Reclaiming the Right to Play in the Googleburg Galaxy

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Abstract

This essay explores the concept of reclaiming democracy in the Googleburg Galaxy by emphasizing the need to separate from our current relationship with mediated technologies. It argues that digital spaces should be activated as public spheres, third spaces, counter-publics, and sites of contestation. The essay emphasizes the importance of participatory democracy, which requires freedom of assembly, thought, speech, play, and choices for individuals to be active agents in their lives. It discusses the intertwined nature of democracy and capitalism and highlights the role of critical media literacy in navigating mediated spaces. The essay also examines young people's occupation of digital spaces and social media, focusing on the impact of language and the importance of diverse stories and representation. It discusses the need for a free press in guaranteeing the protection of democratic rights and critiques Habermas' notion of the public sphere. The essay calls for reconfiguring the Googleburg Galaxy through third spaces and counter-publics and emphasizes the role of play, storytelling, and critical media literacy in reclaiming democracy. It explores the impact of COVID-19 on digital spaces and the need for alternative spaces, politics, and pedagogies. The essay concludes by highlighting the role of play as a subversive tool for reclaiming democracy and the importance of children's rights in digital spaces.

Keywords
democracy, mediated technologies, public spheres, third spaces, counterpublics, critical media literacy, play, resistance

Introduction

Critical media literacy can be viewed as an approach that encourages play. As a project of social justice, critical media literacy uses play to unpack issues of representation, ideology, and economics in media and technology. With the popular and political competition for global electronic attention, social media platforms have become contested advertising, recruitment, propaganda, and activism domains. Education, play, economics, and citizen-

ship are in crisis and are the battlegrounds for reclaiming democracy. Education is only one component of social change. Political action and social movements are also necessary to produce more democratic, socially just, and eco-friendly futures. Play can and must reclaim its role as the tool by which education moves into political action. Marshall McLuhan famously noted how technology could be viewed as an extension of the self (McLuhan & Lapham, 1994). For close to 300,000 years, language has been a human technology (Handwerk, 2021). Through language, the ability to play and tell stories has served as an extension of the self into physical and digital environments. However, language is more than an extension of self; it is also a core component of subjecthood. The choice of words (storytelling) we use to categorize, order, structure, and explain the chaos of human life offers different glimpses into our subjectivity based entirely on the language we select (the stories we tell). The words that describe the spaces we occupy impact how we exist within those spaces and, of course, who benefits from such interpretations. We use language to craft the stories by which we embody the world we live in. Language organizes one's place within that world by describing who belongs and who benefits from access and privilege. In the Googleburg Galaxy, a world dominated by Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook, and more, subjecthood requires critical media literacy and an active engagement with media technologies to ensure diverse stories and media.

Storytelling, which is how sapiens use the tool of language, connects the self to one's environment. This is an act of play. From the earliest stages of humanity, play has served as the process by which sapiens appropriate language and remix it to tell their stories. Friedrich Schiller (2004) calls this the play impulse. Play embodies creativity and expression, functioning as the conduit through which our subjective experiences assimilate into our objective realities. It holds immense power to shape language, enabling the validation or destabilization of prevailing power dynamics. Beyond a mere activity, play defines our humanity and influences our worldview. However, the dominance of technological entities has significantly impacted the apparatus through which stories are conveyed, affecting the regulations that govern play.

Reclaiming democracy in the Googleburg Galaxy involves reshaping digital spaces to serve as public spheres, third spaces, and sites of contestation. This paper delves into the essence of participatory democracy, emphasizing individual freedoms and choices within political and economic arenas. It highlights the regulatory limitations within democratic structures and the intertwined relationship between democracy and capitalism.

Literature Review

Johan Huizinga (1998), in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, emphasizes the significance of play alongside language and storytelling in human history. Play informs language for storytelling and engages individuals in challenging their roles in different situations, empowering them as active creators of meaning. Play is creative and expressive. Play is how our subjective selves digest our objective realities. It animates our language and, in doing so, has the power to legitimate or destabilize unequal power dynamics. Play is more than just something we do. It makes us human and shapes how we see the world. In H*omo* Ludens, Huizinga (1998) suggests that play is equal to language, storytelling, or myth in the history of humanity. As a system, play informs language to tell stories. As a technique, play engages sapiens in their concrete situations, challenging them to question

their role in these situations and empowering them to engage as active meaning-makers.

Equally important is the connection highlighted by Schiller between actions of play and human beings' moral and civic freedoms. Schiller (2004) states, "But how does the artist secure himself against the corruptions of his time, which everywhere encircle him? By disdaining its opinion … let him resign the sphere of the actual to the intellect, whose home it is, but let him strive, through the union of the possible with the necessary, to produce the Ideal. Let him stamp it on illusion and truth, coin it in the play of his imagination and in the gravity of his actions, in every sensuous and spiritual form, and quietly launch it into infinite Time" (p. 52). As Karen Davis (2021) argues in discussing Schiller's arguments on play, "it is in this state of aesthetic play ['playfulness' that is free from physically or moral constraints] that we become most fully human." Play is creative and expressive, offering contestation, rebellion, and subversion opportunities.

Reclaiming democracy in the Googleburg Galaxy demands separation from our relationship with mediated technologies. In its stead, digital spaces must be activated as play spaces, public spheres, third spaces, counterpublics, and sites of contestation. Access to the press is essential in guaranteeing the protection of the fundamental rights of democracy. For Habermas (1989) and his notion of a public sphere, ideas were passed on or communicated through a free, non-commercial press. The press, as described by Habermas (1989), was not yet a corporate organization that required significant capital to participate in and with large-scale access afforded only to those accredited as part of the institution of journalism. Like social media platforms today, if an individual is both literate and possesses enough wealth to access the internet, they can publish and circulate their own ideas on whatever subject they choose, regardless of legitimacy or credibility. The challenge for Habermas was that as media became corporate, individual citizens lost their direct access to the media production system, thus closing opportunities for citizens to publish and circulate ideas about politics and the government. Instead, a professional press emerged, which became authorities on subject matters, whose ideas and opinions were deemed more important and accurate and believed to garner more influence over public opinion. As Douglas Kellner (n.d.) notes,

Habermas's focus on democratization was linked with emphasis on political participation as the core of a democratic society and as an essential element in individual self-development…The two major themes of the book include analysis of the historical genesis of the bourgeois public sphere, followed by an account of the structural change of the public sphere in the contemporary era with the rise of state capitalism, the culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in public life. On this account, big economic and governmental organizations took over the public sphere, while citizens became content to become primarily consumers of goods, services, political administration, and spectacle. (p.3)

Without a free press, Habermas concluded, there could be no public sphere.

Reclaiming the public sphere requires using existing media spaces offered by the technocrati as third spaces, despite their heavy use of surveillance. Third spaces oppose the primary and secondary spaces of home and work by their very existence. Here, meaning is made, contested, and negotiated—despite a framework of colonialized and institutionalized unequal power relations. For Homi Bhabha (2004), third spaces describe the meeting point between dominant and oppositional cultures occupying the same physical space. Embedded within the folds of the dominant structure that envelopes the lives of its inhabitants and dictates norms and opportunities (or lack thereof), these third spaces

often go unnoticed or unseen until they grow to the point where their opposition presents a clear and present danger to domination. Graham Huggan (2001) notes that third spaces are where: "minority groups in the metropoles—marginal within the center—adumbrate a third rhetorical space that disrupts and destabilizes centralized authority" (p. 21). As a result, third spaces are often noted as liminal or oppositional in that they speak from the margins or periphery. However, Huggan rightly points out that third spaces exist within the same potentially oppressive structures to which they are liminal. Because they continue to be overlooked by those outside, third spaces can act as counterpublics, necessary for reconfiguring the Googleburg Galaxy.

Counterpublics exist as both subsets of and in opposition to dominant publics. For Michael Warner (2014), "A public organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church … It is self-creating and self-organized, and herein lies its power as well as its elusive strangeness" (p. 51). He notes, "A public in this sense is as much notional as empirical. It is also partial, since there could be an infinite publics within the social totality" (p. 51). Building on Warner's analysis, counterpublics are any oppositional or subversive public.

The digital realm, primarily social media, is a dominant space for play and communication. Despite limited opportunities for individual agency and narrative freedom across social media platforms, there is growing evidence of young people's digital activism on critical societal issues, such as climate change, the environment, food scarcity, gender equity, and racial inequality. With an understanding of technology far more sophisticated than any previous generation, today's youth possess the tools, savvy, and possibilities to reclaim the Googleburg Galaxy. However, placing the sole responsibility of overcoming an infrastructure of domination on today's youth would be unjust. Especially when the technology required to activate change embodies them and subversively normalizes its presence into the backdrop of their every action. The materiality of objects we engage with (like iPhones and Google search engines) has become so subversive, regular, and ordinary that we no longer ask critical questions of the media, mediums, and messages we consume. For example, who owns the medium, what inherent bias exists in the technology, and how material objects inform our perceptions of truth, justice, and democracy.

This paper critiques the limitations of existing media ownership and representation in digital spaces. It emphasizes the need for broader inclusivity through the reclamation of social media platforms and digital networks as play spaces, third spaces, public spheres, and counterpublics, whereby young people as citizens challenge the dominant narratives perpetuated by traditional and digital media.

Methods

Play creates spaces where individuals assume distinct roles and behaviors. Humans play by entering spaces, like what Huizinga (1998) called the magic circle, "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (p.10). Within the magic circle, individuals take on expected roles, actions, and personalities that differ from those outside the game. When controlled by a select group, these spaces shape shared narratives and solidify certain ideologies. Notably, tech giants have capitalized on platforms where stories are narrated and where play occurs, impacting the tales told and shaping societal discourse.

During the lockdown period of the COVID-19 Pandemic, I conducted a series of research projects to discover more about young people's digital "play" in a time of social distancing and isolation. This research is built on earlier ethnographic projects at York

University in Toronto, Canada, dating back to 2011, and now includes more than 1000 Canadian children's discussions of digital play. Drawing on critical social theory and intersectionality and using qualitative research methods, such as photovoice, ethnography, surveying, and participatory techniques, I investigated young people's lives in the virtual public. This research provides a deeper understanding of how young people make sense of their experiences in an increasingly digital world. A greater understanding of young people's lives in digital spaces is now essential to promoting and preserving children's rights in law, advocacy, social work, policy, education, and play (UNICEF, 1989).

This research aligns with the recent importance placed on researching young people's digital lives as part of a parallel existence to their physical lives for scholars and activists of Children's Rights. UNICEF, for example, turned its focus in this direction with its 2017 State of the World's Children annual report "Children in a Digital World" (UNICEF, 2017). It also adds to longer-standing debates, such as those by youth critical theorist- Shirley Steinberg, dating back two-plus decades, but most recently in her introduction to *Young People and Social Media*, about how the lack of public space designated as youth space has continued to fuel moral panics concerning young people gathering in physical and now in digital spaces and why digital spaces are an essential component to children's culture and youth culture (Gennaro & Miller, 2021).

Results

In the opinions expressed by the young people who participated in this project, their play during the pandemic helped them to formulate a sense of self and a sense of purpose and to display those attitudes and feelings to others through play to remain connected and to feel normal. This connection and normalizing occurred online as well as in physical space. Based on these findings from this research, it becomes evident that young people who spoke to us in the Pandemic Project are aware of the changes to their lives due to COVID-19. They are also quite adept at adapting to these changes. Play has moved from liminal spaces or third spaces outside of adult control and direct supervision into the primary space of the home. One of the ways that young people re-assert a youth-centric space for identity formation and connection and stabilize their everyday experiences through play with their peer group has been to relegate play, work, socializing, shopping, fitness, art, culture, leisure, learning, music and more to the digital. As described, these activities sometimes remain in primary spaces- open for adult supervision and control. Other times, the movement to the digital, as explained to us, allowed for the escape from direct surveillance at a time where social isolation due to COVID-19 places young people even more under the direct control of adults in their lives than at any other time in modern history. In either case, we have discovered here that young people gather to play, whether in physical or digital spaces.

The material artifacts produced by the young people and their explanations show that Covid has moved all aspects of young people's lives online, including play, and that young people have adapted by treating their digital experiences with the same primacy/value that was previously only attributed to physical play and space. Therefore, by acknowledging the value of digital materiality for child and youth culture, I argue that the digital spaces of young people's play can no longer be "other" for corporations, workers, policymakers, and academics- all who occupy essential roles in the construction, surveillance, policing, and legitimation of digital play spaces for young people. Instead, in conjunction with adult allies, these spaces can be activated as play spaces whereby they operate as public spheres, third spaces, and/or counterpublics, to ensure the voices of young people are heard, the

rights of children and youth are protected, and enforced, and that democracy is removed the pockets of corporate media and returned to the hands and mouths of the people for whom it exists in the first place.

Discussion

Reclaiming Third Spaces

Participatory democracy requires the freedom for individuals to assemble, think, talk, and play. It also requires choices for individuals when presented with the politics of their societies as an invitation to be active agents in their own lives. For example, Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms explicitly states, «Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: freedom of conscience and religion; freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication" (Government of Canada, 2018). Each individual in a participatory democracy is afforded the protection and opportunity to freely exercise choice within two separate and overlapping arenas: the political and the economic.

However, in the lived experiences of people in the Global North, freedoms are regulated, and choices are limited within the structural apparatuses that enact democracy. Democracy and capitalism are strange bedfellows. The political arena of democracy concerns the governing structures of society, and its apparatus extends to and includes education systems, media, and social institutions such as health, judicial, and penal systems. The economic arena of democracy encompasses the material conditions and transactions of individuals. This includes the general economy, the banking system, privatized personal credit, media monopolies (phone companies, television companies, film companies, internet providers, social media platform owners), and, of course, through convergence, the overlapping ownership of all these areas by a select few. Capitalism, on the surface, appears to be an economic system, yet the underlying actions that grease its wheels are ideological, based not on what gets sold but on how stories get told and consumed.

Media in our media world develops within existing sets of specific and overlapping economic, social, cultural, political, and historical frameworks (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2016). The impact of these frameworks appears in and through shared symbols in media discourse, which either explicitly or implicitly make, mark, and maintain social inequality and difference. As economic and political citizens, we must hold all control systems and institutions accountable for fair and equitable representations and access. To do this, we require unfiltered access to the freedoms of speech, press, and association. These are the pillars of participatory democracy. However, when a small group of proprietors controls the magic circle, the stories that get told, shared, liked, and cemented into popular discourse are framed through their guiding principles. The guiding principles of the proprietors who own the magic circle are entirely profit-centered.

Habermas (1989) discussed the need for a safe, open space where the members of the bourgeois could congregate and discuss the reigning government and monarchs without fear of repression. The public sphere described by Habermas existed in places like coffee houses and salons across Europe. It was modeled in the Ancient Greek tradition of the agora, where trade and commerce intersected with discussions of philosophy, politics, the self, and government. The first and second spaces of home and work dominate the daily activities of citizens in the Googleburg Galaxy. Home is the primary space for individuals' lives, and work is the secondary space that occupies their daily routines, rituals, and

interactions with the social world. The first and second spaces are heavily politicized. However, third spaces are spaces for de-politicization from dominant norms, ideas, and ideologies and re-politicizing the self through reflective and critical play. Social media spaces reshape the lines between the public and the private. With social media, public spheres can now exist in the privacy of one's home and no longer require a protected and safeguarded public space for public meetings of individuals to discuss politics. The digital public sphere and virtual agora are supposed to increase accessibility and participation.[1] To ensure this, we must reclaim these spaces as third spaces despite their totalitarian structure and economic dominance. Digital third spaces are required; however, they remain just one dimension of the human experience in the Googleburg Galaxy. Humans still need to interact physically with the political in the first and second spaces of home, school, work, and community—even if many exist online after COVID-19. Considering the neo-liberal projects to dismantle the Welfare State, colonize the public sphere, and control all media communication, it is up to citizens, activists, and educators to create alternative spaces, politics, and pedagogies. As proliferating technologies become increasingly central to everyday life, and the lines between what is the extension of the self and what is the cyborg blur, developing oppositional politics in third spaces becomes increasingly essential. Changes in the economy, politics, and social life brought about by expanding social media into all realms of life in the Googleburg Galaxy demand critical and oppositional thinking in response to the ever-expanding marginalization of our material conditions.

Reclaiming Play Spaces

Shanly Dixon and Sandra Weber argue that most children's lives are primarily within the adult-dominated structures of home and school. As children live out daily experiences in these spaces, they are actively denied the freedom and choice of citizenship within the structures of primary (home) and secondary (school) spaces because of adult gatekeepers (Weber & Dixon, 2011). Still, third spaces for children's play exist—from hiding spaces and secret spaces to treehouses and bedrooms to ravines or basement forts—where "they both feel concealed and secret; they are spaces where a child might slip off alone escaping daily demands; and they are places in which to fantasize and dream" (p. 486). It is here that young people actively negotiate their social place and value. Therefore, play (both physical and digital) occupies a pedagogical role, acting as "a sense-making interaction with the environment through which they learn about the world, each other, and themselves. Through fantasy or narrative play, they represent and interpret their understanding of various aspects of the culture surrounding them" (Weber & Dixon, 2011, p. 488). Play also occupies a subversive position when activating inside a public sphere, third space, or counterpublic, enabling the safety to challenge, critique, and destabilize social norms. Mary Flanagan (2009) notes, "[p]lay is, by definition, a safety space. If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems." Through play, children accept or deny the stories of

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1   The internet as a public sphere is not a new idea. A simple Google search of the terms "internet as public sphere" on June 23, 2021, returned more than 77.3 million results, and a similar search on Google Scholar returns results of 723,000 articles or books with the phrase in its title. The connection between these two topics is often attributed to Mark Poster (1997), whose 1997 "Cyber-democracy: Internet and the Public Sphere," remains a canonical text decades later despite the rapid and dramatic shifts in the technology and access.

their culture, media, and society, ensuring play's primary role in young people's cognitive, social, emotional, and psychological development.

COVID-19 forced the migration of all aspects of young people's lives to the digital. Around the world, outdoor public spaces are closed, schools are shut down, sports teams and clubs are canceled, and the opportunity to gather and congregate in public spaces is discouraged and even made illegal in some parts. UNICEF reported that COVID-19 displaced over 1.6 billion children in 190 countries, confining them to their homes and moving all their activities—including play- away from the public and physical spaces (UNICEF, 2021). Social media platforms emerged as a battleground for freedom, democracy, and subjectivity in the Googleburg Galaxy. COVID-19 forced the migration of all aspects of young people's lives to the digital, placing their actions of play—both re-enforcing and subversive play– into first spaces and a clear view of parents, teachers, coaches, practitioners, and other adults. This removed previously liminal spaces, third spaces for young people's lives. Whether in a virtual public space for all to see or in the privacy of handheld communication between contacts, play, storytelling, and being occurs almost exclusively on sites owned, controlled, and monitored by third parties who operate primarily on the economic interests of their shareholders.

Among those themes most often discussed in the stories told by young people when asked about their experiences of play during the pandemic were that play and digital play helped them to feel normal during the pandemic and how digital play served the role of the primary conduit for connection to others during COVID19 lockdowns. Herein lay the challenge with online or digital play for the Googleburg Galaxy since play, by its very definition, is supposed to exist outside of ordinary life. However, pandemic play research has shown that play during COVID-19 has taken on a more significant social role for young people. One of the ways that young people re-asserted a youth-centric space for identity formation and a connection was to digitally stabilize their everyday experiences through play with their peer group. As described, these activities sometimes remained in first spaces open for adult supervision and control. Other times, movement to the digital allowed for the escape from direct surveillance when social isolation due to COVID-19 placed young people under even more direct control of adults in their lives than at any other time in modern history. In either case, we have discovered that young people gather to play, be it in physical or digital spaces. Play remains central to their sense of self and understanding of the changing world.

A rights-based approach that recognizes the digital in all elements of young people's lives: law, advocacy, education, policy, media, play, work, and family, is the requirement a priori if we are to reclaim the Googleburg Galaxy. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all young people have the right to play. Articles 12 and 13 address the need to establish platforms for young people to share their voices and the required allyship from adults and institutions for activation. These are fundamental human rights. Our struggle to reclaim the media, the public sphere, the right to resistance, and a participatory democracy begins with establishing and enacting children's rights in digital spaces.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper advocates reclaiming digital spaces as third spaces despite their surveillance-heavy nature. It underscores the importance of third spaces, counterpublics,

and critical media literacy in fostering diverse, inclusive, and participatory democratic engagements within the Googleburg Galaxy. Because of the pandemic, young people are thrust into digital spaces and are navigating a landscape where play, storytelling, and identity formation occur under third-party surveillance. There's a growing need to recognize digital rights as integral to children's development, ensuring their right to play and shaping spaces for participatory democracy and resistance against hegemonic norms. Establishing and enacting these rights is pivotal in reclaiming digital spaces as avenues for authentic expression and protest.

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