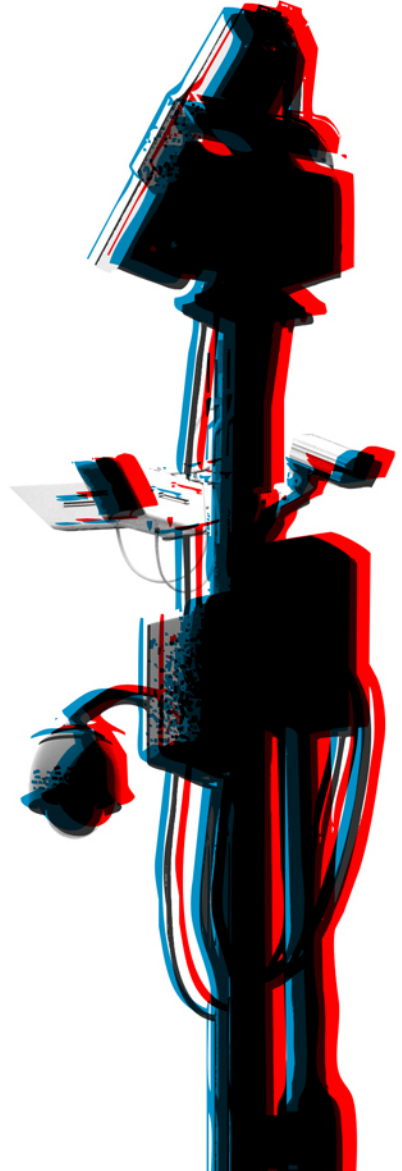


UN PROYECTO DE FUNDACIÓN RODRÍGUEZ + ZEMOS98

PANEL DE CONTROL

INTERRUPTORES CRÍTICOS

PARA UNA SOCIEDAD VIGILADA



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98

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INTERVIEW: ALEX GALLOWAY BY PAU ALSINA

Alex Galloway

Alexander R. Galloway is an author and programmer. He is a founding member of the software collective RSG and creator of the data surveillance engine *Carnivore*. The New York Times recently described his work as “conceptually sharp, visually compelling and completely attuned to the political moment.” Galloway is the author of *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (MIT, 2004), *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minnesota, 2006), and a new book coauthored with Eugene Thacker called *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minnesota, forthcoming). He teaches at New York University.

A general assumption is that networks have the potential to dehierarchize and dissolve rigid structures of all kinds. But in your book, “protocol” refers to the technology of organization and control operating in distributed networks. Could you explain us a little bit more these particularities? But how could protocols be subverted? Or would protocols force everything under its totalizing control apparatus?

“Protocol” emerges from a problem. The problem is an historical one: What is the system of organization and control that is endemic to the distributed networks that currently encompass the globe? And further: How do the specific transformations within material life bring into being a set of participatory techniques and behaviors? The concept of protocol is an attempt to “give a face” to this hitherto faceless form. But in giving a face to the formerly defaced a new cycle begins, one in which -I hope- the very asymmetry of historical transformation can be met and understood within one’s own discourse without glamorizing one component or the other (the tree or the rhizome).

Albert-László Barabási described internet as a free scale network, with very few highly connected hubs where all small nodes are connected and dependent on (and this is true for both the material infrastructure and the world wide web with its webpages interconnected). Does this structure determines completely possible actions to be done?

I have a great deal of respect for Barabási. His famous claim is in fact a highly political one, even if it is masked in the commanding language of empirical observation. The interesting questions however are not whether or not the Internet is a scale-free network, but the following: Which specific technologies within the Internet are scale-free and which are not? What sorts of interests are served by making this claim? Why is Barabási so intent on prohibiting rhizomatic organization? What is the architectonic shape of power and how does Barabási’s claim help to naturalize that power? In the end, I am prompted to ask not what network do we have, but what network do we desire? There is a certain naive rhetoric around networks being liberating, being anti-hierarchy, “information wants to be free”, and so on. But what Barabási indicates is precisely the opposite: we do not desire networks to be free, we expend any amount of energy to abolish them in a wash of retrograde, pyramidal reorganization. The key problem then, to use psychoanalytic terminology, is that the new media are fundamentally sadistic, when in fact we are currently treating them as if they were masochistic. This is the central problem for desire today. But beyond this classical method of “ideology critique”, I must also observe that Barabási offers a very reactionary answer to a very progressive question. Is it not rather convenient that this new technology resembles the corporate or even royalist decentralized and centralized networks of yore? Again, I find this approach entirely lacking in imagination. Instead I

pose the question: How can the distributed network itself offer a novel form of organization and control, without recourse to anachronistic (but familiar) diagrams? To answer this question would be to address the sadistic essence of new media directly. Barabási answers this question instead through a slight-of-hand: What was thought to be a rhizome is in fact a tree! The more his claim is ratified with any number of graph-theory studies and mathematical models, the more it is denuded as pure fantasy projection. Instead we require entirely new anti-histories of technology, histories of technology from the eye of the swarm.

So we have protocols, networks, languages and underlying algorithms in the programmes that structure actions. An algorithm is a defined set of instructions in order to solve a problem. We just have to follow its instructions because the intelligence required to do the task it's already codified in the algorithm. But what about the political implications inscribed in those algorithms? Is it Google Page Rank algorithm free of political implications?

Page Rank is a highly political technology. It is, in fact, the most important political question we have in our culture: how knowledge is connected to power. This has been the reigning question in Western culture since the Greeks. Google has succeeded in radically altering this terrain in the contemporary arena. What impresses me most about Google is the valorization question: they have discovered new techniques for valorizing human activity. Both work and play may now be exploited. Much more needs to be studied in this area. I am particularly interested in the question of unpaid micro-labor (i.e. all of us sending emails, blogging, surfing, etc.) which Google has proven exceptionally adept at extracting. It has dramatically changed the status of labor in today's world.

As Florian Cramer says software constructs ways of seeing, knowing and doing in the world that at once contain a model of that part of the world it ostensibly pertains to and that also shape it every time it is used. So a computer's ontology and its deconstruction through art and philosophical practice are needed in order to evoke their control structures living behind. Turning upside down algorithms could be considered as new tactical media tools? Is that what you were trying to do through your artistic projects as RSG and the data surveillance system Carnivore?

I advocate tactics of engagement. It is through the computer that we must direct our energies, not against it. This is what Eugene Thacker and I call "hypertrophy". Perhaps where I diverge from your assessment of Cramer is the following: there is no such thing as a computer's ontology that is dutifully deconstructed at a later date through art and philosophy. It is in fact the reverse: deconstruction is precisely what evokes the ontological status of the computer. It is what brings it to presence. This is what Thacker and I call the exploit. The exploit

is not the "exception" that stands outside and happens from time to time -like an earthquake- bringing with it some calamity or radical transformation of the current state of affairs. The exploit is in fact the very necessary condition for rhizomatic, which is to say machinic, being. This is how Thacker and I define the exploit as an abstract machine:

Vector: The exploit requires an organic or inorganic medium in which there exists some form of action or motion.

Flaw: The exploit requires a set of vulnerabilities in a network that allow the vector to be logically accessible. These vulnerabilities are also the network's conditions for realization, its becoming-unhuman.

Transgression: The exploit creates a shift in the ontology of the network, in which the "failure" of the network is in fact a change in its topology (for example: from centralized to distributed). Thus it is my impulse to scrap any talk about ontology versus deconstruction (and also why one must be extremely careful with any talk of "counter protocols" or "counter games"). With computing "deconstruction" precedes "ontology" to such a degree that they both collapse inward upon themselves.

So many have been said about the web 2.0 utopias as new business models tend to capitalize online free cooperation immaterial labour as Trebor Scholz has explored extensively. But it also makes possible distributed modes of organization and a renewed and realistic optimism as Geert Lovink says. Would the social software movement be new models for political intervention in distributed networking?

The contributions of Lovink and Scholz are invaluable. Development of the productive forces is always a dialectical process. The problem is that most today do not even recognize that a development of the productive forces is taking place! Social software is cast as liberating, democratizing, and so on, which it undeniably is, but more important is the fact that today we are ushering in a whole new system of informatic value extraction and exploitation. The web is, in essence, the world's largest sweat shop. The phenomenon is evident across the spectrum of web technologies, but also in the biological realm as life itself as emerged front and center as the central locus of valorization and exploitation. In this sense companies like Google and Monsanto are marching in lock step, for they both use informatic spaces (the internet, the genome) to extract new forms of uncompensated value. They both are leveraging the ability for life to self-valorize. Of course anyone familiar with the modern era will note that this process has been happening for a long time. The key question for us is not if or how this is happening; the key question has to do with the moral state of matter.

Some theoreticians as Friedrich Kittler have argued about the image centered approach to new media practices that has not taken inconsideration the implicit calculability of digital images as a key factor for its analysis. Will this new approach lead to the action's discussion as key elements for critique in software and videogames as you have been exploring in your latest book gaming? What does it mean to change image for action?

Certainly the algorithm, not the image, is of crucial importance today. However I maintain that the only way to understand software is to claim first that it is a question of the visual, and then later to assert the algorithmic as the real for which visibility was a helpful symptom. Much writing on the "information age" or "cyber culture" misses this crucial point about the visual. Few truly acknowledge that the computer was born not from the age of information but the age of spectacle. Informatics is what Marx would have called a real subsumption -but of what? Of the visual. By this I mean the entire visual episteme handed down from the Enlightenment, seeing as a structure for knowledge acquisition, the "clarity" of reason, the logos of the eye, and so on. Software is essentially the real subsumption of that episteme. But not at all to preserve it- this is crucial. A real subsumption is always a complete erasure of its object (as opposed to the formal subsumption which merely negates its object in a dialectical inversion). The real subsumption of the visual, its erased "un", allows informatics both to retain and deny its viability.

As you say there are also true political implications in the allegories of control inscribed in videogames, as it demonstrates the sinister possibilities of informatic dominion. It is also a way in which biopower formulates itself producing creatively power relationships that construct ways of looking and thinking about reality produced. Does the counter-gaming represents an effective subversive practice against this dominant hegemony of games structure? How this can be done?

My claim about counter-gaming is in fact that it's exceptionally difficult to achieve. It is possible to cite a micro trend from the last several years in which artists have created game mods that essentially deny the reality of play itself. Perhaps we can chalk this up to a sort of "modernist" nostalgia in which the artists wish to revert to an earlier modality of non-interactive media, which can only redeem itself through convulsions of formal introspection. Of course I am also guilty of this. But there is also a counter current which has a long history. Buckminster Fuller's World Game is one example that I am particularly interested in. The question is: What constitutes a progressive algorithm? The answer to this question is rather hard to uncover. Many of today's so-called "serious games" are in fact quite reactionary at the level of the algorithm, even if they cloak themselves in progressive political desires on

the surface (gaming to "save Darfur," and so on). The secret of counter-gaming is therefore the quest to create alternative algorithms. This is something that history has seen very little of. The vast majority of algorithmic research and development throughout history has unfolded under the banner of rather dubious political virtues: efficiency, expediency, machinic mastery. I have recently been calling this phenomenon the "separative cause". The separative cause brings things into existence through a segregation effect between the realm of the social (or ideal) and the realm of the material. In such a system exploitation is material, while liberation is semiotic. The material is the realm of political failure; the social is the realm of utopian compromise. Many games fall into this same trap: the liberating and infantilizing attraction of play -which is truly real, I am not denying it- is only ever experienced via a material substrate that is physically and morally retrograde. An example. People often comment on the so-called problem of "Chinese" gold farming in games. But in fact it is the reverse: we are the goldfarmers.

Could you tell us what are you working on right now ? Which are your actual interests and on going research at NYU?

I participate in an informal collective of programmers and designers called RSG. We recently launched the Liberate Computer Language (LCL) which is a beta attempt to draft a new computer language unlike any currently in existence. Of course, no computer currently exists that can run the language. But we hope to expand the LCL in the future. Currently in development is the "Kriegspiel", a work of historical translation based on the largely forgotten 1978 game designed by filmmaker and philosopher Guy Debord. The "Kriegspiel" will be released some time before the end of 2007. Debord's game engages with a number of interesting questions including the political status of war gaming and simulation. I am particularly drawn to the game because it appears at first glance to be rather backward-looking, even nostalgic. Yet on closer inspection the game contains some interesting details that keep it relevant to today's world of global networks and perpetual war. In Debord's own words, it was his only work that had any real value.