

Gaming with the Spectacle of Community in *The Bonfire of the Humanities*

For “Hacking the Academic Conference: *Bonfire of the Humanities* in Retrospect.”
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By Andrew Houston

Part One: The Origin of the ‘People of the Torch’

I am a site-specific theatre creator. This means I often work on the creation of performance in spaces other than theatres, wherein the site is the source of the work, and as such it can be animated in various ways. In the case of *Bonfire of the Humanities*, the sites – the campuses of the Universities of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier – were important, but more so was the social geography of these places; that is, the political and cultural detail of these sites as certain educational institutions in southern Ontario, in particular, and Canada, as a whole.

Math, Computer Science, and Engineering departments dominate the campus of the University of Waterloo, and the many prominent buildings that serve the faculty, staff, and students who work in these powerful and important disciplines that dominate the landscape; Wilfrid Laurier is similarly dominated by its Business School. Yet, at both universities, the Faculty of Arts (as well as Music at Laurier) enrolls the greatest number of students, so each campus is actually more populated by Arts students, and this creates various levels of tension.

The theme of the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences in 2012 was “Crossroads of Cultures: Toward an Uncertain Future.” As this was the event for which we were creating *Bonfire of the Humanities*, all of the collaborators working on this project wanted to create an ARG that would address this Congress theme. Given my experience in creating site-specific performance, I began my work by considering how the Congress theme was embedded in the environments of the two campuses hosting the event. Ultimately, my main task on this project became directing the development of the characters who in various ways manifest the tensions of the landscapes of each campus, and who would become the ‘People of the Torch’; that is, members of the Torch Institute, a fictional group of students and former students who were dedicated to the opposition of Congress, and who would become the focus of opposition (a kind of crossroads) for those who chose to play the ARG.

The characters we created who became the People of the Torch were ‘janus mask’ versions of the actors’ personalities, perhaps in the same way that the Faculty of Arts on each campus often feels like the janus mask, the ‘other half’ or the disadvantaged sibling of the Engineering / Math student at UWaterloo or the Business student at WLU. Our process began with the request for each performer to create a video. The video was to be a two-to-five minute presentation of their identity at UWaterloo; that is, an account of the hopes and dreams of these young people as artists and why they came to UWaterloo to pursue these goals and realize themselves as artists here. These videos turned out to be surprisingly

candid displays of each person's identity; each performer was vulnerable in this process, and for this reason I knew this material would prove useful in a later stage of the process of creating the ARG.

Then each performer was instructed to create a character that was the opposite of the person in the video. I directed them to create this character in the mould of someone who might embody the deepest doubt and insecurity about how each performer represented him- or herself in the video; that is, each actor was instructed to create a character who might be his or her own worst enemy. Moreover, the characters created needed to be students at the University of Waterloo. Perhaps not surprisingly, the characters created were students in the dominant disciplines at the university: Engineering, Computer Science, and Accounting; they were deeply skeptical and antagonistic towards the arts, and as we developed them through various improvisational exercises, they were aggressively against arts education, and were willing to resort to fairly drastic measures to get their perspective across. In sum, we had created a small community of right-wing university students who would become key members of the Torch Institute.

Part Two: The (planned) Appearance of the Torch Institute at Congress

In the process of creating *Bonfire of the Humanities*, it took us a while to discover the best use of the People of the Torch in the game. We spent six months of weekly meetings discussing and developing the framework for the game, and it wasn't until the last two months that it became clear how the Torch Institute members could interact with players and followers, who were either in Waterloo at the Congress, or playing virtually, from a distance. Ultimately we settled on the idea that the Torch Institute had recruited students at the University of Waterloo, and they would become 'foot soldiers' in the campaign to discredit postsecondary arts and humanities education, and disrupt the smooth progress of the Congress. The impact of the People of the Torch would be experienced by players of the ARG and attendees of the Congress alike; players would know from playing the game that a Torch Institute activity (e.g.: a cryptic message left either in a specific place on campus or something similar conveyed online) was a clue that would lead them toward greater understanding of the Torch Institute and its presence at Congress; non-players would likely shrug off the incident as either a legitimate, if peculiar, protest or simply something that didn't involve them.

In the creation of the *Bonfire of the Humanities* we wanted to create puzzles that would gradually draw players into an awareness of what the Torch Institute was, who made up its membership, and why it was attacking Congress. My hope was that those who attended Congress – professors, researchers, students, and other intellects of the humanities and social sciences – might be concerned about a group that is acting in such a mean-spirited and reactionary way toward this obviously progressive, educational forum. We created three 'series' of videos, that we had planned to release gradually over the course of the four days that it would take to play the ARG. Each video was a solo performance by each Torch Institute character, given that these videos revealed clues to players who uncovered them

while playing the game, all of them took on a confessional quality. The first series, offered players information about how the Torch Institute was planning to symbolically burn down the most significant humanities building on the University of Waterloo campus, the Dana Porter Library. The second series, based on clues players found in the library, and accessible only through a USB key hidden beneath the main entrance walkway to the Dana Porter Library, would have alerted players to attend the Margaret Atwood keynote address the following day, in order to receive more clues, and so on, and so on.

We had also planned that Torch Institute members would interact with players through specific performative interventions at the conference events of certain targeted organizations; for example, the Canadian Association of Theatre Research or the Canadian Games Studies Association, both of which had several members who we could plan on playing the ARG. For example, a University of Waterloo Games Institute celebratory barbeque, for those who had successfully played the first part of the ARG, *Questing at Crossroads*, turned into an opportunity for the People of the Torch to hi-jack this happy affair, and turn the event toward the dark side, as we had planned they would march into the barbeque in a manner not unlike the National Socialists with books to be burned on the barbeques. Torch Institute characters were scheduled to appear in many locations throughout Congress, in a uniform made up of white lab coats, safety glasses, and carrying clipboards. We chose buildings being used for Congress conferences, such as the Douglas Wright Engineering Building, wherein our characters would enact a series of choral physical scores that we created; these physical scores generally took the form of a slow, meditative series of actions observed in the locations where they were staged, their effect was a kind of tableau vivant of stereotypically costumed scientists and engineers protesting the presence of artists and arts researchers in their midst. We hoped these meditative 'protests', would give conference-goers an interesting experience of a presence on campus that actively questions the value of their work.

The creation of these live events was a clear demonstration, in true ARG fashion that "this is not a game," or, at least, not just a game limited to online play. In thinking about our initial approach to this project and its subsequent shutdown, I now realize that perhaps this project was most usefully posing difficult questions about the nature of the Congress community and how this community is communicated to the rest of the world. We wanted to create an ARG that had site-specific theatre qualities, and in so far as *Bonfire of the Humanities* is based in part on the social geography of both the university campuses, maybe our project ultimately succeeded in the way it posed important questions about the formation, definition, and communication of 'community' on university campuses.

ARGs run the same ethical risks as site-specific performances, where the space of representation sits alongside and overlaps with the space(s) of reality, and thereby the players / audience and even by-standers may be prompted to consider how reality is constituted in our society, through play and performance. Here the speculation about the construction of society can be experienced as a form of play, tested, and examined as a form of performative spectacle; in this way

Bonfire of the Humanities posed important questions about who controls the events that happen on the campuses of UWaterloo and WLU, and what is the nature of the kind of community created at these schools, among its students, faculty and staff.

Part Three: How the Torch Institute Threatened the ‘Game’ of Community at Congress 2012

If we consider the relationship between the academic community at Congress and how the work of this community is communicated, through this event, to the rest of the world, as a kind of spectacle, it is possible to see how even though the *Bonfire of the Humanities* was shut down before being fully realized as an ARG, as a censored presentation of research at Congress, it still offered a compelling, complicit critique of academia as spectacle. Ultimately what was most interesting about *Bonfire* is not so much the way in which we tried to use spectacle to mobilize discussion among an academic community of Congress, but in the way we were trying to reveal that the idea of this academic community is itself spectacle: “a matter of appearance, representation and simulation” (Schmidt 28).¹

Bonfire of the Humanities attempted to produce a representation of a right-wing voice in the academic community of the Humanities and Social Sciences, not with the goal of recovering some ‘real’ politics that lies behind this representation, but in order to explore the workings of representationality itself: to build a alternative game to disrupt the ‘game of Congress’, and most of all the game we wanted to disrupt – to pose questions about – was that of the presumption of a community of scholars and students itself. In this way, perhaps *Bonfire of the Humanities* was not creating an opposition between the idea of an engaged community with that of a falsified spectacle; instead, I think our work attempted to explore what might be called a “politics of appearance,” in which the conditions of representation are not regarded as that which must be overcome for a meaningful politics to emerge, but are themselves the domain of politics.

I wish to draw parallels between the provocation of *Bonfire of the Humanities* and Jean-Luc Nancy’s arguments about the relationship between spectacle and community, which he lays out in *The Inoperative Community*. Nancy’s approach is particularly relevant because he is concerned with an explicit awareness of the threat of totalitarianism, and this of course, echoes both the politics of the Torch Institute, and perhaps sadly the Faculties of Arts at both University of Waterloo and Laurier, given their rash suspension of our ARG.

Through his idea of an ‘inoperative community’, Nancy seeks to revitalize an understanding of ‘community’ as a source of radical political vision. But in his reappraisal, he insists on an ontology of community that is conceived as neither the coming together of distinctly subjectivated individuals, nor the expression of any

¹ For this analysis of spectacle in public performance, and in particular the use of the ideas of Jean-Luc Nancy on this subject, I am indebted to the work of Theron Schmidt, and his excellent examination of the work of Christoph Schlingensiefel (see Works cited).

transcendental spirit of the people. Nancy characterizes both of these as based on a kind of 'immanentism', a dangerous ideology that tends, in the end, towards totalitarianism (Nancy 3). Nancy argues that by idealizing some form of being that presupposes and outlives our momentary instances of coming together, both individualism and totalitarianism prepare the ground for the embodiment of the people in a single form (Nancy xxxix). Instead, Nancy is interested in an idea of political community which is built from the ground up on the basis of selves (or 'singularities') that are defined by their finitude, rather than their autonomy, and 'which always presents itself as being-in-common' (Nancy 28). The idea of 'finitude' implies a kind of incompleteness, but Nancy is not suggesting that community might provide that missing completion. Instead, in Nancy's ontology *all* Being is characterized by finitude, including both the Being of singularity and the Being of community.

In place of ideas of wholeness, completion or communion, Nancy proposes an idea of Being whose very Being-ness exists through its exposure to others, an exposure which he describes as "compearance" or "co-appearance". In his later writing, Nancy reiterates that compearance is not some form of revelation or manifestation, the 'becoming-visible' that has an ongoing, invisible existence separate from its appearance. Instead it is only through co-appearance that our being-together, our experience of society, is constituted:

In this sense, there is no society without spectacle; or more precisely, there is no society without the spectacle of society. Although already a popular ethnological claim or, in the Western tradition, a claim about the theatre, this proposition must be understood as ontologically radical. There is no society without the spectacle because society is the spectacle itself (Nancy qtd. in Schmidt 29).

In this way, Nancy reverses the typical opposition between spectacle and society, when he writes: "the various critiques of "spectacular" alienation are, in the end, grounded on the distinction between good spectacle and a bad spectacle" (Nancy qtd. in Schmidt 30). To illustrate these positions, Nancy evokes the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Guy Debord.

In this characterization, Rousseau stands for the argument that the 'good' spectacle is a faithful representation of 'the people itself', a community that exists independently of its specularization and indeed is alive in the spectacle itself – as exemplified at the university by frosh ceremonies, orientation events, promotional campaigns for fund raising purposes, and indeed by the spectacle of Congress, itself. The key to these examples of the 'good' spectacle is total participation. On the other hand, Debord represents the position that the 'bad' spectacle – that is, commodity based media culture, which I might underline, means social media, on-line gaming, and other such lures of the digital realm, is an unfaithful representation of our true potential, as exemplified by Debord's opening declaration in *Society of the Spectacle*: "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord 12). Debord and his followers called for the

construction of 'situations' that would overcome this alienated separation. As Debord describes it, this activity "begins on the other side of the modern collapse of the idea of the theatre" – again, through the involvement of its participants as neither spectators nor actors but as those who 'live'.

However, Nancy argues that the distinction between spectacle and community that underpins ideas of both the 'good' and the 'bad' spectacle is misconceived. Instead, the spectacle of community is all there is: for Nancy, this is the only basis for an idea of community that is not derived from immanentism, and that does not therefore prepare the ground for totalitarianism. Nancy argues against the myth of the 'good' mimesis of the Athenian theatre, in which the spectacular representation of the people was supposedly the same thing as the realization of the ideal community; he also rejects the need to transcend the 'bad' mimesis that allegedly characterizes postmodern society and which must be overcome in the name of true politics. In contrast to this false opposition, Nancy proposes an understanding of community that is fundamentally spectacular.

But what would this look like? In a rare passage in which Nancy comments on the kind of action that might prepare the ground for the inoperative community, he writes:

We do not have to identify ourselves as 'we', as a 'we'. Rather, we have to dis-identify ourselves from every sort of 'we' that would be the subject of its own representation, and we have to do this insofar as 'we' co-appear (Nancy qtd. in Schmidt 30).

Unlike Rousseau or Debord, Nancy does not distinguish between a 'world of appearances' and the world of 'real' identities and relationships; instead, it is through our appearances on what Nancy calls "the stage of the 'we' that we are related" – and we are only related insofar as we appear.

I want to consider the forms of co-appearance that we attempted to produce in *Bonfire of the Humanities* – a project that deliberately tried to frustrate the processes of identification, and in which 'we' exists as a disputed concept, as a fiction, as something not yet determined rather than as a reliable category in relation to which one can either belong or remove oneself. In this sense, even in its censor, *Bonfire of the Humanities* became a project that demonstrated our unease with the production of community as an aesthetic object, which is precisely one of the aims of a university administration in concert with the federal government, when Congress comes to your campus.

In a sense, our game was a form of activism, but not the traditional kind that works through declared opposition to available discourses, rather our ARG was more playful, and operated on the level of appearances, spectacle, or on the level of the representational regime of images; this is how we created a game (that is not a game) of politics. *Bonfire of the Humanities* is clearly not what Rousseau had in mind: this is not the 'good spectacle' of the restored community. Nor is our work Brechtian, for no distance is possible, either for director, player, or spectator. We were not like Debord; the game's immersive situations and supportive videos,

where not alternatives to the alienation of everyday life, but rather they were our attempt to embrace the everyday of life on the campuses of the University of Waterloo and Wilfrid Laurier, in all its complexity and ugliness. This made for a fragmented and chaotic scene, but perhaps this is what is implied by Nancy's notion of the inoperative community: singularities that are not working together to produce some ideal form of themselves, but are instead manifested as fractured and fractious, inconsistent and incomplete. Such a spectacle might be the necessary site of our being-in-common, for it is only as we dis-identify ourselves from this fictional 'we' – and *game* with this myth of community – that we begin to appear to each other: ecstatic, finite and exposed.

Works Cited

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

Schmidt, Theron. "Christoph Schlingensiefel and the Bad Spectacle." *Performance Research*, 16 (4) 2011, pp. 27-33.

HASTAC Panel Schedule

"Hacking the Academic Conference: Bonfire of the Humanities In Retrospect"

Lauren Burr, Michael Hancock and Andy Houston, University of Waterloo

11:45 am – 1:00 pm;

Session 45 ACE 005

Lauren/Michael: 5 minutes (?) explanation of game

Lauren: ARGs and pervasive games, politics and ethics (15 minutes)

Andy: Site specific theatre connection, inoperative communities, "crossroads" theme, etc. (15 minutes)

Michael: Pipe Bomb and political games; serious/persuasive games; why can't we use games to talk about real issues? (15 minutes)

Questions / Discussion.