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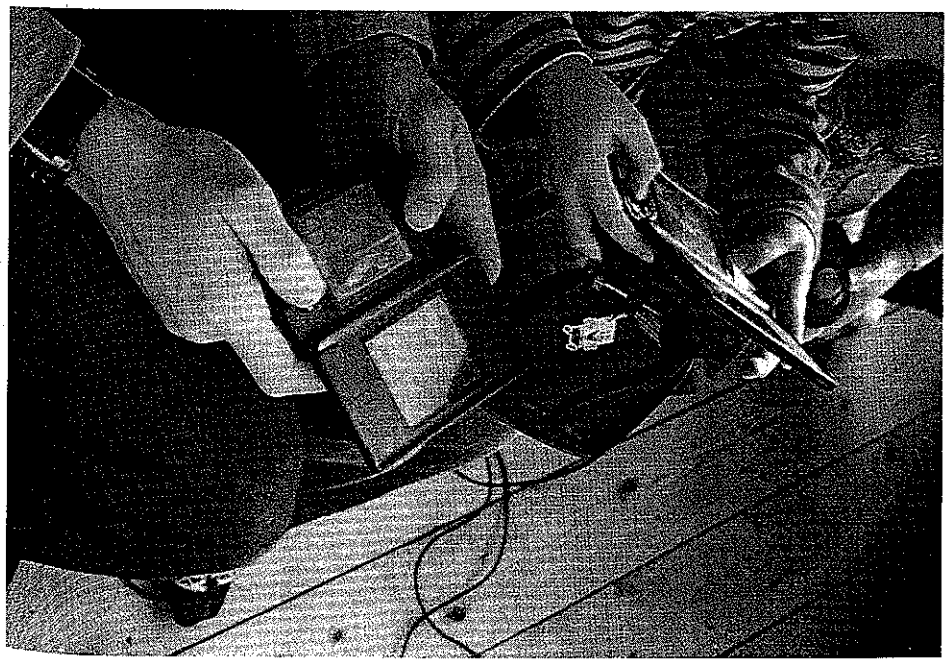
by Lister, et. al.

4 New Media in Everyday Life

4.1 Everyday life in cyberspace

From clocks to telegraphs to radio and television, new media have always woven themselves into everyday life, interfering with existing patterns of spatiotemporal organisation, generating new rhythms and spaces. The migration of computer technology from industry and research laboratory to the home over the past thirty years or so has intensified these processes. The popular culture of new media began with videogames, a medium that brought with it a technological imaginary of an everyday future disappearing into the 'cyberian apartness' of virtual worlds. As, over time, some new digital media have become unremarkable due to their familiarity and ubiquity, and others have been refashioned or displaced, we can see not a Narnia or Matrix-like division of virtual and actual worlds, but rather a complicated interweaving of mediated, lived, time and space. For example, mobile devices such as cell phones, GPS/satnav, MP3 players, and handheld games consoles, draw bodies and communication across everyday and technological realms and temporalities. Attention, throughout the



4.1 Handheld virtual worlds

working or playing day jumps to the communicational polyrhythms of diverse digital media: from the Tetris-like deluge of the email Inbox; the rapid volleys of IM and SMS; the insistent realtime pull of the social network page; the bubbles of virtuality that pop into existence as a handheld games console is snapped open; the gravitational pull of persistent virtual worlds such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft* with their event horizons from which little or nothing may escape for hours.

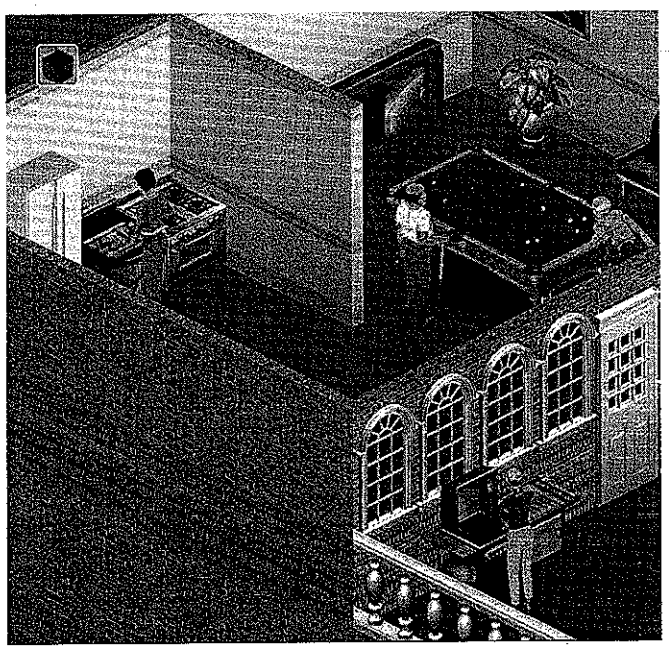
Cultural and Media Studies offers vital tools, concepts and methods for the study of a mediated everyday life, and this Part will survey important research in this field. It will identify useful tools, concepts and methods for the study of everyday cultures of technologies and media technologies. This will be a critical survey however, as it will become clear that some of the underlying tenets and assumptions of Cultural and Media Studies (and the humanities and social sciences more generally) limit the possibilities of the study of technoculture. In particular three foundational, and interlinked, assumptions will be interrogated. These are:

1 that culture, everyday life, individuals and households are materially and conceptually distinct from technologies – that the former 'adopt' technologies for instance or suffer the 'impact' of new technologies, and hence that distinctions between subject and object are absolute

2 that technologies are socially shaped but that society is not technologically shaped

3 that human activity – in the form of social, historical or economic forces, or subjectivity and identity – is the sole motive force or agency in everyday life and culture.

This section will introduce, synthesise and deploy some key alternative ways of thinking about everyday technoculture drawn from the emerging field of new media studies, from the study of videogames and from cybercultural studies.



4.2 *The Sims*: everyday life as cyberspace.

4.1.1 Everyday life

For accounts of everyday life in the study of media culture and technologies, see Silverstone (1994), Mackay (1997), and Highmore (2001)

The concept of everyday life is central to work in Cultural Studies and Media Studies. It covers the family relationships, routines, cultural practices and spaces through which people make sense of the world. On the one hand then, everyday life is the site in which the popular meanings and uses of new media are negotiated and played out. On the other hand, nearly all of the discussions of new media to a greater or lesser degree make claims that they transform, or will soon transform (or transcend) day-to-day life, its spatio-temporal limits, its restrictions and power structures. The nature of this transformation is contentious; for some observers new media offer new creativities and possibilities, for others they reinforce and extend existing social constraints and power relationships.

Everyday life is a central concept within Cultural Studies' approach to technologies. It is studied and theorised as:

- the market for which companies develop consumer hardware and software
- the site of practices and relationships in which sense is made of new media
- the focal point of an interlocking set of convergences of consumer, media, educational and entertainment technologies and markets
- the social conditions which are, to a greater or lesser degree, transformed by the use and consumption of new media
- the absent or underplayed term in utopian visions of new knowledges and shifting identities in cyberspace – as alienation and routine to the connectivity and creativity emerging in Internet communication media
- the site of consumption of mediated popular culture, not least the images and dramas from comics, television and video that constitute a commercial technological imaginary.

Popular culture is here taken to mean both the commercially produced artefacts of entertainment culture (television and television programmes, toys, films, etc.) and the lived practices, experiences and contexts within which these artefacts are engaged with and consumed

From the perspective of Cultural Studies, the 'newness' of any new medium is always tempered by the longevity of the economic and social conditions from which it emerges and the domestic and cultural contexts – from the architecture and layout of the home to the relative stability of the nuclear family – into which it is inserted. In his study of an old medium that was once new, Raymond Williams argues that the arrival of television as a popular medium was bound up with historical and cultural processes originating in the Industrial Revolution. His notion of 'mobile privatisation' highlights, for example, a complex of developments linking the privatisation and domestication of screen media with television's usurpation of cinema, and the new mobilities of the privatised family afforded by technologies such as the motor car:

> Socially, this complex is characterised by the two apparently paradoxical yet deeply connected tendencies of modern urban living: on the one hand mobility, on the other hand the more apparently self-sufficient family home. The earlier period of public technology, best exemplified by the railways and city lighting, was being replaced by a kind of technology for which no satisfactory name has yet been found: that which served an at once mobile and home-centred way of living: a form of *mobile privatisation*. Broadcasting in its applied form was a social product of this distinctive tendency.
>
> (Williams 1990a [1975]: 26)

However, whilst these longer historical trajectories have shaped the everyday world into which new media insinuate themselves, and indeed have shaped the design of, and intentions for, new media technologies, the new media and the cultural activities and uses to which they are put are by no means wholly determined by these contexts. In its review of research into, and theories of, technology and culture in everyday life this section will highlight how newness and continuity are identified and articulated, and signal the underlying conceptions of the relationships of determination between technologies, people and culture.

4.1.2 Cyberspace

Cultural Studies' concentration on everyday life would seem at first glance to be unhelpful in the study of new media and cyberculture. The former implies the mundane and quotidian, the routine and ordinary – all the features of daily existence from which the latter, in both their fictional and actual forms, promise to transform. Both celebrations and critiques of cyberspace tend to posit its separateness, its profound otherness to everyday life, embodiment, subjectivity. For Michael Heim, 'cyberspace is Platonism as a working concept', and 'the cybernaut seated before us, strapped into sensory-input devices, appears to be, and is indeed, lost to this world. Suspended in computer space, the cybernaut leaves the prison of the body and emerges in a world of digital sensation' (Heim 1993).

The intense excitement generated by new media forms such as the World Wide Web and Virtual Reality in the late 1980s and early 1990s has waned as such media have become part of a commonly experienced media world. However, the notion of 'cyberspace' as a separate, emancipatory (or more often, threatening) realm within, yet distinct from, everyday media culture persists. Journalists routinely affirm the apartness of Internet media such as chatrooms and social networking sites in articles on the ominous implications for children and young people. Here cyberspace is either an alienating, anti-social distraction from more authentic

4.3 Telewest brochure. Courtesy of Telewest

social and communicative activities, or a dangerous realm stalked by predators. Manufacturers of, and service providers for, new (or newly upgraded) digital communication media also invoke the transformation of daily routines and domestic space through the collision of actual and virtual space, albeit in an enthusiastic and celebratory tone.

Another persistent model of a more fully mediated everyday life is that of ubiquitous computing. Futurologists from Nicholas Negroponte to the US National Academy of Engineering's Ray Kurzweil have predicted personalised media, the transformation of everyday products and furniture into 'smart' objects through the minituarisation of computer chips and circuits, and recently, the possibilities of nanotechnology for both everyday life and the human body and mind's relationship with it:

> Intelligent nanobots will be deeply integrated in the environment, our bodies and our brains, providing vastly extended longevity, full-immersion virtual reality involving all of the senses . . . and enhanced human intelligence.
>
> (Ray Kurzweil, quoted in Jha 2008).

However, excitement about, and anticipation of, particular consumer technological trajectories (currently minituarisation, virtualisation, pervasiveness, etc.) does inform and shape producers' designs and research, and consumers' expectations and willingness to invest in new formats and devices

It is not our concern in this book to assess the likelihood of any particular prediction for new media cultures coming to pass. A glance at any past predictions for future everyday technologies from jetpacks to holographic television would remind us that predictions often tell us more about the immediate concerns and technological imaginary of the time they were made than about their future.

For example, Kevin Robins, in a widely anthologised essay 'Cyberspace and the worlds we live in', argued that the hyperbole that characterised early, and enthusiastic, cybercultural studies rendered cyberspace as little more than a rhetorical or ideological construction. William Gibson's articulation of cyberspace as a 'consensual hallucination' is, Robins argued, applicable to discourses of non-fictional cyberspace (i.e. actual VR or Internet applications and practices), at best perhaps representing a naive neophilia, a 'metaphysics of technological progress – whatever comes next must be better than what went before' (Robins 1996: 25). At worst (and it is clear Robins suspects the worst), it is an ideological construction, a faith in new technologies blinding its celebrants to the real, here-and-now, political and economic contexts from which the technologies spring and to the problems and contradictions of which they assert false solutions. This faith presents

> a common vision of a future that will be different from the present, of a space or reality that is more desirable than the mundane one that presently surrounds and contains us. It is a tunnel vision. It has turned a blind eye on the world we live in.
>
> (Robins 1996: 1)

Robins's critique of this particular cyber-rhetoric is convincing and amusing, yet misses an important point. Neither enthusiastic cyberculturalists nor their critics address the *reality* of cyberspace as a set of already existing industrial, entertainment and everyday technocultural phenomena. Robins's target is cybercultural discourse, he says nothing about actual, material, technologies of cyberspace. For these celebrants all is new, for their critics all is old – or an even worse upgrade of the old. The object of each is not lived technoculture but concepts and images, fictions and speculations. It becomes clear that on the one hand a more nuanced conception of the relationship between the 'new' and the 'old' in everyday digital culture is required; while on the other, that the materiality, the reality of new technologies and new technocultures must be addressed.

In their ethnographic study of Internet use in Trinidad, Daniel Miller and Don Slater question the assumption that the virtual and the everyday or material are distinct realms. They argue that the Internet *cannot* be explained in terms of a fictional or speculative cyberspace, 'a kind of placeless place'. Indeed we can only make sense of it as it is encountered in concrete places and through specific practices. For the individuals, families and groups studied, Internet media such as email and websites are experienced, they argue, not as virtual but as 'concrete and mundane enactments of belonging' (Miller and Slater 2000: 4). Just as new media in this case were not experienced as places apart from 'real life', so too the changes brought about through the interaction of new media and Trinidadian culture, while significant, were not experienced as revolutionary transformation, but as continuous with already existing social structures and senses of identity. Indeed the authors argue that new media quickly cease to represent exciting new futures and are incorporated into the fabric of everyday experience. Importantly though, this is not to argue that there is nothing new or revolutionary in the mediations of the Internet and everyday life (or that the widespread sense of 'space' that computer media produce is false). Rather it is to suggest that any progressive understanding of the potentialities of new media in everyday life is only possible by rejecting a notion of 'a self-enclosed cyberian apartness' (Miller and Slater 2000: 5) *and* recognising the materiality of these technologies and their place in everyday lived experience. We could instead think of a productive tension between the places and practices of new media: 'these spaces are important as part of everyday life, not apart from it' (Miller and Slater 2000: 7).

However in their emphasis on the rolling horizon of everyday media mundanity, Miller and Slater downplay aspects of new media that are genuinely novel. Everyday cyberspaces do exist, generated by telematic communication through networked and mobile digital media, and in the dynamic software worlds of videogames. Whilst they are thoroughly enmeshed in, and accessed from, everyday life, they generate new modes of communication, new games, new opportunities for identity play, and new relationships between the human and technological. The virtual and the actual are intertwined, and each is all the more interesting for it. This Part offers some productive theoretical resources for the study of the historical, social and cultural dynamics that shape, and are shaped by, everyday technoculture.

4.1.3 Consuming new media

The concept of consumption is central to Cultural and Media Studies' approach to technology in everyday life. It is a contested term: seen variously as the primary cultural practice in a passive, greedy consumer society; or as a potentially rich and creative way of making sense of individual identity in a complex world: 'Rather than being a passive, secondary, determined activity, consumption . . . is seen increasingly as an activity with its own practices, tempo, significance and determination' (Mackay 1997: 3–4). Though Cultural and Media Studies are characterised by a wide range of conceptual and methodological approaches, it is possible to generalise and assert that their analyses of technology and consumption tend to be based on certain premisses. First, digital media technologies tend not to be seen as fundamentally distinct from 'old' electronic media, or even, in some studies, other domestic technologies, such as microwaves or freezers (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). Second, there is a general reluctance to privilege either consumption or production in the generation of the meanings of a domestic technological device. That is to say, the meanings and uses of domestic technologies (and consumer goods and mediated images) are not fixed in either the moment of their production or in the act of their consumption. Rather, they are the always contingent product of the relationship between the constraint or 'encoding' of meaning through pro-

duction and marketing, and the creative activities through which individuals and groups make sense of or 'decode' these meanings. Cultural and Media Studies' work on domestic media technologies is based on a political dynamic between 'constraint' and 'creativity' (Mackay 1997). Producers attempt to constrain the uses and meanings of their products, consumers negotiate these intended meanings more or less in accordance with the producers' desires, and Cultural Studies scholars attempt to identify creative or progressive trends within the consumers' negotiations.

The emphasis on the 'meanings' rather than, say, the 'uses' of media technologies here is significant. It draws our attention to the cultural nature of technologies, for instance the ways in which the acquisition of the latest mobile phone or MP3 player might be driven more by its owner's desire for status than by its functionality. Producers and advertisers operate by the long-established dynamic of differentiating essentially similar products through the generation of images and brand identities. In this regard, a phone is the same as any other commodity. However, the notion of 'meaning' by no means exhausts the cultural operation and circulation of media technologies, indeed concentrating only on their discursive construction detracts from their material nature as technologies, in actual lived moments of adoption and use. This tension between meaning and use will be explored further below. For now we will look at some ethnographic case studies that draw out some of the dynamics of the relationships between new media technologies and their domestic context.

4.2 Everyday life in a media home

In an influential Cultural and Media Studies textbook on consumption and everyday life, Hugh Mackay argues that '[t]o understand the consumption of technologies in households, we have to understand the practices of everyday life there – how new technologies are implicated in household routines and activities' (Mackay 1997: 277). To this end, and with particular reference to computer media (or information and communication technologies – ICTs), he identifies four key areas of enquiry:

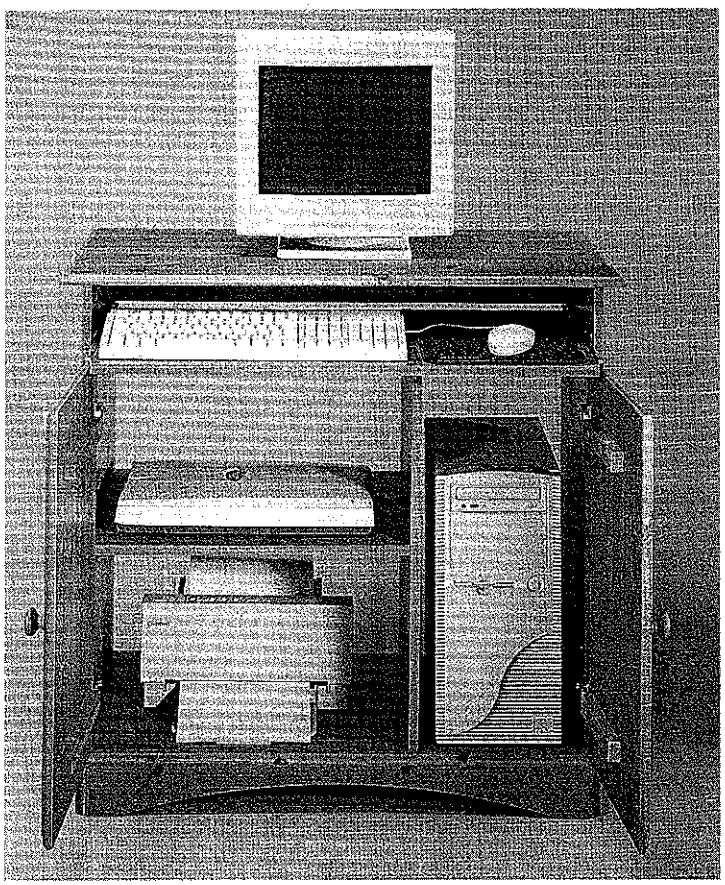
Hugh Mackay, *Consumption and Everyday Life: culture, media and identities*, London (1997). See also Dewdney and Boyd (1995), du Gay *et al.* (1997), Silverstone and Hirsch (1992), Howard (1998)

- the significance of consumption of ICTs for domestic lives and relationships
- how ICTs are implicated in the establishment of individual and family identities
- the relationship between household members' public and private worlds; and
- how technology (as well as the household) is transformed in the process of domestication and incorporation (Mackay 1997: 278).

The emphasis here is on the shifting or negotiated meanings and implications of media technologies as they are adopted and consumed in the home, in everyday life. Shaun Moores' study of the 'domestication' of satellite television exemplifies Mackay's four areas of enquiry. In describing the 'embedding' of a new media technology in the home, he too draws a picture of domestic media technology adoption and consumption as dynamic and requiring negotiation between household members and their established consumption tastes, patterns and devices. Households are not static environments into which media technologies are straightforwardly 'inserted'. Often the purchase of new media technologies coincides with 'the redrawing of domestic boundaries and relationships' (Moores 1993a: 627). For example growing children may make new demands for educational and entertainment hardware. Also, households have their own dynamics and politics, not least along the lines of gender and generation. Such power relationships intersect and interact with producers' expectations of

the uses and meaning of new media products: 'Social divisions of gender or generation produce differential dispositions towards a technology like satellite TV' (Moores 1993a: 633).

4.2.1 Home computing



4.4 Tradition and newness. Courtesy of Argos

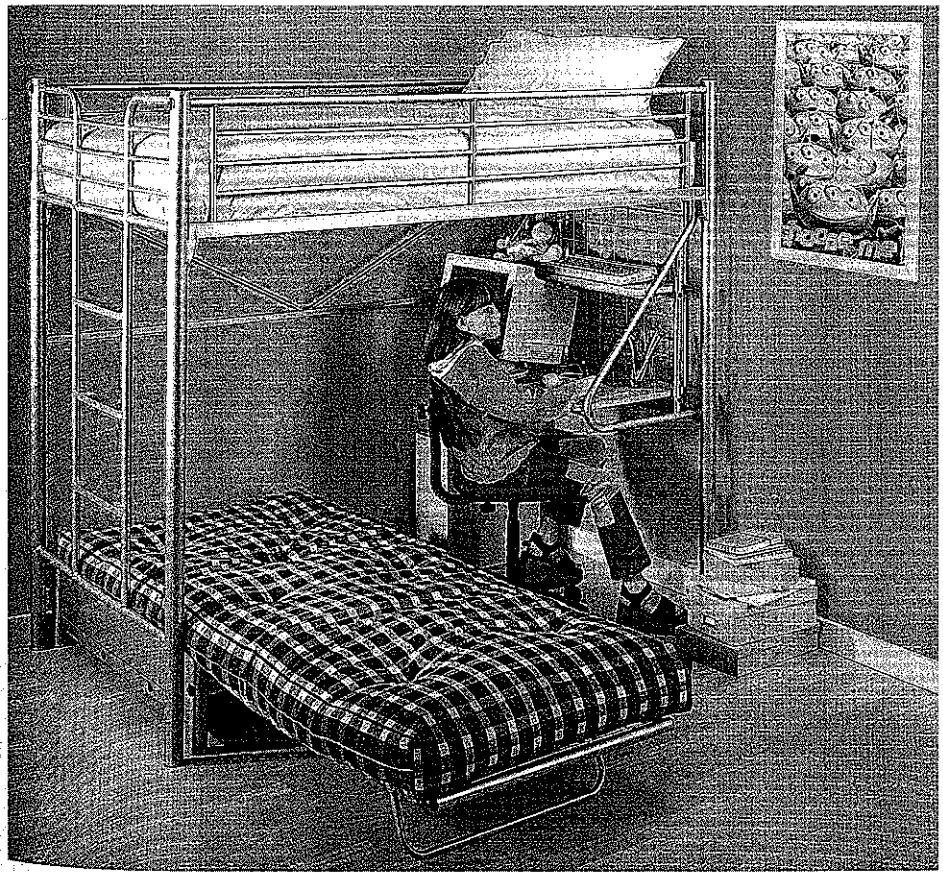
In a large-scale ethnographic study, the *Screen Play* project (based in the Graduate School of Education at Bristol University, and conducted from 1998 to 2000) researched children's 'techno-popular culture' and its implications for education. The project recently drew attention to issues of access to new media, first by recognising that many children do not have a PC in their home, and second by pointing out constraints on access to, and use of, ICTs, even in those households which did have computers. They found that physical as well as social or familial constraints had significant effects on the ways in which computers and networks are accessed. For instance, the families studied in the Screen Play research tended not to place PCs in the main communal spaces of the house – for example in the living room alongside the television – but rather in spare or 'dead' space: landings, spare bedrooms, under stairs, lofts:

> **Mrs H** Well because it's the other side of the house at the back so you don't have to hear it. So if you were in here watching television and we've got company then they're out the way.

Q Why did it go in the spare room? What was the reason. What was the thinking?
Mr D Because it was a spare room.
Mrs D Because its nobody's room in there and just let everybody else use it. It's a sort of spare room cum office.
Steven, 13 It's not as private as your bedroom.

(Facer, Furlong, Furlong and Sutherland 2001b: 18)

It is clear that the existing layout and use of space in the house affected the ways in which the new technologies were used. Computers were occasionally placed in children's bedrooms, though this was rarely the ideal, 'one child one computer' image of the instrumental fantasies of computer manufacturers or furniture catalogues. As Sara McNamee observes in her study of the domestic gender politics of video game playing, the location within the home of a computer or games console can lead to unequal use. This inequality is frequently structured around gender. She notes that girls *say* they like playing videogames as much as boys, but often *play* less. This is in part due to the fact that although consoles are often shared within the family, especially between siblings, they are usually kept in the boys' rooms, and hence, girls' access is controlled by their brothers: 'the machine becomes a symbolic focus around which gender relations are negotiated and expressed in domestic space' (McNamee



4.5 One child, one PC, and the domestic ergonomics of new media. Courtesy of Argos

1998: 197). So, it is argued, even where everyday consumption or use of digital networks is possible, it is constrained by socio-economic factors, established household politics and relationships of gender and age, and by material constraints of space and time.

Ironically, the same 'open' nature of computers that appears to free them from established media constraints can also entail complex negotiations around access. In households that can only afford one machine (i.e. most: 14 out of the 16 Screen Play case studies), new systems of 'time-sharing' have to be developed to allow different family members to perform different uses, 'managed around the temporal organisation . . . of the family':

> **Mum** . . . Steven normally gets in first you see, so he would always get the opportunity of going to the computer first. So we said 'that's not fair'. So Mondays and Thursdays Helen has first choice. She can decide whether she wants to go on the computer or watch television and on the other . . . I mean it tends to be just the Tuesday and Wednesday because Friday you're quite often not here or doing other things. – But we try and stick to only two hours on the computer each in any one day. – Generally speaking that's probably about enough. In terms of playing games. If they want to then go on and do some homework, then that's fine.
>
> (Facer *et al.* 2001b: 19).

This organisation is also partly determined by discourses of computer use that originate outside the home, in particular the conflict between the domestic computer as an educational resource and as a leisure/entertainment device (see **4.3.2**). This conflict is evident even at the level of the arrangement of the 'space' of the computer itself. In many families, for example, one person (often, but not always, an adult) takes responsibility for the set-up of file-management systems and 'parental control' systems, installing short-cuts, de-installing software and freeing up memory for authorised or 'preferred' practices, perhaps removing games from the hard drive.

Thus the different levels of knowledge and authority within the family in relation to the computer ensure a different relationship to its use. Facer *et al.* (2001b) draw on Michel de Certeau's concept of 'tactics' to analyse the various methods by which the 'less powerful' in this context attempt to use the computer in their own ways. For example, by disguising games playing as homework or the grasping of an opportunity to use the computer in the competitive game of access:

> **Helen, 10** And I was having a go at that and I couldn't get past this particular bit and I called Steven . . .
> **Steven, 13** I did it in 30 seconds.
> **Helen** He did it in 30 seconds.
> **Q** Right. So if Steven shows you something . . .
> **Steven** He normally does it.
> **Q** He normally does it and then you carry on.
> **Helen** And then I carry on. Or he normally does it. He pushes me off and he goes the rest of the game. He does that a lot of the time.
>
> (Facer *et al.* 2001b: 20)

Alternatively, the tactical 'occupation of the digital landscape', though 'only ever temporary and transient' (Facer *et al.* 2001b: 20) can also be effected through changing the computer's desktop and settings, adjusting screen savers, etc. Thus, the features that can in

some circumstances be seen as making the computer 'personal' are here tactics within a struggle for ownership of a communal 'space'.

The open, multifunctional nature of domestic computer technology can be seen, then, as a site of conflict or self-assertion. Family members may try to establish their own 'black boxes' (see **4.3.1**), however partial and temporary: 'This poaching of the computer space, a temporal appropriation of technology . . . can also be seen as a negotiation to fix the meaning and, subsequently, function of a technology which has the potential for multiple purposes' (Facer *et al*. 2001b: 21).

The networked home

Domestic access to the Internet is shaped in part by the same everyday constraints of time, space, access and resources as stand-alone PC use, though in some ways online activity can face more restrictions. One factor commonly cited by parents interviewed by Screen Play for monitoring and restricting their children's access to the Internet is the cost of telephone calls for Internet access in the UK. Since this particular study was undertaken, the rise of broadband connections has been marked, and this in itself changes the character of Internet access significantly, enabling people to 'treat the Internet as a ubiquitous, "always-on" dimension of their lives, instead of a special place they visited occasionally' (Burkeman 2008). This said, many homes still rely on telephone connection (broadband overtook the phone line as most common domestic Internet access in the UK in 2005). Broadband connections have done nothing to allay widespread anxieties about the Internet as potentially dangerous, threatening intrusion of pornography or even – through chat rooms – paedophiles, into children's lives. There is an irony here: many parents bought computers for their children because of the perception of the increasing dangers of them playing outside. Now the Internet seems to bring a dangerous outside world directly into the hitherto safe private realm. These anxieties had led some of the parents either to not go online in the first place, or strictly to control access through passwords or adult supervision:

> As the permeable boundaries of domestic space are made apparent in the introduction of the Internet (and television before it) into the home, the space of the networked home computer becomes a site of surveillance in which children's activities are monitored in not dissimilar ways to those employed in the space outside the front door.
>
> (Facer *et al*. 2001b: 23)

So even where everyday consumption or use of digital networks is possible, it is constrained by socio-economic factors, established household politics and relationships of gender and age, by material constraints of space and time and by anxieties about the relationships between everyday space and cyberspace.

4.2.2 Theories of media consumption

The terminology of constraint, creativity and consumption is used to study all manner of everyday cultural practices. Its use in the study of technocultural artefacts and activities however raises questions. If consumption is seen as a primarily symbolic activity, one of meaning-making, is there a significant difference between this meaning-making and *use*? What is the difference between *consuming* and *using* a media technological device? Or, if the consumption of a product is motivated by the consumer's identity construction, is this process different from the materially productive activities of technological use? When technologies are used to *do*

or *make* things, are the opposing terms 'constraint' and 'creativity' the most productive starting point for analysing the dynamics and power relationships mobilised? Do technologies themselves have any influence over their uses or meanings or are these latter fully shaped through the human activities of production and consumption? Within the diverse debates around new media the concept of consumption may be configured differently, ignored or substituted by terms with different connotations. We will now set out the key discursive positions on the everyday consumption of media technologies. This grouping of discourses is far from definitive, and each brackets together some quite divergent positions, but they do give an indication of the debates and issues.

Cybercultural studies

Though the term cyberculture may seem rather dated, evoking a late-twentieth-century technological imaginary of immersive VR worlds, headsets and an SF aesthetic of black leather and mirror shades, it has been very influential in the development of the academic study of new media. Cybercultural studies brackets together a diverse range of theoretical approaches to new cultural technologies. They share a premiss that technology, especially computer technology, is instrumental in profound transformations in contemporary culture and beyond – primarily through new, intimate relationships between the human and the technological. The cybercultural tone is by and large optimistic about this change, sometimes falling into Utopian assumptions about the emancipatory possibilities of digital media such as virtual reality and certain Internet media.

The term 'consumption' itself is rarely used in this context, indeed its absence tells us something of cybercultural studies' understanding of digital media. In popular celebrations of the 'newness' of new media, consumption is browsing, surfing, using, 'viewsing', we do consume so much as we are 'immersed'. Digital media and virtual culture are generally seen to transcend, or render obsolete, mundane questions of commercial interests or already existing practices of media use. Either new relationships with technology – from immersion in cyberspace to the various notions of the cyborg – are so intimate that any sense of 'consuming' technology as a distinct set of devices and media becomes impossible, or 'consumption' as a mode of engaging in culture belongs to the bad 'old' pre-digital media. These electronic media are centralised and authoritarian whereas new information and communication media are interactive and decentralised. The pioneer of personal computing, Ted Nelson, talking about the potential of computer media, hoped that:

> Libertarian ideals of accessibility and excitement might unseat the video narcosis that now sits on our own land like a fog.
>
> (Nelson 1982, quoted in Mayer 1999: 128).

Cyberculture discourses may well be informed by progressive politics, however; indeed, cyberspace is seen as a realm in which social divisions based on bodily and material attributes and positions (age, gender, class, race, etc.) can be transcended (see **4.4**).

See for example, Robins (1996) again, Robins and Webster (1999) or Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2003). We might bracket these studies as a 'left pessimist' approach, in reference to an earlier critique of culture and cultural technology – that of the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and 1930s (Adorno 1991). See **1.5.4** The return of the Frankfurt School critique in the popularisation of new media

'Business as (or even worse than) usual'

Here the role of economic production in determining the meanings and uses of new technology in everyday life is emphasised. Drawing on a Marxist model of consumption as operating in the sphere of the cultural superstructure, determined and shaped by the economic base of capitalist production, consumer goods and mass media serve primarily to sustain and reproduce the existing economic and social order.

This approach holds that the development, dissemination and consumption of media technologies is instrumental in the commodification and reification of everyday life. Culture is made subservient to the interests of bureaucratic control and capitalist accumulation. Thus this 'left pessimist' position might be superficially similar to cybercultural studies in its analysis of 'old' broadcast media as hierarchical, stultifying, and serving commercial and state interests. The difference is of course that the pessimists do not see new media as any escape from this controlling logic; there is a fundamental continuity between the dynamics of digital technologies and the electronic and industrial technologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If anything, new media are seen as even worse than earlier media. On the one hand, the technologies of computer media are seen as lending themselves to the production of spectacular but empty images and narratives – addictive immersion that makes the television-viewing couch potato seem positively energetic – and on the other to new forms of political and commercial surveillance and domination of the time and space of everyday life.

Videogames in particular are a digital medium that have been seen to epitomise the acceleration of, and colonisation by, capitalist technoculture. From this perspective the computer game, far from offering new interactive possibilities, instead presents 'an ideal image of the market system'. Computer games' meanings are locked into their code, and consumption only realises their repressive potential:

> In their structure and content, computer games are a capitalist, deeply conservative form of culture, and their political content is prescribed by the options open to democracy under modern capitalism, from games with liberal pretensions to those with quasi-fascist overtones. All of them offer virtual consumption of empty forms in an ideal market.
>
> (Stallabrass 1993: 104)

For Kline, Dyer-Witheford and Peuter, the videogame is the ideal commodity for post-Fordism:

> It is a child of the computer technologies that lie at the heart of the post-Fordist reorganization of work. In production, game development, with its youthful workforce of digital artisans and netslaves, typifies the new forms of post-Fordist enterprise and labour. In consumption, the video game brilliantly exemplifies post-Fordism's tendency to fill domestic space and time with fluidified, experiential, and electronic commodities. Video and computer games, moreover, are perhaps the most compelling manifestation of the simulatory hyperreal postmodern ambience that [can be seen] as the cultural correlative to the post-Fordist economy. The interactive gaming business also powerfully demonstrates the increasingly intense advertising, promotional, and surveillance strategies practised by post-Fordist marketers in an era of niche markets. In all these aspects the interactive game industry displays the global logic of an increasingly transnational capitalism whose production capacities and market strategies are now incessantly calculated and recalculated on a planetary basis.
>
> (Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2003: 75)

From this 'business as usual' perspective certain connections between the progressive cyberculture position and a neo-liberal celebration of digital media become evident. Without an analysis of the persistence of social and economic power in, and through, the everyday consumption of new technologies, any analysis of a new media age would be a delusional and utopian projection of future possibilities into the here and now, eliding or ignoring current power relationships and struggles.

Populists and postmodernists

Most postmodernist theories of the meanings of new media technologies subscribe to the view that it is now consumption and leisure rather than production and work that determine the texture and experiences of everyday life. Consumer culture is now the dominant, if not the only, cultural sphere. Some theorists celebrate the pleasures and freedoms of consumption of individuals and groups actively constructing their identities through their choices in media and consumer culture.

> Rather than being a passive, secondary, determined activity, consumption . . . is seen increasingly as an activity with its own practices, tempo, significance and determination. (Mackay 1997: 3–4)

There is some overlap with cybercultural theory here; indeed, cybercultural studies is sometimes closely engaged with postmodernist ideas. Notions of a hyperreal and simulated media world of pure consumption often strike a chord with those attempting to theorise the apparently non-material, disembodied and textual characteristics of virtual reality, MUDs and the Internet. However, whereas for cybercultural studies it is specifically the digital age which promises creative mediated pleasure, for postmodernists it is the media/consumer society as a whole.

Cultural and media studies

These discursive categories are not mutually exclusive, and any particular approach to the analysis of new media may entail one or more of them. The academic discipline most thoroughly concerned with theorising everyday cultural consumption is Cultural and Media Studies. Its attitudes to consumption have been outlined already, but it is worth pointing out that it is itself characterised by a wide range of conceptual and methodological approaches, including its own versions of both postmodernist and left-pessimist discourses, and, when cultural and media technologies are explicitly addressed, the influence of cybercultural studies becomes evident.

The divisions between cultural studies and postmodernist positions can be hard to maintain. While downplaying the significance of production, notions of active consumption are not necessarily without an analysis of power. Paul Willis, for example, doesn't see consumption of commodities and popular media as transcending the class system of capitalist production; rather, he is celebrating working-class culture in the face of bourgeois arts funding and privilege. Indeed he argues that working-class youth should be given access to the production of the media images they appropriate (Willis 1990).

Alternatively, the feminist analysis of cultural consumption is critical of arguments that economic structures (and the social formations of class they entail) are all-determining. Addressing the gendered structures of consumption highlights different constellations of power and resistance in the face of commodified (and technologised) everyday life. Feminist debates have also pointed out that the marginalisation of the study of media consumption is related to issues of gender, in which domestic consumption generally and communications media like television in particular have been commonly ascribed to the feminine.

Returning to the study of the technologies of media, then, we can see that a focus on consumption tends to foreground the conflictual nature of meaning generation – the struggle for meaning between production and consumption. Producers' attempts to build in meanings, and articulate them through promotion and advertising, can result in nothing more than 'preferred readings' of their products. They may have wished us to see the Betamax video format, laser discs, or HD DVD as the future of home entertainment, but they could not make

them mean, or become, that. Early home computers in the 1980s were often sold as information technologies, but were widely consumed as games machines (**4.3.2**). In mainstream Cultural and Media Studies all commodities and media, then, are 'texts', 'encoded' products which may be 'decoded' in their consumption to reveal a quite different message (Mackay 1997: 10). So – and this assertion is a highly significant one – 'the effects of a technology . . . are *not determined by its production, its physical form or its capability*. Rather than being built into the technology, these depend on how they are consumed' (Mackay 1997: 263, our emphasis). Or, put more baldly by John Ellis in *Visible Fictions: cinema, television, video*: 'there is *nothing* in the technologies themselves that dictated how they would be used by societies that invented them' (Ellis 1982: 12, our emphasis).

See for instance: Cockburn and Furst Dilic (1994), Gray (1992), Green and Adam (2001), McNamee (1998) and Terry (1997)

Each of the fields of enquiry loosely sketched above is bound up in its own models of the relationship between technology and culture. Cybercultural Studies and Cultural and Media Studies for instance may cite Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams respectively as key influences and inspirations. Thus the discussion, earlier in this book (Part 1) of the differences between these two models of technoculture is directly relevant to our concern with everyday life here. Before we consider such questions of shaping and determination in the next section however, we will introduce another approach to understanding consumption and media technology that is generally (though not entirely) overlooked by each intellectual position.

4.2.3 Consumption and play

Between preferred readings – or uses – and resistance to or appropriation of media texts and technologies lies a more ambiguous and under-theorised mode of engagement: play. The rise of the videogame is only the most obvious example of the ludic (playful) nature of popular digital media and the increasingly game-like nature of significant aspects of more established media from television game-shows and reality TV to interactive games accompanying feature films on DVDs to online fan cultures and the amateur production of YouTube as they adopt, and are adapted by, digital communication technologies.

Attention to play in the study of everyday media culture has a number of significant implications.

- It draws us to alternative genealogies of media technologies and modes of consumption (for example, pinball and board games are as significant to the study of videogames as television and cinema).
- It questions media studies' emphasis on journalism and drama as privileged popular media forms and genres at the expense of game shows, comedy and audience participation, etc.
- Concomitantly, play troubles attempts to categorise media consumption in political terms: to play a game is to 'play by the rules' and hence the player may be seen as complicit with the values and machinations of the producer. Yet play is disruptive and generative as well as conservative and rule-bound.
- Playing with digital media (not only videogames, as we will see) offers a vivid and intense paradigm of the intimate relationship between the technological and the human (human bodies and identities) in everyday cyberculture.

Implications of these points will be explored more fully in the rest of this Part of the book; here we will introduce them with a small screen, a keypad, and a charm.

CASE STUDY 4.1: The mobile phone: gadgets and play

4.6 Hello kitty!

Over the past decade the status of the mobile telephone (or cell phone) has shifted from that of a rather exclusive communication device to being the near universal augmentation of children's and adults' everyday existence in the developed world. For example in 2003, 88 percent of 15–34-year-olds in Britain owned a mobile, and by 2006 91 percent of 12-year-olds had their own phone (Oftel). By July 2007 there were nearly 100 million mobile phone users in Japan (Daliot-Bul 2007: 968). While these statistics apply to the post-industrial world, it should be noted that the mobile phone has been widely adopted in developing countries. For example in rural areas of some African countries mobile networks and mobile phone ownership far outstrips landline networks. In Kenya the number of mobile phones was one million in 2002 but grew to 6.5 million in 2007. The number of landlines (around 300,000) did not change in this period (Mason 2007).

The mobile has been 'decoded' by a generation of teenagers, who have at once bought into the producers' dreams (coveting particular brands for example) and generated new communication practices such as text messaging. The ways in which texting has been adopted, and the kinds of message sent, represent a genuinely new communication medium in everyday life. The technical limitations of the keypad have proved to be not so much a constraint on texting's potential as facilitating a new vernacular shorthand of everyday communication. The incessant development and sale of new ringtones, games, and display graphics is a familiar consumer capitalist strategy of selling us new commodities we never knew we needed, but at the same time seems inseparable from other new media practices such as the customising and personalising of computer desktops or online services.

Jean Baudrillard, taking an earlier mobile personal communication device, the Dictaphone, as an example, highlights the uneasy status of the technological in a consumer culture:

> whisper your decisions, dictate your instructions, and proclaim your victories to it . . . Nothing could be more useful, and nothing more useless: when the technical process is given over to a magical type of mental practice or a fashionable social practice, then the technical object itself becomes a gadget.
>
> (Baudrillard 1990: 77)