



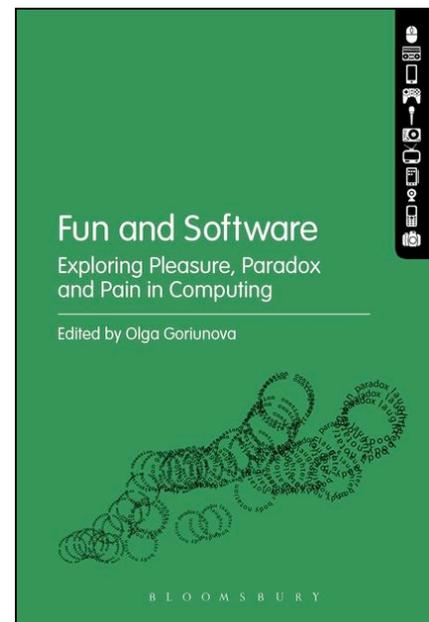
Reviews

Fun and Software: Exploring Pleasure, Paradox, and Pain in Computing, edited by Olga Goriunova, Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2014, \$121 hardcover edition on Amazon; ISBN 1623560942. Language: English.

The edited volume *Fun and Software: Exploring Pleasure, Paradox, and Pain* examines the human dimension of computational programs and coding. Whereas historians typically attribute the rise of the information age to the ongoing identification and fulfillment of bureaucratic, military, or economic processing objectives, this book sheds new light on the intrinsic motivation of “fun” in the extended development and utilization of computers and associated software.

The variegated processes by which users interact with machines assume “experiential, affective, and collective” proportions (p. 11). In addition to the matter-of-fact creation and maintenance of databases, networks, schedules, payrolls, etc., computing reinvigorates human passions for enhanced connectivity, interactive games, the thrill of problem solving, and the means for formulating and realizing different identities. Moreover, computation holds the potential to archive the entirety of artistic creation in a variety of media formats, to give access to multisensory experiences in immersive virtual environments, and even to afford programmers the God-like ability to create machinations capable of autonomous thought. Human desires to realize these computational goals have been fomenting from time immemorial. Every step of innovation yields still new inspiration promoting the continuous generation of original forms and methods that serve to expand the ontological basis of humanity, and its collective imagination.

As compelling historical examples of the role of fun in programming, editor Olga Goriunova opens the book with some of the earliest computer programs devised by Alan Turing and Christopher Strachey at Manchester University on the Ferranti Mark 1, often referred to as the Manchester University Computer, MUC (p. 1). Although Turing is well-known for cracking Nazi enigma encryption, sparse scholarly attention has been devoted to



his post-war projects, including the development of the 1949 program for playing draughts (checkers), and the 1952 Love Letter Generator, “an ephemeral, even flippant poetic program that can be retrospectively seen as one of the first text-generating algorithms” (p. 2). It was fascinating to learn about these unique episodes from the historical annals of computation. These intriguing undertakings of Turing and Strachey serve as emblematic departure points for investigating the trajectory of information technology and its connection to the humanistic pursuit of pleasure.

Surveying these human drives from philosophical, psychological, and technical perspectives, Goriunova defines “fun” as a “desiring process and a sensibility, a mode of thinking and of working; a horizon, an idea, a passion and an action. Fun should not be understood correctly or in one way: its strength is in its multiplicity” (p. 11). While “fun” derives its strength from multiplicity, this same consideration yields contradiction, and the dissimilitude of preference and taste from person to person. To account for these multiplicities, Goriunova refers to formulations of “fun” devised by the likes of Erasmus, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, thereby situating contemporary computing, and the human drives stimulating its ongoing advancement in the continuation of prolonged interdisciplinary discourses. Following the divergent theories set forth in *The Gay Science* and *In Defense of Folly*, Goriunova demonstrates that the world of computing reflects the idiosyncratic deliberations of personalities and societies, expounding that fun concerns “intensification, obsession, dreams, exploitation and abuse. Fun can be manic, tragic and evil. Malware and evil media, psychopathic and neurotic lives and the schizophrenia of capitalism, also gild and frame the complexity of fun as a manner of action in the world” (p. 10). While this formulation entails rather ominous implications for computational programs, Goriunova and the contributing authors of the volume demonstrate that “as software enunciates, takes part in affectation, becomes a rhetorical, legal and ethical project, fun performs and circulates, governing specific forms of spontaneity, liveliness and sociality and organizing time-space” (p. 10-11). Software programs embody extensions of the human psyche, and vice-versa.

Consisting of twelve chapters, the book edited by Olga Goriunova grew out of a traveling exhibition that took place at Arnolfini, Bristol, UK and MU, Eindhoven, the Netherlands in autumn of 2010 and winter of 2011. The individual chapters address different conceptions of “fun” throughout the contextual character of computing. The text exemplifies a general fascination with logic, the role of paradoxes, the incomputable, and the introduction of unpredictability in algorithmic processes. Chapter One, “Technology, Logistics and Logic: Rethinking the Problem of Fun in Software” by Andrew Goffey, introduces key “formal-logical categories of mechanized mathematics”, and draws upon the connections of computing to art, virtuosity, free speech, and play. Chapters Two and Three explore the philosophical and cultural ramifications of computing, and trace the development of programming from extended veins of liberal philosophy to Alan Turing, *Minecraft*, and massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs).

Chapters Four and Five consider the autonomy and structure of computer processing systems relative to human cognition. Chapter Six surveys the transference of programming to its disembodied legacy, echoing the metaphysics of Spinoza. Chapters Seven and Eight look at humor in code, and offer correlations to Freudian conceptions of jokes and dialectic

semantics. Chapter Nine inspects the development of *Spacewar!*, developed by hackers at MIT in the early 1960s as a parodic response to cybernetics, which transitions to the assessments offered in Chapter Ten concerning human-computer interactions, HCI. The advancement of HCI improves understandings of user experience and emotion. Chapter Eleven delves into the aesthetics of programming, and probes questions of openness and usability. Chapter Twelve, by the editor, concerns the linkages of computation technology with art, and avant-garde movements, with a special focus on these dynamics in the Russian cultural setting. This chapter, similarly, reflects on themes uniting all the chapters and their associated analyses.

The book fills a pressing need to reconvene discussions in computer science with other disciplines in the humanities. The text is a captivating read, but it requires a willingness to contemplate dense philosophical ideas, and to consider hypotheses that are not easily broached without specific technical knowledge. Fun in any discipline is a difficult theme to explore at length; it is predominately an experiential construct. My familiarity with the computer games, applications, and debates discussed in the narrative helped bring this text to life. As an amateur programmer, I found this book refreshingly stimulating, and it expanded my understanding of key concerns facing all users of computational technology.

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