“But what does it mean?”: inspirations and motivations behind *Spinnortality*

*Spinnortality* is a video game set in the near future where the player controls a powerful multinational company. Players research and market products, manipulate the media to affect culture, bribe politicians to deregulate industries and launch secret operations to gain control of nations. Inspired by real-world corporate scandals, I hope the game will not only be fun to play, but help players come to grips with the complexities of geopolitics and capitalism through these systems.

**Concept**

A management game set in a cyberpunk future, but reflecting many of today’s social, economic and political problems - sometimes satirizing them, sometimes directly critiquing them - as well as society’s worries about the future of technology. The game can act as a lens to analyse our culture and society.

**Background and motivation**

The game will be inspired by cyberpunk fiction (a science fiction subgenre focusing on corporate power, the future of technology, dystopian capitalist futures etc.) I believe that the future predicted by cyberpunk is happening right now; therefore, we can use cyberpunk works in the present to critique the failings of society today. Corporations having unfettered access to our personal data; creating AI technologies; entire nations being destabilized due to silicon valley’s material needs; the election of political wildcards, potentially with election hacking and fake news; these are all pressing issues in the present which can be talked about more freely, and explored more creatively, through an artistic medium, and through an artistic genre such as cyberpunk. I want to make a game that helps people understand this overwhelmingly complex system that is our global media/political/economic/technological system.

**Cyberpunk**

Cyberpunk – a literary subgenre from the 1980s focusing on the exploitation of the masses by big business and the domination of corporate interests – is a popular style within the games industry. It emerged from the 1980s as, I think, a reaction to the more capitalist policies that emerged in the West around that time (Thatcher, Reagan) and can be compared to the punk music movements of the time: it is a political, anti-establishment statement, and an attempt to make sense of an increasingly hostile, confusing world. It is a distorted, pulpy mirror of late capitalism and the concerns its writers had over it. Furthermore, the world we currently inhabit is filled with the kind of
technological breakthroughs and messy interactions with “real” life that cyberpunk writers were interested in. To list a few:

- The election of Donald Trump raises questions about the roles of hacking and user data on democracies
- AI is advanced enough that it can routinely beat humans at chess and (now) Go
- ISIS is using social media to recruit more effectively than many internet startups [Note: this is based on an article written several years ago so is probably no longer true.]
- Our lives are becoming shaped by the influence of barely-perceived, unquestioned algorithms
- Entire nations have been engulfed in war, fuelled by Western demand for the minerals required to make games consoles and phones (cf. Coltan)
- The U.S. military routinely makes deals with Hollywood action blockbusters and is using them to recruit new soldiers

The world has never been more confusing and complex, but cyberpunk is uniquely placed as a genre to critique and interrogate these new technologies and the way they affect our lives. I therefore decided to create a cyberpunk game which was fun and entertaining to play, but also capable of showcasing these issues and forcing players to confront them, if only in a small way. I am dissatisfied with the game industry’s approach to cyberpunk, however. Rather than understanding its political significance, many games use cyberpunk as a purely aesthetic layer. I asked myself, what would a truly cyberpunk game - concerned with radical politics and capitalism - look like? Refining this idea, I realised it would have to be complex, and touch on every facet of our current economic/technical/political world system.

Spinnortality will contain creative simulations to abstractly depict our global technological situation. These include: a culture system to depict the cultural differences between nations (in very broad, abstract terms); a marketing system where a product’s quality is less important than the marketing angle; broad-brush simulations of democratic and media systems; opportunities for players to garner public opinion with public relations events. No game has tried to model these systems in this way before, with a view toward future possibilities and problems.

**Theoretical framework**

Spinnortality is designed to teach through play, an application of a theory by Ian Bogost, a video game academic. For Bogost, games can teach players with “procedural rhetoric”: that is, the systems the player interacts with can, through their mechanics, help the player understand a complex system in real life. Bogost cites “The McDonalds game”, where players run McDonalds and are encouraged, through in-game systems, to make poor moral choices to maximize profits. The game shows how the system operates in the real world, and why the real-world system encourages this behavior.

Spinnortality is effectively a scaled-up version of the McDonalds game, but instead of depicting one supply chain it demonstrates the total system of global capitalism. This is unique to games: there are other games which have demonstrated the power of corporations (“Syndicate”, “AdvertCity”), and some which have dealt with political
complexities (the "Democracy" series), but none have grappled with these problems on this global scale, with so many interlocking systems. Players seek to dominate the globe, but in doing so they learn about the global economic and political realities of the present.

**Game systems**

Research and development: players assign workers to research cutting-edge projects. These projects satirise existing technology (social media, metacritic ratings, big data) and extrapolate into absurd but frightening possible futures.

Marketing: Each nation has a different culture, measured along 7 cultural axes. Each product can be marketed in a nation using a culture-appropriate marketing campaign.

Media: by buying up media outlets, or launching media products, players can gain control of the media and influence culture, making marketing easier. This criticizes the immense media power held by eg. Koch brothers, Rupert Murdoch etc.

Politics: Some products are illegal; to sell them, players must bribe politicians to deregulate industries. This criticizes the power of Super PACs and corporate lobbying in the US. Public relations: all these actions can result in low public opinion for your company. Players stage publicity stunts to gain the public’s favor. This criticizes meaningless stunts eg. ineffective “fight cancer” campaigns from companies with carcinogenic products.

Black ops: players can hire hitmen to quell unrest. This criticizes the “Coca Cola death squads” scandal, where Coca Cola was accused of assassinating union leaders

In conclusion

The text above was written for a funding application in Q1 2018, after *Spinnortality* had made its Kickstarter but before I had got into the nitty gritty of really polishing it. Looking back on this text is a curious experience: I feel like the game achieved a lot of these goals, but that’s largely because the groundwork for a lot of them had already been laid by this point. I was mostly trying to explain my thought-process to non-games funding people.

Did *Spinnortality* achieve these, and actually educate people about these things? I think so, at least a little. I occasionally get emails from people congratulating me on making a game that captures a lot of how big business works, and I seem to remember tweets to that effect. The problem, though, is that I think a lot of the people writing those things already have experience with the systems the game is critiquing, and just recognise it in the game. I’m not sure how many people played the game with zero experience of those things and came away with a slightly better understanding of them. Still, even if that’s only a handful of people I think it’s still worth doing.

In fact, I’d say one of the bigger problems with my whole *Spinnortality* methodology was the timing. Had this game come out before November 2016 and the election of Donald Trump, it might have been a genuinely invaluable resource to people struggling to understand late capitalism. Since then, the game has only become
steadily more irrelevant and unnecessary: the actions of Trump’s administration, and the continuing rise of right wing parties across the globe, have helped expose a lot of these destructive systems for what they really are, and how they really operate. A lot of players have had a go at Spinnortality and then turned to me, saying “Oh, so this is just modern politics.” It’s hard to keep up with the world when it gets this crazy.

Still, there wasn’t really a way for me to pre-empt that, and the current interest in politics, dictatorships and tech interacting is probably one reason why the game sold quite well at launch. I can’t complain.

And even if the game may not have been as eye-opening as it could have been if released in a different era, I’ve still had some interest from university professors who have licensed the game to use in classrooms. The fact they deemed my little game thought-provoking enough for that is pretty humbling.