Press START: Reflections on the Making of the Arcade Table

In the first class, we discussed media archaeology's relationship relative to culturally-oriented and hardware-oriented academia. A project such as the construction of an arcade table or softmodding a Nintendo Wii are very much located between these two extremes, which I see as profoundly productive. During my probe on nonnarrative media, I argued that, just as it is problematic to focus solely on an object's narrative history, it is equally problematic to read objects as entirely independent of their cultural contexts and the ways they have been narrativized. The arcade table project ultimately allows us to to think through both aspects of a cultural object simultaneously; constructing a fully operational model requires ideology, aesthetics, theory and materiality to work together, despite what Ernst and Kittler have argued. Button placement, for instance, requires a sense of a video game's content in order to know a) what buttons are necessary and b) what buttons need to be in close proximity to one another for the gameplay. Focusing solely on hardware seems to be a reductive model of thinking about relationality and operationality (and, as I discovered, results in arcade tables in which certain games become unplayable due to insufficient buttons or difficult button placement).

What follows is a very informal and loosely structured set of thoughts that I've divided into seven (more or less) arbitrary categories for the purposes of organization, but which overlap quite substantially. These notes are my starting point for more formal reflections on the pedagogical and ethical implications of such a project.

Level 1: Infrastructure

The impetus for the Wii project was initially to unpack issues around technological obsolescence and the materiality of infrastructure. As Susan Leigh Star points out, “the normally invisible quality of infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks” (382), and it was only when the disk reader on my own Wii ceased to function that I really began thinking about the materiality of the console itself. On Thursday, Abelardo made a comment about “reversing obsolescence” with regard to Lilli’s notion of reversioning, and I believe that is precisely what a hands-on project such as the arcade table allows us to do. It is a resistance to the manufactured obsolescence of our cultural objects—particularly our recreational electronics.

Repurposing the Wii as an educational tool by softmodding and running homebrew apps resists the obsolescence that the WiiU (2012) and the Nintendo Switch (2017) confer onto the original Wii console (2006). Since the advent of the Nintendo Shop, which provides the ability to download Wii games onto the new console, the Wii has been rendered obsolete in the sense that it is both useless for playing new games and redundant for playing old ones—its backwards compatibility with the Gamecube having been one of its key features.

Both the Wii project and, as I will discuss, the arcade project, engage with engage with Bourdieu’s idea of estrangement and Sterne’s encouragement not to describe an object in its own terms. Both projects require an “epistemological break with the common sense of technology” (Sterne 369) by asking us not to think about video games just as avid consumers, but also as makers and as scholars.

Level 2: Ethics

My originally proposed project about the Nintendo Wii thought through issues of digital rights management and the ethics and legality of ROM usage. Where does the consumer's right lie with respect to displacing media we purchased onto a device of our choosing? Nintendo says that even archival copies are illegal, so what is it that we purchase when we buy a game? When it comes to the arcade table, numerous questions of materiality are in play, such as where is the original cartridge relative to this entire project and does it make a difference?

Something I will continue to explore is Nintendo's "Virtual Console Games," wherein the WiiU and the 3DS run their own emulator in able to be able to play games for the GBA, NES, Gamecube, and more. Games can be purchased from the Nintendo store for between $8-10 range, but you never receive a physical game that could then be played on a GBA, NES, or Gamecube. Moreover, this feature still has not been brought to the Nintendo Switch, which means that even the anti-obsolescence machine has now been rendered obsolete.

Level 3: Materiality

Of course, ROMs are material in that they take up space as data and need to be placed on some sort of physical drive, but they are also very intangible. The weight of the cartridge is physically absent, replaced instead with a file name and extension. Classic controllers are replaced by configurable buttons.

I am interested in how material fetishism fits into these projects. Going back to our discussion of eBook readers in the first class, when eReaders first became popular, many people were aghast at the thought of experiencing a book divorced from its sensory experience—what's a book without its weight and the old book smell? Such line of thinking is admittedly privileged—you can't change the font size on books, they're heavy to carry, and holding them for an extended period of time may be difficult.

Level 4: Bodies

Emulators offer various solutions to issues of accessibility. For instance, I approached the design of the arcade table thinking about my father—we're both fans of the *Fire Emblem* series, but he has only so far played the titles that were released for Gamecube and the Wii because they're meant to be displayed on the television. GBA and DS screens are too small, and emulators for cell phones fail to solve this problem. The arcade table I produced is therefore essentially a large-scale GBA emulator that would allow someone like him—as well as persons for whom using tiny buttons is not feasible—to access this content.

However, for some, the gestures required would be too large. I am only barely able to reach the shoulder buttons with my hands on the other controls. As well, the button kits come in

single colours, but buttons on controllers are colour coded for a reason—it is difficult to play on a machine where all the buttons are the same colour and none of them are labelled, especially when they need to be configured differently for the GBA and the N64.

Level 5: Ecology

Where do the objects that make up the arcade table come from? What will happen to them in the future? What are the potential post-game lives of this table. As Lai-Tze, Jason, and Bo had originally considered doing, we can return the object to a table; we can put a coaster on the monitor, place a bookshelf beneath it, or rest our feet on it.

Another consideration is the sheer mess this project makes. How much is wasted to put the table together? What toxins are we exposed to when soldering and sawing? When we purchase IKEA furniture or video game consoles, the labour has already been performed for us, and we erase from our minds the people who have performed such labour. The project raises a number of questions about privilege: what does it mean when these end-devices are intended to be replaced every five to six years?

What does that say about the way we view the industrial labour that goes into these devices? When we discard our old technologies to replace them with the newest console, we discard not only the physical object, but the labour that went into them as well.

Level 6: Performance

As Lori mentioned on Thursday, lab space is a performative space through design and infrastructure. Most graduate seminars happen in closed classrooms and are seldom ever photographed, but the entire process of creating this arcade table was documented not only by the Residual Media Depot, but by Millieux, Concordia Communications, and ourselves. What does it mean to make something in front of a camera? How is the performance marketed?

Level 7: Pedagogy

Finally, in addition to approaching the project from a Media Archaeological perspective, I'm also interested in the pedagogical potential of making things and the sense of empowerment it confers onto the learners. The generative nature of the arcade table project allows us to think through theory with our hands and to make rather than leaping into criticism with theory we haven't tested. Having built the table, we can now say that there's an aporia in Ernst's media archaeological theory, but that's difficult to substantiate before constructing and playing with the emulator. This open-mindedness of applying the theory—or in scientific terms, testing the hypothesis—seems to be a liberating tool for the classroom and a way to bring empathy back into the academy.

Moreover, a project such as this confers onto us many practical skills and calls into question social assumptions. What does it mean to be building this object in the middle of a graduate seminar that feels almost like what I imagine nerdy summer camp to be? Eliminating shop and home economics from high school means we no longer grow up knowing that we *can* fix things. When something breaks, we throw it out and buy something new because everything is and must be disposable to a consumer society ignorant of how things work. This week I learned how to fix wires and use a dremel, drill and jigsaw, but I also learned that I'm *able* to do so, which I was socialized to think I couldn't or shouldn't do so.

Maker culture has a fair bit to give to pedagogy, most importantly that failure opens pedagogical opportunities; risks and thinking outside the box should be embraced, not suppressed. Just because a space is a play space or a maker space doesn't mean it isn't didactic as well.