

# A Proposal

*notes: ~9000 words (without references)*

## Introduction

In this thesis, I will develop and experiment within an aesthetic of ‘contemplative play,’ a play with the potential to more clearly show the nature of the world around us, and who we are within that world. The functionality of play, the nimble maneuvering within a formalized system, is a unique form of meaning-making that, in an age of fractured attention and instrumentalized leisure, offers a compelling alternative: a space of purposeless engagement where we encounter ourselves, others, and the world afresh. Where many games try to guide the player through specified challenges and defined narratives, contemplative play points the player toward an openness that provides the opportunity for introspection at a deeper, more ambiguous level. And this new potential of playful contemplation offers an antidote to many of the ways that people feel ill-at-ease with modern life.

Contemporary society has created a situation in which people feel overwhelmed, with fractured attention and the pressure to be continually active and productive. Many academics and artists have begun to push back on the narrative that a life is just a series of quantifiable achievements. Jenny O’Dell is a key voice in this movement, publishing books such as *How to do Nothing* (Odell 2019) and *Saving Time* (Odell 2023), but many others have noted the pull to have a more meaningful relationship with the world than what the design of our technologies seems to dictate. We act and act, without giving ourselves time to reflect, to contemplate the nature of the world. In the past, art fulfilled this purpose. The paintings in our museums, the music in our recital halls, and the stories in our literature would give us opportunities for contemplation, but now even our leisure time is full of activity and over-stimulation. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han laments this loss of respite, saying “‘Leisure time’ lacks both intensity of life and contemplation. It is a time that we kill so as not to get bored. It is not *free, living time*; it is *dead time*” (Han and Steuer 2023, 2). In contrast, he claims “we owe true happiness to the useless and purposeless, to what is intentionally convoluted, what is unproductive, indirect, exuberant, superfluous, to beautiful forms and gestures that have no use and serve no purpose” (Han and Steuer 2023, 5). He names this concept “ceremonious inactivity” where “we do something, but to no end,’ resulting in the discovery of a reality that”reveals itself only to contemplative attention” (Han and Steuer 2023, 11).

Play is an ideal vehicle for this ‘ceremonious inactivity.’ It is a powerful and increasingly common way to engage with the world around us. For decades, game designers and researchers have claimed that play provides an opportunity to understand fundamental aspects of human existence. Bernie De Koven, a foundational figure in this movement, speaks to how play can elicit “a shared

transcendence of personal limitations, of our understanding of our capabilities; a sudden, momentary transformation of our awareness of the connections between ourselves, each other, and the world we find each other in” (De Koven and Gramazio 2020, 83). Similarly, in his book *Play Matters*, Miguel Sicart states that “[t]o play is to be in the world. Playing is a form of understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others. Play is a mode of being human” (Sicart 2014, 1). Designer/researcher Frank Lantz argues that the very nature of play as being outside normal life contributes to its aesthetic value: “It is this distance that gives aesthetic experiences their power to be *about* life, its purpose and values” (Lantz 2023, 24).

This aesthetic understanding of play provides a helpful framework with which to analyze the experience. In his book *Design Aesthetics*, Mads Nygaard Folkmann states that “aesthetics gives way for a reflection of how we perceive, sense, and are present in the world – that is, how we relate to our surroundings” (Folkmann 2023, 10). Common understanding of aesthetics can be slippery, with definitions stretching back to Plato and Kant and covering concepts such as phenomenology, art-for-art’s-sake, and epistemology. However, taking from Yuriko Saito’s concept of ‘everyday aesthetics’, which encompasses “the sensuous and/or design qualities of any object, phenomenon, or activity,”(Saito 2007, 7) we can better develop a functional scaffold with which to approach the design and analysis of both play and contemplative experiences. Game designers and researchers have put a lot of time and effort into developing a whole host of frameworks of the foundational building blocks of games, but an aesthetic understanding of play helps us to take a wider and hopefully more contemplative look. From this expanded perspective we can leverage particular lenses of aesthetic engagement and how they contribute to the play as a contemplative experience. With this extended scope, and leaning on an aesthetic structure that I often think about in my own design practice, I propose looking at four distinct components of play: Player(s), Playthings, Playgrounds, and Playtime. These aesthetic pillars will give us helpful vantage points from which to think about how play intersects with the contemplative mode.

Contemplative play offers a way of engagement that is both reflective and participatory - an approach to dwell with and on the world and its inhabitants in a playful manner. The aesthetic lenses of Players, Playthings, Playgrounds, and Playtime will provide a framework to analyze the various ways and environments that make play ‘contemplative.’ For each aesthetic pillar, I propose to read related work and build out playful experiments in response to these ideas. In addition, I will position this work in communication with other artistic practices that encourage a contemplative engagement with the world along similar aesthetic spheres—such as soundwalks, deep listening, performative objects, contemplative architecture, and ambient media. Through this reflective design practice - making playful experiments in response to each of these aesthetic elements, reflecting on the nature of play experienced through these explorations, and leveraging the method for design materialization (MDM) for further insights - we will gain more crystallized knowledge about that potential,

and develop ways to cultivate more engaging and meaningful play experiences.

## Background

### Reflective Design

In his 1982 book *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön sets up his argument for “reflection-in-action,” (Schön 2021) a way of thinking about design practice that has been adopted by academics and practitioners alike (Frayling 1993; Redstrom 2017; Eklund, Dixon, and Wegener 2023). Though this design process-focused understanding of “reflective practice” is perhaps most commonly discussed with a focus on the designers themselves, we can also think about how as designers we can build “reflective practices” into our designs.

The concept of reflection has found a strong foothold in the academic world, where it becomes a desired state for learners. Numerous thinkers and educators have relied on Dewey’s concept of ‘reflective thought’ as a goal for teaching (Dewey 1933). Dewey explains this state as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (Dewey 1933, 6). Dewey and those who follow focus on how reflection helps the learner learn. For them, the goal is the gaining of knowledge. Jennifer Moon, for instance, states that reflection is “we reflect in order to learn something, or we learn as a result of reflection” (Moon 2013, 80). This understanding of reflection is unambiguous and practical, something to be harnessed for a desired end outcome.

Similarly, in their paper “Reflective Design,” Phoebe Sengers et al. (Sengers et al. 2005) build on critical theory to argue for designs that brings “unconscious aspects of experience to conscious awareness, thereby making them available for conscious choice” (Sengers et al. 2005, 2). Specifically, they “expand on reflection-in-action by not waiting for surprise to occur but by intervening to create or stimulate these reflection triggers” (Sengers et al. 2005, 5). This shifts the focus of reflection away from the nature of the designed object and instead places it on the nature of technology as a whole. Sengers et al. argue that by focusing on the user’s critical reflection, designers are able to counter norms and create positive social effect.

However, there is also an opportunity for designing more ambiguous reflective experiences - non-prescriptive experiences with the potential to point outwards to larger open-ended questions and ideas. One possibility is through experimental interactions. Lars Hallnäs and Johan Redström (Hallnäs and Redström 2001) introduce the concept of “slow technology [...] as a tool for making reflection inherent in design expression” (Hallnäs and Redström 2001, 204). They propose that slowing down, removing clarity, and building friction into designs can make the user reflect on the nature and role of technology in their life. A doorbell that influences several fans behind an array of fabric squares communicates something different from the usual chime, but what exactly? The user is left to consider these objects and interactions and what they might mean. This is similar to Rilla Khaled’s (Khaled 2018) proposal of a ‘reflective game design,’

where the designer designs to highlight questions over answers, disruption over comfort, and reflection over immersion. These types of games are designed in stark contrast to serious games, which often have an underlying lesson to be learned. Rather, reflective game design is a space where “asking meaningful questions is more important than providing clear answers” (Khaled 2018, 23).

### Contemplative Design

In order to differentiate the present work from the widespread use of ‘reflective design’ as a means for targeted critical reflection, I propose the term *contemplative design*. The word contemplation stems from the latin *com + templum*, and was originally “to mark out a space for observation” (“Contemplate - Etymology, Origin & Meaning,” n.d.). From this tradition, translators rendered the earlier Greek term *theória*, used by both Plato and Aristotle, into the Latin *contemplatio*, which gets used in both the Platonic contemplation of eternal Forms and the Aristotelian notion of contemplation as the highest form of human happiness. Later, the term took on a more religious and spiritual tone, especially popularized by the twentieth century Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, and his book “Seeds of Contemplation” (Merton 1949). More recently, scholars such as Byung-Chul Han (Han and Steuer 2023, 2020) and Oludamini Ogunnaike (Ogunnaike 2020), have expanded the idea of contemplation into a more mysterious interplay between humans and the world. This use of ‘contemplation’ gets more to the root of what a deep interaction with designed experiences could feel like. In their paper “Contemplative Neuroaesthetics and Architecture: A Sensorimotor Exploration,” Djebbara et al. (*Contemplative Neuroaesthetics and Architecture*, n.d.) use the term to indicate a “heightened level of awareness and an intentional focus on the present moment, fostering a state of deep reflection and non-judgmental engagement” (*Contemplative Neuroaesthetics and Architecture*, n.d., 98). Using examples from architecture, including the Rundetårn in Copenhagen, Denmark, Louis Kahn’s Salk Institue in La Jolla, California, and the Chartres Cathedral in France, Djebbara et al. argue that these buildings can bring about states of deep contemplation/reflection in a viewer by “enforcing an embodied experience of presence” (*Contemplative Neuroaesthetics and Architecture*, n.d., 100). Indeed an entire field of contemplative architecture has developed that explores how architectural spaces of all kinds can foster these kinds of deeper experiences. Krinke (2005)

We see this focus on contemplative design in other places as well. Such designs are often art objects, with critical design and speculative design as example approaches. Anthony Dunne’s Faraday Chair, for example, uses a large Faraday cage to create a haven from electromagnetic fields, which causes the viewer to ask, “If the inside is empty, what is outside?” (Dunne 2008, 143) Additionally, the “chair” is actually a daybed, which Faraday claims contributes to the notion that “once electromagnetic fields are taken into consideration, conventional assumptions about everyday objects need to be reexamined” (Dunne 2008, 144). In Critical Play, Mary Flanagan calls these the designs that “represent one or

more questions about aspects of human life” (Flanagan 2009, 6). This ‘critical play’ is a type of play that pokes at the very nature of play itself (rules, competition, playspaces, for example) and uses that questioning stance to reflect on the world at large.

Soundwalking is another field of artistic practice related to my understanding of contemplative design. Soundwalking started as part of R. Murray Schafer’s *World Soundscape Project* (“WORLD SOUNDSCAPE PROJECT,” n.d.), which arose from active listening practices developed by artists like John Cage and Pauline Oliveros (Cage and Gann 2013; Oliveros 2010) Schafer and those in the project sought to anchor these active listening practices to a given place. Hildegard Westerkamp especially believed that through soundwalking, listeners could better understand their sonic environments (Smolicki 2023). This deepened connection with the sonic world is enigmatic of how other aspects of our lived experience can open up in new ways when we pay attention. (Han and Steuer 2023)

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller use their recorded soundwalks to guide the listener through a world of their making, a sonic world that is overlaid onto a real, physical place (Cardiff et al. 2005). In *Her Long Black Hair*, as the listener walks through Central Park in New York City, snippets of conversation slip by that feel like they are in the same space as you. Cardiff speaks directly to you but then has a conversation with others who are not visibly present. Recorded audio effects of long-gone marching bands, sirens, and political rallies make the listener feel like they are experiencing a highly professional radio drama, creating a space for deep and truly unique contemplative experiences where “our seemingly dull everyday existence has the potential to reveal simultaneous magical worlds of experience” (Cardiff et al. 2005, 24).

Kristina Niedderer’s “performative objects” are another noteworthy example (Niedderer 2007). She distinguishes these objects from Jacques Carelman’s *Catalogue d’Objets Introuvables* (Carelman 1984) by describing them as, “objects that can cause mindfulness in the context of everyday use, and not in the institutional context of art” (Niedderer 2007, 12). This separation means that the performative object must rely on adaptations within its formal elements to create a contemplative state *while remaining functional*. This is particularly interesting as we consider designing contemplative experiences for game-like experiments that retain their sense of play.

Another reference point for contemplative design is “ambient interactive experiences.” These designs build on ideas from other slow, ambient media such as Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports* (*Ambient 1* 1979) and Godfrey Reggio’s film *Koyaanisqatsi* (*Koyaanisqatsi* 1982), to create a more passive yet potentially deeper experience. The genre of ‘slow games’ comes out of this understanding, but thinking about a wider field of ambient media opens up the opportunity to include more material. These projects are interested in slow pacing, obfuscation, and less “comfortable” experiences, with varying degrees of success. Game designer and researcher Tracy Fullerton refers to this as ‘reflective play’ where

slowness isn't "equivalent to meaningfulness, but rather because the process of making meaning through reflection requires time at a human pace, takes cycles of response, interpretation, and unpacking of experience" (De Koven and Gramazio 2020, 72). Examples include the cooperative game *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012), the work of David O'Reilly(O'Reilly, n.d.) and Pippin Barr's *var 5* (Barr [2023] 2023), among others.

### Design Aesthetics

There are various existing frameworks for thinking about the elements of play that might be relevant for a study of contemplation. While these frameworks are often overly descriptive and prescriptive, there are elements within that can inform our current study, providing a solid foundation for our exploration.

Salen and Zimmerman, in their book *Rules of Play* (Tekinbas and Zimmerman 2003), set up an understanding of "meaningful play." In their definition, this relates more to how the playful systems in a game relate meaning back to the game itself. However, this could be expanded to how play could broaden our understanding of meaning-making in the world. In *A Game Design Vocabulary* (Anthropy and Clark 2014), Anna Anthropy and Naomi Clark call this the context of a game, discussing specifically how the design aspects of a digital game (camera, character, sound, etc) communicate aspects of the game to the player. Could we leverage the contexts of play, pointing outward to contemplate on life in general? What are the specific contexts that we could use to do so?

In *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses* (Schell 2014), Jesse Schell introduces the concept of lenses that we can use to develop and evaluate games from specific vantage points. While it may be overkill to apply each of his 113 lenses to our study, applying this concept of lenses as a way to establish and evaluate context is a valuable exercise. Hunnicke et al.'s "MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research" (Hunicke, Leblanc, and Zubek 2004) identifies three key components for game design: Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics. Their concept of *aesthetics* as "the desirable emotional responses evoked in the player, when she interacts with the game system" (Hunicke, Leblanc, and Zubek 2004, 3) is a good starting place, but is a slightly different understanding from mainstream design aesthetics, where as Folkmann explains, at a broader level it "offers concepts for investigating and understanding how design is constituted, how it appeals to and affects people, and how it frames human experiencing" (Folkmann 2023, 1).

Thinking of the context of play, specifically through these wider lenses of design aesthetics, is an excellent framework with which to explore how play could engender contemplative experience.

### Aesthetics of Contemplative Play

Book III of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (Schopenhauer 2012) holds some key language about what he calls "aesthetic contem-

plation,” which is pertinent to the ideas of contemplation in artistic fields. In section 34, he describes the shift from looking at something through ‘reason’ to ‘a steady contemplation’ by saying:

Further, we do not allow abstract thought, the concepts of the reason, take possession of our consciousness, but, instead of all this, devote the whole power of our mind to perception, sink ourselves completely therein, and let our whole consciousness be filled by the calm contemplation of the natural object actually present, whether a landscape, a tree, a mountain, a brook, a crag, a building, or anything else. We *lose* ourselves entirely in the object (Schopenhauer 2012, 178)

This concept of aesthetic contemplation helps to specify the type of aesthetic play experience that one could have, an experience that moves from the surface to something deeper. What is especially helpful is how Schopenhauer includes space for *active* contemplation on the viewer’s part. It is not a passive, peaceful, zen calm, but rather an attitude of looking that is searching for more. Some philosophers and art historians have coined the term “aesthetic attitude” to explain this idea (“Aesthetic Attitude | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” n.d.).

Combining this with an *aesthetics of play*, we can create a series of lenses with which to explore the idea of contemplation. I find that Katja Kwastek’s *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (Kwastek 2013) is foundational here, especially her chapter on the “Aesthetics of Play.” However, while Kwastek’s playful aesthetics are organized around the formal elements and characteristics of games (freedom, flow, artificiality, etc), I desire to develop aesthetic categories that are wider and less formally descriptive. In my personal practice, I often think of four big picture aspects of play. First, the players are those who willingly engage with the playful systems. Second, the playthings are the trappings of games, the objects with which the player interacts. Third, the playspace is the boundary created by play, a boundary that is often as much mental as physical. Lastly, playtime is the time set aside and made ‘sacred’ by the play, a time that expands and contracts to contain more than the sum of its seconds. These four aesthetic lenses, when used as a way to reflect on play, will give us a way to in to the discussion, a way towards the construction of unique experiences with contemplation in and through play.

## Methodology

### Methodological Foundations

In his paper for the first issue of Research in Art and Design, Christopher Frayling introduced a key concept in the relationship between research and design by differentiating between the kinds of research possible within the field (Frayling 1993). He split these into three main areas: ‘Research *into* art and

design,’ where established research methods are used to analyze art and design on historical, cultural or critical means (such as art history, film criticism, etc.); ‘research *for* art and design’ which encompasses all the learning, gathering, and thinking that supports the making of an artefact; ‘research *through* art and design’ which describes a creative practice where making is the method of investigation, a practice that is both the process and the means of producing insights. In the years since the publication of this paper, Frayling’s concept of research through design (RtD) has set a foundation for the design community to establish itself as a knowledge-making one.

Where Frayling offered a taxonomy, Redström expanded on the concept by exploring explicit tactics for how these methods are employed (Redstrom 2017). In particular, his concept of sequencing describes a way that design and theories can coexist throughout the design process. “Using a highly iterative process, more developed relations between theory and design can evolve as the understanding of how the different design variables will have an impact on the test situation grows deeper” (Redstrom 2017, 19) Design informs theory, and theory informs design. This echoes Schön’s notion of the *reflective practitioner*, who, while engaging with reflection-in-action, remains in conversation both with the materiality of the design and the larger ideas that it represents (Schön 2021).

More recently, Nigel Cross’s work on *designerly ways of knowing* strengthens this claim even further by placing design in its own distinct epistemological tradition, what he calls a ‘third culture’ set apart from science and the humanities (Cross 2007). Cross argues that design knowledge is inherently constructivist, and it is in the very act of designing where that knowledge is built. Complementing this, Candy defines practice-based research as “a principled approach to research by means of practice, in which the research and the practice operate as interdependent and complementary processes leading to new and original forms of knowledge.” (Candy, Edmonds, and Vear 2021, 27) Bærenholdt et al. (Bærenholdt et al. 2010) agree, noting that, “design becomes as much a medium and process of research, as a result” (Bærenholdt et al. 2010, 6).

Taken together, these frameworks show design as a valid form of meaning-making, where knowledge is produced in and through the act of making. This establishes a core methodology, one that leverages the iterative design process of making, reflecting, and documentation towards the production, analysis, and testing of new knowledge.

### Research Process

In *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön argues that “research is an activity of practitioners. It is triggered by features of the practice situation, undertaken on the spot, and immediately linked to action” (Schön 2021, 308). I have found that this very accurately describes my own game design process. As a designer, I am in a dialog with my design, and the process involves thousands of decisions that are repeatedly implemented and evaluated, with this interchange happening

throughout the entirety of the process.

In my practice, this process starts with a sketching phase, which Buxton argues is the ‘archetypical design activity’ that itself helps create new knowledge (Buxton 2007). Ideas about visual style, game mechanics, themes, etc are explored by rapidly sketching and reflecting on their feasibility and design potential. The goal of this stage is to generate as many ideas as possible, helping crystallize the problem and generate possible solutions. These ideas are then refined down to something more concrete and actionable for a larger prototype. The collateral from these sessions are captured using a camera to be included in any online documentation, and the entire process is reflected upon in a series of design journals.

Once the design process moves out of the sketching phase, I build prototypes that implement some of the most promising ideas from the ideation phase. As these prototypes are built, new ideas emerge and those that do not work as intended are discarded. This mirrors Schön’s concept of reflection-in-action, where I am in conversation with the material and can glean which directions are more fruitful than others. It happens repeatedly and at a very quick pace. Then, once the ideas are more solidly understood, the process of refinement introduces even quicker but far less radical incremental changes. This stage of iteration is often one of the most fruitful times of the creative process. Macklin and Sharp (Sharp et al. 2024) liken it to the Japanese concept of *kaizen* or ‘continuous improvement.’ Additionally, this stage adheres to Jesse Schell’s Rule of the Loop, where “the more times you test and improve your design, the better your game will be” (Schell 2014, 94).

Through all of these phases, I implement the Method for Design Materialization (MDM) first presented by Rilla Khaled, Jonathan Lessard, and Pippin Barr (Khaled, Lessard, and Barr 2018). In this method, the numerous decisions that a designer makes during the course of their process are documented using the version control system Git. Any time that the designer uploads a commit, they write a detailed message commenting on the particular design decision, motivations, thoughts, and any future plans at that specific moment in time. This opportunity to describe the work at its current state also invites a point of reflection, where the designer can step back and think about the overall state of the project, echoing Schön’s concept of reflection-on-action (Schön 2021, 61). This is all stored in a public repository which becomes an archive not only of a design’s trajectory, but also the designer’s unique thought process throughout. Khaled et al. (Khaled, Lessard, and Barr 2018) state that the “history of commits over time can give an understanding of the overall design space and how it has been traversed: its pressure points, its branching points, where decisions have been made, and where possible lines of inquiry have been pruned” (Khaled, Lessard, and Barr 2018, 4).

The end goal of all of this is both a playable prototype that has made it through several phases of internal testing and refinement as well as a thorough archive of the reflective design documentation. These two artifacts help to make the

knowledge gained from the experimentation more concrete and actionable, both as a living document of the particular design process and as a roadmap for those who may wish to engage in the design conversation.

## Design Orientation

This focus of this research on both contemplation and play puts it at an intersection within design and other disciplines. While many games and playful media foreground challenge, skill, or entertainment, the goal of this exploration is to discover ways that play can cultivate deeper reflective states. I seek to create artifacts that invite the player to pause, reflect, and hopefully turn that questioning posture outward to the world around them. In this way, my methodology treats play not only as an engaging activity, but also as a vehicle for cultivating states of attentiveness and reflection, more in line with poetry, art, and sacred architecture.

Organizing this research through four aesthetic lenses (player, plaything, playground, and playspace) helps to emphasize different aspects of the contemplative play experience.

- **Player:** This lens highlights the role of the player engaged within play. It explores their role in fostering both play and contemplation, how agency and willingness is crucial to both.
- **Plaything:** Here I focus on the artifacts of play, the objects that become the focal points of play. What change of state happens when a cardboard box becomes a spaceship?
- **Playground:** This lens shifts focus to the environment created for play. It considers how spatial, visual, and atmospheric elements generate opportunities for reflection, whether through limitation, openness, or carefully curated affordances.
- **Playtime:** Finally, we look at the temporal dimensions of play. To play and to contemplate means to be within time. How does pacing, rhythm, and duration affect both the play experience and the opportunity for contemplation?

In exploring these questions through this framework I will engage with the possibility of contemplative play. This exploration is grounded in complimentary theories of play, aesthetics, and contemplation, but the end result is not prescribed beforehand. I have some notions of what might instigate contemplation (frame-shifting, slow pace, repetition, etc.) but, as mentioned above, much of the knowledge will be gained *through* the creation of these experiments. It is primarily through their creation that a deeper understanding of this possibility-space will arise.

## Summary

In summary, by combining research-through-design with the concept of designerly ways of knowing and systematic reflective MDM documentation, my

methodology enables both the production of exploratory design artifacts and the development of new knowledge around contemplative play. Through each stage in the iterative practice my own prior designerly knowledge and intuition will help to refine an initially large amount of ideas to only those with the most potential. Additionally, using the four lenses of player, plaything, playground, and playtime will help to structure which aspects of the playful/contemplative experience to foreground during each stage of the exploration, becoming a key guiding principle towards the development of contemplative play as a unique practice.

## Timetable

In general, I propose to focus on each of the four main aesthetic-topic areas for a set duration. During this focused time, I will read literature and experience first-hand the art and design experiences in this domain, responding to the material both in writing/reflecting and creating playful exploration prototypes. Once the initial stages have been complete, I will spend the remaining time on the synthesis and writing of the thesis paper.

- Explorations
  - Player (Sep. 2025 - Dec. 2025)
  - Playthings (Jan. 2026 - April 2026)
  - Playgrounds (May 2026 - August 2026)
  - Playtime (Sep. 2026 - Dec. 2026)
  - Synthesis, Thesis Writing, and Revisions (Jan. 2027 - Dec. 2027)

## Chapter Breakdown

### Introduction

The introduction will frame the thesis by proposing “contemplative play” as a way to more deeply interact with the world - as an antidote to the overstimulation and fractured nature of modern life. It will introduce the basic brushstrokes of the philosophical and aesthetic discourse. It will situate play as a meaningful way of engagement supported by thinkers, artists, and game theorists. It will introduce the concept of contemplative play aesthetics (Players, Playthings, Playgrounds, and Playtime) that will guide the thesis’s design experiments and analysis. **See Above**

### Background

The background section will ground the thesis in existing scholarship and introduce and explain key terms and domains. It will look at the lineage of reflective design, contemplative design, and design aesthetics before introducing and establishing a framework within which to explore the aesthetics of contemplative play. **See Above**

## **Methodology**

The methodology chapter introduces the key literature for design as a powerful way to engage with knowledge-creation and meaning-making. Tracing the thinking from Frayling to Redström, Schön, Cross, Candy, etc., it lays the groundwork for the exploratory nature of the thesis, where both the process of experimentation and the experiments themselves will be the artifacts with which we will build an aesthetics of contemplative play. It will explain how this theoretical understanding of knowledge-creation within the iterative design process is made concrete by utilizing the MDM framework. **See Above**

## **Player**

This chapter examines the role of the participant both in play and in contemplation. We will look at concepts of play like player agency, performance, and flow as well as concept of contemplation like repetition, purposeful obfuscation, and focus. It will include the following sections:

### **Aesthetic Description**

Much of play is performative. A player acts out scenarios. They move their body in a coordinated effort with other players or the playful system. Play can even be designed so that the act of playing is engaging from those outside of the playspace. Professional sports is a clear example of this, but Let's Plays, E-Sports, and arcade experiences (kids gathered around a Street Fighter cabinet in the 90s or DDR machines in the early aughts) also point to the possibilities of "performing" play. Contemplation is also about performing. The contemplative practitioner moves their body in a particular way, engages in repetitive action, and seeks to create states of both flow and often unexpected occurrence. How might this overlap be explored?

### **Related Genres**

Soundwalking is a useful genre precedent to think about how not only our physical bodies inhabit an experience, but also how the physical world around us allows for performance. Artists like Hildegard Westerkamp (Smolicki 2023) built on the active listening practices of Pauline Oliveros (Oliveros 2010) and John Cage (Cage and Gann 2013) to invite listeners to playfully explore acoustic space. Tapping on bridges, shouting in tunnels, banging on cans: these playful acts require the listener to become performer in order to discover something new about the world around them.

The soundwalks of Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller are of particular interest here (Cardiff et al. 2005). Since 2017, they have been creating site-specific audio and video walks. These walks function as alternative audioguide experiences, layering narrative voice, music, description, sound effects, and more onto the existing aural environment. What begins as a walk through central park becomes a meditation on love, longing, loss, history, and art. These walks already have a playful and contemplative feeling to them, and expanding on their ideas and processes may lead to new knowledge, as can already be seen in



Figure 1: “Her Long Black Hair” (Cardiff 2004).

the “Experiments in Soundwalks for Video Games” paper that I have already published specifically about this topic (Bethancourt and Barr 2024).

#### Existing Work

Thinking about the player as performer and how soundwalks (and other interactive artworks) have used the movement of participants to create meaning, what new contemplative and playful experiences can we create?

Games and Soundwalks both operate in this area of “performance,” but come from at it at slightly different angles. The game “performance” is generally much more about how the avatar “performs” than the actual player. An early attempt to interweave soundwalks with play was a series of soundwalks for the PS5 game *Spiderman 2* (Insomniac Games 2023). These experiments led to a framework of techniques adapted from soundwalking practices that could be applied to videogames for new sonic experiences. However, the specific concept of performance remains unexplored, and is a fruitful area of inquiry.

Installation-based play, Like Buy! Sell! (Mouse & the Billionaire 2022a) thinks about the player as performer. In a similar way, playful soundwalks could be a space to explore the overlap between play and performative spaces. Janet Cardiff hints at these playful moments in her soundwalks, and existing work like the “An Invitation to Play” (Mouse & the Billionaire 2025a) soundwalk recently presented at ICMC 2025 in Boston explicitly explore this crossover.

#### Ideas to Explore

That recent soundwalk was a good start in exploring how directed play could be approached in a soundwalk. In that example, a narrator led the participant through playful thinking and activities in a given space. Analysis will needed to



Figure 2: Miles Morales in *Marvel's Spider-Man 2* (Insomniac Games 2023). Screenshot by author.



Figure 3: Mouse & the Billionaire's *Buy! Sell!* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2022a).

think through and iterate on that approach, but an immediate counter-approach presented itself through the creation process. Rather than guide the player by the hand, could we more subtly create a contemplative state? In *Vita Contemplativa*, Han states “information is the active form of language. Poetry, by contrast, suspense, language as information. In poetry, language enters the mood of contemplation. It becomes inactive” (Han and Steuer 2023, 19). What would a soundwalk that exists in a poetic rather than an expository mode look and feel like? What if the ideas are more hidden? Could obfuscation be a powerful tool here? Is something more compelling if it harder to understand, harder to get to the core of? Is current mainstream videogame storytelling too blunt? The existing thinking around ‘poetic games’ (“Game Poems Magazine,” n.d.) is looking at these questions, and might also be a fruitful area of exploration.

The end result of this chapter will be a series of short soundwalks that explore physicality, performance, and flow (among other possible topics) as they relates to both play and contemplation. These soundwalks will inform and establish an aesthetics of contemplative play as it relates to the player’s role.

### Playthings

This chapter examines how the objects we play with inform the act of play. We will look at the formal and material considerations or playthings, their weight, heft, texture, and embedded meaning as well how objects can be used to initiate contemplative states (particularly in design, but also looking at art-objects and religious iconography) It will include the following sections:

#### Aesthetic Description

The materiality of the objects in play has a profound effect on the playful experience. Not only do textures, shapes, and other physical characteristic communicate essential aspects of these items (which Fullerton dubs “resources”), but the very introduction of external elements themselves communicates something about the playful experience. A verbal bang, pointed finger, plastic cap-gun, and hyper-realistic 3D modelled firearm all say something of the values at play in the games that include them, but the presence of weaponry at all as a “resource” communicates even more.

#### Related Genres

The Performative Objects of Kristina Niedderer (Niedderer 2007) fit well into this understanding, as they strategically explore the material and functional aspects of objects in order to provoke what she calls “mindful interactions.” Their materiality (often at odds with rather than in service to their functionality) initiates a more reflective stance from the user within the context of their intended use. Her “Social Cups,” for example (above) can only be useful when combined. Each individual cup would tip over without the support of group, reinforcing the social qualities of a glass of wine. Yoko Ono’s famous all-white chess set “Play it by Heart” (Ono 1997) is another clear example of how the materiality of an object can be at service for both play and contemplation. What starts as an



Figure 4: Kristina Niedderer’s *Social Cups* (Niedderer 2001).

ordinary game of chess devolves once the pieces become too enmeshed and the players can no longer remember whose pieces are whose, bringing to the forefront a commentary on the futility of war. In a slightly different mode, Yurkio Saito’s notion of *Everyday Aesthetics* (Saito 2007), where reflective experiences can happen with ordinary objects in everyday life, is a great starting place to explore how the objects of play shape our experiences.

#### Existing Work

“Performative resources” seems then to be a fertile space for exploration (albeit not a great name). Within this understanding, a designer would create material objects for play in which their materiality informs both the playful act and the associated contemplative experience.

Alt-ctrl is specifically interested in an expansion of the “stuff” of games. We build alt-ctrl installations to ask, “what if a phone was a controller,” or “what if a series of hold menus could be playful?” Existing games in my artistic practice, including TIKATMOS (Mouse & the Billionaire 2022b), Busy Work (Mouse & the Billionaire 2017), and Buy Sell (Mouse & the Billionaire 2022a) rely on specially designed and constructed objects for the player to interact with. Please Hold (Mouse & the Billionaire 2018) (above) is an interactive, story driven game where the user interacts with and speaks into an analogue phone to solve puzzles, find clues and advance the story. The familiar physical material of office-style phones and the conceptual material of the hold menu



Figure 5: Mouse & the Billionaire's *Please Hold* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2018).

are used to examine human nature and what we subject ourselves to for the sake of forward progression. These objects communicate the game world, but they also can work in cooperation with (or opposition to) their perceived uses. A phone communicates “phone-ness” but does the playful experience hidden within become stronger by breaking free of its mundane appearance?

#### Ideas to Explore

My most recent project cycle of Lest Ten Horizons Cry (Mouse & the Billionaire 2024) and Instauratio Exiguus (Mouse & the Billionaire 2025b) are specifically designed to instigate contemplative experiences. Both of these leverage the often obtuse and confusing nature of analog synth and musical controller design to introduce ambiguity to the gameplay experience. The player is left to explore what the unfamiliar dials, buttons, and UI elements might do, spending time exploring both the play and sonic spaces of the environment. Perhaps they notice the ways that sound influences on-screen visuals. Maybe they realize that these subtle changes in dial placement can have larger effects on the game environment, bringing about reflective insight that help them glean an understanding about the gameworld, their impact on it, and their experience of it. These experiments in how playful objects communicate a contemplative mindset is one clear line of inquiry. Exploring the ideas set forth in Han's *Vita Contemplativa* (Han and Steuer 2023), how can we push this further? Do the ergonomics matter? If so, are *difficult* ergonomic situations a powerful way to introduce meaning? Similarly, would even more confusing and/or obtuse con-



Figure 6: Mouse & the Billionaire's *Lest Ten Horizon's Cry* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2024).

trol structures and visual representations hurt or help? Is a flow state useful? Is that the same thing as contemplation?

The end result of this chapter will be a series of short alt-ctrl games that explore control, ritual, ambiguity, and materiality (among other possible topics) as they relates to both play and contemplation. These games will inform and establish an aesthetics of contemplative play as it relates to the role of the external object.

### Playspace

This chapter examines how the spaces of play affect states and attitudes of play. Exploring Huizinga's (Huizinga 1949) concept of the magic circle both in its playful and contemplative implications will lead to new possibilities of creating spaces that foster both states. It will include the following sections:

#### Aesthetic Description

Space is a core aesthetic to the play experience. The concept of the magic circle in particular, sets to explain the physical and mental demarcation between "the real" world and the imaginatively playful world. It is this established structure that gives the player agency to engage in playful acts, choosing one possible action over another and reflecting on how those actions contribute to the imagined world. In contemplation, spaces can play an important role in bringing about a reflective state. Some spaces are inherently more contemplative than others, but also, much of contemplation (as in play) happens in the space of the mind. In his introduction to *Transcending Architecture*, Julio Bermudez speaks of the words of architects that

*despite their secular or spiritual interpretations, share strong commonalities. For there is little doubt that agnostic LeCorbusier's "ineffable," highly religious Rudolf Otto's "numinous," and philosophically minded Louis Kahn's "immeasurable" are indicating moments in which architecture is being transcended: a building's geometric proportions turn into shivers, stone into tears, rituals into insights, light into joy, space into contemplation, and time into heightened presence.* (Bermudez 2015, 3)

#### Related Genres

Contemplative Architecture exemplifies how creation and consecration of a space can engender different perspectives than the ones a person came in with (Krinke 2005). Changes in sound, light, and material imbue the space with a meaning in contrast to the outside world, and this can be done in sometimes very opposite ways. For instance, the stark open spaces and minimalist aspects of Theaster Gates' *Black Chapel* (above) (Gates 19AD–20AD) reinforce notions of quieting one's mind for meditative purposes. This contrasts starkly with Gaudí's Sagrada Família (Gaudí 1882–) in Barcelona, which, like many traditional western Romanesque, gothic, and Renaissance styles, favours ornamentation and complex architectural elements to signify it as a special place, set aside from the 'normal.' Huizinga's discussion of the "play-festival-rite" (Huizinga 1949) is of particular



Figure 7: Theaster Gates' *Black Chapel* (Gates 19AD–20AD).

interest here, as it provides a direct link between play and contemplative (even sacred) spaces. Miguel Sicart's chapter on playgrounds in *Play Matters* (Sicart 2014), which analyzes the historical lineage and social meaning of public areas of play, is also a valuable resource for this chapter.

#### Existing Work

Focusing on this concept of the space in which play happens (i.e the magic circle) and examples from Contemplative Architecture, how can we create playfully contemplative experiences? *Busy Work* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2017) and *TIKATMOS* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2022b) are two existing games that I have developed that explore this question by creating distinct (and physical) gameworlds to facilitate a certain level of engaged play.

Using narrative elements, physical actions, and environmental storytelling through the built environment, *Busy Work* examines the modern challenge of accomplishing work while juggling conflicting priorities.

*Over an intense two-minute period, players sit at individual work-stations, furiously mashing their keyboards to ‘compose’ emails to customers while juggling various tasks. Example gameplay: you’re about to hit send, a message pops-up, reminding you that the meeting will begin shortly and that you need to finish all emails. You click “okay,” but immediately the phone rings. You answer the phone and read from the given prompt, while clicking “send” on the email. As*



Figure 8: Mouse & the Billionaire's *Busy Work* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2017).

*soon as you hang-up the phone another message pops up, telling you to grab the “LL-78” form from the filing cabinet and bring it back to your station. Jumping up from your desk, you rush to the filing cabinet, frantically trying to find the proper form, and are back just in time to hear the phone ring a second time.*

(Mouse & the Billionaire 2017)

Players are left wondering if what they do matters, whether or not they are set up to fail and if the rewards are worth the effort. People handle the mundane and possibly futile aspects of life in many ways, and this work helps player to reflect on this by giving them playful options based on lived experience.



Figure 9: Mouse & the Billionaire’s *TIKATMOS* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2022b).

*TIKATMOS* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2022b) is a deeply speculative interactive installation that seeks to explore gaps in conversation, sustainability, the future of humanity, and what it means to help using voice-control technology and adaptive audio. By putting the player in the role of an unidentified species, and creating a fleshed-out world space, *TIKATMOS* pokes around some interesting questions about identity. The spatial design of the experience is crucial for this with a handmade boutique controller communicating the ‘otherness’ of the environment and a large portrait-oriented screen acting as a window to the

world, giving the player the feeling of actually sitting at an information desk.

### Ideas to Explore

Prototyping further physical installations is one clear continuation of this concept, but exploring these topics and processes in digital spaces is an exciting area with great potential to be more widely experienced. Looking at games like Pippin Barr's *v r 5* (Barr [2023] 2023) and David Kanaga and Ed Key's *Proteus* (Kanaga, n.d.), can we create sacred digital space? What would make it contemplative? Is it possible to have virtual contemplation or is it necessary to be in the real world for proper contemplation? Additionally, can we leverage sound for robust mental spaces for contemplation apart from relying on visual stimuli? Is there crossover with the idea of contemplative soundwalks?

The end result of this chapter will be a series of play experiences that explore immersive and spatial considerations, including entertainment production design, world-building, and embedded narrative (among other possible topics) as they relate to both play and contemplation. These games will inform and establish an aesthetics of contemplative play as it relates to the role of the play environment.

### Playtime

This chapter explores how time is involved both in play and contemplation. Taking lessons from ambient media, slow games, and traditional contemplative practice, we will explore how adjusting, slowing, stopping, and ignoring time can effect the potentials for playful and contemplative experiences. It will include the following sections:

#### Aesthetic Description

In *Das Spiel. Theorien des Spiels*, Hans Scheuerl argues that “play is always a ‘playing between’” various characteristics like seriousness and pleasure, rules and chance, focused effort and ease (Scheuerl. From Han and Steuer 2023) This concept of ‘ambivalence,’ in conjunction with Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) helps to explain the playful state. The oscillation between the states is where play exists. Salen and Zimmerman use the example of the ‘play’ in a steering wheel. (Tekinbas and Zimmerman 2003)

#### Related Genres

Ambient Media also relies on tension, but specifically a tension of attention - between something that demands focused attention or can exist entirely in the background. Brian Eno (*Ambient 1* 1979) imagined his ambient music as the soundscape to an environment, ever present, always playing, with the listener able to tune-in or out as they pleased. David O'Reilly's *Mountain* (O'Reilly, n.d.) is a perfect example of how ‘ambient games’ might function. After answering a series of questions, the game generates a 3D mountain floating in space. At this point the player can lightly interact with it (by rotating, zooming in and out, or triggering notes) or leave it completely alone. In this way, the game acts as an interactive ambient media, allowing the player's attention to traverse its

ambivalent space at will.

#### Existing Work



Figure 10: Mouse & the Billionaire’s *Lest Ten Horizon’s Cry* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2024).

*Lest Ten Horizons Cry* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2024) is an exploration in how we can explore game spaces with traditional electronic instrument interfaces. In this way, the design of this experience is also deeply concerned with a material object, but the way that the interaction changes over time is the most relevant here. Initially, users are presented with a custom-built boutique synthesizer. By turning the dials, the various sonic parameters can be adjusted, creating an ever-evolving sonic landscape. The large synthesizer screen displays simple, cryptic, but generally traditional visuals mapped to each of these physical dials. It is only after focused attention from the player that another world can be discovered. And this attention is not required. Only a player who is willing to engage with a seemingly “difficult” interface is rewarded with this experience.

*The Meeting* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2015) functions on a similar concept. What looks on the surface like a standard “clicker game” becomes an entirely different experience if the user refuses to interact with it. A standard clicker game demands that it be clicked. However, *The Meeting* contradicts this standard gameplay mechanic, and if the player refrains from touching the screen a generative musical piece slowly develops. Once the worker has fallen asleep, his head floats out into space. Here the user can control the worker’s head with the phone’s gyroscope, collecting stars and influencing an interactive musical



Figure 11: Mouse & the Billionaire's *The Meeting* (Mouse & the Billionaire 2015).

composition.

#### Ideas to Explore

How can the concept of ambient ambivalence be leveraged in regards to time? How can we move the playing of games *away* from flow-focused and mark the passing of time for contemplative ends? Pippin Barr's statement of "time is one of the most valuable resources that we ask of our players" (Barr 2025) is of particular importance here. Is pervasive technology, where it is always running in the background asking for less focused attention, a good vehicle for contemplative play? How else might we explore the idea of 'attention' in play? What about 'intention?' Additionally, contemplation itself is an activity outside of 'time.' It is often an activity of attentive waiting. It asks you to stop doing. To stop being productive. As with games, this could be looked at as a 'waste of time.' Han's concept of ritualistic time demarcated from productive time is informative for this discussion (Han and Steuer 2020).

The end result of this chapter will be a series of play experiences that explore ambient temporal considerations, including attention, waiting, and the idea of games as frivolous (among other possible topics) as they relates to both play and contemplation. These games will inform and establish an aesthetics of contemplative play as it relates to the time-based aspects of play.

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