

THE DIS-ORDERLY CITY

A NIGGER IN CYBERSPACE

By Keith Piper

I was struggling to envisage a Rodney King computer game. Initially, one would be confronted with an interface asking you to choose one of two options, to be a Controller or to be a Transgressor. However, in response to your privileged position as custodian of the system, the role of Controller is set as a default, whilst transgressor is ghosted and inactive.

As the game opens on the first level you are alerted to the fact that your system has been infiltrated by a rouge 'virus', which you perceive to be crammed with transgressive algorithms. The 'virus' is moving at high speed along a communications bus, and you fear for the security of the cherished resources and privileged information stored in discrete locations elsewhere in the system. In response to this perceived threat you dispatch a series of devices programmed to 'protect and serve' and this level of the game develops into scenario of cat and mouse. The object of the game at this point is to apprehend the 'virus', and to return it to the part of the system which has been labelled the 'Trashcan', a location within which all redundant, inconvenient, unsightly and transgressive elements are deposited, out of sight and out of mind.

Once the 'virus' has been apprehended, this stage of the game is complete, and you are at liberty to move on to the second level. The second level of the game borrows elements from 'Street Fighter II'. However, as the controller you have up to eight agents at your disposal, arrayed against the single transgressor. The object of the game is to determine an adequate response to transgressive gestures on the part of the 'virus'. If for instance, the virus raises itself to an angle of 20 degrees or greater, you are presented with a choice of options ranging from administering a swift blow to the side of it's head with a long handled baton, shocking it with a electrified prod, or placing your heel onto the back of it's neck. This stage of the game is over when the 'virus' either assumes a position of absolute passivity, or lapses into unconsciousness.

On the third level of the game, you are confronted by the uncomfortable knowledge that the tactics employed on level two have been scrupulously logged in the systems memory, and you are called upon to defend your choice of responses as measured against the perceived threat to the system posed by the transgressive 'virus'. If you succeed on this level, if you are able to create an argument which sufficiently demonises the transgressive 'virus' and amplifies the danger which it potentially posed to the continued smooth running of the system, then you are at liberty to play another game.

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The first time the game was played however the logic broke down and transgressive viruses flooded out of the Trashcan crashing the entire system.

A Rodney King computer game may at this stage represent a marketing flight of fancy, but it does provide us with a convenient entry point into a wider set of debates. It provides us with a recognition that we are currently entering a scenario in which we are coming to occupy two parallel landscapes, separate but inextricably linked. Both are sites across which a range of contests of territory are being played out in earnest.

Across one of these landscapes, these contests have already come to form the mythological backdrop which has come to inextricably colour the perception of that landscape in the contemporary consciousness. Across the other landscape a set of contests which have come to hauntingly replicate those played out across the first landscape are beginning to reveal themselves in all their startling complexity.

The first of these landscapes is the physical and social landscape of the city, both as an conglomeration of disparate neighbourhoods, and as key locus in a complex web of regional, national and international networks. The second is the parallel landscape which has come to be known as 'Cyberspace', the intricate and inextricably expanding universe of digital data; the spaces which it occupies and the channels through which it is disseminated.

Both of these landscapes historically came to be identified in modernist discourses as sites across which the optimism and opportunity afforded by the inextricable forward march of technology would inevitably bear their finest fruit. The city would become an arena replete with the technologies of economic, material and social enablement and recreation, and within this scenario of a brave new world, computer based technologies would play a key role. The new citizen of the high-tech metropolis (the Technotropolis) would be at liberty to delve into Cyberspace at will, tapping into informational networks and structuring lifestyles around the logical interaction between commerce, productive labour and entertainment.

The historical events surrounding the beating of Black motorist Rodney King, the acquittal of the Police officers who had been caught on video tape administering the beating and the subsequent rioting which gripped Los Angeles, and spread to a series of other American cities, provides a symbolic point of dislocation, a key indicator marking the inextricable breakdown of those previously held scenario's of optimism.

Instead, what emerges is the notion of the 'dislocated city'. What emerges is a vision of the contemporary 'city' as a dislocated jigsaw of isolated and antagonistic communities entrenched within balkanised neighbourhoods. Disintegrating communications systems along with the entrenchment of privilege

and disenfranchisement has not only created a dangerously volatile underclass, but also a disjuncture between the language systems with which these dislocated communities conceptualise the world around them. It is this chaos of language, this fragmenting of a 'common sense' which led the Simi Valley Jury in the Rodney King beating trial of 1992, to accept the logic which framed excessive force on the part of the Police officers as a justifiable protective measure. After all, these were individuals who had enlisted to guard the boundaries of those neighbourhoods of plenty, of good order and accumulated privilege, from incursion by outsiders; individuals from those other neighbourhoods; neighbourhoods of poverty, chaos and bedlam; neighbourhoods of the racial 'other'. These were their front line troops in the contest of territory between white wealth and the numerical expansion of black and other 'Third World' peoples. Here was a key point of struggle in the battle against the inextricable 'Africanisation' of the city.

This language and the logic which underpinned it, was lost on those black and 'Third World' folks and for three days the city burned. The metaphor touched upon within the scenario of the Rodney King computer game which identifies the black as a rouge virus, as a conglomeration of transgressive algorithms whose presence must inextricably disrupt the smooth running of any system which it infiltrates is useful only to the extent to which it parodies white racist discourses which frame the black as the cause rather than victim of urban deprivation and decay.

The wider issues however, around the particular in-roads and struggles for visibility of a black theoretical and aesthetic presence within the realm of digital media, within Cyberspace, and the sense to which it parallels the various struggles around black visibility and presence across the landscape of the post modern city is of particular interest to us here. This is very much a contest of territory, a struggle around the colonisation of Cyberspace by various constituencies, and within this colonisation, a series of eclectic and expansionist 'Africanised' enclaves are emerging. These 'Africanised' presence's are transgressive to the extent that the 'founding fathers' of Cyberspace very much replicated the social and economic interests of the enfranchised white status quo, and within their 'brave new world' as in the landscape of the affluent city, the black presence would always be a trespassive one. It is however the extent to which the black presence in Cyberspace uses it's transgressive and trespassive nature as a tool of tactical engagement and struggle which I shall go on to explore in this text.

Transgressive behaviour has been a feature of Cyberspace since close after it's inception. The so called computer 'Hacker', a technically literate data burglar, ensured an early entry into the lexicon of digital demonology, presenting himself as the swashbuckling scourges of the banker and the information manager. The image of the 'hacker' seemed to hover in the space between the rouge and disgruntled digital professional, using

his insider knowledge of systems architecture to roam Cyberspace at will; and the adolescent digital progeny launching raids from a computer rig cobbled together amidst the clutter of an untidy and unventilated bedroom. Such an individual was conjured into celluloid life in the John Badham film 'War Games' which sees a teenage boy 'hack' his way into a military mainframe computer in order to play a game of 'thermonuclear war'. What becomes interesting about such characterisations, is that the 'hacker' is firmly located against a backdrop of middle class white America. Whilst this may in fact be an accurate reflection of the background of progressive generations of digital technocrats, and the path from teenage hacker to corporate new technology yuppie may indeed be a well trodden one, it has the net effect of recreating Cyberspace as a domain peopled exclusively by clever white males.

This image is to an extent off set not only by the predominant role of the Japanese and other far Eastern companies in the expansion of Cyberspace, but also the growing phenomena of the so-called 'Otaku': Japanese kids who are busy colonising Cyberspace' sometimes for transgressive ends. In his article on the subject, Volker Grassmuck maps out the transgressive spaces into which the Otaku frequently wonder and begins to touch upon the resultant wide scale moral panic which such excursions have come to engender.

Though minuscule discrepancies in the informational level can have immense consequences for Otaku, they seem less discriminating with ideologies. War and sex, fantasies of mass murder and sado-masochistic rape appear regularly in their media. Volker Grassmuck .

Moral panic around the dangers of allowing young people to emerse themselves into a Cyberspace universe as threatening as any inner city no-go area, replete with violent games and corrupting pornography has now become another favoured 'cause celebre' of the British tabloid press. In a recent article entitled 'Sex, Lies and video games' Stevie Kennedy states that:

It is one of those ironies of life that, after years of printing articles on the possible social effects of games software, the computer press should see the embryonic spark of mainstream interest in the subject turn into a bush fire of hypocritical hysteria and tabloid hyperbole. Stevie Kennedy

It is interesting therefore to begin to examine how various aspects of black visibility, so often characterised as an almost essential cipher in the recasting of a space into a site of dangerous and transgressive activities have impacted upon the universe of Cyberspace.

In very real sense the world of new technology has succeeded in projecting an image which either sees the black as placed outside of it's domain, as being literally 'other', or frames the black as the 'subject' of the high-tech gaze. The so called

'Third World' for instance, the world of underdevelopment and poverty, is seen very much as a pre-technological space. It's dark skinned peoples are characterised within the Western gaze as being unconscious to any notion of a digital realm of logic, development and privileged knowledge. Their only interaction with Cyberspace comes at those points where they are subjected to the gaze of the Electronic News Gatherers, their passive images beamed out into Outer Space to be collected and reprocessed for the consumption of distant, technologically engaged audiences.

Their other potential interaction with Cyberspace would come only if they ever attempted to trespass into the so called 'First world'. The perceived threat of the migration of peoples from the poor South into the industrialised centres of Europe and North America have resulted in an unprecedented escalation in investment in new technology as a means of monitoring and controlling their movements. At every port of entry, Cyberspace forms an invisible but all pervading barrier, scrutinising potential migrants and adding high-tech re-fortification to the fortresses of economic privilege which are now Europe and North America.

It is within the boundaries of the so called 'First World' however, that the perception of the black as being either outside technology, or passive subject of the technological gaze comes under it's severest strain. Although often celebrated as occupants of a more intuitive, physically reflexive space, a space in touch with the body, as opposed to the cerebral, coldly logical and physically detached space of new technology; The black presence has marked out a whole set of terrain's in Cyberspace as sites of contest with the enfranchised status-quo.

Principal amongst these sites has been the terrain of new technology and music. In the track 'Caught, can I get a witness!' Rap group Public Enemy being to explore the legal mine field opening up around copyright ownership and the re-appropriation of black creativity through the use of the digital sampler as an act of political defiance.

I found this mineral that I call a beat I paid zero I packed my load 'cause it's better than gold People don't ask the price, but it's sold...

The power which new technology gave to plunder the previously sacrosanct world of copyright ownership, (the copyright of much popular music being in the hands of the Record Company as opposed to the artist) represented a major transgressive threat to the music recording establishment. Initiating a form of digital looting. The realisation that the technology also allowed production capabilities which were formally the exclusive domain of the enfranchised, to become available to individuals to use in their bedrooms, redoubled it's transgressive potential. The fact that the resultant musical movements of Rap, House, and Acid House were all the products of the

democratisation of Cyberspace, and represented a significant creative entry into that technological domain by young black people is noteworthy. The recognition that around all of these movements have gathered a smoke-screen of media demonology and hysteria, from panic around the violent, political and sexual lyrical content of Rap, to the spectre of British riot police storming 'illegal' Acid House 'raves', is testimony to the transgressive potential afforded by the colonisation of these spaces by black and black derived cultural activities.

The key issue here is one of control. The contest has always been between those agencies which need to preserve Cyberspace as a tightly structured domain where information can be organised and accessed by the privileged, and by so doing reinforce their control over the physical landscape of the City and the Nation State, and those for whom that control has always been detrimental. In this sense I would argue that the enthusiasm on the part of Cyberspace insider's for so called 'Interactivity' has to be placed in perspective. True 'Interactivity', in the sense that for example African cultural forms have always displayed interactivity, allowing a unpredictable and intuitive interaction between presenter and spectator, would represent an anarchic nightmare to the enfranchised controllers of Cyberspace. The sense to which the listeners intervention into the 'Griot's' account, or the traditions of 'call and response' in black cultural events, or more recently in 'Scratch' music where the DJ intervened with the received pre-recorded disc, creating a new 'interactive' collage of sound, is at odds with the Artist and audience scenario of western 'high culture'. Within this scenario one is presented with the work of the gifted 'maestro' as fixed and eternal. As audience you are asked to passively spectate and applaud at the end, using a fixed set of expressive gestures.

In this sense, I would argue that many of the digital products presented as 'interactive' remain in point of fact tightly structured matrix's which one is allowed to navigate only along preordained pathways to a set of fixed destinations. In a sense these interactive products become models of the orderly city of which the power structure has dreamed but failed to realise. As a pedestrian in this orderly city, one can only proceed along predetermined roadways, turning left, right or straight ahead at set junctions.

Within the truly interactive city on the other hand, the unruly pedestrian could jay-walk and trespass, cutting across waste land and leaving graffiti on hallowed walls. Worse (or better) still, such a pedestrian could force a path through or over those walls and help him or herself to the treasured resources beyond. This becomes the interactive domain as riot zone with the user not as orderly citizen but as digital looter, disorderly and anarchic. Within this zone, treasured and privileged resources are redistributed and exclusive spaces a democratised. It is within this nightmare scenario for the controllers of Cyberspace, that the digital equivalent of the disorderly black of urban chaos and

transgressive behaviour steps into full visibility. It is at this symbolic point that Cyberspace changes from a sterile zone at the service of the establishment into a free domain within which everyone becomes a liberty to seize a portion of terrain and reshape it to their individual needs.

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