

Orality and Cybernetics in Battleship

Aaron Trammell

Blog post published March 5, 2012 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/41xap-tk127>

Abstract

The gendered space of play. Borrowed from superpunch.blogspot.com. His moment has come. After having scoured each vector of a ten by ten grid, the young tactician makes his move. “G-4,” he announces, possessing some intelligence of a large ship in the south-west quadrant of enemy territory. There is a moment of tension, as his dad sizes up the situation. “It’s a hit,” Dad admits, smiling, as he resignedly lifts a token from his board.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Advertising, American Studies, Article, Games/Gaming, History

Recommended citation

Trammell, A. (2012, March 5). Orality and Cybernetics in Battleship. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/41xap-tk127>

Copyright

Copyright © Aaron Trammell 2012. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



The gendered space of play. Borrowed from superpunch.blogspot.com.

His moment has come. After having scoured each vector of a ten by ten grid, the young tactician makes his move. “G-4,” he announces, possessing some intelligence of a large ship in the south-west quadrant of enemy territory. There is a moment of tension, as his dad sizes up the situation. “It’s a hit,” Dad admits, smiling, as he resignedly lifts a token from his board. The women in the family beam proudly from the kitchen. For a brief moment the social hierarchy is undermined as the house patriarch on the front of the Battleship box concedes victory to his progeny.

Sound has been integrated in different ways into the production of simulated warfare after World-War II. Simulated warfare involves, namely, the cybernetics of [paper machines \(as board games have been coined by Matthew Kirschenbaum\)](#), and the gradual effacement of oral mediation therein. As technologies of interactivity improve, the need for oral communication amongst the games participant’s decreases. The following is a case study of four Battleship commercials that aims to chronicle a set of shifting cultural tendencies parallel to the integration of sound-effects within the material game-form.

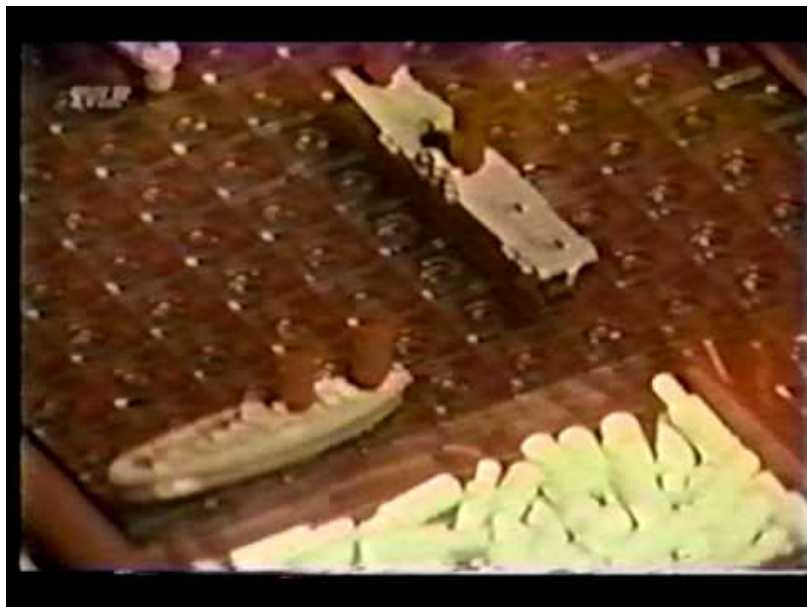
As [Ong \(1982\)](#) has noted, writing is powerful because it mediates the vastness of imagination. Once spoken words become grounded in text and inscribed on paper, they become, “locked in our visual fields forever” (p. 11). This is not as totalizing as it sounds, for as words are recirculated in oral cultures, the trace of writing yields slowly to the performative nature of ritual, oral culture. The rules of tabletop games, such as Battleship, although first established in the manual included with the game, are passed through oral ritual more often than not ([Fine, 2002](#); [Bowman, 2010](#)). The

oral maintenance of game rules is a practice which lends itself, critically, to the cultural attitudes of the group which maintains them. As is evident in the box art above, the game of Battleship is a gendered space where the rules have likely been explained (and maintained) by the household patriarch, then shared with his enthusiastic son.

[Borrowed from badhaven.com.](#)

Borrowed from badhaven.com.

There is an ideological element at play here as well. The box art for Battleship is unmistakably American. From Milton Bradley's strong red-and-blue branding to the white trim of the son's shirt, dad's sweater and the soap suds in the kitchen. After all, the company owed its success to America and the war effort. [A 1940s bailout](#) saw Milton Bradley producing landing gear for fighter planes and gunstock for soldiers alongside portable game kits for soldiers seeking diversions in their down-time. The production of board games in post-World War II America owes as much to the military-industrial complex, as the production of video games does today ([Dyer-Witherford and dePeuter](#), 2009). The relationship between the military production and simulation has been well documented by [Crogan \(2011\)](#), who has argued that the production of game interfaces, from the start, has been the by-product of a military desire to map real space onto the virtual in the design of ballistics. To this point, the bombastic introduction to a late-1960s commercial for Battleship (see video below) should come as no surprise. The sonic blast of a real-world battleship is calculated to lure consumers into believing that the game is an authentic simulation of maritime warfare.



<https://youtu.be/PrHs8CWDzmc>

The players in this commercial are actively engaged in a discussion amongst themselves. They laugh, and joke as they engage one-another in a tactical crossfire. In some cuts, the players seem particularly engrossed in the game's strategy. Even though the commercial showcases two players actively engaged in oral communication, it is important to note that the players are both white

males, and that the winner callously gloats as his opponent tumbles into the water. Milton Bradley's connection to the American military is distinct here, and it plays out as a set of social relationships between the players. Reminiscent of Cold-War politics, the game's action plays out as a series of tactical exchanges. Consumers are urged to practice at winning in their living-rooms, or on the go. The portable elements of Battleship are played down in an advertisement about 15 years later. Here, Battleship is situated as a centerpiece of family life.

<https://youtu.be/yE1K05Su5Zo>

Also integrating stock footage of real-world military battleships the narrative in this mid 1980s commercial begins with a squabble over domestic space. The actors are (at first) two boys (10 and younger), playing Battleship in the bedroom. After winning, the older boy banishes his younger brother, presumably forever, from his bedroom. Although this act could easily be imagined as selfish, in the context of the 1985 nuclear family, competition is fostered and encouraged. In a second skit, the older boy emerges again victorious at Battleship, his opponent (and father) slouches, consoled by the mother while the grandfather eagerly congratulates the young victor. Electronic Battleship is introduced here as a product as well, and the players are depicted commanding the electronic elements of the game. Feedback is given to the players sonically, as programmed game moves result in dynamic military explosions. There is still a residue of oral communication here, notably the father lamenting, "You sunk my battleship," as the older boy lets out a strong cheer. Even though the embarrassed father is a commercial trope designed to stimulate the consumer imagination of aspiring child tacticians, it also functions as an in-joke for caring parents looking to instantiate intellectual (mathematical) competition as a centerpiece of domestic life in the age of Reagan's Star Wars economics and family values.



<https://youtu.be/txFC-hDDYdY>

Ten years later, the commercial narrative has more to do with overt warfare than family life. The competing children are spliced alongside clips of competing Navy officers performing various technical tasks on a real Battleship. As the background music takes on a tense, and somewhat militaristic tone, a command to "Man your battle stations," is echoed as the two boys careen into

their chairs. No longer is the narrative established as a civil exchange between two military masterminds, Electronic Talking Battleship uses sound to enhance the player experience of the simulation. When a hit is scored, a quick shot of the player pumping their fist and shouting is quickly replaced by stock footage of a battleship-explosion. Even wavy radio-lines are used to enhance the over-the-top comic feel of the product's sound. A number of shots showcase the players programming their battle-stations. The commercial explicitly connects the discourse of soldier-controlled military technology, to player controlled information technology. Good players are able to program on their toes, the only conversation between players is a series of taunts and cheers. At one point, a player refers to the rules. Electronic Talking Battleship is evidence of the increasing capital of information technologies, and deterioration of orality in electronic games in the mid-1990s.

<https://youtu.be/q1DbSxmbJfU>

A final, 1997, commercial for Electronic Talking Battleship disposes entirely of the oral element of gameplay. The commercial begins with a child in what seems like an office conference room. After he presses a green button, a virtual matrix appears before him, and two navy officers materialize across the table from him. The viewer is to assume that one is an officer, and the other his superior. The narrative has the Navy officers desperately trying strategies against a hooting and smiling child. The Navy officers are a metaphor for the game's computer, which can, at this point, serve as a virtual Battleship opponent. The affective work of companionship, which was once performed by one's friends and family is now, in at least this commercial, replaced by a machine interface. The oral communication, which once governed the rule-set in a social space, has been outsourced to a machine which governs the rules, precisely, in cybernetic space

As computers begin to take a more active role in our culture, a by-product is the exchange of oral ritual for cybernetic participation. This odd shift can be read as having both positive and negative potential. One positive aspect is the estrangement of the social hierarchies which have been a necessary for the ritual infrastructure of oral communication dating back to Homeric times. While the children in the commercials (and on the original box) seem increasingly autonomous, they also begin to dialogue less with themselves, and more with the game. This, unfortunately, is the negative potential of this cybernetic shift. Where the early advertisements of the game depicted a product which provided a potential escape from a war-ravaged world, later advertisements seek to situate the consumer in the center of the action. A common thread amongst these social, and technical shifts is the instantiation of an electronic voice and interface as keeper of the rules. And, with this shift, the military discursivity of the game-form and its accompanying electronics is inscribed, and made to seem innocent in our imagination and understanding of childhood games and play.

—

Aaron Trammell is co-founder and multimedia editor of Sounding Out! He is also a Media Studies PhD student at Rutgers University.