

# Game, Space and the Politics of Cyberplay

Brett Nicholls

University of Otago

E-mail: [brett.nicholls@stonebow.otago.ac.nz](mailto:brett.nicholls@stonebow.otago.ac.nz)

Simon Ryan

University of Otago

E-mail: [simon.ryan@stonebow.otago.ac.nz](mailto:simon.ryan@stonebow.otago.ac.nz)

**ABSTRACT:** This paper traces the overlapping spaces that constitute Sega's/Smilebit's Xbox game, *Jet Set Radio Future*. Our claim is that this cybergame emerges in and through what Edward Soja calls Thirdspace. This means that even though cybergames are currently the site of more capital investment and more real-time cognitive activity than any other form of mass entertainment, it does not follow that players become capitalism's drones. Building on the evidence of the game, and Soja's insights on space, the paper works through Alec McHoul's concept of cyberbeing, in which gamers hover in a twilight zone between interconnecting spaces. This "between" suggests that game playing is a politically engaged activity and that the study of games should involve tracing the passages and intersections, and indefinite possibilities of spatial negotiations that mark play.

**KEYWORDS:** Gamespace, Cyberbeing, Thirdspace, *Jet Set Radio Future*.

*Jet Set Radio Future* (*JSRF* 2002) is a recently released Sega/Smilebit multi-player inline skating console game tailored to exploit the speed of the 233 Mhz NVIDIA graphics acceleration chip-set (300 million polygons per second) included in Microsoft's Xbox. The game designers' innovative use of cel-shaded graphic rendering lends a comic-book style to *JSRF*'s skater subculture game-world set in a future Tokyo (2024). Gaming culture generally "exists in a strange terrain somewhere between competitive sport and pure entertainment" [15] and *JSRF* is no exception but it exhibits additional features, "metafeatures" perhaps, that describe the complex spaces and interfaces of cybergames. *JSRF* foregrounds an unsettled between. This makes this console game particularly appropriate for an examination of what we would wish call the unsettled nature of cyberbeing.



Figure 1: *JSRF* grinding and tagging [16]

The space of the between is evident at the most basic level of the game situation. The gamer is any one of several

members of a teenage skater gang that has come together to fight the takeover of the city by Gouji, the downtown corporate boss of the Rokkaku Group, and his henchmen who are backed up by the Rokkaku Police. Professor K., DJ of the pirate radio station Jet Set Radio Future, guides the player through the story-line. A major part of the game involves defeating territorial challengers in acts of graffiti tag executed as complex inline skating routines. *JSRF* is not a remediated game but a simulated, subcultural "sport" with fantasy extensions. The gamespace consists of nine arenas or chapters and a range of optional tasks. The game's garage music, a feature integral to its subcultural address, offers a range of optional sets drawn from a database of 30 tracks including five Beastie Boys' (aka The Latch Brothers) numbers written for the game as well as Latch Brother remixes of other material [6].

Our aim here is to suggest that cybergames occupy difficult and complex spaces in the social imaginary. These spaces are complex because cybertechnologies produce new modes of equipmentality and with them new modes of social and cultural being. The equipmentality associated with cybergames can be understood in terms of what Alec McHoul has called cyberbeing [12]. Cyberbeing can be loosely understood as an indeterminate space that hovers between the actual and the virtual. An ontological presupposition of player participation in *JSRF* is at least a subliminal if not an active sense of the unsettled nature of cyberbeing. This unsettling is operative in the field of tension which is the gamespace both in the formal presentation of transgressive social practice in the game text and in the wider context of computer game culture.

This field of tension turns up, and will continue to turn up, as games studies seeks to establish itself as a distinct discipline. In marking out distinctions between the interactivity of gameplay and cognitive engagement with narrative forms such as cinema, Jesper Juul suggests that the gamer "inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game and undertakes a role inside the game" [9]. It is perhaps this complex interplay of the "outside" and the "inside", rather than formal properties, that marks the specificity of cybergames. While we would consider Juul's appeal to the formal properties of games useful, and agree that it is necessary to combat narrative as a "privileged master concept" to carve out a specific formal space for the study of games, his work opens up another important issue. The twilight zone between gamespace and the space of the player, the machine and the body, demands to be (re)thought. Games produce complex spatial and temporal modalities, from the hours of extended game play, to the repetition of a climb or a specific action, to the waiting of load time, to the pause for a toilet break or a snack, to

saving a level or heading back to the *JSRF* garage to change the sound track. The temporal and spatial relations to and of the game are not governed by a linear logic but by a range of contingencies both within the game space and the space of the game. All this suggests that we are dealing with a complex object in itself and a complex subject/object relationship.

We would like to contribute to thinking the twilight zone by taking up McHoul's ideas on cyberbeing. The questions concerning the complex relation of the outside and inside are questions concerning technology. Working through Heidegger's ontology, McHoul suggests that cybertechnologies produce "new modes of relating to equipment". He maintains that Heidegger's distinction between technologies of the everyday and technologies of the imaginary no longer stand in a straightforward relationship. For Heidegger technologies of the everyday are characterised by a "standard availability", that is to say a "readiness-to-hand" that "involves Dasein [socio-cultural being] in an actual relation to equipment". Heidegger calls this actual relation the "as" structure, and this structure describes the "everyday world of practical activity" consisting of tools and the methods for using them. Alongside the actual relation to equipment there is an equipmentality that is intangible. "Against this actual", McHoul continues, "we might pose the virtual. Here equipment becomes intangible and its characteristic manifestations would be in art, fiction, poetry, and all the technologies of the imaginary whose mode of understanding is understanding "as if". It would be tempting to think of cybergames in these terms as a form of visual art, but because cybertechnologies open up a twilight zone where the player is both an empirical subject outside the game *and* an active participant inside the game (Juul), the "cyber's unique equipmentality flick(er)s or hovers between the actual and the virtual, between the "as" and "as if". Cyberbeing is thus "ghostly", McHoul concludes, it resides in the "unbounded or fuzzy space between the actual and the virtual" [12].

Clearly this "hovering" describes Juul's twilight zone. Hovering suggests that there is no distinct or easily demarcated relation between bodies and machines. Gameplay involves a relation to objects that are ready-to-hand (the console) and objects that are virtual (the world on the screen). Here on the surface there appears to be a clearly defined relation between "as" and "as if" structures. But gameplay also involves a relation to "objects" in which the player acts "as" and "as if" at the same time. In *JSRF* players grind on rails as material forms. Even though it is possible to grind against gravity, there is a sense of the materiality of the act. The diegetic sound of grinding and vertiginous sense of speed as the player moves through the gamespace suggest the readiness-to-hand of the rail. But even though the rail appears to be ready-to-hand the player is stationary, except for the movement of fingers and hands upon the controller. This suggests that the grinding of the rail is virtual, "as if". The rail, in this instance, is thus ground "as" a rail but its reality is "as if", the "as" and "as if" collide in the course of the game.

Gameplay exists not in the hardware or game software,

not "in" the player or in an idealist concept of game, but in the interface and interplay of "as" and "as if" structures, the connections and passages between playerspace and gamespace. Markku Eskelinen [8] underscores the dual materiality of cybernetic signs as information implicit in Espen Aarseth's distinction between *textons* (signs as they appear in the cybertext) and *scriptons* (signs as they appear to the reader/user/player) [1]. In analysing the players' traversal of cybergames such as *JSRF* we can observe how the interplay between *textons* and *scriptons* is productively reworked and reconfigured through the unpredictable flows of gameplay.



Figure 2: *JSRF* skater and other city dwellers

*JSRF* provides us with a specific case of the hovering of cyberbeing. We say 'case' because cyberbeing is not fixed and settled, it is marked as an openness that takes many forms, notwithstanding the many and varied forms and trajectories that different cybergames open up. The game presents particular possibilities within a range of possibilities that mark the between of cyberbeing. The player/user interfaces and negotiates a city space rendered in the cel-shaded graphic style. The graphic style of *JSRF* has been a point of contention in on-line discussions, and noted in interviews with the game's producer, Takayuki Kawagoe, as "driving towards a very different feel of gaming" [13]. The cel-shaded graphic style resists graphic realism and simulation, and serves as a visible maker of the between of cyberbeing. The experience of this gamespace hovers between a future vision of Tokyo city "as" and Tokyo city "as if". The city is both real and not real in the sense that it loosely represents the actual Tokyo whilst connoting another space where the player plays, reworking and transgressing the rules of civic/capitalist space. At the character level, where the player is actant, the cartoon rendering lacks the specificity of identity and enables players to identify with character type, as opposed to playing specific game roles. And the main characters (Corn, Gum, Yoyo, Professor K, and Roboy, the garage robot who provides the interface with the game's configuration controls) along with the various characters throughout the game who challenge and join the GG gang (Beat, Combo, Ruth, et. al.) and the rival skater gangs (Poison Jam, Immortals, and Noisetanks et.al.), appear to be more 'present' to, and more "filled out" in, the city of the skater gangs. The other inhabitants of the city,

including the Rokkaku police, who appear as the skaters make their way through the gamespace, are graphically differentiated from the skaters. They appear almost like cardboard cut-outs, ghostly shadows rendered with less detail, and with less fluid movement. Perhaps a programming limitation, this visual differentiation, along with the 'as' and 'as if' quality of the cel-shaded graphic, suggests that this gamecityspace is a city within the city.

Crucially this city within the city has a social and political character. The player experiences vertiginous movement and the struggles of an underworld of rival skater gangs pitted against the power of corrupt capital. If *JSRF* foregrounds the complexities of cyberbeing, as we maintain, then the game also represents its political nature. Along with the cel-shaded graphics, the "sonic scape" of the game politicises the experience of the visual between. With a minimal use of diegetic sound (players hear skating and grinding and not the sounds of the city), the player listens to the game's "sick tunes". The characters wear headsets that are tuned to Professor K., DJ of the underground pirate radio station Jet Set Radio Future. Iain Chambers usefully suggests that the use of portable sound technologies, such as walkmans, might seem to represent "the emptiness of metropolitan life, but [...] can also be understood as a pregnant zero, as the link in an urban strategy, a semiotic shifter, the crucial digit in a particular organization of sense" [4]. The use of the headsets in the game sets the players apart from the city that is transformed in the course of play. The player is situated in a space that refuses the sociability of urban capital, but at the same time is linked to the game's skater community. Ultimately the player is co-opted into a skater subculture that would exploit play to resist the tyranny and rigidity of advanced capital.

Crucial in this situating is the camera. The camera positions the player in the skater gamespace. Three basic camera positions are available to choose from. The ideal shot in play conveying kinaesthetic sensation is a medium-long shot over the shoulder of the chosen character. At rest a subjective 360-degree close-up shot with tilt can be used to examine details and at architectural limit points in the gamespace a close-up shot of the character similar to that of a surveillance camera is produced: the latter usually prompt left-trigger camera correction but are interesting for the translucent effect they give the body which is reduced to a shimmering outline that heightens the abstractness of the game characters and, at the same time, creates an almost empty space of identity which players can inhabit at will. These "surveillance" shots also highlight the vulnerability of the skaters in the oppressive city space dominated by the Rokkaku Group.

A further aid to the player's visual orientation is provided by the game map which can be accessed at any point in the gameplay. The map displays an active set of vectors revealing the location of the player and the graffiti target sites. The map can be rotated to match the player's current viewpoint. Recourse to the game map enacts the idea of the cognitive mapping of urban space as cultural orientation at the most literal level: the abstract representation of city space outlines the political aims of

the skater collective in terms of the challenge of the city territory which has still to be liberated from the Rokkaku Group. It is interesting to note that this liberation is conceived of in the game text primarily in aesthetic terms as symbolic reterritorialisation by graffiti, a strategy which is not dissimilar to the methods adopted by anti-globalisation, environmental activists or culture jammers.



Figure 3: *JSRF* game map

We would maintain that there is a clear link between the underground politics that is expressed through *JSRF*'s gameplay and the politics of cyberbeing, as it is expressed through gamer culture, the struggle of game studies for academic legitimacy, and the moral panic that grips the popularisation of cybergames. Cyberbeing, in many respects, is scandalous, precisely because it marks the radical transformation and breaking down of categories that were once considered stable. The collapse of "as" and "as if" structures means that the world of the everyday and the world of the imagination and of art cannot be clearly defined and contained. Perhaps the possibilities of an unchecked imagination, one without the clear boundaries of the "as" and the "as if" structures, impacts too forcefully upon everyday assumptions about literacy, learning, and citizenship. The game producers' sense of the tension between "approved" and transgressive player-engagement with *JSRF* is clearly signalled in the opening screen sequence as the following warning appears:



The marketing genre classification of *JSRF* as a simulated

sports-orientated game raises the question of the unsettled relationship between game as a series of fast-paced search and challenge activities and the social and political environment of the city as it is framed by the backstory. On the one hand the inline skating activities played out in the game amount to a fantasy extension of skating as an extreme inner-city sport beyond the boundaries of Newtonian mechanics. On the other hand, the relationships between the skaters, members of the rival gangs and the Rokkaku Group involve multilayered social exchanges which in the gameplay are motivational rather than merely incidental and suggest that the skaters' position in the game's ostensive field of social struggle, activated by the efforts of one or more players to overcome rivals in the graffiti wars and win allies against their mutual downtown oppressors, can easily flow beyond the proprietary limits of the game into the downloading or authoring of cheats and into more transgressive domains of games culture such as "scandalous hacking" and the recoding of the game and console via freely available mod chips. The range of on-line discourse on *JSRF* in the Internet from semi-professional, amateur game reviewers and players exceeds by far the level of analysis necessary to successfully clock the game. There is abundant online evidence of subcultural appropriation and intervention even in the highly protected code of Microsoft's recently released Xbox [2]. Such clearly game-related extensions of play activities constitute the kind of serious play that functions as the engine of culture jamming which in the domain of cybergames rejects the notion of the player/user of computer games as a mere consumer. For players the game does not end with the termination of a game session.

We have suggested that cybergames can be considered a locus for the unsettled nature of cyberbeing. Through the passages and connections of gamespace and the experiential and imaginary spaces of players *JSRF* emerges as a cybertext. These spaces are connected through play and not through interpretive acts of reading. Play for us, in this context, is understood as connecting, negotiating and blurring the interfaces of disparate kinds of spatial machines: the virtual and the actual, the real and the imagined, the body and equipment. What we are suggesting is that players of cybergames are, as Andrew Darley puts it, "seekers after modes of direct visual and corporeal simulation" [7]. But unlike Darley, we do not hold to the idea that players are unthinking automata, held captive in the trancelike states produced by cybergames. As we have gestured here, to play is to hazard intersecting and disparate trajectories and passages. This is not an innocent activity. Cyberbeing is fragmentary and unsettled and difficult to define. It is the scandal that is at the centre of the moral panic that grips popular conceptions of game culture. Just as the characters in *JSRF* struggle against the tyranny of advanced capital through a skater underworld, cyberbeing in the context of discussion on cybergames is quite clearly a marginalised category. Our discussion of *JSRF* suggests that the play of cybergames exemplifies what Edward Soja calls Thirdspace [14], which can be defined as the messy lived space that encompasses the conflicts and struggles of *all* other kinds of space that fall under the broad categories of

the imaginary and the empirical. Thirdspace is a space of fragmentation and struggle, and, following Soja, is the locus for marginality. The margin here is championed as a space of struggle and radical politics. The Thirdspace as margin consists of multiple possibilities and points of view and is opposed to the rigidity and dogmatism of monolithic spatial orientations, such as Rokkaku's urban capitalism in *JSRF*.

Crucially, this sense of the multiple is built into the fabric of *JSRF*. The GG skater gang struggle against Poison Jam, and other rival gangs, for graffiti space. It is perhaps a limitation in the game that the player can't change sides to take on an alternative subcultural style in order to struggle against the corrupt Rokkaku. Poison Jam skaters wear monster masks, for instance, and we are unable to access "their" music. But even though this is a limitation, marginality emerges as a space of struggle, rather than a utopia.

The game-world is a coded space of representation embedded in "the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle" [14]. It is not merely arbitrary to think of game-worlds as supplements to this lived Thirdspace, "the dominated – and hence passively experienced (*subi*) or subjected – space which the imagination (verbal but especially non-verbal) seeks to change and appropriate" [11]. The gateways between the game-world and other domains of Thirdspace are multiple – flows, lines-of-flight. As one of the GG group battling the forces of vertical integration, the player is interpolated as a freedom fighter, a member of the skater underground. The appeal to the actual situation of teenage skaters in the world's urban streets and shopping arcades is blatant enough as a games marketing strategy. What remains largely concealed is the game-world's particular ideological construction of game culture as one of the "*counterspaces*, spaces of resistance to the dominant order arising precisely from their subordinate, peripheral or marginalized positioning" [14]. As Corn, the GG's leader, races to collect enough cans to graffiti and out blast-grind his opponents, the gamer's verbal and non-verbal imagination as the body/machine locus of subjective vision [5] finds pathways in the freeplay of the game that connect the screen events with their own real or imagined experiences of the relations of domination and subordination.

We have been considering *JSRF* as a cybergame that emerges in and through Soja's Thirdspace. We have also followed Soja and claimed that cybergames are marginal sites. This means that what is at stake in this form of game is the possibility of a future urban space that is multiple and digital, and structured, to borrow a phrase from Scott Lash, "not as dominium but horizontally linked together as *communitas*" [10]. Even though cybergames are currently the site of more capital investment and more real-time cognitive activity than any other form of mass entertainment, it does not follow that players become capitalism's drones.

The retooling of the body for new labour processes through new visual technologies and associated regimes of vision is enhanced in the digital by the power of

algorithms to reinforce the possible equivalence between capital and sensation raised by Jonathan Crary in his study of the industrialisation of visual culture in the nineteenth century [5]. The mathematical quantification of vision pioneered in Gustav Fechner's psychophysics prompted Georg Simmel to derive "an informal kind of calculation to demonstrate how exchange values were equivalent to quantities of physical stimulation" [5]. A similar mode of thinking about the relationship between capital, technologies of vision and cultural value is advanced by Jonathan Beller in his theorisation of "the cinematic mode of production" as the key to harnessing of human attention as labour in the production and circulation of value. Beller's thesis is that "cinema and cinematic technologies – television, telecommunications, computing, automation – provide some of the discipline and control once imposed by earlier forms of imperialism" [3].

We agree that the game commodifies the attention of the player to the extent that it harnesses the player's visual attention and ergodic activity to the production process but unlike on-line gambling, for example, where attention is immediately and almost continuously commodified, the regime of vision in which the game takes place promotes the harnessing of an excess of attention which overflows the boundaries of its use value in ways that are unproductive. This is at odds with the desire of capital to control disruptive flows and points to capital's flirtation at its margins with the possibilities of its own destruction. Beller's thesis and related approaches to the ways "modern visual technology tools the body for new labor processes" like Darley's tend to construe vision in terms of a stimulus-response model which lends itself readily to totalising positions concerning capital's power to quantify, discipline and commodify attention. The study of cybergames, however, seems to us to require a model of attention which takes into account the slippage that occurs in the between of cybergames when the flow of production opens into the undisciplined, "unproductive" space of play. It is perhaps in the spatiality of the workings of *JSRF*, intensified as it is through the collapse of "as" and "as if" structures, that the sense of scandal associated with cybergames, including much of the "moral panic", is in fact located. Further this sense of unease may in part be rooted in the anxieties of capital as it attempts to draw energy from the unmanageable. Cybergaming possesses an energy that can be utilised by capital in its system of exchange. But there are also productive possibilities that disrupt this system. The between of cybergames is ultimately indeterminate and uncontainable.

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