

# PING, An Alternate Reality of Control

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A key issue in philosophical analyses of technology is the concern to conceptualize innovation. It could easily raise the question whether human beings are capable of truly creating something novel, or to what extent their future output is condemned to repeat past moves and previously defined technological possibilities. The question of innovation is even more pressing viewed in the light of archaic features of social behaviour, such as the primordial concept of 'gaming' that is dealt with by Huizinga in his study 'Homo Ludens'.

As he points out in this famous cultural history study; it is not only the prime recognition that human culture exceeds the realm of the physical, but also that 'gaming' as an ever expanding cultural fabric has to be recognized as the possibility of a rupture of what was previously known, understood and accepted. Game, or play, is a vital element of a culture that reinvents itself time and time again.

Gaming breaks, e.g. even in the animal world, the borders of the physically existing. It appears that gaming is a different social and cultural code that defies the powers and power structures that be. Reading Huizinga's theory anew it leaves no other option than the idea that we all have to affirm the notion that life is more than mechanisms that are endlessly repeated; and that for the existence of play it only suffices to understand that human life is more than only 'reasonable'. Human life is beyond reason.

Following that acknowledgement it is fair to state that game or gameplay emerges out of a sense or undeniable desire to 'probe a space of combinations'. It is for this reason only that no serious analyses of innovation and creativity can bypass or leave unaddressed the concept of play in all of its guises.

All future scenarios in the most divergent of traditions and attitudes, varying from stock development analysis to the analysis of the probability of surviving predator attacks in bird migration, rely heavily on probability and simulation studies, and in other cases, on game theory. In the era of the advent of the computer, the scientific field necessary for this quantum leap in human imagination seemed to converge in a cluster of related concepts that brought forth the promise of the 'modern society' with all its 'dreamed blessings', including the grim ones that have sorrowfully shaped modernism. These concepts circled

around the ontological problem of how to predict and manage the future. The mathematical field of game theory proved to be a strong antidote to the relativistic sentiments that were stirred up by the developments in quantum physics, and simultaneously, the urge to control technological and economical innovation and progress.

Game theory opened a way to calculate fate, to measure uncertainty! In other words: it was the necessary fuel to the concept that the future could be designed! Not only economists relied in their research on the proceedings of technological forerunners such

as John von Neumann, with his ground breaking game theory in its application to economics, and similarly for his concept of cellular automata in its potential to computing. But it was most notably ballistic specialists and the military who shared the deep recognition that for the maintenance of a 'balance of power', the work in this specific field of scientific investigation; the key to the enclosure of the future, had to be found. It is for this reason that von Neumann, as the prime source for this type of investigation, could not have been anyone else to organically engage himself in the activity of conceptualizing the bomb that was designed for the



destruction of the Japanese town of Nagasaki. It is the necessity that speaks out of these historic facts that makes it defensible to draw an almost causal line that connects the specialist field of game theory applied to the dropping of the A-bomb via the arcade games of destruction to the algorithms that produced the possibility of multiple virtual kills in Quake.

The simulation of reality became the cornerstone of a culture hooked on the idea that reality, even in its deviancies could be programmed. Stronger still: that reality is completely subordinate to its design: a game!

If culture has made it significant to think about its capacity to invent itself constantly anew, then gaming as a dominant cultural form becomes more telling and important to understand that culture. Or to put it the other way around: why not recognize gaming as the most appropriate way to conceptualize innovation! However, true innovation can only be conceptualized if it is based upon an open stance towards the future. Innovation can then be seen less as an activity for the realization of pre-defined possibilities, than the process of actualizing virtualities.

Designed to be played by two persons at the same time, PONG; the primordial video game of the early seventies (November 1972) was realized as a coin operated game by Atari, and met with great enthusiasm and recognition. A difficult interface would not have paved the way to its success. So the designers decided to come up with a game that could be operated by any drunk in a bar. Yet one could ask if anticipating the familiar is truly innovative, but it still opened a completely new field of entertainment and a truly innovative science: game design. It changed the paradigms of how to design. For it stressed the importance that for a game to be successful it needs to grant its players not only an alternate sense of reality but also the control on it. The control of PONG

was highly simple: just one knob per player that you could turn in both directions.

It was this simpleness and yet its effectiveness that inspired students Eelco Wagenaar en Arjan Scherpenisse when they conceived their PING. Based on an assignment for a course project of DOGtime ID/UM, at the Rietveld academy in Amsterdam, their stance was



similar to what the designers of PONG once faced: a player should immediately understand where the fun of a game lies. By making tennis or ping pong into a video graphical game was one step to help the audience understand the fun potential of virtuality. And unlike the currently highly popular game interfaces like the Wii, Wagenaar and Scherpenisse wanted PING to make a loop in the orientation: from analog to digital and back. This in order to instruct its users that simulated games are simulated games, and that you can also choose to play real tennis or ping pong. Yet it added another level of virtuality: the possibility of remoteness, playing real ping-pong with someone who is not directly

present. The 'quick and dirty' but adequate solutions of the setup heighten the effect of a game that points to its structure.

As a final result of a rapid prototyping project it offers a strong blend of genres both virtual and actual, in a discretely innovative game that takes its player hostage to a media ecology that sketches the structure of how it has become a reality.

PING as a game will not disappoint the players; for it is completely unpredictable where the ball of the opponent will set its trajectory in the playing field. A game that not only makes you sweat, but a game that shows you exactly that gaming is not only a real experience: it is an alternate reality of control. Or should I put it more aggressively: an alternate reality to control?