

Past Orientations: Edutainment, Computer Games and Historical Consciousness

Diego Calderara

Global Intellectual History Graduate School - Freie Universität Berlin
Koserstraße 20,
14195 Berlin
d.calderara@fu-berlin.de

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“I do not want to preach to the player what is right and wrong. But I want to give them a chance to get in touch with themselves about how they do feel.”
(Bunten Berry in Leyenberger 1985)¹

With these words Danielle Bunten Berry described what players could learn from playing *The Seven Cities of Gold* (Ozark Softscape 1984). This historical game about the exploration and conquest of the Americas published by Electronic Arts (EA) was labelled as edutainment, a type of software that promised to blur the traditional distinctions between art, entertainment, and education.² Edutainment intercepted parental anxieties around screens and digital literacy, benefiting from the idea that the computer could be considered a “good screen” in contrast to the “bad screen” of the television (Ito 2013, 21). Differently from contemporary educational games, *Seven Cities* was not meant to teach history or logical skills. Rather, the pedagogical value of the game was in the freedom of choice given to the player, and the emotional feedback provided by the game. Describing the game’s complexity, an advert from the time claimed that *Seven Cities* “gives you a sort of feeling that’s unexpected in computer games. It’s deeper. Maybe disquieting. It plays as much in your head as it does inside your computer” (Electronic Arts 1984). The concept of a historical game that could be both fun and pedagogical had existed since the 1960s, but it was only with the diffusion of computer games in the late 1970s that it

¹ Before her transition in 1992, Danielle Bunten Berry was credited as Dan Bunten. In my research, I refer to her solely with her chosen name. In this regard, researcher Whitney Pow has written extensively about trans game designers and is currently working on a book that includes Bunten Berry as a main actor.

²

Many contemporary sources cite this instance as the invention of the portmanteau “edutainment”. While the actual origin of the term is contested, the anecdote remains ubiquitous.

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reached a wider public. In this phase, historical games became an important part of the evolving relationship between Americans and computers, shaping the public's feelings towards technology and their historical consciousness.

This ongoing doctoral project studies the evolution of historical computer games in the United States, considering both the context of their creation and of their reception. My aim is to explain how edutainment games were an essential part in learning to live with computers, by providing a medium that made this technology accessible to kids while assuaging the anxieties of parents and educators. The dissertation is divided into three sections, which roughly follow a chronological and spatial distinction: first, I consider American schools as one of the first places where students would have entered in contact with computer play and edutainment. Starting from the 1970s, state-wide educational experiments began to define a communal style of play that functioned with specific educational games. My first case study is the popular series *The Oregon Trail* series (MECC 1971 -), which provides excellent sources for the analysis of emotions and relationships between kids, teachers, and technology. The second section focuses on the 1980s, and the process of “domestication” of personal computers (Nooney 2023). I will show how computer games allowed adults and children to foster intimacy with the machines, and how the educational software industry adapted to the private consumer market. The category of edutainment emerged as the result of this shift from the classroom to the home, which is reflected in the family-oriented design games. I consider the case of the aforementioned *The Seven Cities of Gold*, and the pedagogical ideas and influence of designer Danielle Bunten Berry. The last section shifts the focus to the 1990s, and the emergence of bedroom cultures and online games. I will analyze the afterlife of Bunten Berry's ideas in later historical games such as *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios 1997), part of a new wave of historical games that re-oriented edutainment towards the individual player and away from the family.

Throughout this research I adopt methodologies from the theory and history of emotions, to better understand the evolving relationship between players, games, and computers. In particular, I plan to adopt the source-concept of “orientation”, which Bunten Berry used to talk about the way games *move* people (Bunten Berry 1998; Pow 2019). She criticized the video game industry of the late 1990s for being thing-oriented, meaning that it completely focused on individual experience and the player's relationship to the machine. To imbue this critique with an existential quality she coined the famous phrase "No one on their death bed says: 'I wish I'd spent more time with my computer!'" (Bunten Berry,1997). Instead, she argued for creators to make people-oriented games, focused on the affective and relational dimension of play. In particular, she thought that online multiplayer games had the potential to give players real freedom of action and elicit more complex emotional responses. This source-concept can be used in combination with theories of affect and emotions, which have already been employed in feminist game studies, in particular Aubrey Anable's analysis of video games as affective systems (Anable, 2018) and Laine Nooney's research on domestic space and early computer games (Nooney, 2013). Bunten Berry's words echo Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, in which to be oriented to have bearings in a shifting world, as well as “to be oriented towards certain objects, those that help us find our way” (Ahmed 2006, 543).

I will use the concept of orientations in two ways: first, to describe the way the games' text interacts with historical consciousness (Berlant 2008). For example, the

experience of orientation and disorientation is central *Seven Cities* (a key part of the game was to get “lost” at sea, without any real-world bearings to help the player find their way). What did designers think players could learn from history? Which emotions were part of the pedagogical process? Second, orientations help us understand how these games then entered the social spaces they were intended (or not intended) for. I focus on how edutainment games entered American classrooms, homes, and bedrooms, asking how their presence in the domestic space moved people towards computers and each other. Did these games bring people together or did they isolate them? How did they reorient their historical consciousness? I rely on digitized and digital sources, mostly archived, that include blog posts, Interviews, and memoirs of the designers, as well as physical sources at American archives. To reconstruct the domestic and public side of this story, I rely on educational reports, contemporary anthropological and sociological studies, advertisement, and personal stories collected on archived websites and social media.

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