

The Toywar on Words

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Even though the Internet connects us in a global village, the result is not automatically a mutual understanding, as some early net romantics would have it. It is thought provoking that the primary social activity of many online multi-player games is shooting and not exchanging viewpoints. Though games should not be mistaken with reality, it is worth considering whether exchanging information on the Web leads to the exchange of viewpoints, or whether words are changing their nature on the Web?

An example of how the word is changing its function for the 21'st century is the "Toywar" which took place on the Web around the turn of the millennium. The war included 1797 toy soldiers of which 270 died and it caused a reportedly \$ 4.5 billion in damage. It did take place in the virtual realm of a multi-player game interface on the Web and the dead toy soldiers probably live happily in real life. However the effects of the war were real or at least as real as gains and losses are on the stock market of the new economy.

The hostilities began when the Internet toy store eToys sued the netartists Etoy, after Etoy had turned down an offer from eToys of buying the domain name www.etoys.com, which the netartists had used and registered for several years. It is easy to become confused by the close resemblance between the two names of the netartists, Etoy, and the Internet toy reseller, eToys, and this is part of the reason for the trouble. The online toy store with the web address www.etoys.com was of course worried that customers shopping for Christmas gifts should get lost or even hijacked into the chaotic and subversive space of the netartists. Etoy even has a record for hijacking webservers, since they in 1996 hijacked more than half a million webservers with their digital hijack (www.hijack.org). Thus, eToys took Etoy to court in California claiming that they violated their trademark with the provisional result that Etoy's web server was blocked and the netartists were prohibited from using their name on the Web.

Etoy did not give up and in short time a community of angry net activists gathered to fight eToys. A lot of resistance sites were opened (www.toywar.com/res_sites.html) and press reports around the world started harming eToys' good name. Later, in January 2000, www.toywar.com was launched as an attempt to organise the resistance, which was staged as an online multi-player game. In Toywar one enters as a toy soldier with different roles, such as spy, DJ, lawyer, bomber, or media agent, and after the battle ended it is also possible to enter as a war tourist. When the fight was over the toy soldiers was awarded with military ranks and orders, but the most important score was the value of the eToys shares, which fell from \$67 to less than \$10 during the battle. The battle ended when eToys withdrew from all claims and agreed to pay all legal expenses, and when Etoy's web site was reopened 25 January 2000.

Toywar staged this war on words as an online, multi-player game and thus combined the 'shoot and kill' attitude of gaming with the more discursive and economic battle of domain names, trademarks, and online ethics. In the digital networks words are read by both humans and the computer, and Toywar highlights this doubleness of machinic and human reading. As in the off-line reality, a word can be a name or a valuable trademark, but on the Web the names and words also form the infrastructure, or the routes between places such as in hypertext links and in search engines. Words even replace the physical address of these places and surpass real estate and central geographical addresses. As it was emphasised by Toywar, the word "etoys" is an important value, both for the Internet toy reseller and the artist group. It is important since it is both a great name with a smart meaning, a potential valuable trademark, and an important search word and address.

Toywar demonstrated how the value of words is increasing in the digital domain - not because they transport meaning and viewpoints, but because they are becoming machine-readable infrastructure.

However, Etoy, the artist group, won the war, since their aim is not maximising their value and selling goods, but maximising what they call cultural profit and cultural impact. Toywar was a gamble with the new digital word value - a new form of digital literature. And even though the battlefields are peaceful now, it is ready for new action.