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Max Barry's *Jennifer Government* and NationStates: neo-liberalism and the cultural public sphere

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ABSTRACT. In the United States, many people point to the corporatization of the media and the impoverishment of the public sphere as symptomatic of a crisis in democracy. While the mainstream media has not given much attention to popular anger against corporate globalization, literary works have started to explore this terrain, suggesting that the cultural public sphere is a parapolitical site for debates about economic neo-liberalism and its effects on people. This essay analyzes the representation of neo-liberalism, corporate power, and resistance in Max Barry's novel *Jennifer Government* and computer simulation game NationStates in the context of debates over globalization and the cultural public sphere.

Key words: corporate power, cultural public sphere, *Jennifer Government*, Max Barry, nation-state, neo-liberalism.

RESUMO. *Jennifer Government*, de Max Barry, e Estados-Nações: Neoliberalismo e a esfera pública da cultura. Muitas pessoas nos Estados Unidos alegam que a corporativismo dos meios de comunicação e o empobrecimento da esfera pública são sintomas da crise na democracia. Enquanto os meios de comunicação principais não deram tanta importância à ira popular contra a globalização corporativa, muitos autores de obras literárias já começaram de analisar esse assunto. Sugerem que a esfera pública cultural é um lugar para-político para debates sobre o neoliberalismo econômico e suas consequências na população. Esse ensaio analisa a representação do neoliberalismo, poder corporativista e resistência no romance *Jennifer Government*, de Max Barry, e o jogo de computador NationStates no contexto de debates sobre a globalização e a esfera pública cultural.

Palavras-chave: poder corporativo, esfera pública cultural, *Jennifer Government*, Max Barry, estado-nação, neoliberalismo.

Introduction

For the past decade, globalization theorists have robustly debated the status of the nation-state and the condition of democracy in relation to the socioeconomic processes of neo-liberalism¹. While globalization studies have been attentive to the gamut of neo-liberal policies broadly associated with expanding market forces and constraining the reach of government, they have not arrived at a consensus on the role of the nation-state and its power relative to other transnational entities such as corporations and international financial institutions². Despite arguments about its role, the nation-state continues to be a crucial economic, political, and imaginative force. Some scholars such as Masao Miyoshi

argue that the nation-state largely functions on a symbolic level, providing a “vast majority” with “a nostalgic and sentimental myth that offers an illusion of a classless organic community of which everyone is an equal member” (Miyoshi, 1993, p. 744). The nation-state’s influence on the global economy has been supplanted, Kenichi Ohmae believes, by the “4 ‘Is’” of investment, industry, information technology, and the individual consumer (Beynon and Dunkerley, 2000). Yet other scholars more cautiously opine that declarations of the nation-state’s demise are premature insofar as it still retains a monopoly on the use of force and determines the framework that enables the global economy to be unregulated under the precepts of neo-liberal policies. For example, in the introduction to *Global Inc.*, Medard Gabel and Henry Bruner (2003, p. 4) note that

[...] although the geopolitical power of nation-states cannot entirely control or contain the workings of

¹ I am grateful to Leoné Barzotto for encouraging me to write this article, which developed from a conference presentation at the 2007 annual (U.S.) Cultural Studies Association meeting in Portland, Oregon. In addition, Laura E. Lyons, Radhika Parameswaran, and Janet Sorensen generously provided helpful comments and suggestions, and I thank them. All errors, of course, are mine.

² For an overview of globalization theory, see Purnima Bose and Laura E. Lyons’ “Corporations and Fetishism” in *Cultural History and the Global Corporation*.

the economy, neither does the economy operate outside such constraints.

Paul Hirst more emphatically asserts that nation-states act as “linchpins” in distributing power

[...] upwards and downwards, both through agreements between sovereign states to create international agencies and regulatory regimes and to abide by treaties, and through the constitutional ordering of power between central, regional and local government and publicly recognized bodies in civil society (Beynon and Dunkerley, 2000, p. 243).

Max Barry’s 2003 novel *Jennifer Government* and the computer game NationStates grapple with this dialectic between the nation-state, on the one hand, and transnational capital, on the other. Set in the near future, the novel offers a diagnosis and prognosis of the unhealthy alliance between the two, presenting a dystopic view of neo-liberalism run amok in a world where governments can no longer protect their citizens from getting crushed by the juggernaut of corporate capitalism. Given their content, *Jennifer Government* and NationStates contribute to debates regarding the human costs of neo-liberalism, a contribution that participates in the cultural public sphere through affective communication. *Jennifer Government*, in its capacity as a novel, creates an affective bond with readers, who might identify with specific characters and their anti-corporate globalization sentiments. In this essay, I analyze the representation of neo-liberalism in the novel and probe the limitations of sentimental affect, which is materialized in the novel as a conventional heteronormative plot.

I then turn to NationStates, a political-simulation game created by Max Barry as an extended advertisement for his novel, to consider how this game functions as an alternative cultural public sphere, serving as a social institution that facilitates open and rational debate regarding the role of governments, supra-national bodies, and corporations in the lives of a global citizenry. By way of conclusion, I end with a meditation on the role of culture in creating a revitalized public sphere. In order to serve the goals of social justice, cultural debates must be directed into institutional and political channels that matter and have the power to effect change in people’s lives. *Jennifer Government* and NationStates encourage readers and gamers to reflect on neo-liberalism and corporate power, to debate these issues, and perhaps to imagine alternative configurations of social interactions and relations for envisioning more just futures.

Neo-liberalism, International Finance, and Transnational Corporations

Before embarking on a reading of *Jennifer Government* and NationStates, a brief gloss of neo-liberalism seems in order. The alliance between state power and elite interests alluded to in the novel is not new insofar as most modern western democracies have embodied bourgeois aspirations and desires, projecting specific class interests as national ones. What is new – if not in kind at least in degree – is the configuration of global capitalism according to the dictates of neo-liberalism. Representing a departure from Keynesian economic policies in the 1940s and 1950s, which placed a premium on state regulation and the intervention of central banks to increase opportunities for employment, the neo-liberalist agenda promotes instead the rule of the market, reducing public expenditure for social services, and advocating deregulation, privatization, and the substitution of “individual responsibility” for any concept of the “public good” (Martinez and Garcia, 2007). In their evangelical belief in the free market, supporters of neo-liberalism disparage big government “as either incompetent or threatening to individual freedom”; they proselytize the notion that

[...] power should reside in markets and corporations rather than governments (except for their support for corporate interests and national security) and citizens (Giroux, 2005, p. 2).

Neo-liberalism also codes all problems as private rather than social in nature (Giroux, 2005). As Henry Giroux explains, “human misery is largely defined as a function of personal choices and human misfortune is viewed as the basis for criminalizing social problems” (Giroux, 2005, p. 8). Under neo-liberalism, profit-making becomes the essence of democracy while the paradigmatic citizen is figured as the consumer (Giroux, 2005).

Spreading neo-liberalism around the world has been the priority of powerful financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, founded at the end of World War II during the Bretton Woods Conference. Established to create rules and procedures to regulate the international monetary system, both institutions have played a powerful and controversial role in the development of post-war economies, particularly in the developing world. Oil and debt crises, along with multiple economic depressions and stagflation, in the 1970s prompted both institutions to grant Structural Adjustment Loans [SALs] to countries contingent on their governments implementing

austerity measures by cutting social expenditures, liberalizing trade, courting foreign investment, privatizing state-owned enterprises, removing price controls and state subsidies, among other of what are quaintly referred to as "conditionalities". While the IMF's SALs have typically been short term, aimed at offering a temporary fix for problems that countries face as a whole, their analogues at the World Bank are granted on a project-to-project basis. Critics point to the deleterious effects that these loans have had on national sovereignty, the capacity of nation-states to supply the basic needs of their citizens as production is increasingly oriented towards export rather than domestic consumption, the degradation of the environment as borrower nations are forced to adopt high-tech agricultural methods, the erosion of the quality of life of average citizens as public subsidies in education and health care are slashed, and the increasing disparity in wealth between the rich and the poor³. Since the late 1990s, SAL gurus have touted poverty reduction as a goal, to this end urging borrower nations to formulate Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers [PRSPs] which are to take the place of SALs. Rather than mark a departure from SALs, unfortunately, the PRSPs have tended to mimic the content of their precursors.

While some scholars perceive financial institutions of this sort to be in retreat – predicting, for instance, that the IMF will run out of funds in the next ten years – there seems to be a general consensus that transnational corporations [TNCs] are major agents in the global arena⁴. They have acquired immense power in the last quarter of the twentieth century, comprising slightly over one half of the one hundred largest economic units in the world (Miyoshi, 1993). Corporate power gets materialized on several registers, including the economic and the political. TNCs sometimes persuade and coerce subjects to act in ways that they would ordinarily eschew – for example, when corporations use the threat of relocation to coax tax breaks from local communities (Staats, 2004). They set social, economic, and political agendas by infusing large sums of money into the political process, thus limiting the range of issues that are placed on the public agenda (Staats, 2004). Corporations also control the dissemination of

information through the consolidation of media ownership in a handful of conglomerates (Staats, 2004). Most perniciously, TNCs, in their interpellation of citizens as consumers and political leaders as stewards of the economy, exert the ideological power to commodify and corporatize sectors of society, such as universities, once deemed to be distinct from the market (Staats, 2004).

While there is a lively body of scholarly work on neo-liberalism, along with extensive coverage of the anti-globalization movement in the independent media, mainstream media in the United States has been more restrained in its investigation of the root causes for popular anger and the widespread dissatisfaction against the current economic regime⁵. In the absence of meaningful debates regarding the social consequences of these processes in journalism, the cultural public sphere assumes greater importance. Cultural artifacts such as *Jennifer Government* and *NationStates* present a potentially powerful space for the reimagining of everyday life, social interactions, the role of the nation-state, and corporate responsibility, the meanings of which have been transformed under neo-liberalism.

***Jennifer Government* and the New World Disorder**

With the exception of those societies that value the oral transmission of texts or have vibrant reading groups and book clubs, the reading of literature for leisure in most modern societies is a quintessentially solitary activity. Yet in the consumption of literature, we can see the contradictory nature of the aesthetic at work: as a commodity form, literature both literally exists within the market and imaginatively engages with the social relations that structure the market place; literature is at once consumed in the private sphere and simultaneously represents public life. For Jürgen Habermas, it is perhaps the Janus-face quality of the literary object, and the novel in particular, that enables the emergence of a literary public sphere in the eighteenth century which would mature into the bourgeois political public sphere⁶.

The world represented in Max Barry's *Jennifer Government* is the neo-liberal order of corporate power; Barry critiques this order through two primary representational strategies. First, he

³ For criticism of SLAs, see Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*, Robin Hahnel's *Panic Rules! Everything You Need to Know About the Global Economy*, Joseph Stiglitz's *Globalization and its Discontents*, Patrick O'Meara, Howard D. Mehlinger, and Matthew Krain's *Globalization and the Challenges of the new Century: A Reader*.

⁴ Jan Aart Scholte, the director of the Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation at the University of Warwick expressed this view at the annual Conference of the *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* on "Democracy and the Transnational Private Sector" at Indiana University School of Law, Bloomington, Indiana, on April 13, 2007.

⁵ For a critique of the limitations of mainstream journalism in the United States and India, see Radhika Parameswaran's analyses of *National Geographic* and the *Times of India*. She argues that representations of globalization in mainstream journalism and photojournalism in different geographic locations valorize the interests of a transnational, professional, managerial middle class, a socioeconomic bloc whose consuming potential has provided the basis for corporate global expansion in emerging markets.

⁶ See Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* for an account of this transformation.

literalizes the high costs that individuals pay in terms of their human rights in a neo-liberal regime and, second, he represents culture jamming and other forms of anti-corporate activism, reminding his readers that these practices can become part of the repertoire of resistance to such regimes. After analyzing Barry's representation of the ravages of neo-liberalism, I assess the extent to which his novel constitutes a counter hegemonic intervention in the globalization debate. I argue that the novel does not express emergent ideology insofar as its representation of resistance is circumscribed by positing a false symmetry between anti-corporate activism and neo-liberalism and by its reliance on a conventional plot resolution.

Set in the near future, *Jennifer Government* depicts both the imbrications of state power and transnational capital and its logical extension in a rollicking narrative which follows the main character, Jennifer Government, as she battles corporate crime. The novel is prefaced by a map which recalls Matt Wuerker's famous map of the world with its binary demarcations of the United States' allies and enemies. Wuerker's cartoon exposes the imperial aspirations of the United States, which in the novel are more explicitly identified with transnational capital; the binarism of the Cold War has been replaced with "blocs": "United States Federated Economic Units", "Non-United States Federated Blocs" and "Fragmented Markets". The "United States Federated Economic Units" consists of an eclectic mix of states that today vary widely in terms of their Human Development Index, including the United States (ranked eight), Australia (ranked fourteen), Russia (ranked sixty-five), and India (ranked one hundred and twenty-six). While the units in this bloc share an ideological commitment to the "free market", some individual states are qualified on the map: Russia is "US affiliated" but "not fully absorbed" and Australia is a "newly acquired" territory. The "Non-United States Federated Blocs" primarily consists of China (HDI ranking eighty-one) and the European Union (the majority of whose countries have an HDI in the top twenty in the world), which is labeled as "Here be tariffs". The third bloc, "Fragmented Markets", features most of Africa, described as "emerging markets", the Middle East, marked "hostile markets: trade with caution" and Central Asia.

This brave new world is run by powerful TNCs, whose company names have displaced individuals' patronymics. In the United States Federated Economic Units, taxation has been abolished, and governments only provide those services for which

they can bill citizens. The ideological division of the world is paralleled by a corporate division, pitting US Alliance against Team Advantage in a fierce struggle to capture global market share through their customer loyalty programs, which are essentially frequent flyer programs on steroids. As part of its launch for a new sneaker intended to enhance the shoes' street credibility, marketing executives at Nike trick a naïve merchandise distribution employee, Hack Nike, into signing a contract that commits him to murder eager shoppers outside its stores. Horrified at his assignment, Hack Nike turns to the police for help and exposes Nike's plot only to have the police volunteer to subcontract the job for him. They, in turn, subcontract the assassinations to the NRA, which kills fourteen teenagers instead of the originally-mandated ten youngsters. This macabre marketing scheme works and sales of the \$ 2,500 a pair shoes skyrocket.

Needless to say, TNCs do not come off as ideal citizens in the novel, and are literally figured as agents of mayhem and murder, valuing the sanctity of profits over human life. Acting on behalf of US Alliance, John Nike, the executive who hatched the sneaker-assassination marketing scheme, attempts to eliminate whatever inadequate government regulations still exist by contracting the NRA to blow up a plane carrying the President of the United States Federated Economic Units, along with half his cabinet. Confronted with disgruntled executives of other US Alliance corporations, who feel that John's actions will generate a consumer backlash and boycotts of their goods and services, John pontificates on the cultural logic of maximizing profits and capital accumulation:

Yes, some people have died. But let's not pretend these are the first people to die in the interests of commerce. Let's not pretend there's a company in this room that hasn't had to put profit above human life at some point. We make cars we know some people will die in. We make medicine that carries a chance of fatal reaction. We make guns... you want to expel someone here for murder, let's start with the Philip Morris Liaison. We have all, at some time, put a price tag on a human life and decided we can afford it (Barry, 2003, p. 221-222).

John Nike's acknowledgement of the human cost of commerce, an admission that commodity production is structured on the assumption that some people will perish, tallies with actual practices of TNCs. In *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*, Joel Bakan argues that the legal status of corporate personhood is more appropriately understood through the trope of pathological

criminality insofar as the corporation is an institution which possesses “a psychopathic contempt for legal constraints” (Bakan, 2004, p. 79). Contending that decisions to comply with regulations are based on the bottom line for most corporations, he explains that executives weigh the penalties and probability of getting caught against the costs of compliance (Bakan, 2004). In the novel, John’s formulation is less elegant; he exclaims,

Yes, some people die. But look at the gain! Run a cost-benefit analysis! Maybe some of you have forgotten what companies really do [...] they make as much money as possible (Barry, 2003, p. 222).

Indeed, John embarks on a sales pitch to his corporate chums, describing a looking glass world where capital thrives without checks and balances. In the absence of government intervention, he points out,

[...] there is not now no advertising campaign, no intercompany deal, no promotion, no action, you can't take. You want to pay kids to get the swoosh tattooed on their foreheads? Who's going to stop you? You want to make computers that need repair after three months? Who's going to stop you? [...] You want to pay [consumers] for recruiting their little brothers and sisters to your brand of cigarettes? You want the NRA to help you eliminate your competition? Then do it. Just do it (Barry, 2003, p. 222).

The banality of John’s utterance of Nike’s corporate slogan produces the desired effect on the executives who become “electrified by the possibilities” throwing around “outrageous marketing plans, deals for customer referral, for market leverage” and “segmentation”, enough so that even *he* becomes nauseous at their greedy chatter (Barry, 2003, p. 223).

If John Nike represents the psychopathic face of corporate globalization, Hack Nike, in contrast, becomes radicalized by his contact with the big swoosh and transforms himself into a cultural warrior, becoming an Australian hybrid somewhere between Ad Busters and the Guerrilla Girls. Disgruntled at his mistreatment by his employer Nike, Hack joins a group of ragtag anarchist-types who vandalize billboards to expose the underbelly of corporate capitalism. On a billboard for the GAP sporting an emaciated model, the group paints a speech bubble with the imperative “FEED ME” (Barry, 2003, p. 182). Other billboard tags include a “Nike poster that used to say: I CAN SHOOT THE MOON” which reads: “I CAN SHOOT 14 KIDS” (Barry, 2003, p. 216). A medical insurance advertisement “now boasts: WE CARE ABOUT YOUR WALLET” whereas a Coke billboard

beseeches people to “ENJOY STOMACH CANCER” (Barry, 2003, p. 216). “25% MORE CARBON MONOXIDE” brags one billboard for a tire retailer (Barry, 2003, p. 216). Hack’s vandalism is of a piece with a strand of the contemporary anti-corporate globalization movement, whose strategies in the cultural public sphere are characterized as “radical subversion” by Jim McGuigan (2005, p. 437). Radical subversion emphasizes symbolic contest and culture jamming, a strategy that rebrands products and corporations to socially de-market them in ways which make visible the social-justice costs of production and consumption (McGuigan, 2005).

We might ask if these fictional representations of corporate malfeasance and anti-corporate activism qualify the novel to be a counter-hegemonic ideological production? Yes and no. On the one hand, the novel literalizes the violence of corporate capitalism, offering a critique of neo-liberal ideology; on the other hand, the representation of resistance is troubling in several ways. First, Hack Nike’s merry band of vandals never articulates a very coherent critique of capitalism, and their activities remain trapped at the level of the spectacle. McGuigan elucidates the limitations of this kind of cultural work in relation to the anti-globalization movement; culture jammers’ impact on communications media seems negligible:

Their tactics in producing ‘subvertisements’ that attack capitalism, and in anti-media campaigning generally, are those of guerrilla skirmishing in the space of signification, which on their own are unlikely to bring the whole edifice of postmodern culture and consumerism tumbling down (McGuigan, 2005, p. 438).

Second, and perhaps more troubling, Hack’s brand of activism is coded as having a negative impact on his capacity to empathize with other people. As the novel progresses, he becomes consumed with striking out more stridently at the corporate world; scrawling graffiti on billboards no longer satiates him. Eventually, the young people graduate to more militant forms of activism, simulating a biohazard attack on a McDonald’s by pretending to contaminate the eatery with tinted green flour while reciting the corporation’s misdeeds as shocked customers, Big Macs and Quarter Pounders in hand, gape at them. Throughout, Hack’s character is figured as obsessed with the next guerrilla semiotic action in a version of activism for spectacle’s sake rather than for the sake of its politics. Later in the novel, while planning an action against Nike to dramatize its role in

assassinating teenagers by spreading blood and offal on the premises of an outlet, Claire, his girlfriend, tells him: "Hack, I don't think this is making you a good person [...] You used to be [...] nicer. More generous" (Barry, 2003, p. 257). Clare explicitly identifies Hack's anti-corporate activism as being the reason for his personality transformation and devolution from Mr. Nice Guy into a mean spirit. In effect, Hack becomes John Nike's doppelganger: the corporate world is the *raison d'être* for both men and the prime motivation for their actions, albeit from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. *Jennifer Government*, thus, implicitly proposes a moral symmetry between corporate globalization and anti-corporate activism.

Apart from positing a moral symmetry between these very disparate phenomena, corporate power and anti-corporate activism, the representation of resistance seems further compromised by its promotion of individualism and reliance on a heteronormative plot line. The novel is named after its main character, Jennifer Government, ex-advertising whiz, single mother, and government agent, whose single-minded pursuit of John Nike is conducted not so much out of an abstract allegiance to justice as it appears inspired by a desire to get even with the father of her child and the man who once jilted her after learning of her pregnancy. In its focus on Jennifer as the central protagonist and most effective corporate crime-fighting agent, the narrative promotes individualism and literalizes the sovereign subject. Notably, this valorization of the sovereign subject has its literary antecedents in the emergence of the novel in the eighteenth century. Insofar as Barry traces Jennifer's development within the social milieu of neo-liberalism, a maturation which requires the ubiquitous journey away from home, entailing experiences that place her in conflict with the constituted authority of her world, *Jennifer Government* functions as a modern *bildungsroman*.

Moreover, the resolution of the plot and John Nike's capture coincides with the reconstitution of the patriarchal family and Jennifer's reunion with her new lover, Buy Mitsui, who is characterized as a competent and loving surrogate father to her young daughter, Kate, whom he cares for in Jennifer's absence⁷. In the conventional pairing of its heroine with a partner of the opposite gender, *Jennifer Government* shares a plot device with other novels that present critiques of corporations and global

capitalism, such as Jane Smiley's *Moo*, Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, and to some extent, Jessica Hagedorn's *Dog eaters*, only to end in a romantic partnership. The assertion of the heteronormative romance allays concerns about the stability of social relations that are shaken by the representation of global capitalism in these novels. Patriarchy provides a reassuring social continuity otherwise disrupted by challenges to or changes in the modes-of-production in this fiction; the family structure endures long after the architecture of other social formations such as the state has started to crumble.

NationStates and the Virtual World Order

In spite of these limitations, *Jennifer Government's* representation of the state's abdication of public interests and the general welfare of its citizens fills a vacuum in the contemporary political discourse of neo-liberalism and corporate globalization. As a marketing tool for his novel, the author, Max Barry, created an interactive computer game, NationStates (www.nationstates.net), that enables an articulation, in Stuart Hall's sense of the term, of corrupt business practices with their social and environmental costs. Gamers create profiles for countries that vote and debate on issues pertaining to daily life and governance in their territories. As of the end of May 2007, this virtual world consisted of 90,865 nations with names and flags that clearly reference familiar political signifiers. For example, the "Revolutionary Force of Nak Nak" features an iconic image of Che Guevera on its flag while the nation "The Hateful Hating Hated Haters of Hatred" sports a picture of Uncle Sam, pointing his finger at the viewer, captioned "We Hate You" and "The Neo-Socialist Republic of Hendon" has a graphic of the Marx brothers joined by Karl Marx on its flag. These states are categorized according to rubrics determined by the virtual UN: the "Revolutionary Force of Nak Nak" and the "Hateful Hating Hated Haters of Hatred" are described as "corporate police states" whereas the "The Neo-Socialist Republic of Hendon" is a "Liberal Democratic Socialist" state. Other sample state classifications include categories such as "Compulsory Consumerist State" "Benevolent Dictatorship", "Left-Wing Utopia", "Authoritarian Democracy", "Democratic Socialists", "Psychotic Dictatorship" and "Capitalist Paradise".

These nations can elect to join a virtual United Nations, where they debate and vote on a variety of issues that pertain to neo-liberalism, the role of the state, and the contemporary global economy. The creation of the virtual UN can also be read as

⁷ Given the satirical quality of Buy Mitsui's name, literally a command to consume Mitsui commodities, it is difficult to know how seriously we are to read the novel's happily-ever-after conclusion.

implying that the actual UN is itself virtual, given the ways in which globalization and the consolidation of corporate and dominant state powers have eviscerated the organization's ability to intervene effectively in the geopolitical sphere. Resolutions featured on the site involve proposals to rein in transnational corporations and to insist on the benefits of welfare capitalism. Examples include, "Ban Single-Hulled Tankers", "Require Basic Healthcare", "Stop Privacy Intrusion" and "Ban Child Labor". Max Barry himself seems surprised at the popularity of the game. Responding to the question about the authorship of the UN resolutions, he notes that he wrote the first thirty, thinking

[...] nobody would be interested in playing a political simulation game. I imagined NationStates as the kind of game you might stumble across, have fun with for a week or two, then move on. Then this entire community just popped into existence, as vibrant and dedicated as any on the internet, and it became clear that 30 issues just weren't enough [...] I decided to ask players to submit their own issues (Barry, 2007).

Gamers also debate UN resolutions in forums, the tone of which by-and-large confirms Zizi Papacharissi's assessment of online political discussion groups as generally being civil and polite, "encouraging of virtual political discussion, and contributing to the well-being of the public sphere" (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 280)⁸.

Interestingly, the game does not have "winners" and "losers" in the standard sense. Barry poses the question of what winning in the geopolitical arena would entail: "Which is better, a left-wing civil rights paradise with no money, or a right-wing economic powerhouse where the poor are left to fend for themselves?" (Barry, 2007). His question supports hegemonic assumptions that posit politics as a zero-sum game which equates the left with economic bankruptcy and the right with wealth. Even though Barry claims this question is rhetorical, in one sense it is implicitly answered by his encouragement that gamers gauge their success by attempting to place their countries "in the top rungs of a United Nations report" along the lines of the actual Human Development Index I mentioned earlier. Compiled once a day, the virtual UN reports rank nations on "anything from economic strength"

to the liberalism of their nudity laws. "There's a certain glory in making it onto one of those [reports]", Barry explains (NationStates FAQ). The fact that a political simulation game with no easily-identifiable winners is so popular suggests that not all sections of the population are apathetic and not all agree with neo-liberal policies. In this sense, NationStates asserts that which is absent from mainstream political discourse in the United States – here I am quoting and paraphrasing Eva Cherniavsky –, "an ethical project" for corporations "in the absence of an assimilative, or universalist, agenda on the part of the ruling class" (Cherniavsky, 2006, p. 30).

Conclusion

In spite of the energetic debate regarding neo-liberalism, corporations, and the state enacted on NationStates, I want to end on an inconclusive note. I am not sure if one can make any large claims about what *Jennifer Government* or NationStates signify in terms of a revitalization of democracy other than to suggest that they might be indicative of a shift in what Raymond Williams refers to as a "structure of feeling," a "kind of [...] thinking which is indeed social and material, but [is] in an embryonic phase before it can become [a] fully articulate and defined exchange" (Williams, 1977, p. 131). The cultural public sphere to which both artifacts belong articulates politics with the public and personal through affective modes of communication that elicit aesthetic and emotional responses from individuals (McGuigan, 2005). Requiring a Coleridgean compact with the aesthetic, the cultural public sphere asks the subject to willingly suspend his or her disbelief in order to vicariously experience pleasure and pain (McGuigan, 2005). As McGuigan compellingly argues, this compact in turn enables

[...] people to think reflexively about their own lifeworld situations and how to negotiate their way in and through systems that may seem beyond anyone's control on the terrain of everyday life. The cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of some consequence" (McGuigan, 2005, p. 435).

Critical attention to cultural artifacts such as *Jennifer Government* and NationStates can illuminate fissures and disagreements in the seeming consensus regarding neo-liberalism, potentially making the cultural public sphere into an important parapolitical site.

⁸ Papacharissi analyzed ten political newsgroups in the study, which were chosen through a random sampling interval: alt.activism.d; alt.politics.clinton; alt.politics.correct; alt.politics.marijuana; alt.politics.nationalism.texas; alt.politics.republicans; alt.politics.usa.misc; alt.politics.usa.congress; talk.politics.mideast; and talk.politics.theory. For an analysis of democracy in online discussions, see Steffen Albrecht's "Whose Voice is Heard in Online Deliberation?".

While affective communication is no doubt a necessary catalyst for social change, in-and-of-itself it is not enough to galvanize individuals to act and cannot function as a public sphere. To realize its democratic potential, the cultural public sphere must be linked in some crucial way to different spheres of decision making and policy formulation (Dahlgren, 2005). "There can be all kinds of political information and debate in circulation", Peter Dahlgren observes, "but there must be structural connections – formalized institutional procedures – between these communicative spaces and the processes of decision making" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 152). We have no way of knowing whether gamers of NationStates and readers of *Jennifer Government* are engaged in political and social action outside of cyberspace and their imaginations, but then again, there is also no reason for us to assume that they are not participating in such activities.

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