distracts them from the unpleasant alternatives, but it nonetheless is, in the mind of the author, a political failure.

As a 'toon, I can claim some authority in this area, and it seems to me that none of these categories are as clear cut as Critical Theorists might believe. I find that many 'toons with whom I play are, in their disguises in TRW, hackers, hacktivists, programmers, crackers, drones, and game players, sometimes in bewildering combinations.

And were he aware of us, it surely would follow to Kirkpatrick that 'toons like myself are little better than convicts doing data entry for points toward cigarette purchases. I, for example, write,

cheekily, about my world of Azeroth and compare it favorably to the insanity of TRW; but cynicism remains my dominant motif. I stop far short of calling upon all 'toons to break through the glass wall, to seize the mouse, and to end this nonsense! To do so would interfere with my leveling, and if too many 'toons listened, there would be nobody to duel in the battlegrounds of Azeroth! Like gamers, to use a metaphor derived from *The Matrix*, a popular film at about the time the book was researched, 'toons have swallowed both the red pill of awareness <u>and</u> the blue pill of resignation.

But, Kirkpatrick thinks, even enslaved gamers and 'toons might well serve a higher social purpose. Together with hacktivists and others opposed to the dominant paradigm of computing —the impenetrable interface—they may be creating a new form of mass culture that greatly facilitates communication and offers at least the promise of a new "cultural platform" and a new "public sphere" [5]. (My argument above that Kirkpatrick's categories are really not that distinctive, could be, I suppose, indications that this sphere is already emerging.) This would, he believes, be potentially much more open and democratic than the status quo. In so doing, he follows many other e-democracy hopefuls.

To sum up, this work is not for everybody. It requires the reader to level quickly in puzzling out its jargon. It is intensely if almost opaquely political. It is extremely critical of the individual, the society, and the economy of TRW. It ultimately condemns gaming worlds as delusional obstacles to true knowledge and to progress. But Kirkpatrick also hopes that the changes resulting from hacking and gaming are creating dynamic new social forces. To move this virtual democracy forward requires that we all achieve self-awareness of our relationship to our computers, the purpose of the book itself.

Endnotes

[1] See; "The Tales of Azeroth" and "Toons and Terrorism" and most recently, "Protecting Human Children in the World of Warcraft." See too my book reviews, the first of R. V. Kelly 2's *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games*, and Edward Castronova's work, Synthetic Worlds, The Business and Culture of Online Games, and most recently: Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg, (editors,) Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader

[2] Here we will define it from the source of all human electronic wisdom, Wikipedia, as: "The initial meaning of the term *critical theory* was that defined by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School of sociology in his 1937 essay *Traditional and Critical Theory*: Critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it. Horkheimer wanted to distinguish critical theory as a radical, emancipatory form of Marxian theory, critiquing both the model of science put forward by logical positivism and what he and his colleagues saw as the covert positivism and authoritarianism of orthodox Marxism and Communism."
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory

[3] Kirkpatrick 114

[4] Kirkpatrick 83

[5] Kirkpatrick 85-87

[6] Kirkpatrick 126-131

This entry was posted in Uncategorized by **Editor**. Bookmark the **permalink [http://bcis.pacificu.edu/interface/?p=3711]** .

9 THOUGHTS ON "CRITICAL TECHNOLOGY. A SOCIAL THEORY OF PERSONAL COMPUTING."

seriale
on **January 30, 2014 at 7:12 AM** said:

If you are heading away to watch comic videos on the web then I suggest you to pay a quick visit this site, it consists of definitely thus comical not merely movies but also much more data.

naija social network
on **January 30, 2014 at 11:36 AM** said:

Hi Shane, I've extremely appreciated these content and the helpful summaries that they provide. You say each "the Son is God" and suggest we shouldn't say "God died over a cross." Can you explain? Thanks!

Whitney Mcclinsey
on **January 30, 2014 at 6:15 PM** said:

Hi my family member! I want to say that this post is amazing, nice written and include approximately all significant infos. I

plotka
on **February 1, 2014 at 1:56 AM** said:

Hi Shane, I've quite appreciated these posts and the helpful summaries that they provide. You say both "the Son is God" and suggest we shouldn't say "God died over a cross." Can you explain? Thanks!

kuchnia
on **February 1, 2014 at 2:18 AM** said:

If you will be going away to watch comic videos online then I suggest you to pay a quick visit this site, it consists of actually thus comical not merely movies but also far more data.

nigeria
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:31 AM** said:

If you are heading away to watch comic videos online then I suggest you to pay a quick visit this site, it consists of really thus comical not just movies but also far more data.

plotki
on **February 3, 2014 at 1:56 AM** said:

Attractive section of content. I just stumbled upon your weblog and in accession capital to assert that I invest in actually enjoyed account your blog posts. Any way I will be subscribing for ones augment and even I accomplishment you access consistently quickly.

nigeria entertainment news
on **February 4, 2014 at 10:40 AM** said:

One more issue I desire to talk about is that as an choice to trying to accommodate all your on the net degree lessons on times that you end jobs (since the majority folks are tired when they get home), try to have most of one's instructional classes on a week-

ends and only a couple courses in weekdays, even if it approaches a little time away in the saturday and sunday. This can be excellent mainly because over a saturdays and sundays, you might be additional rested along with concentrated in school work. Thanks much for the several issues I have figured out from your site.

nigeria dating
on **February 5, 2014 at 12:18 AM** said:

A individual essentially help to generate a lot articles I would state. This can be the very first time I frequented your internet site write-up and as much as now? I amazed from the analysis you created to produce this true write-up extraordinary. Excellent task!