

$$\sum_{n=-\infty}^{\infty} f\left(\frac{n}{T}\right) e^{2\pi i n t}$$

The secret life of games

Description

Broadcast media have latched onto the public desire to get behind the scenery and see what goes on in private. Most of us have an appetite for knowing how things work, or at least seeing the preparations for the big event, how the frocks got onto the catwalk, the coach psyched the team, the camera operators stalked the leopard, the banquet was prepared, and the recriminations after a firing on *The Apprentice*. These private spaces are a respite from politeness; they are sites of conflict, when the

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Skilled content providers (producers, writers, directors,

designers) control such exposures and balance the formal, professional front-of-stage product, with the *other* show, the back stage interviews, the fly-on-the-wall documentary, the confidential.

Irvin Goffman developed the idea that we all have these two modes of behaviour. The metaphor of acting is appropriate, as it suggests we put on a performance in the public sphere, but let down our guard in the private. We are always putting on an act, or at least, we act differently in different contexts.

The metaphor here is of layers, and a priority among layers. It seems we want to peel back the covers and see what's underneath. It's basic human curiosity that compels the small child to poke a stick under a log, the investigator to root out a scandal, the archeologist to keep excavating, and the physicist to expose the Higgs boson (particle).

This forensic impulse also compels the Marxist philosopher to search inexorably for the hegemony, the corruption that is capitalism, in the most innocent of places, such as where the news media parades its supposed independence and impartial quest for truth.

There's also capital to be gained in the exploitation of the secret lives of computer games and other online media. When I used to play video games (for "research") in the 1990s I was intrigued by the unofficial online forums where games were discussed, cheats exchanged, and game designers challenged on the quality of their game elements, narratives and game task difficulty. Some of the conversations were very knowing about the industry and its audiences. The idea of "user generated content" seems to stem from the insistence of some players to be involved in the production process.

It seems there are always some segments of an audience aware not only of the front of stage spectacle of the game, but the backstage arena where other games are being acted out. I thought of these as meta-games, games about games.

Some media content providers recognise the importance of exposing audiences in a controlled way to how things are made, behind the scenes: Brechtian-style stage productions, museums that show off their workrooms, film studio tours, reality tv shows, "The making of *Inception*," branding a tv documentary about mathematics [The Code](#).

Perhaps there's a place for interactive media experiences where audiences shift at will between the front and the back, the main event and the rehearsal, the game and the meta-game. Or perhaps access to off-stage secrets is one of the rewards of the game. The desire to get behind the scenes to see what's really going on is after all one of the perennial drivers of detective stories, conspiracy theories, *The Matrix*, psychoanalysis, and paranoia.

Bibliography

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Category

1. Play

Tags

1. front stage
2. games
3. Goffman
4. reality tv

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