

BEYOND WARGAMES

Douglas Rushkoff

“ Our nation is both a functioning nation and a model for a functioning nation. ”

Whenever democracy and computers show up in the same sentence, I can't help but flash back to some early Cold War simulations conducted by RAND corporation. If we bomb Moscow and then they bomb Phoenix, and so on..... Basic zero-sum game theory, applied through the paranoid schizophrenic lens of *Beautiful Mind* mathematician John Nash, yielded the no-win Doomsday scenario eventually satirized in the cyber-action flick *War Games*.

The underlying assumption of these early computer simulations was that people and, by extrapolation, nations, behave with their own strategic interests in mind. Humans—and nations—are presumed to be fearful, self-interested, and hyper-rational. The solution of these kinds of prisoner's dilemmas was Mutually Assured Destruction: creating nuclear arsenals big enough to ensure that everyone dies if anyone attacks.

Even Nash has subsequently admitted that this way of applying game theory was based on his own paranoid delusions. While the math works out, the logic is hopelessly polar. In short, the paranoia plus binary technology equals an insane, oversimplified, and unstable stand-off. Differences and conflict are exacerbated because the competitive game is an underlying assumption. There's no possibility for reconciliation, compromise, or collaboration. It's my computer against yours.

To me, the most exciting thing about a networked computing era is the opportunity to model new kinds of games. More than anything else, computers are modeling systems. They let us model the function of a typewriter, a spreadsheet, or a paste-up board, not to mention all sorts of social and fantasy interactions. The most advanced models right now are the ones we're developing in forums, from MySpace to Second Life, Facebook to World of Warcraft. These are the places where people can experiment with alternative behaviors, life strategies, alliances, and goal sets.

Because our computers are networked rather than isolated, we no longer need to see the "other" team as on the opposite side of a discrete boundary. They are part of the same system. As a result, scenarios for cooperation more complex than "mutually assured destruction" begin to emerge.

What I'd like to see as a result of computer networking is the possibility for modeling new, as yet-to-be conceived, collaborative behaviors. Play behavior has almost always been relegated to the Dionysian side of the culture, while purpose remains with Apollo and the courts. Both of these artificially isolated aspects of society end up suffering as a result: politics ends up unsexy (leading to the salacious behavior of its repressed participants) and the arts end up unserious (leading to the equally disastrous attempts to bolster its relevancy through cruel entertainments like reality TV).

Gaming and government are actually one and the same. While we have to actually govern using the Constitution, we can't let it become so set in stone that we lose the ability to game with it. Our nation is both a functioning nation *and* a model for a functioning nation. Imagine a discussion of urban planning conducted through a simulation like SimCity. Or a model for local currency developed in a community within Second Life. How about reconfiguring the Electoral College model based on a year of in-person collaborative processes practiced by groups using Meetup.com? Or consider a bottom-up editorial process for amending the Constitution itself, pairing traditional legislative processes with the mass participation offered by wikis and other collective authorship tools. Or, finally, how about engaging the next generation of citizens in all of these collaborative online processes as a way of instilling curiosity and civic practices that will surpass what currently passes for debate in the chambers of Congress?

Networked gaming applied to the democratic process can restore our ability to evolve our republic, bring our international relationships beyond the presumption of mutual enmity, and —perhaps most importantly —make participating in government fun and interesting.

About the Author

Douglas Rushkoff is the author of several seminal books on media and society, including *Cyberia*, *Media Virus*, *Playing the Future*, *Open Source Democracy*, *Coercion*, and, most recently, *Get Back in the Box: Innovation from the Inside Out*. He founded the Narrative Lab at NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program.