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Nintendo Switch and post-convergence media

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One important aspect of studying Cross Media-Culture consists in the critical analysis of the ways in which new media are presented, promoted and imagined: Why do we need something new? How do new devices or new services promise to solve which (and whose) problems?

In October 2016, Nintendo launched the campaign for its new game console with a three-minute trailer. Nearly half a year before the expected availability of the so-called *Nintendo Switch*, which is announced for March 2017, the clip shows off a number of pleasurable social practices that are enabled and enriched by the technical capabilities of the device. (Just on time for the Super Bowl, Nintendo published a **second commercial**, which focuses somewhat more on playability).

The clip is, of course, a commercial and we cannot expect it to describe the device critically or even accurately; as you would expect it mutes all issues related to media waste or to political economy. On the other hand, by highlighting certain forms of use, particular places and practices, which apparently are thought to lend plausibility and originality to the new device, this trailer is an important contribution to the discursive practices which shape media's forms and their social impact. Earlier research has shown how the social imaginary, to which commercials are a relevant contribution, influenced the understanding, the dominant appropriation, but also the further technical development of new media. Especially in the current situation, in which 'permanent beta' and constant update characterize more and more devices, the promises of what a medium will or should be able to do might be just as important as their actual technical features.

Adaptability / Modularity

The form of the commercial is so obtrusive and obvious that it feels a bit redundant analysing it – nevertheless, it might be helpful to isolate some key motifs which give the technical capabilities of the console cultural relevance and urgency.

To start with, the console is displayed as an example of a *post-domestic media technology*: In the 1980s and 1990s games (as computer culture more generally) had to be domesticated; especially with the more family friendly and explicit social games of Nintendo Wii and the Kinect, the practice of gaming – which was coded as a male and nerdy activity – had to be integrated in the gendered space of the nuclear family. This is the now naturalized starting point of this commercial. It is still a guy playing in the middle of the night; yet, far from being a nerd, he plays in a tidy and luxurious living room on a big flat-screen TV – the device that helped to masculinize the TV set while simultaneously de-emphasizing technology. While older computer game technology often offered a virtual alternative to the allegedly boring and restraining suburban domesticity, Nintendo Switch can easily affirm affluent domesticity because it is not bound to it.

The main topic of the commercial is the extensive *adaptability to different spaces* which is not least guaranteed by the *modularity of the technology*. When the dog wants to get attention – a motive that was already used to sell DVRs and all forms of time-shifted viewing – the domestic gamer doesn't hesitate, quickly turns his Nintendo console into a mobile device and continues to play on a park bench while the sun is rising. The shape-shifting continues and the device is adapted to playing in a cramped airplane seat, in a car, on an outside basketball court and finally in a huge arena were the same device that was casually used in various intimate places now allows for e-sports in front of thousands of spectators. If old media were often characterized by the space which defined their social situation, their screen size and a respective mode of attention, this device promises to seamlessly connect the most different spaces, their social and technical affordances: If your friends are calling for a barbecue, you take the console with you

and continue playing together with them.

Scalability / Manageability



On the one hand, the game thus enables turning all spaces and all social situations into situations of gaming; augmenting all possible spaces and thereby suturing them with each other. On the other hand, the game allows for a just as seamless transition from real life to game reality. A group of male friends is playing a racing game in a car only to switch to real life kart racing; some guys finish playing basketball only to gather around a picnic table to play a basketball game on their console. Gaming is not an alternative (or virtual) reality but it is both a possible layer of all reality and one particular *mode of reality* that allows to scale and to adapt to other modes of reality: You can play basketball on a court or on a console. This *scaling ability*, which I would list as a third characteristic, is most obvious in the final part of the clip when small teams of players first use the controllers and small screens in connection to a piece of paper to develop strategies and then use the same technology to actually compete with others in the gigantic arena on gigantic screens.

This scalability is closely connected to a *manageability of social situations*. The example of the dog that wants to go out already showed that the technology is supposed to absorb if not eradicate all possible interference. Interruption is only a trigger for shape-shifting and adaption. It is of relevance, though, that the shape-shifting of the device follows urgency as well as desire. If your neighbours call you to join the barbecue, you can do so without interrupting your game; but you can also use the game and its adaptability to more pro-actively fashion the social arrangements with the console. You can easily and intentionally switch from lone gamer to chatty social gaming. Waiting at the airport, the guy uses the console to make contact with a woman; you can modulate a long car ride into a fun activity by placing your game monitor in a way that it

becomes visible to the fellow passengers. By handing out additional controllers, you can offer other people to join the game, this can be two or four or more – you can even involve thousands of people as enthusiastic audience. Socially, the console thus has a dual potential: to be flexible enough to cope with any changes in your environment, but also to actively create this environment. It protects you from interference but it also incites you to shape the social situations.

To make this promise real, however, the commercial itself has to fall back on the most common, most bland and stereotypical situations: barbecue, car ride, walking a dog, competitive gaming. It pretends a class-less and socially fluid society and yet it harvests the dominant gender, race, class distinctions to articulate recognizable social situations. The domestic situations all look like the ones of the creative class and are distinctively white, the public spaces allow for some economically ambivalent hipster or slacker culture and also for some people of colour – mainly pushed to the background as the sleeping guy in the airplane. Finally, for the competitive gaming when ethnicity gets marked it is carefully divided: a group of four white persons (mixed gender) challenges a group of four Asian guys. As with the glimpse on heterosexual romance at the airport, these cultural markers underline that the seemingly fluid manageability of social situations is based on recognizable settings. This is well known from earlier media technologies: Most of them are introduced with the promise to overcome the limitations of existing media and to revolutionize the established forms of communication and entertainment – simultaneously the ‘newness’ is cushioned and explained by connecting the potentials to familiar cultural patterns.

Post-Convergence, Freedom, Crisis

Overall, the clip highlights the growing ubiquity, mobility, modularity and adaptability of media, which can all be considered trajectories driving the contemporary media landscape’s transformation. Characteristically, the device does not have a clear identity and achieves different functions in the context of each specific situation, space and cultural practice. This might be called *post-convergence media*. Convergence in the past meant many things; using the concept most often assumed either the increasing connection between or the actual fusion of separate media. It referred to the institutional convergence of telecommunications and broadcasting, the economic mergers of film and television, the technological combination of different media functions in one device, or the intensified circulation of media content and media practices across different devices and infrastructure.

The Nintendo Switch does still participate in these dynamics since it presages to unify many functions in one gadget and it also announces to function as a hub connecting (and ‘scaling’ to) highly different screens. Yet somewhat different than the various models and ideas of convergence so far, the Switch, with its morphing capabilities, undermines the dichotomy between media specificity on the one hand and (economic, technological, narrative) converging dynamics on the other. Smart phones, which have been considered the Swiss Army Knife of media culture, technically do stay the same when they are used in domestic or in public space – the Nintendo switch changes technically to guarantee its usability in all kinds of situations. The

clip thereby replaces the concept of media convergence with a process of constant transformation – or more specifically, a constant re-organization of the assemblage of social situations, spatial mobility and modular technology.

Instead of convergence that integrates or at least increasingly connects ever more functions, industries and technologies, endless transformation takes over as the dominant characteristic of the cultural form of media. Of course, constant transformation has characterized our media culture for quite some time; so far however it was either the permanent updating of software and the ‘permanent beta’ of Web 2.0 or the accelerating product cycle. Nintendo now adds to that a device whose principle is technical transformability and which prompts from its users to transform it to transform their own social situations and practices.

As long as the promises of social transformation and disruption are attached to the next new app or device on offer, they are clearly driven by the economic pressure to create artificial needs and planned obsolescence. Yet, since the Nintendo Switch is offered as a device that itself can be flexibly adapted, the promise of transformation outruns the obviously transparent strategy to sell something new; it has to be taken serious as a cultural rationality as well.

The commercial itself, not surprisingly, describes the post-convergence media landscape as the paradise in which technology does what we want and need it to do. The transformability of Nintendo Switch liberates the users from the spatial and temporal restraints of prior media. Nintendo thereby continues to tell us what so many commercials (and unfortunately also a not so small amount of academic research) has claimed since the late 1990s: Finally, we can use the media where we want, whenever we want. If we read the images of the commercial somewhat against the grain, we might find a different, more ambivalent, phenomenon – a life in which we are constantly incited to optimize our own media use and thereby our social life. This might not be a promise of freedom but rather, as **Wendy Chun recently has argued**, the menace of permanent crisis. Since we are equipped with a tool which enables us to make the best of each social situation, we are involuntarily tasked with endless reacting, tweaking, and adapting: each social situation a challenge that can be tackled with the appropriate form of media use.

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