

**Information Overload:**  
**“Cybridity” and an Overwhelming, Lonely World**

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On April 7, 2011, approximately 40 students from the University of Waterloo's English department gathered at the university's Critical Media Lab in downtown Kitchener, Ontario to unveil the digital media art projects they had been working on the term previous. The event, titled "CABS of CURIOSITY," provided food, beverages and the company of nearly one hundred visitors. But of course, the student projects were the main focus.

The students—in teams of three or four—were asked to create video games (or theoretical simulations of some sort) to be played in retro arcade cabinets that were also built, wired and customized by the students. The projects were, as Dr. Marcel O'Gorman explained at the event, "digital essays" that were to encapsulate theories from their English courses. The students were free to create anything their imaginations conjured, and the results were surprisingly varied. There was a group whose cabinet was complete with a built-in camera that took action shots of users struggling with the game they played; there was a cabinet with a living human being inside, who told the fortunes of users; and there was a cabinet that merely asked users to furiously tap its coin return slot. But perhaps the most unorthodox arcade cabinet came from team "Cybridity," who positioned their users *inside* the cabinet, which was given the appearance of having been turned inside out. This paper will discuss team Cybridity's project (which was branded with the same moniker), including their video game and its connections to mass/social media, and the cabinet itself and how building it inside out symbolizes society's collective introversion.

Team Cybridity was made up of four graduate students enrolled in the University of Waterloo's English 794 "Cyberbodies" course. Despite the fact that Cyberbodies was

labeled an English course, topics therein tended to stray more towards the relationships humans have with technology, new media, environmentalism and philosophy. The following is an excerpt from the official course description, which should shed some additional light on the mission of this peculiar course:

Today, specific technologies such as video games and the Internet lure us into forgetting about our bodies altogether, which pale in comparison to the infinite flights of fancy offered by digital embodiment. But in spite of the discourse on progress and disembodiment that characterizes technoculture, the body still remains—in fact, thanks primarily to screen based technologies that encourage immobility, bodies are getting bigger.

With this in mind, the fact that Team Cybridity and their classmates built an arcade cabinet as their final projects may not be as unusual as one thinks. Especially since Mark J. P. Wolf considers video games to be “the first medium to combine moving imagery, sound, and real-time user interaction in one machine” and that also “made possible the first widespread appearance of interactive, on-screen worlds in which a game or story took place” (21). Video games, then, provide the perfect vehicle with which to analyze the ever-growing relationship between humans and machines. After all, the game’s interface, “the boundary between the player and the game itself [that] includes such things as the screen, speakers, and input devices like a joystick, keyboard, or game controller, as well as on-screen elements like menus, buttons, and cursors,” is the only thing that separates human from machine (Wolf 24). In many cases, this boundary is unnoticed by the user, who allows him/herself to fall into the “virtual reality” that is offered by a video game.

Team Cybridity did not create a “virtual world” that consumed its users as games like *Halo*, *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* have been known to do. Instead, Team

Cybridity decided to make the boundaries between human and machine obvious in order to highlight the effects new technology and digital/mass media have on human society. Their video game, also titled “Cybridity,” is intended to overload users by asking them to absorb all of the information presented on-screen, through a visual interface that looks similar to broadcasts of CNN News or Toronto’s CP24 news channel. The term “Cybridity” is not widely used and will not be found in any standard dictionary. However, Michael Liskin, in his seminar presentation titled “Evaluating Cybrid Communication: A Structural Analysis of Computer Gaming Teams,” he provides an interesting definition of the word that he himself may have coined. Cybridity, says Liskin, is the “synchronous interaction between two or more people that incorporates both mediated and face-to-face modes of communication within a given frame of time and/or space” (4). With this definition in mind, it is easy to see why Team Cybridity decided to take on this moniker, not only for their blog—which incorporates a variety of communication media, including video, text, images, a Twitter feed and a database of hyperlinked web articles—but also for their video game.

“Cybridity,” like the aforementioned television news broadcasts, offers an astounding amount of on-screen information in a number of formats. Along the bottom of the screen run a pair of “tickers,” scrolling lines of text that provide the day’s sports scores and top headlines. Above the tickers and in the right-half of the screen lay three more boxes: a news broadcast hosted by two news anchors, a continuously regenerating weather report of major Canadian cities, and a Twitter feed. Along the top of the screen rolls a collection of web banner advertisements, which market things from the Toronto Raptors and Serta comforters to course theory-inspired topics such as organ donation and

vegetarianism. The weather feed and advertisements offer the kind of information you would expect from such items—weather reports and sales-conscious propaganda. The main thing to notice in regards to the advertisements is that they are particularly distracting on-screen, and offer significantly less information than the newscast, tickers and even the Twitter feed. Team Cybridity did this intentionally, in order to highlight the effect advertisements have on us when watching television, listening to the radio or “surfing” online. How effective did these advertisements prove to be? Consider the following comment made by a user of “Cybridity” at CABS of CURIOSITY: “All I can see is naked Alicia Silverstone!” Such distraction makes the media presented on-screen much more obvious to users, and the frustration users experience while playing the game makes the users more aware of the disconnection between them and the “virtual world” presented on-screen. Users realize that they cannot interact with the scrolling text, flashing images and cold, mechanical graphics that lack a warm, soft and personable feel.

The news broadcast is the only element in the game that offers consistent sound and interactive “faces” with which the human user can connect. While the sound of the newscasters’ voices help immerse users more deeply into the game by targeting a sense other than the visual faculty, the faces of the two newscasters (Cindy Sullivan and Marilyn Moody) help give “Cybridity” an element of what Anna Munster calls “interfaciality.” Interfaciality, Munster explains, is “dominant interface design within new media,” which “coerce[s] us into face-to-face relations with the computer... by providing the machine with a ‘human face’ to address our own” (21). Although the news broadcast is pre-recorded (as opposed to live), users relate to the warm faces on-screen and feel more comfortable receiving information from them as opposed to the cold, “*hard*

and *dry*” (and therefore mechanical, lifeless and unresponsive) text scrolling across the screen elsewhere (Stelarc, in Jones 88).

However, despite the fact that the newscast is the only element containing human faces, interfaciality exists elsewhere within the game as well, and this helps the user bridge the gap between human and machine. In order to play the game, users must answer questions that display in the top-left portion of the screen by highlighting one of four answers with a joystick, then selecting their choice using the single button on the interface. In addition to “face-to-face relations with the computer,” Munster says that “interfaciality” can occur when the game “subsum[es] the body into a command-control scenario by aligning human and computational ‘cognitive’ processes” (21). When “Cybridity” prompts the user to answer a question, the user communicates with the machine by selecting their answer, and the two entities (human and machine) somehow become joined in a reflexive conversation. When the user sees his/her choice highlighted as s/he moves the joystick, “the interlacing ‘of one’s own bodily surface with the visible surfaces of the other(s)’ occurs, and “even though in a virtual environment these are immaterial,” the on-screen images act as techno-visual extensions of the human body (Hansen 111). In a sense, the user reaches into the computer game and wriggles his/her fingers inside the “guts” of the machine.

Television programs such as CNN News and Toronto’s CP24 are great examples within modern western society where multitasking and productivity are a top priority. “Multitasking,” says Sherry Turkle, is “our twenty-first-century alchemy... Subtly, over time, multitasking, once seen as something of a blight, was recast as a virtue... Experts went so far as to declare multitasking not just a skill but the crucial skill for successful

work and learning in digital culture” (155, 162). Team Cybridity sets out to examine this idea with “Cybridity”—is our multitasking, productive society something we should be comfortable with? Do we benefit from exposure to this kind of overwhelming information on a daily basis? If feelings generated by “Cybridity” at the CABS of CURIOSITY event were any indication, users did not feel comfortable when attempting to extract information from Team Cybridity’s game. Nor were they able to succeed in answering the questions or “winning” the game. This would be no surprise to Turkle, a professor at MIT, who “notice[s], along with several of [her] colleagues, that the students whose laptops are open in class do not do as well as the others” (163). Technological distractions could pose a significant problem outside of the classroom as well, says Turkle, since “a child doing homework is usually—among other things—attending to Facebook, shopping, music, online games, texts, videos, calls, and instant messages” (162). Despite fears that such multitasking leads to a drop in work quality, people are encouraged to multitask in the workplace as well. Turkle provides an account of “Diane,” a museum curator, who says, “when I move from calendar, to address book, to e-mail, to text messages, I feel like a master of the universe; everything is so efficient. I am a maximizing machine” (165). But soon Diane’s story of success turns to one of despair:

I’m expected to have a Twitter feed and a Facebook presence about the museum. And do a blog on museum happenings. That means me in all these places. I have a voice condition... All I do is type, but it has hit me at my voice. The doctor says it’s a nervous thing. (165)

Diane is clearly feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities she is given, and the information she is asked to absorb and relay. In terms of production, while Diane may be able to manage the information and multitasking for a short while, her human biology will not be able to maintain that pace for long.

Because of the issues raised by Turkle, The Twitter feed is a particularly important aspect of Team Cybridity's project. Although there are no social media feeds on television news broadcasts (yet), the addition of this element to "Cybridity" emphasizes the feeling of being overwhelmed by information—a feeling that, as Turkle has illustrated, permeates society throughout. But the Twitter feed also emphasizes a relatively new trend that has resulted from this growing interest in the ability to multitask—the trend of valuing quantity of information over quality of information.

Bernard Stiegler (with inspiration from Katherine Hayles) feels that by encouraging people to focus on the quantity of information that they are exposed to—rather than the quality—society has experienced "a generational mutation" (72). In a rather excessively dystopian claim, Stiegler describes what kind of generational mutation we are dealing with:

What parents and educators (when they are themselves mature) patiently, slowly, from infancy, year after year pass on as the most valuable things civilization has accumulated, the audiovisual industries systematically destroy, every day, with the most brutal and vulgar techniques, while accusing the family and the education system of this disaster. (72)

To paraphrase, Stiegler argues that recently, the virtues and skills of patience, reading, writing, teamwork and attention to detail that teachers and parents preach to young children are being undermined by the demand for people who can multitask, work independently, and produce a large quantity of information or material. Turkle's subject Diane was likely taught the importance of grammar, spelling and even cursive writing, at a young age. But now, with the popularity of Twitter, Text messaging and email, Diane must shift her attention towards familiarizing herself with "web slang," developing her typing skills and attracting followers (virtual friends/contacts).

But Stiegler and Hayles argue that this is just the beginning. Young students who are now growing up in the age of such new technology as Twitter, Facebook and Wikipedia are developing bad habits early on in life, and are experiencing generational mutations such as “hyperattention” as a result. Hyperattention, explains Hayles, “is characterized by a rapid oscillation among different tasks, in the flux of multiple sources of information, in search of a heightened level of stimulation, and having a weak tolerance for boredom” (in Stiegler 73). Such a generational mutation could certainly be seen as a positive if people are going to be expected to make use of new digital media like Twitter, Wikipedia and YouTube, where information is concise, varied and readily available at all times. But hyperattention contrasts “deep attention,” cognitive behavior that allows an individual to focus on a single object for an extended period of time, such as a lengthy Victorian novel or a three-hour lecture. Due to the increased demand for multitasking, hyperattention is on the rise and deep attention is on the decline, resulting in an increased number of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) cases, and more students “taking Ritalin, Dexedrine, and other equivalent drugs in order to prepare for important exams, ... searching for cortical stimulants that will help them concentrate” (Hayles in Stiegler 74). People have been resorting to physical alterations in order to cope with the demands put on them by new technology.

The theories of Stiegler and Hayles are most evident at the end of “Cybridity,” once the user’s “score” is revealed. Users who answered 0-20% were told they had Attention Deficit Disorder, while those who answered 21-80% were declared hyperattentive, and anyone who managed to answer over 80% of the questions correctly

were told they exemplified deep attention. Of course, these labels were not handed out with any scientific backing, but were rather a fun way of connecting the game to course theories.

Another way of looking at the changes people have been experiencing in relation to the ways they use technology and communicate with others is with another idea proposed by Bernard Stiegler: “epiphylogenetic evolution,” the coevolution humans experience with their tools (Hansen 61). Just as our computers have grown smaller, more capable and better connected with the world around us in order to meet our desire to be more productive and to be able to do more at once, so too have we evolved to better use the tools we have created. Hyperattention may be a part of this, and certainly humans today are quicker with their hands (as a necessity to use keyboards, game controllers, calculators, etc.) than ever before.

Epiphylogenesis played a big role in the most interesting aspect of “Cybridity”—the inside-out arcade cabinet in which the game was played. But perhaps a better way of explaining the concept would be to describe the cabinet as being “outside-in.” In the early 1980s, during the peak of video arcade popularity, “teens could go to the video arcade not only to play video games and perhaps consume minor refreshments... but also to socialize” (Farr 35). Video arcades were community centres, public meeting places like arenas, ball parks, and bowling alleys. People had to leave their homes and go to the arcades to play video games. They socialized face-to-face with opponents; they stood over each other’s shoulder as they attempted to defeat high scores; they sat beside each other as they drove virtual racecars around a virtual track. Human interaction was always present to some degree at the arcade.

But as technology evolves to meet the needs of humans desiring to become more mobile, so too are humans evolving by taking advantage of stationary technology within the home. With the demand of affordable, practical personal computers came the technology necessary to create small and affordable game systems that people could plug into their televisions, and experience the arcade from the comfort of their own living room. In 1985, when the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) hit North American markets, the popularity of the video arcade began to diminish and people stayed at home to play their games. Additionally, with the popularization of the Internet in the 1990s, global communication changed forever. Now people can play games over the Internet with people they may have or have not met previously, they share personal stories with friends and strangers publicly over Facebook and Twitter, and are able to speak face-to-face with people around the globe with computer programs such as Skype. As the title of Sherry Turkle's book suggests, we are "Together Alone"—together in the fact that "the global reach of connectivity can make the most isolated outpost into a center of learning and economic activity," but quite literally alone in our living rooms or bedrooms (Turkle 152). Having users of "Cybridity" play inside the arcade cabinet rather than outside emphasizes this current dominant trend of people communicating virtually from their homes.

When playing "Cybridity," the user engages with newscasters from a remote location, people on Twitter they've never met, and headlines from news around the world. But the user is isolated from the rest of the arcade, stooped uncomfortably in a box smaller than a phone booth. S/he is overwhelmed by the information that fills the screen, but at the same time is devoured by the bright lights, fascinating sounds and on-screen

faces. The user grips the joystick, presses the button and “reaches into” the game by moving and selecting items on-screen. “Cybridity” responds with a quirky tone, communicating the user’s success or failure. In this way, a bond has been formed between user and machine, and the boundaries between the two become blurred. People who walk past the cabinet from the back can see light from the computer screen reflecting across the user’s face, but that is all that can be seen of the user. Their body is in the cabinet, once again a part of the machine. Just like many of us in our homes, or walking down the sidewalk with our gaze to our mobile devices we are connected to an infinite amount of information from an infinite number of sources. But while we are given freedom in terms of the information that is available to us (from around the world) we are also tied down to these sources—computers, games and mobile devices—and in an ironic way, are more alone than ever.

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