

The Replication of Ideology: An Interview with Adrienne Shaw and Marcus Boon

Melissa Aronczyk

Moderator (Melissa Aronczyk): One of the themes that we discussed that is going to be central to our conversation today is the replication of ideology. Let me start the conversation off with a question for Adrienne. One of the things that you mentioned that you really were interested in when it came to this theme of the replication of ideology was in the talking about the underlying ideological assumptions of electronic systems. Not just the textual representations of, how do they reflect ideology, but those structural systems that are ideological. You can talk a little bit about that?

Adrienne Shaw: When it comes to thinking about power through structure and ideology through structures, one of the things I'm interested in is not just how they replicate ideology of structure, because I think there are a lot of game studies that address that very well. But also what players then do with it. I think something that gets lost in conversations on formalism, for example, *what is a game?* And *how games represent to people?* There is also a rich history of study of players and what players then do with it, and I approach this as a media scholar through audience studies and through *encoding and decoding* by Stuart Hall. And this idea that yes, ideology is encoded into media texts, but as audiences, as players, we then can approach these texts in different ways. When it comes to technological structures, one of the things that is actually more problematic than other media is precisely the interactivity of the design and what you are allowed to do in that system. But, by focusing on what systems allow you to do, and I think we also miss those rich moments in which people don't use those systems as expected. Where people can play despite the ideology built into games, moments where people can actively critique it. One of the things that I've been working on lately is to adopt Stuart Hall's three reader positions, *hegemonic*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional*, into how

Author Biography

Melissa Aronczyk is Associate Professor in the School of Communication & Information at Rutgers University. Her research addresses critical issues in promotional culture, nationalism and national consciousness, and political and cultural interpretations of globalization. She is the author of *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity* (Oxford, 2013) and the co-editor of *Blowing Up the Brand: Critical Perspectives on Promotional Culture* (Peter Lang, 2010). She has also published several articles in journals such as the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Poetics*, and *International Journal of Communication*.

players are or are not able to speak back to play systems and gaming systems and technological systems.

Moderator: Do you have an example that comes to mind?

AS: Well, one of the things that people talk a lot about is the way that technological systems determine play, right? Controller systems, for example, determine the games that can be played. But people don't have to play games in the way that they are designed. For example, *Angry Birds* is designed as a solitary game. It's addictive because it's one person playing it over and over again. But you can play around the game with other people in a way that's not limited to the design. Like it's not pre-determined in the design itself, but the structure of the game itself can't tell you how to play it just gives you a preferred mode of engagement with it.

Moderator: Marcus, you said that you were interested in thinking about digital culture writ-large as inherently ideological. I'm really curious what you think about that?

Marcus Boon: I think it's a good question, whether digital culture as a whole is ideological. There is this question of what ideology is. It has to be said from the beginning that we really don't know what ideology is and I can illustrate that by simply asking the question of the relationship between science and ideology. It is easy to see that certain types of political propaganda are ideological. It's easy to see how culture generally has a kind of ideological contour to it. You can see projections, biases, the distortions that culture involves. But, usually we define science as being not ideological because it consists of procedures that in some sense are intended to remove ideology. Yet, we can show that science is ideological in some ways: if you check your funding mechanisms, or if you just show the history of things that were believed to be true, but then turned out to be false. When you think about digital culture, can we say that the mathematics beneath digital culture is ideological in itself? Is the fact that we code in all ones and zeros—numbers—an ideological form or not? It's an unanswered question, because there's no agreement as to what a number is. There are different schools of thought, as to what a number is. So it may well be that the very point of applied mathematics is a basis for computer science, we are still within the realm of ideology. And then I guess the question would be is there a way of breaking free of that?

Moderator: I was just wondering...you said earlier that theory had gone too far down an endless road. But you also mentioned that Alain Badiou was one of your influences when it came to thinking about mathematics.

MB: The standard way to talk about copy and theory these days would be through Deleuze's work. He wrote this book, *Difference and Repetition*, and in it he makes the argument that if repetition introduces a difference, then it follows that the difference between things involves the private act of repetition, the creative act of comparison. So then you can make creativity

the basis for thinking about repetition and copying. So then Alain Badiou comes along he says that difference and repetition is itself ideology and that the notion that there is something mechanical about repetition is an ideology of repetition. He makes the argument that in an Althusserian way, repetition is the maintenance of the current the means of production. This is Althusser's definition of ideology. You repeat the cultural structure and it basically forces the repetition of the current systemic inequalities that allow it to keep going.

Moderator: Can you talk about the difference between repetition as ideological or not? Adrienne?

AS: I would actually like to take a few steps back and get back to the question of whether science is ideological. It seems odd to even have to point that out given the progress of feminist science studies. The very basis of how the human body is studied in the first place is wrapped in ideologies of binary sexual difference—biology has sort of reinforced patriarchal ideology from the get go. All statistical tests, literally every statistical test that you run in a research methods 101 course is developed on eugenics, right? The underlying basis of social science statistics is eugenic ideology. It looks to establish what a *normal* human is and compares all others to that standard. I come from a philosophical perspective where all of those things are ideology and you can't get out of that. As you point out, it's also the ideology of funding structures. I made a flippant comment on twitter (most of my comments on twitter are flippant, that often gets me into trouble) about how we tend to critique game and media studies for what it has studied, as opposed to how it has studied those things. Usually people justify what they study by saying *it* makes a million dollars, or that *it* was the first thing to do something, or that lots of people practice *it*, and so therefore *it* is important. That's the ideology of academic practice, where we are forced to justify what we do in the first place.

This is not a great transition, but is there something ideological about binary code? Well, yes, it's a binary, right? Either things are or aren't. And that means that a lot of the ways we understand identity in digital games is "are you or are you not?" There's a great piece by Rebecca Mir and Trevor Owens in the book *Playing with the Past on Civilization 4*, and how if you want to hack the code of the game and play as a Native American culture, the underlying code of the game is "if native is true.." then you can't do a bunch of other things in the game. You can't progress in the same way all of the European cultures do, and so ideology is embedded in the code of the game, not just the representation of the game.

In getting to the question of replication, because that's what the question actually was, I think you can see ideology embedded in how people are represented in games. When I tell people that I study representation in games, they ask me which game? Like, all of them. Not just one game. I tend to study players and how the patterns of games are replicated, right? The same mechanics are replicated across games, the same codes are replicated across games. When I pick a lock in *Assassin's Creed*, it looks exactly like picking a lock in *Skyrim*. That's because it's cheaper to code. The activities of games are replicated, the goals of games

are replicated, the narratives of games are replicated. They are replicated because of social pressure. In a very basic sense they replicate what players already know how to do so that the mechanics of the game become really simple. It is easy to jump into new games, because they look so much like older games. It takes a lot of effort to get people to play a game is that totally unlike any other game that they've ever played before. Only indie designers are able to play with, outside of, market imperatives.

Moderator: How much of the logic that you are describing is due to market imperatives?

AS: Part of me wants to say that the market imperative never gives the consumer market enough credit. They assume that consumers want the same thing, just because that's what worked before. In actuality, big business is risk averse in the culture industries, because risk is super expensive. It's easier to assume that people like something because it's what they consume, as opposed to imagining what people might also like to do. This is where indie design is able to take off. Indies are allowed to play with our expectations. Unfortunately, because of the way the industry is structured that means we are also constantly in a critical state of repair.

MB: I noticed, when I first published *In Praise of Copying*, which basically celebrates the free sharing of copies as potential—especially in digital culture—that it's easy to make a copy proliferate almost infinitely. The objection that I would often hear was, "Well how's anyone going to make a living if there's infinite free copies?" And when people first started saying that, I really had no answer to that, because in some sense, it seems like you would have to back down—you would have to say well, you shouldn't have the free sharing of copies even though technically it is entirely possible to have it. I guess my way of backing down was to change the subject and really see that there are aesthetic questions about copying that couldn't be answered through an analysis of the practices of copying. I had to see copying in terms of a broader political economic framework. It is this political economic framework that has to change in order to catch up with the technical capabilities for sharing that we now have on a global scale. Even though that ends up having a kind of utopian flavor to it, I think that if you can do something for free and that there's a benefit to doing it free, then creating a political system that supports it is what we ought to do.

AS: This is related to intellectual property architecture in the Middle Eastern games industry, where Middle Eastern countries are sort of forced by U.S. and European countries to abide by IPR units of protecting U.S. and Western European intellectual property. These rules are enforced for something that they're never going to gain anything for. So these countries spend money to protect the intellectual property rights of first world countries, gaining no benefit to themselves except financial credit. Whether or not they receive loans depends on whether they make it harder for people to make pirated DVDs of *Big Bang Theory*. It sounds ridiculous when you think about it that way. But the reason the Middle Eastern gaming industry has such a hard time being successful is because they can't control the property in

their own countries, and so it becomes hard for them to maintain a strong market presence. If your entire business model is built upon the notion of selling creative units, well then yes, copying is always going cut into those sales; unless your basis of industry is being supported through other means—those other means could be grant systems, those other means could be government imposed systems (whatever we may think about them). It requires a rethinking of capitalism to consider how we might create a sharing economy.

Moderator: I do have a comment about mapping this to the Canadian context, because some of what Adrienne just said has implications for the Canadian economy, although things have changed drastically recently.

MB: I'm not sure. What came into my head actually was student protests at the Bank of Ontario—that lasted six months over the last few years—and especially the Quebec protests which are not similarly pragmatic protests about changing a particular funding mechanism, rather than an overall critique of what's called austerity measures. The argument is that at a public university education should be free.

Moderator: Let me ask you Marcus, I'm curious to know. The thread of “the replication of ideology” runs through all your books. You have this first book on the history of writers on drugs; you have a second book on copying you've mentioned, and the religious tradition of Buddhism, another on rethinking creativity, authorship, and culture, and finally your last book is on sound. Can you talk about how “the replication of ideology” works its way through those books?

MB: I think drugs are an interesting thing to talk about just because they are ideologically over-determined, and so they are interesting. I was interested tracing the kind of local accounts of drug use by authors, beyond ideology. My work was organized by drug, so I was just interested in seeing and connecting the accounts of people who used a drug, a certain drug, over time. Was there an emerging discourse that somehow related to a specific substance? I think I was sort of doing the same thing with copying, especially in the early to mid 2000s. I noticed my students were spending all their time downloading stuff online. When you tried to talk to them about why they did this, nobody could offer an intellectually coherent explanation of why they did it or if it was an ethical thing to do. They would do it, but then they would say it was wrong, or let's not talk about it, or they would giggle and laugh. It struck me as an interesting problem to actually try to imagine what their interest in copying might be. I am more or less a practicing Buddhist, and it kind of struck me that Buddhism was involved in practices of copying. When you speak mantras, when you meditate, you intensely in these repetitive activities, but there's a notion that there's a particular kind of ethical outcome from these practices of copying. In the book *Nothing: Three Inquiries in Buddhism*, which was written with two other people, I wanted to look at the problem of ideology as it relates to Buddhism. Is Buddhism an ideology or is it something else? You think, you meditate. In some sense you try to free your self from the prevailing ideological structure of

the society in which you live in. All the delusions, the fantasies, that seem compelling, but ultimately are in fact fantasy—can you make a break with them in some sense? Buddhists continue to believe that you can do that. When you encounter actual Buddhists, they are the most ideologically saturated people you could possibly imagine. When you think of Buddhism in terms of the problem of ideology: you mediate, you sit and you meditate, you do that for hours. To what degree, are you involved in ideology when you do that? And to what degree are you reproducing ideology when you do that?

Moderator: Adrienne, how does this work in your research? How does ideology reproduce in the ethnographic studies that you conduct?

AS: I'm interested in studies of the way people sort of push back. A lot of things that come to mind are people pushing back on expectations about what they should and shouldn't care about. Not everyone that plays video games necessarily identifies as a gamer. No matter how much they play, what kinds of games, that's not an important identity or category for everyone. This is because the term is over-determined by a market, by player culture, by a lot of things unrelated to the pleasure of playing a game.

An obsession with fan cultures has been embedded into player studies for a really long time, as opposed to just looking at people who play games. The market discourse doesn't predetermine what people actually do. The market assumes that gamers are men. I got into games through women. My mother was a single mother, she bought us an NES. My step-father bought a Sega Genesis to ingratiate himself to us when my mother got remarried, but my mother, sister, and I were the only ones that ever played. And it's the women in my family that got me into games, but that's not a story that gets told through the replication of who a player is in our popular culture. But that also means that my understanding of game culture is shaped through my personal experience in relation to that replicated image of who plays games and who is expected to play games. And that makes it so if it's harder for me to necessarily identify gamers, despite the fact that apparently it's my job (to some people).

It is assumed by people I've spoken to that the discourse around representation is supposed to matter to them. People talk about representation mattering to them by relating to the ongoing discourse as they understand it or rejecting it. Some say, "You can't tell me what's important to me," while others say "I can enjoy things that don't necessarily represent me." Still others are upset because the popular discourse makes them feel responsible for their marginalization in the game industry. They feel that the industry supposes that if you are not knowable as a market, and therefore not representable as a market, it is your fault and not the industry's. Another argument is that you are increasingly responsible for creating their own content through customization options, as opposed to just being represented because you matter, because you exist in the world, and you ought to be represented in these texts. I try really hard in my book to think about representation mattering beyond either market logic or media effects discourse. It's important to talk about more than representa-

tion just mattering to groups because they play games and therefore are subject to marketing, but also not talking about media effects research that is ultimately far less nuanced than ideology. The total replication of the same ideas over and over and over again—that's where representation matters.

Moderator: I'm going to go ahead and ask the question: representation for what? Can we just ask the question of representation for representation's sake?

AS: Well, in my book I frame it as "representation, why not?" as opposed to "for what?" What if the goal is just the imaginative possibilities of representation in the first place. That doesn't require justification. One of the things that I think it is worth thinking about is how we might say representation matters without having to always make the case for it mattering. A driving argument in my book is that there is actually very little reason for games to not be more diverse. There are multiple excuses for the lack of diversity that are based on problematic assumptions about what people will or will not play. But what if we stop trying to defend diversity in games on a regular basis? By defending it constantly we're replicating the ideology that these are peripheral concerns that we will address when they matter, as opposed to just making them acceptable to the production process.

MB: To what degree do you see the solution to diversity in games as a technical issue as opposed to a critical issue?

AS: Yes, I think part of it is technical. The politics of who has access to the creative means of representation continues to make people coming from marginalized positions responsible for representing themselves. The industry insists they can't possibly represent diverse people. Representing others requires more work. This is why in media studies, there is a way in which we talk about authorship as a way to anchor the authenticity of the experience that's being communicated. Just a gay person wrote a TV show where the main character was gay doesn't mean that show somehow speaks to the authentic experience of all people who are gay—that requires more diversity in the industry itself. People must be more reflexive about the choices they make in the creation process, regardless of who they are, and regardless of what they represent. This critical process can come from either outside or within the industry itself.

In my department, we are split up between "production" faculty and "studies" faculty. At the end of the semester, a video artist colleague reports that their production classes are asked to talk about technical choices they make, but they're never asked to question their overall ideology. When they go to the "studies" class, they can critique TV shows ideologically, but they can never go back and do it with their own work. So, I'll be sitting in our end of the semester student award show and see a student who wrote a really nuanced critique of race in a popular TV show, but who also produced a show with a racist joke in it. Our students are taught to treat representation and production as two separate things. We must bring them together in

order to critique our own work.

Moderator: Both of you are taking innovative approaches to standard questions that we all consider in media studies. Can you say a little bit more about that, what would you say is the great motivator for asking questions?

MB: This makes me think of something Gayatri Spivak said: the problem is not lack of benevolence, the problem is the lack of imagination. One has to be able to imagine before acting. I suppose the question that follows is what conditions best encourage people to imagine? That's a huge question. That is the question which ideology asks of the imagination. I just read Beatriz Preciado's *Testo Junkie*, it's a book where the author decides to take testosterone, but refuses to say that she's become a trans man. She just says, well, what if I start messing around with testosterone, let's see what happens. That's the kind of level that gaming is happening now—we're gaming with our bodies. We're gaming with nano-technology. We're gaming at these very micro levels. Maybe if we had the sense we were actually gaming those moments when we introduce products, some interesting possibilities could open up. There's an emerging global practice that is very similar to gaming. And it really tells us something about what we are as human beings.

AS: On a slightly different note, one of the things I mention in the book is that it's not about why representation matters, but when it matters. It's about how it comes to matter to audiences. I made a comment earlier about how people ask me: "You study representation in games, what games do you study?" This is because a lot of game studies is focused on specific games. One of the critiques I've gotten of my book is that I don't focus on one specific game, instead I talk about games broadly. That's because my goal was not understanding games, it was understanding people. That was my starting point. People help us to better and more broadly understand the medium.