Morality Settings: New Generation Game Systems and Parental Controls

Raiford Guins

“This is an invitation to a new generation.”

—Xbox One: Invitation Trailer

In Edited Clean Version: Technology and the Culture of Control,¹ which connects theories of governmentality and Deleuzian control to the study of censorial practices in the digital era, I launched the book by recounting a Chaplinesque scene that saw me stymied in a failed effort to play a DVD on my PlayStation 2. Each time I tried to play John Water’s A Dirty Shame (2004), I received the same on-screen “error message”—“The Parental Settings of This Player Prohibit Play”—despite the clear intent signaled by turning on the machine, inserting a disk, and repeatedly jabbing the button to select “play.” But my machine said no, or more accurately, refused to say yes. My access was disabled by parental controls predicated upon “enabling” choice, “empowerment,” and the ability to exert more “control” over content and access. As I wrote in Edited Clean Version, this experience reveals the paradox of being in control: the delimitation of choice as a measure of securitization.

Spending hundreds of dollars on a game system to then intentionally disable certain functions in a self-administered action of distributed micro-political technocratic morality is not unheard of today. Parental controls—touted as pro-user, de-regulatory measures in the neoliberal interest of user self-governance and of moral adjudication of their own digital environments—are described as “digital tools” for content filtering and blocking, use restrictions and management, and user monitoring and tracking. Since the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and supplemental legislation like the Family Entertainment and Copyright Act of 2005, such capabilities have become de rigueur integration in the United States, a design “solution” found in all manner of digital devices and services. Televisions, smart phones, tablets, music interfaces and storage media, operating systems, Internet search engines, social media sites, software and hardware: Our involvement with the world occurs through an assortment of such technologies, each equipped with parental control features.² Game systems are not outside of this purview. For more than a decade, the following game systems have included parental controls in

¹ Raiford Guins, Edited Clean Version: Technology and the Culture of Control (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

² Latour reminds us of such involvement in the world via the powerful opening sequence from Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), where we witness an Australopithecus hurling a bone-tool-weapon skyward, resulting in a sublime match-cut with a space station. “He flings it so high and far,” Latour recounts, “that it becomes the space station of the future, it is because all technologies incite around them that whirlwind of new worlds.” Bruno Latour, “Morality and Technology: The End of the Means,” Theory, Culture & Society 19 no. 5/6 (2002): 250. How parental controls script these “new worlds” that we now inhabit and what that scripting might entail are the questions this essay begins to address.

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their architecture: Nintendo Wii, PS2, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, and mobile game devices like PlayStation Vita, Nintendo 3DS, and Wii U. They, too, help shape our relationship with the world as they increasingly gain substantial cultural and social, if not political, currency in the home as emergent instruments for connectivity. For this reason—the stakes of the matter, so to speak—we must not dismiss parental controls in game systems as inconsequential, as compared to State oppression of the Internet the world over—whether as NSA/CIA spying, which is running rampant domestically and abroad, or as the United Kingdom’s draconian turn to default ISP filters to police “adult content.” An inquiry into game system parental controls demonstrates that the tiresome allegory of “Big Brother” still dogs our conceptualization of control, retarding how we can address such issues. The neglected extended family cannot be ignored: Little siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins, along with “Big Bros,” have transformed our phones, televisions, computers, and, my emphasis here, gaming devices into control technologies.

Parental controls have certainly come a long way since my PS2 inhibited the playing of a DVD back in 2005. Their suite of options expands with each new generation. For example, on Microsoft’s Xbox 360, a settings option labeled “Console Safety” permits the restriction of both game and video content based on existing ratings by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) or the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)-Classification & Rating Administration of America (CARA); it also sets time restrictions on use, blocks online friend requests, and could completely disable access to Internet Explorer—Xbox 360’s browser—to effectively downgrade the machine’s capability to a game playback device à la the Atari VCS of old. It’s like buying a Ferrari and then setting a speed warning at 20 mph. Parental controls of the Xbox 360 generation had a rather confined reach, basically working to administer what a user could “come into contact with,” to maintain the “safety” metaphor of Microsoft’s settings, via direct interaction with its console: published game software, DVDs, and online access. Parental controls have translated abstract cogitation on moral problems into instantaneous actions, initiated in a settings routine designed in our game systems. And now with new generation game systems, such actions intensify, aggrandize, and generalize across computational devices and networks: a “remote control” whose reach overtly refuses to stay in the box.

Xbox One, released in North America on November 22, 2013, promises to be a game changer for Microsoft’s parental controls, “family settings,” and “online safety,” as its restrictive measures are known within the game system: a ground-up redesign from settings enforced solely on a game console to blanketing consolidation across all Microsoft platforms, as well as

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3 The task at hand is not to canvass the history of game system parental controls but to provide an impressionistic account of an often overlooked, purportedly unused, and (to many) annoying attribute, if not also an industry conciliation to threatened legislation and retail restrictions.
media content/web access available through its game system. (I have intentionally used “game system” over the more prominent “game console” to avoid giving the false impression that parental controls are restricted to a single unit.) Given public outcry over Microsoft’s other design decisions—its originally intended compulsory regional locking software, rigid restrictions on the self-publishing of games via Microsoft’s online platforms, an aggressive DRM policy for playing used games, and the requirement that the machine must always be online even to play offline—little attention was directed at its parental control features prior to market release. Interactive Entertainment Business VP Ben Kilgore identified “simplicity” as the motive to have all of Microsoft’s products “share the same family settings”—all progeny ostensibly called into obedience, disciplined. In an interview with game culture website, Polygon, Kilgore details Microsoft’s aspiration:

So you know that, once you’ve configured it that you don’t want your son to watch R-rated movies, it doesn’t matter if he’s on a Windows slate, Windows phone, or the TV. His account just knows those things. So those are, like, we’re trying to drive a really unified story across all of our products.

Sleek black boxes like the Xbox One and PS4 tastefully accent my Hi-Def plasma screen TV. They let my FIFA 2015 starting 11 share screen space with live HD football (soccer) matches via cable service and Skype chats with friends. But those very same familiar boxes synchronously operate as a control node to centralize morally and to stabilize a decentralized and distributed network. The same game controller that allows me to rocket my team, Leeds United, into the Champions League Final enables both my indulgent play and in the system’s inscription of my role as parental administrator the relational mediation of morality in its ergonomics of control; we have a technological means to govern through our fingertips, with, in, and across our machines, with the system affecting movement and shaping conduct while fitting different users into a social relation with control.

Parental controls mold our experience with game systems. “Morality” is a perceived affordance inscribed in settings preferences, delimiting our actions within a game system. “Control” in this context denotes neither a game’s rule structure and game-play design, nor actions performed by users in-game; rather, it is control of users by gaming devices. “Welcome to the all in one, Xbox One,” where our interaction and engagement with a game system is far from what cultural historian Johan Huizinga claims of play as a “free activity”; in this system, play has become administrative and restrictive, monitoring and disabling movement as optimized “new freedoms.”


5 “The science of politics,” Langdon Winner urges, “must include an ergonomics able to specify a suitable fit between the body politic and its instruments.” I offer the slight modification of “ergonomics of control” to assess how parental controls “fit into” the scheme of control. The question here is how design scripts the actions of actors and how the mere presence of parental controls is accepted as a designed solution for moral judgment. Langdon Winner, “Political Ergonomics,” in Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies, Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 163.
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Deleuze offers the striking example of the “highway” as a “new freedom” to illustrate how control generalizes and multiplies discipline’s conditions of rules across new configurations of social relations, in contrast to the long shadow of confinement and surveillance indicative of disciplinary society. “In making highways,” he elaborates, “you don’t enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the highway’s exclusive purpose, but that people can drive infinitely and ‘freely’ without being at all confined, yet while still being perfectly controlled.” The adage “in control,” stated previously in exasperation with my PS2, is suspect in Deleuze’s societies of control. Is it we who possess the agency to control within this dispositif? Or are we controlled as we speed down the highway, constrained by governance configuring our movements, molding our choices, directing us where we can go without overt authoritative restraints on freedom? We see this highway not as the fantasy of unlimited choice, but as delimited choice assembled via pre-determined configurations—and for my interests in this brief probe of an essay, we also see designed moral solutions built into a game system.

Consider a propitious analogy to another well-traveled road from the philosophy of technology and from science and technology studies: the seemingly innocuous objects of both Langdon Winner’s analysis of Robert Moses’s bridges and Bruno Latour’s much referenced assortment of “mundane artifacts.” In the case of Winner, we find ourselves confronted not by the disciplinary “structures of confinement” that Deleuze’s societies of control surpass, but by a distributed array of politically charged artifacts; these material things performing political and moral actions in their management of highway access are Long Island’s parkways, designed in the mid-1920s. A bridge indubitably enables movement; however, the design of these Janus-faced stone bridges “contain political properties,” Winner asserts in his now classic piece, “Do Artifacts have Politics?” They enable travel by private automobile while simultaneously disabling public transport. “Poor people and blacks,” Winner charges, “who normally used public transit, were kept off the roads because 12-foot buses could not handle the overpasses.” A material means brought forth and made permanent a political conviction, as political entities a bias was intentionally designed into an array of interspersed objects, thus morally affecting a transportation network.

Madeline Akrich, who shares a vocabulary with Latour, would designate Winner’s scenario as an illustration of a script. Well known in philosophy of technology and in science and technology studies, the concept of the script defines the roles that actors—both human and non-human—play in helping to shape and influence certain actions. “Technical objects define a framework of action together with the actors and the space in which

they are supposed to act,” Akrich explains. For Akrich, designers play a key role in defining scripts. Through conceptualization, process, and production, scripts are physically embedded in designed objects to help shape and inform user action. In another often-quoted passage, Akrich states that “[t]he technical realization of the innovator’s beliefs about the relationships between an object and surrounding actors is thus an attempt to predetermine the settings that users are asked to imagine for a particular piece of technology and the pre-scription (notices, contracts, advice, etc.) that accompany it.”

The inability of buses to travel on Long Island’s parkways because of the intentional design of Moses’s bridges is one, obviously troubling, example of how a designer’s vision was inscribed into material form. Even though motorists today can easily take different routes to access North and South shore points, Moses’s conviction, as Winner notes, “became just another part of the landscape.” Poignant here is that the same object—a bridge—is an engineered structure to safely and efficiently overcome distance or obstacle; a decorative element to complement tree-lined surroundings; and a physical barrier, an intentionally designed technological instrument, to prevent the travel of certain vehicles and, most notably in Winner’s explicit orientation, their passengers. Although we ought to be cautious in assigning strict determining properties to design, especially as actual use and users vary, Akrich’s script concept is nevertheless valuable here. Moses has long passed, yet his bridges still remain, performing the one-time intended script in their blunt materiality, regardless of our awareness and use today. The take-away is that technologies are scripted to evoke certain types of actions by and for their users. Part of their job in doing so resides in their prescriptive presence.

Even before we reach such a politically determined highway in our private automobiles, we likely already find ourselves “made moral” by other mundane artifacts mediating our actions and behavior. The car equipped with an electronic sensor to detect seatbelt engagement makes it impossible (or very annoying) to drive without being securely fastened. Latour laments: “I cannot be bad anymore. I plus the car, plus the dozens of patented engineers, plus the police are making me be moral.” This network of actors assists in manifesting this safety script (whether I want it or not). We then proceed, presumably safely, toward Moses’s parkway while having to quickly ease off our car’s accelerator pedal to avoid damage from the impending speed bump. This lump of asphalt, like the bridges Winner examined, signals an action inscribed in a material thing that delegates the rule of the textual traffic sign bearing the all-caps STOP and the police officer’s interpellation to that of a material impediment to cars moving faster than the posted speed limit. A moral action is inscribed in asphalt, both Latour and Winner would say, and delegation is a means by which


10 Ibid.

11 Richard Buchanan’s “Declaration by Design” proves equally valuable alongside Akrich’s work: “By presenting an audience of potential users with a new product—whether as simple as a plow or a new form of hybrid seed corn, or as complex as an electric light bulb or a computer—designers have directly influenced the actions of individuals and communities, changed attitudes and values, and shaped society in surprisingly fundamental ways.” Richard Buchanan, “Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice,” in Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism, Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 93. The “shaping of society” is all-encompassing; not even a game system is regarded as superfluous or beyond the need of reshaping.

12 Winner, “Do Artifacts have Politics,” 23.

a desired action can result because of a complex program of action employing artifacts to help shape and manage conduct. Mundane artifacts achieve an action via their very ordinariness—politics camouflaged in quaint masonry, or in public safety instruments. This observation resounds when one considers the ordinary, ubiquitous, and opaque architecture of today’s game system, which can also restrict movement and disable actions across its digital landscape.14

These well-trodden tenets from the philosophy of technology and science and technology studies, which specialize in the political and moral agency of technological artifacts, rarely speak of computational networks or digital technologies in these or later writings on assemblies, apparatuses, circuits, arrays, and networks of complex relations. This is not a shortcoming but an opportunity to try their vocabularies on digital objects and processes equally implicated in moral programs of action. Deleuzian control expands the terrain so that the mediation of morality does not have to rely so heavily on stone bridges and seat belts in the twenty-first century. Reciprocally, the likes of Winner, Latour, and others can still provide effective ways to—intentionally riffing on the profitable highway metaphor—“manage traffic.” New generation game consoles are fascinating artifacts for consideration within this coupling,15 given that their prevalent physical presence presents its candidacy as a political and moral artifact while the machine-as-process linked into a system accords well with Deleuze’s “free floating” modulations of control. In a line, parental controls are today’s bridges and speed bumps for traveling “safely” across computational networks.

The highway is not a single artifact but a complex aggregate of things, like a gaming system (a blackbox opened to reveal many close and distant additional blackboxes). Specific elements (e.g., a lone bridge or a single game console) do their work systematically, through a network of co-relational and co-shaping social and cultural agents. That Latour, Winner, and even Deleuze use transportation infrastructure systems to detail their political theories of moral actants and control offers an insightful model for parental controls embedded in today’s gaming systems. The model is expressly fitting because our game consoles are navigational devices. These new generation consoles are gateway managerial technologies for interfacing and communicating while piloting our involvement with and within our networked media environs. One review of Xbox One’s parental controls regards this newfound prominence in domestic media connectivity to warrant special attention. Writing for Trustedreviews.com, Stuart Andrews warns, “with the Xbox One at the centre of the living room, parental controls become all the more important.”16 They do so as additional layers of control to the legion already in place (e.g., television ratings, parental controls in televisions, Internet filters, music ratings,

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14 Game systems ought to be regarded as participants in our “design culture,” a phrase that Highmore uses to capture the ubiquity of design in its “ordinary and inescapable state.” After all, game systems have been familiar artifacts occupying our domestic spaces since the 1970s. Ben Highmore, The Design Culture Reader (London: Routledge, 2009), 5

15 My coupling takes its lead from the authors of The Design of Everyday Life, who state their ambitions as being: “to fill some of the gaps and cracks that lie between the tracks of disciplinary development in sociology, science and technology studies, design research, and studies of material culture. The other is to do so by pulling threads of different disciplinary approaches together in new combinations.” Elizabeth Shove, Matthew Watson, Martin Hand, and Jack Ingram, The Design of Everyday Life (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 10. Game studies and the materiality of media would be the additional threads I hope to braid into a study of design culture that actually considers parental controls alongside other household cleaning products.

operating systems, browser “safe settings,” MPAA ratings for DVD and streaming, ESRB game ratings, etc.). “Raiford’s access to content & apps” in Xbox One’s settings allows me in my inscribed role as “parental” to set the age restriction of all users—for example, “Appropriate up to age 15.” Each rating system used in the United States automatically shows its equivalency: “Games: For ages 13 and up,” “Movies: For ages 13 and up,” “TV: for ages 14 and up,” “Music: For all ages,” “Apps: For ages 12 and up.” “All in one,” Microsoft’s marketing slogan, boasts complete compliance in terms of its parental control features. As a control node, my game console is a censorial-ratings aggregator, compiling existing (industry and trade associations) classificatory systems for games, movies, television, music, and software application to synch with its parental control settings. Initiating a single setting, such as “Appropriate up to age 15,” envelopes all content; one setting aligns all media according to inscribed safety protocols. The required presence of parental controls in game systems has redefined our technologies in an oxymoronic manner, for they are concomitantly a source of danger and harm, whether in the form of “violent” game content, “adult TV,” player hate speech, “explicit” lyrics, or online “predators,” and the means—the mediator—to control these surmised dangers and harm.

The very materiality of the game console presents itself as one of Latour’s “calming devices,” mediating moral actions between artifacts and, in this case, “children” and “teens”—the ones demarcated most at risk by the system’s prescriptive settings—who have little choice but to oblige themselves to the encoded strictures of access, or be denied, locked out. The user co-acts with software inscribed to manage use and content on a game console, content judged acceptable by far-from-clear standards. (But do definitions matter when convenience, efficiency, and ease remove the burden of understanding?) The user is part of the network of relations implicit or explicit within a game system. We are enabled to regulate by parental controls while enabling them to regulate for us. The user becomes the “I” in Latour’s pronouncement on his seatbelt: “I plus the car” (users plus parental controls), “plus the dozens of patented engineers” (game system developers), “plus the police” (social, industry, retail, political pressure), “are making me be moral.”

My retrofitting of Latour’s example demonstrates the various actants defining and sustaining the script of delimitation indicative of control technology. Rather than our car “demanding” that we “buckle up” before “allowing” us to drive it, parental controls prompt us—the “parental” user—to delegate our moral decision-making to their capabilities. They don’t threaten us by not starting like a car, but they do promise to make our journey safer should we submit. The “settings,” as in Akrich’s sense of a script serving as a “framework of action” to “predetermine the settings,” of our particular actors are integrated into
hardware, thus providing a series of options for how users can occupy the scripted spaces that game systems enable. Xbox One’s categories of “Child defaults,” “Teen defaults,” even “Adult defaults,” are the ideological portals through which we determine settings. In my “Adult defaults,” “Everybody” is preselected in the “Customize” option for “See your game and app history,” while “Block” appears for “See your live TV and on-demand video history.” The homonymic “settings” of parental controls determine the “settings” within which users can interact. A tongue twister: Users set their settings via settings. Despite the rhetoric of personal customization often attributed to the selection of parental control settings, such decision-making are formative social links to technology and the content made accessible. The game system delimits social space in its settings through which we come to occupy the world it enables. Parental controls materialize the ethos that users must take responsibility for their own environments and actions (as opposed to federal agencies). Integrated settings inscribe the belief that a gaming device is a viable, prudent means to predetermine how the machine can be used and how, under specific settings, its content can be accessed.

With Microsoft’s Kinect-based sign-in options, a user’s demarcated movement within the system is automatically determined in his or her account settings—parents, sanctioned as authorized administrators, can determine a profile for their child by adding an account through which the child is leashed-licensed to access the system’s various features. I write “leashed” not to sound snide, but because the settings “travel” with the user bound by such an account, even when logging into the account via other Xbox One consoles turned network terminals for circumscribed access. Wherever the child goes, his or her settings will “already be there.” At the risk of mixing metaphors, this practice is an indication of control technologies like highways, bridges, seatbelts, and speed bumps, becoming concentrated while simultaneously distributed to insure that movement is always delimited according to approved settings—like a speed bump that always travels with you. Access to content and applications, filtering of the web, and Microsoft’s OneGuide television descriptions are morally “re-centered” for living room safety, even when outside of the home, no less. The “parental” actor can customize a narrowcast point of view across Microsoft’s networked products, one of hyper-extended isolationism and moral solipsism, working to redefine the very concepts of networked computing and social media. The “parental” in “parental controls” is less a specific quantifiable type or “super-actor” than a scripted relation. “Parental” actually involves any user of these settings as the ideological figure of a characteristic guardian because of the word’s advisory, governing, and genetic connotations. The game system is inter-relational—
shaping both the user who initiates such settings while, in return, configuring the options for others. The “parental” actor is not outside of such assignment; rather, they are scripted in their willful compliance with settings, and in the practice of becoming “involved parents” via a settings option.

Such involvement is not necessarily a trait of commitment or admiration, as is common to the phrase. Within the context of parental control, involvement signals something altogether different. In 1964 Marshall McLuhan spoke of the “implosion factor” incurred by our then new media, whereby “the Negro and teenager” (his figures to shock middle-class white mid-1960s readers—his “we”—into awareness) “can no longer be contained, in the political sense of the limited association. They are now involved in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media.”

New technologies create new environments; thus, the consequence of any medium (understood as a “make happen agent” in McLuhan’s language) is the transformation of our experience. Fifty years on since the publication of McLuhan’s *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, our media technologies now give us the means to judiciously extricate ourselves from involvement, so that refusal becomes a form of engagement. The on-screen “block” message comes to signify automatic and omnipresent parental involvement.

Parenting through parental controls is, in practice, however, deactivation. Involvement with the world is a filtered affair ideologically polarized to permit only what conforms to our singular worldview (which is precisely why I would claim it as an “isolationist” mechanism). *Devolution* is a much more accurate description of the mediated morality performed by parental controls. “Devolving” is the equivalent to Latour’s use of “delegation,” whereby human agency and specific human actions can be entrusted to artifacts. They are delegated with responsibility. Famous examples are the hydraulic door closer replacing the “undisciplined bellboy” and the heavy European hotel key fob embodying the hotel manager’s command to return the key. Devolvement transfers a duty onto another (e.g., door pistons and heavy keys). Parental controls “speak” on behalf of parental actors who devolve the responsibility of monitoring to software. The action of pre-screening to determine judgment is removed, devolved to the game system’s inscribed settings. I am not saying that “parenting” goes the way of the bellboy, but rather that practices of parenting have devolved to parental controls in their scripts of security.

Within its “growing suite of features,” devolving parental controls are meant not to complicate the process of filtering content (something many purported “parents” are said to find confusing); instead, they are as “simple” as selecting a preferred setting with our impulse triggers and capacitive touch pads, as familiar as

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playing a game. “As the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One continue to broaden their reach, both through gaming and other forms of entertainment,” writes Brian Crecente, another reviewer of new generation parental controls, “it’s great to see two monolithic companies thinking about the tools parents can use to help them be better parents.”

By this understanding, devolvement would seem to allow for improved parenting. This view is often regarded as a positive factor in today’s “user-centered” media regulation practices in that users decide and determine what is acceptable and accessible for them (and for others, I should add). Winner also alerts us to the case, less obvious than we think, that Moses’s bridges “have been designed and built in such a way that [they] produce a set of consequences logically and temporally prior to any of its professed uses.” Regardless whether one actually enables parental controls on their Xbox One or PS4—and many users do not—they are already an authorized “core part.” They precede use. They precede us. Moral decision-making is hard-coded.

Fresh out of its box, my PS4’s “factory settings” delimit any user’s access to content according to numeric level restriction. Level 9 is its default “Mature” setting—which leads to the question, why 9? “The lower the level, the tighter the control,” my PS4 parental controls features screen informs me. OneGuide in my Xbox One’s “Privacy & online safety for Raiford” blocks “by default” the descriptors for “Adult TV,” automatically contained in the ill-defined labels of “explicit” and “objectionable.” I then have to select “Allow in OneGuide,” should I want to permit the programming descriptions to be visible. Why have a pre-set level, or default setting, if the user is tasked with such decision-making? Its default is a pre-inscribed judgment on user “safety,” regardless of an actual user. On whose behalf does it act? Is it for me, the 45 year-old player whose Leeds United lost to Bayern Munich on penalties in the Champions League Final? For my 4-year old son, who plays FIFA 2015 with me? For the 3- to 18-year olds, for whom Xbox One allows you to “customize settings” according to their “appropriate” age? For the parent or legal guardian who feels inclined to leash their offspring? Or for the parent, or legal guardian who does not, shunning such devolvement? Unless actively changed by a user, access will remain restricted to this level. Such an object is neither neutral nor passive, lying in wait to be acted upon by its user. It already involves and anticipates the user in its perceived affordances of morality management. An emphasis on “use” as the evaluative determinant neglects the fact that parental controls, as Winner says of Moses’s bridges, “have been designed and built” thus; and for over a decade now, identifying the game console as a control technology presents a moral bias in its construction: The machine has become an acceptable means, an entrusted actor for governance.

20 Winner, “Do Artifacts have Politics,” 25 (original italics).
To further explicate Winner’s criticism of the privileging of use, he adds that “if our moral and political language for evaluating technology includes only categories of having to do with tools and uses, if it does not include attention to the meaning of the designs and arrangements of our artifacts, then we will be blinded to much that is intellectually and practically crucial.” The meaning of parental controls surely resides in their mandated integration, regardless of any usage. Designed into the architecture of the game console, they are not optional but always present—part of the hardware specs. The multiple meanings of “default” speak to this point well. “Default” is failure toward an obligation. Preceding users are already “obliged” to their settings, prior to any awareness or direct interaction with settings. “Morality is from the beginning inscribed in the things,” Latour writes, “which, thanks to it, oblige us to oblige them.” We, the user, are also pre-inscribed; thus, our use is anticipated into the materiality of the machine. We cannot fail in our obligation; we are already obliged to “them” by “default” via a preselected option, factory installed. Inclusion in Winner’s sense of the term is the “success” of control technology: It has achieved the rank of a default, assisting in the “designs and arrangements of our artifacts” while also shaping how we live in and know the worlds they assist in structuring.

We are obliged to stay on the highway.

21 Ibid.