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The New Alphabet

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THE NEW ALPHABET[†]

DOUGLAS RUSHKOFF*

Before the advent of Judaism and the alphabet, written communication took the form of hieroglyphics.¹ Most of us forget that hieroglyphics means “priestly writing,” which it was, because only priests had the time to learn the five or six thousand characters, so it was an elitist form of writing. Subsequently, the original Hebrew twenty-two-letter alphabet changed the equation because all one had to do was learn these twenty-two characters and one would have access to literature — to the story, to the code — and it changed everything. Now that people could read and write, they wanted to participate in creating the laws by which they lived instead of just receiving the laws from the gods, or accepting things as they were.

Instead of simply inheriting reality, people felt that they could now contribute to the creation of reality — that they could actually be authors of the human story. And thus history begins. There is a passage very early in the Bible where God says to Abraham, “you will be a nation of priests.” For a long time Jews have taken this to mean, “Oh, we’re going to be the priests, and have the little yarmulkes and wear the robes and so on.” I do not think the Hebrews’ God was saying they would be a nation of actual priests. For to call them priests simply means they would be literate. He was saying they would be a literate nation. That is the miracle of it. It is imagining a nation of people who can actually read and write, and who would actually be literate. And of course, it was so unprec-

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1. I recently wrote a book on Judaism and someone said to me, “Oh, so are you back working in media and games after finishing ‘the Judaism thing’?” But to me, they are the same subject, the very same topic. I find it fascinating that people view media and religion as two different subject areas. Because as a media theorist, or at least as a media lover, I see the invention of Judaism as a result of some very ancient new media. In fact, the religion itself might best be understood as a call for media literacy.

edented they needed to have a revolution in order to do that, hence the metaphor of the Exodus — the escape from bondage.

For me, the impact on our civilization of gaming and interactive play is no less profound than that of literacy. I think it is potentially that big a thing. I do not mean video games themselves will prove to launch such a fabulous, earth-shattering social or artistic movement. I do not play video or computer games often, having tired of them after a few years. But as a metaphor, along with interactive media in general, games are extremely important for me.

I have come to liken the experience of a gamer to that of an individual, or even a civilization, maturing. Gamers appear to move through three main phases — three main relationships to the games they play. The first is when one plays the game out of the box. The player reads the rules, like anyone else. And then he plays the game the way one is really supposed to — by the rules. But when he either makes it to the end of the game or gets bored trying to get to the end, the player goes online into a chat room or onto a user group and gets cheat codes for the game. So he goes back and plays the game as a cheater. I suppose the question is: Is the cheater playing the game or not?

I would argue yes, the cheater is playing the game, but now she is playing the metagame; playing the game from outside its original frame, but still playing. The stakes of the game still matter. Besides, the cheat codes are written by the programmers — it is not magic. The cheat codes were written in, and sometimes they are printed in the game magazines because it is an accepted part of the game to go outside the game. So now when someone goes through, say, the dungeons of Doom,² she has invisibility, or can walk through walls, or has infinite ammunition. So a cheater plays the game that way, the metagame, and when she gets bored with that, then what?

A great gamer — a true gamer — goes back online and finds out how the game was programmed. So now if one is a Doom player, one goes from being a Doom player to a super Doom player (or doom cheater), to becoming a full-fledged Doom programmer.

2. Doom, a well known first-person shooter game, was created by ActiVision. The player battles other online players as well as stampeding demons, horrific cyber-organic mongrels, and undead Marines in dungeon-like Martian mazes.

The programmer creates her .wad files — her own levels of the game. She might create a simulation of her own high school floor plan so that players can go and actually play Doom in corridors that look like her own high school. Or a more advanced programmer — with a more advanced vision — might choose to alter the game so characters do not carry guns, but magic wands. I saw one version of a Doom game where, instead of shooting people, players used magic spells to turn one another into creatures. The game can continue to evolve in new directions. Making new levels becomes the game play.

So gamers move from being just out-of-the-box players or receivers of the game to becoming cheaters of the game to finally becoming programmers of the game. And I see those three stages as the same stages that a human being passes through as he or she develops or that a civilization passes through as it develops. What I am looking at in my work is whether or not the moment that we are in right now is a renaissance on the order of the Renaissance of the 1500s — whether civilization, just like a gamer, moves through those three stages.

The Renaissance moved us from being passive recipients of data and narrative, into becoming more active interpreters of the stories by which we live. The current renaissance would be bringing us from interpretation into authorship.

Consider the innovations of the original Renaissance — all the stuff we learned about in school: perspective paintings, which allowed a flat medium to represent three dimensions, circumnavigating the globe, which changed maps of the world from flat to round, the extended metaphor and the Spenserian sonnet, which allowed for dimensionality in literature, calculus, which allowed us to relate one dimension to another mathematically, and finally, the printing press, which gave people the ability to have their own perspective on literature. Instead of just one manuscript being handed to one person, it could now be sent to a great many people who would each have their own perspectives on it and, of course, challenge the single authoritarian perspective on it.

There are analogues to each of these innovations in our current renaissance. The analogue of perspective painting is virtual reality, but instead of just having a deeper perspective on some-

thing, we can now actually go inside and change it. We can change this world from the inside. Instead of having the ability to circumnavigate the globe, we have the ability to blow up the globe. I think this is more significant than the ability to see the globe from space. Now we have some sort of authorship or at least destructive capacity; we can blow this entire thing up. Instead of the extended metaphor or sonnet that allows us to have one form of comparison, we have hypertext, which allows us to relate anything to anything else. Instead of calculus, we have chaos math and fractals, which shows each person, each unit of anything, has tremendous potential — each point in a system is a high leverage point capable of changing the entire system. And instead of the printing press, which allows everyone to have their own perspective, we have the computer and the Internet, which allows everyone to express his or her own perspective on the story.

And so we move, from being receivers to being interpreters to being authors. I think that the experience of doing that, especially for kids who are playing games and who are experiencing this most readily, changes our relationship to the world at large. That was the thing that interested me about the intersection of law and games: it changes our relationship to the whole notion of law, to the codes by which we live. We no longer believe we are living in a world where these are the given circumstances. We start to understand that the laws by which we live, the codes by which we live, the cities, the planning, the world that we are in are not just sets of given circumstances. These realities are planned; they are designed by other human beings. We now understand that we can enter into any realm and become a designer.

So for me, what we are doing historically is going from the very end of post-modernism to the next thing. Unlike my French counterparts, I am not worried about descending into ontological relativism or moving into this haze where every narrative is equal. I am not worried that everything is being deconstructed and will ultimately fall to pieces. This is the next thing, really. Post-modernism is about taking everything apart. We have done that — we have our new alphabet. We are ready — or at least our kids our ready — to become the new authors, to use these pieces as the componentry of the next language and the next narrative that they will write to-

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gether. They are experiencing themselves as co-creators of reality. They are seeing the world they are living in as an open source phenomenon — if you learn the code by which this collective narrative is being written, and if you fight for access to those codes, you can actually change things. Each person is a potential author, and I think this is a fundamentally different relationship to law, to code, and perhaps even to reality itself than prior generations have known. This is one of the more important ways in which society could be changed as a result of interactive games and the sensibility that they bring with them.

