

Critical Play

Radical Game Design

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Contents

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INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL PLAY

By the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself.

—Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy and Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*

For many game players, games exist for entertainment, for passing the time, for fun. They are a diversionary activity, meant for relaxation or distraction—a “not-work” space where players are free to engage in fantasy narratives, amazing feats, and rewarding tasks. But what if certain games have become something *more*? What if some games, and the more general concept of “play,” not only provide outlets for entertainment but also function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues?

Each day, computer users check email, search for movie trailers or the news, and perhaps blog, balance a budget, or download digital camera images. They also play computer games—simultaneously during these other tasks, as in casual games, or in more comprehensive games both on- and offline, such as the multiplayer PC game *World of Warcraft* or a console game such as *Katamari Damashii*. Computer and console games have become a significant cultural medium across a wide range of social, economic, age, and gender categories.¹ As the game industry involves an increasing number of educators, designers, and scientists, there is considerable need for games that take on, and challenge, the accepted norms embedded in the gaming industry. There is a need for a critical approach not only in examining such games but also in creating them.

Critical Play is the first book to examine alternative games and use such games as models to propose a theory of avant-garde game design—that is, like alternative

theories of narrative texts, poetry, and film, a theory that focuses on the reworking of contemporary, popular game practices to propose an alternative, or “radical,” game design. Specifically, this book investigates games designed for artistic, political, and social critique or intervention, in order to propose ways of understanding larger cultural issues as well as the games themselves.

The research for *Critical Play* grew out of an avid interest in popular computer games technology, history, and cultural studies, as well as my own creative work: I use play and game fundamentals in projects as diverse as activist software design, classroom teaching, and drawings, installation, and sculpture that appear in more traditional art venues. The games and other works I discovered while investigating my interests in social issues are collected in this book. In the course of so much play, I became fascinated with observing how ideas about politics, play, and games were most interesting in those projects operating outside the software, board-game, or theme park industries—not only among those who are independent game developers but also those who thought of making play scenarios or games within the context of being artists. Art has long been intertwined with politics; the twentieth century has witnessed provocative materials produced during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the Constructivist political design used in the Russian Revolution of 1917, the theatrical protests in World Wars I and II, the 1968 student poster campaign, and the U.S. civil rights campaigns that used mixed media. *Critical Play* outlines how play has influenced the history of creative exploration of the social and the political. The book’s arrival is well timed, for this is a significant era in which to learn how to play in ways that break the mold and open up what play can be, and at the same time possibly benefit someone or something.

Prior to this project, few researchers had advanced gaming scholarship from the point of view of art history. Numerous scholarly studies have focused on the early forms of computer gaming as a field, in topics such as early console games or the history of gaming at Atari. In this book, I have studiously avoided these too-common examples, for several reasons. First, typical histories of computer games have not examined the practice of play outside the realm of computers. Second, these historical studies do not generally involve artists and their social and cultural roles, either in the making or the playing capacity. Third, few of these studies have made any serious attempt to ground contemporary gaming in creative and aesthetic origins rather than a primarily technological context; and fourth, few have made the connection between games and art.

On first glance, it may seem a stretch to perceive how artists working in a very different place and during very different eras would be able to significantly contribute

to the manners, modes, and processes for making games today. Computer games are often seen as a new medium, and not necessarily aligned with other forms of play. Few would imagine that such play could also be related to ancient divination, psychoanalysis, utopian tax laws, social protest, or environmentalism. While recognizing certain distinctions, *Critical Play* looks to the commonalities among play activities, game genres, and important historical contexts to discover thematic ways in which play can continue to manifest critical thinking.

As Marcel Duchamp said in 1946,

The great trouble with art in this country [the United States] at present, and apparently in France also, is that there is no spirit of revolt—no new ideas appearing among the younger artists. They are following along the paths beaten out by their predecessors, trying to do better what their predecessors have already done. In art there is no such thing as perfection. And a creative lull occurs always when artists of a period are satisfied to pick up a predecessor’s work where he dropped it and attempt to continue what he was doing. When on the other hand you pick up something from an earlier period and adapt it to your own work an approach can be creative. The result is not new; but it is new insomuch as it is a different approach.²

Whether one believes Duchamp’s criticism could apply today, his call for innovation is one that can speak to many. In this book, I will explore historic instances of artists using play in their work. I consider given projects amid the shifting historical context for play, the political use of play, and look also to contemporary artists using physical, locative, and computer games in their work. In the spirit of activist art, *Critical Play* primarily focuses on individual artists or collectives of artists making work because they have something to say.³ The creative experiments with games described in this book help provide a provocative look at how artists can challenge ideas, beliefs, and social expectations and subsequently transform them in their work. These experiments are particularly worthy of note in an era of increasing financial stakes in the games industry, the decline in “street protest” and civil actions, and citizens’ overall lack of time and sense of agency. Taking wild chances to provoke, disrupt, and change even in play appears to be risky business.

Using the term *artist* to describe anyone making creative work can be off-putting to some readers, particularly readers in the various professional fields who might find the term exclusionary. The term *artist* is used here with a particular meaning in mind, to refer to those who are creating outside commercial establishments, and often, those

who are “making” for “making’s sake.” Therefore, while a short section on social impact games is included in the book, these may tend to be more focused in scope and scale and work with more traditional “industry-style” methods instead of the more avant-garde practices that have become many artists’ focus. The voices of the alternative social impact game makers, however, represent a voice of critical play that needs to be explored.

Critical Play is built on the premise that, as with other media, games carry beliefs within their representation systems and mechanics. Artists using games as a *medium of expression*, then, manipulate elements common to games—representation systems and styles, rules of progress, codes of conduct, context of reception, winning and losing paradigms, ways of interacting in a game—for they are the material properties of games, much like marble and chisel or pen and ink bring with them their own intended possibilities, limitations, and conventions. Artists have indeed “revolted” effectively before, transforming popular culture around the globe for the last century and a half. *Critical Play* documents this promise of large-scale transformation.

Defining Some Key Terms

What is, for the purposes of this study, the first key term, *play*? And what does it mean to play *critically*? Play is a notoriously difficult concept to define; it is a culturally and socially specific idea. Anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith, a leader in twentieth-century research in play, and one of the core play theorists used in this book, has defined play consistently through the years as an activity that is fun, voluntary, intrinsically motivated, incorporates free choices/free will, offers escape, and is fundamentally exciting.⁴ He has argued that play activities can be grouped in four categories: play as learning, play as power, play as fantasy, and play as self.⁵ While quick to recognize the dark side of play, including bullying, abusive situations, and frightening circumstances, Sutton-Smith also notes that play can be defined as a variety of activities: as exchanges of power, or “power plays” that prioritize competition and traditionally aggressive play styles; as the act of bonding and belonging; as a practice of real-life functions; and as “fun,” being with friends, and choosing freely.⁶ Play is recognized as one of the most fundamental aspects of the human condition.⁷ While play spaces are generally fantasy spaces, players often experience real stakes when inside them. One might easily find examples of the “serious” aspects of play in sport and gambling.

Play is an integral and vital part of mental development and learning, and playful activities are essential aspects of learning and creative acts. Historically, there have been two “camps” in the study of play: those who see play as voluntary, intrinsic, and

important to class structure (leisure) and socialization (members of this camp Sutton-Smith calls “the idealizers”), such as Huizinga and Caillois; and those who look more to ritual, to communication, and who study play in natural settings, such as Bateson, Turner, and Sutton-Smith himself. In this look at critical play, I use the strengths of both camps. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith suggests that play provides a working model of species variability by incorporating mental feedback that keeps a species flexible in evolution. He particularly focuses on play’s potential to help define social norms and identity, noting that the “use of play forms as forms of bonding, including the exhibition and validation or parody of membership and traditions in a community” is essential to cultural formation.⁸ By playing together, people form close communities and develop a group identity and a sense of belonging. Play can also function as a tool to understand the self. Many anthropologists like Sutton-Smith have argued that play is the way children work out social and cultural norms. “Play can cure children of the hypocrisies of adult life,” notes Sutton-Smith, arguing that children’s play spanning from early childhood to teenage years offers narratives that negotiate the risks of the real world: “These stories exhibit anger, fear, shock, sadness, and disgust.”⁹

Johan Huizinga, in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, defines play in an extraordinarily loose way: play is a “function of the living, but is not susceptible of exact definition either logically, biologically, or aesthetically.”¹⁰ Huizinga rather defines the formal characteristics of play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life.”¹¹ Other aspects include play as a voluntary activity, executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, having rules freely accepted but absolutely binding.¹² In play, the aim is play itself, not success or interaction in ordinary life. Unlike Sutton-Smith, Huizinga focuses on adult play, and he argues that play activities tend not to be serious in and of themselves but shape culture nonetheless through ritual and social custom. At the same time, they absorb the player utterly in a special time and place set aside for play: “a closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings” that he later famously refers to as “the magic circle.”¹³

Distinct themes emerge in scholarship attempting to define play. Most anthropologists and historians agree that play is central to human and animal life; is generally a voluntary act; offers pleasure in its own right (and by its own rules); is mentally or physically challenging; and is separated from reality, either through a sanctioned play space or through an agreed upon fantasy or rule set.¹⁴ Because play and the ordinary world are intermingled amid the increasing popularity of games (specifically, at present, computer games and sports), games are becoming the “sacred spots” Huizinga identifies in his anthropological writing.¹⁵

Critical Play

Games ultimately create cognitive and epistemological environments that position the player or participant with the experiences previously described in meaningful ways. So what does it mean to “play critically”? Critical play means to create or occupy play environments and activities that represent one or more questions about aspects of human life. These questions can be abstract, such as rethinking cooperation, or winning, or losing; or concrete, involved with content issues such as looking at the U.S. military actions in Cambodia in the early 1970s. Criticality in play can be fostered in order to question an aspect of a game’s “content,” or an aspect of a play scenario’s function that might otherwise be considered a given or necessary. Criticality can provide an essential viewpoint or an analytical framework. Those using critical play as an approach might create a platform of rules by which to examine a specific issue—rules that would be somehow relevant to the issue itself. Critical play is characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces.

The challenge, then, is to find ways to make compelling, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking to offer novel possibilities in games, and for a wide range of players. Thus the goal in theorizing a critical game-design paradigm is as much about the creative person’s interest in critiquing the status quo as it is about using play for such a phase change.

Games

Another key term used throughout this text is *games*, to refer to those instances of more-or-less constructed play scenarios. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), among other games scholars, note the wide variety of definitions of the term “game.” Historically speaking, the challenge of defining games has occurred throughout 150 years of game scholarship and research, with the most recent turn in computer games studies yielding related questions. In his 1984 book *The Art of Computer Game Design*, one of the first books detailing the intricacies of thinking about computers as gaming platforms, Chris Crawford contrasts what he calls “games” with “puzzles.” Puzzles are static; they present the player with a logical puzzle to be solved with the assistance of clues. Games, however, can evolve, and rules may shift at certain points in a game and can change with the player’s actions.

Greg Costikyan (1994) also has a concrete definition of what constitutes a game, which he describes as “a form of art in which participants, termed players, make decisions in order to manage resources through game tokens in the pursuit of a goal.”¹⁶ In much of game scholarship, it has been argued that games are by their definition

competitive in that they always have an end point—a winning or losing state. But Costikyan avoids the “win/lose” dichotomy as the only possible goal for players. He additionally details how the structure of games compares to other kinds of experiences, such as stories:

Stories are inherently linear. However much characters may agonize over the decisions they make, they make them the same way every time we reread the story, and the outcome is always the same. . . . Games are inherently non-linear. They depend on decision-making. Decisions have to pose real, plausible alternatives, or they aren’t real decisions. It must be entirely reasonable for a player to make a decision one way in one game, and a different way in the next. To the degree that you make a game more like a story—more linear, fewer real options—you make it less like a game.¹⁷

While Costikyan believes that stories are linear but games are not, the key to the preceding text is his attention to “real options” for players to pursue. Generally, this is referred to as player agency, or the player’s ability to make choices that mean something to him or her.¹⁸ Salen and Zimmerman (2003) also discuss the designer’s ability to create situations for “meaningful play.” They have provided students of game design perhaps the most codified definition of a game: “a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.”¹⁹ Salen and Zimmerman offer six key game concepts in their influential game creation book, *Rules of Play*:

1. a game is a system
2. it is artificial
3. it has players
4. it has conflict
5. it has rules
6. it contains a quantifiable outcome/goal, an ending state in which players can either be considered the “winners” or the “losers.”²⁰

Each of these canonical authors in the field of digital game design—Crawford, Costikyan, and Salen and Zimmerman—notes the importance of rules in constructing games, with varying degrees of storytelling, conflict, and competition added into the (often, technology driven) system. In this book, I choose not to follow such strict definitions. Games can be thought of more productively as situations with guidelines and procedures. Perhaps games are *themselves* a technology.

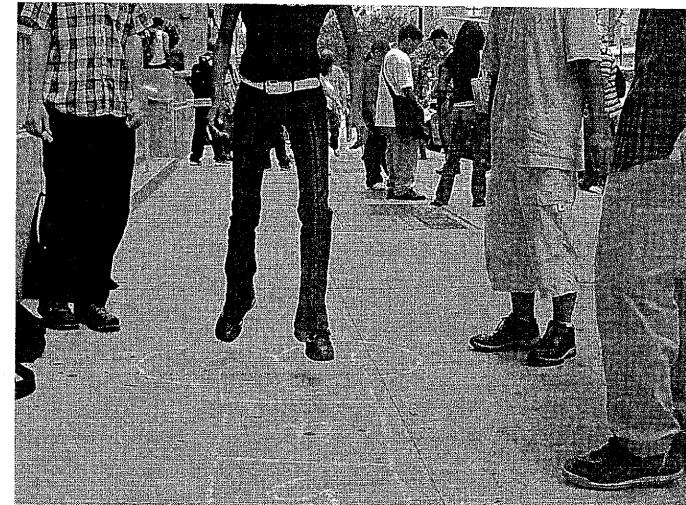
Technology

In organized play and games, rules have a mechanical rigor and are followed as procedures. These take on a kind of algorithmic specificity as players enact meaning through following rule sets. In this way, technological change has been interlinked with changes in play and gaming practices. “All art derives from play,” noted Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, his famous book exploring the human interest in play. This sentiment inspires one to examine both the notion of “art” and the notion of “play” within twentieth-century creative practices.

Shifts in play have historically mirrored shifts in technologies. This is evident in the invention of organized doll play and “playing house” during the U.S. industrial revolution, when gender roles needed to be reasserted due to changing labor conditions.²¹ The link among the reorganization of banking, financial systems, and property ownership in twentieth-century U.S. culture mirrored the rise of financially focused board games such as *Monopoly*.²² Later chapters will examine inventions such as Edison’s mechanical doll and other, literal “play” technologies. But play shifts have done more than utilize such new inventions. Even play that does not involve gadgets or devices might be considered a technology. Games and play activities themselves, with their emphasis on order and conventions, act as technologies that produce sets of relationships, governed by time and rules, played out in behavioral patterns. Even a simple game of hopscotch (figure 1.1), in the hands of an artist, could become a kind of technology.

In the age-old playground game of hopscotch, a play space is drawn on the ground and shared among players. Each takes a turn tossing the potty, hopping the length of the “map,” and returning to the beginning. Hopscotch is one of those universal games that many people seem to recognize. As respected twentieth-century media theorist Marshall McLuhan noted, such “games as popular art forms offer to all an immediate means of participation in the full life of a society, such as no single role or job can offer to any man.”²³

If the hopscotch map contained numbers, the sequence would likely take on meaning for players (marking spaces toward the end of the map, or representing points to add or subtract) but this very simple game could also affect or create social relations. What if the numbers were a collection of points, and the person who had the highest (or fewest) won, regardless of order? If the map size is scaled much larger than is typical, some players would have unfair advantage to win over others (by having longer legs, for example). If two hopscotch maps are laid side-by-side, players might play for speed, one racing against another. Players waiting in line might try to distract the hopping player, waving arms or mocking to make the hopper miss the target square;



| Figure 1.1 |
[mapscotch], 2007, artist's reworking of hopscotch, by the author.

this type of activity would not be explicitly forbidden by the rules and would thus fall into the realm of peer sanctioned or accepted play. In other words, how the game is designed and presented carries implications for the social group. Some players might opt not to play (and become perhaps an onlooker, witness, or referee); some players might choose to compete. Other players might choose to break the explicit game rules by skipping ahead in line or by jumping on the wrong spaces in order to get ahead. Games, functioning as an ordering logic—a machine, or a technology—for creating social relations, work to distill or abstract the everyday actions of the players into easy-to-understand instruments where context is defamiliarized just enough to allow Huizinga’s magic circle of play to manifest. From this one example, it is possible to see how games in and of themselves function as *social technologies*.

If games themselves act as types of technologies, then technological games are twofold in their capacity for meaning making. Most students of the evolution of digital gaming begin their studies among the technological milestones of computing: Vanavar Bush’s technological fantasies, the ENIAC computer, the 1961 *SpaceWars!* game

at MIT, the release of *Pong* by Atari in 1972, or the success of *Pac-Man* when the Buckner and Garcia song “Pac-Man Fever” hit the charts in 1982. Those studying contemporary game design, especially in programs highlighting the role of technology, rarely tap links to the seemingly distant domain of the arts. Likewise, those studying popular culture rarely cross into the realm of institutions such as galleries, museums, and private collections. One of the most important reasons to make such a crossing is that shifts in art movements, like technologies, also indicate (and mirror) world events; these specifically include international events such as the world wars, as well as the cultural and social movements affecting everyday citizens and arts practitioners. For example, at the same time in the early twentieth century that Marcel Duchamp was engaging “high art” audiences to make their own decisions about the nature of art—his famous quote “The spectator makes the picture,” is an example of this philosophy—through his multitemporal paintings and “readymade” found art objects, American cinema fans were participating similarly in early “low art” media culture through newly created fan discourse. Meanwhile, still other avant-garde artists were adopting and reconfiguring themes from culture altogether in their work—take, for example, the board games critical of war by Alberto Giacometti and compare them to the origins of *Monopoly*, the famous Parker Brothers game originally created by a social activist to protest landlords and tax policies. These are examples of the interesting juxtapositions and discoveries the reader will make in this book.

Subversion

Notions of subversion, disruption, and intervention are bandied about along with notions of the critical by artists and activists, and need further articulation. Artists have long reused, worked against, or invented new media forms and conventions: early twentieth-century innovator Marcel Duchamp turned urinals into scandalous “ready-made” sculpture.²⁴ Photographer Claude Cahun, cross-dressing and infantilizing herself, performed over-the-top gender stereotypes in her self-portrait photographs dating from the 1930s to the 1940s.²⁵ Surrealists fashioned experimental films, inverting trends in cinematic narrative and visual conventions, even “cutting the eye” (such as in the famed Surrealist film *Un chien andalou* of 1929) for both shock value and as a statement against overly controlling aesthetics.²⁶ These are only a few examples from myriad artistic practices that survive in significance because they broke the rules.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, subversion is “the turning (of a thing) upside down or uprooting it from its position; overturning, upsetting; overthrow of a law, rule, system, condition.”²⁷ A subversion is an action, plan, or activity intended to undermine an institution, event, or object. When discussing subversion, it is necessary

to know what system or phenomenon in particular one is working against, be it political, social, legal, or cultural. In this book I extend the term *subversion* from the definitions provided by Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci,²⁸ Michel Foucault,²⁹ Judith Butler,³⁰ and others.³¹ The core ideas regarding this term evolved from Antonio Negri’s work on subversion (2001) as well as themes of disruption and intervention from decades of art practices. Subversion has been identified by several theorists and practitioners as a powerful means for marginalized groups to have a voice.³² Likely this focus is due to the activist call to examine how power relationships play out and how social change is actually orchestrated. Much of Negri’s writing emerged during his long house arrest in Italy for his political acts, and his ideas are a culmination of much contemplation on how contemporary culture operates. Negri’s is a dual view; he writes of both the difficulty of “breaking out” against power, and the inherent encapsulation and control by those in power of subversive acts. When working against pervasive systems of power, he notes that subversive practices *still* have the power to trigger social change when used on the right scale and with the right tools. Perhaps games are such a tool: Negri notes that subversion is *necessary* within a multitude of organizations in myriad types of forms, and not merely for the functioning of such organizations but for individual and collective well-being.³³ Negri and others use the term *subversion* to mean a creative act rather than a destructive act.

Because they primarily exist as rule systems, games are particularly ripe for subversive practices. A hallmark of games is that they are structured by their rule sets, and every game has its “cheats”—even play itself, pushing at the boundaries of a game system, could be said to involve a kind of subversion. This idea is supported by games scholarship; to scholars of play such as Brian Sutton-Smith, play is associated, at least in part, with transgressive and subversive actions.

“Interventions” are specific types of subversions that rely upon direct action and engage with political or social issues—a “stepping in”, or interfering in any affair, so as to affect its course or issue.”³⁴ Rather than reducing these actions to limiting categories, it is more fitting to situate the actions of artists among a loose set of principles that guide interventions. The introduction of art objects and performance into public spaces, for example, is a way that artists appropriate the cognitive space of public space, of everyday space, and functions in an interventionist fashion. Artists practicing intervention often have social or political goals, and may seek to open up dialogue by transgressing the boundaries between art and everyday life. With the exception of purely aesthetic movements (abstract expressionism comes to mind), most twentieth-century art movements fostered interventionist activities and strategies, particularly those identified as the avant-garde. Numerous twentieth-century avant-garde artists

had the shared goal of bringing about private and public transformation through creative acts.³⁵ Thus some artistic intervention takes the form of performance, parody, simulation, game, activist, and “hacktivist” strategies. Intervention has been a popular strategy with street performance and activism: feminist theater groups reworked guerrilla street theater of the 1960s and 1970s by El Teatro Campesino, the Farmworkers’ theater, The Black Revolutionary Theatre (BRT) led by Amiri Baraka, or the media interventions of Nikki Craft, Martha Rosler, or Joan Braderman were able to disrupt everyday activities when the “street,” not the computer, was the gateway to cultural intervention.³⁶

A number of artists have invested in interventionist strategies, and they are documented in this book. These artists, and many more, intervened in contemporary art venues, took over traditional art styles to change them, or depicted narratives that operated against social norms. Since the 1960s, numerous artists have furthered these interests without a particular art movement identity, such as Jenny Holzer and Rachel Whiteread, but who reflect an international current in art that subverts everyday lived experience by exposing negative or unexpected visions of the everyday.³⁷

Finally, contemporary electronic artists negotiate between traditional, institutionalized aesthetic discourses and emergent, organic forms of social communication. If electronic art has become an experimental laboratory, not so much for new technology as for new social relations of communication, then perhaps electronic games might operate in an interventionist way within electronic spaces and discourses.³⁸

The definition of the term *disruption* lies somewhere in between the concepts of intervention and subversion. A useful term derived from “Disruption-Innovation” theory in the IT business innovation field, a disruption is a creative act that shifts the way a particular logic or paradigm is operating.³⁹ In the high-tech arena, disruptive innovators are those who introduce relatively simple yet “paradigm-shifting” solutions to a particular market. Examples in business include Dell computer’s direct-to-customer sales model or its “song per song” online music sales, which are examples of low-end disruption.⁴⁰ Other disruptive innovations create entirely new markets. By creating need and new venues for products, the disruption effectively competes against very little. Businesses spawned from such an approach include Starbucks and eBay (which Harvard innovation theorist Clayton Christensen and his collaborators, Erik Roth and Scott Anthony, argue “democratized” the auction process). Disruption-Innovation theory influences game design, for if it is intervention and subversion that artists seek, they create this within the confines of a new kind of game design.

As detailed later, a great deal of pleasure for players can be derived from subverting set interaction norms in both simple play environments and highly complex games. Players will consistently explore what is permissible and what pushes at that boundary between rules and expectations, and a player’s own agency, within any given play environment—no matter how structured that play is. From hockey, to chess, to playing dolls or “house,” player subversion—as cheating, as open play, as social critique—is an intrinsic part of play.⁴² If digital artifacts have truly become a magic circle in which players enter a sanctioned play space, then this culture of play, or playculture, as it is commonly termed, is one in which participants find a space for permission, experimentation, and subversion. In the following chapters, I will postulate the possible historic reasons for the necessity of this stance.

What Are Activist Games?

In this book I use the terms *activist game* and *activist game design*. Activist games can be characterized by their emphasis on social issues, education, and, occasionally, intervention. In other words, they are not purely conceptual exercises, but rather, games that engage in a social issue through, most commonly, themes, narratives, roles, settings, goals, and characters; and less commonly, through game mechanics, play paradigms, interactions, or win states to benefit an intended outcome beyond a game’s entertainment or experiential value alone. This is not to say that activist games cannot, or should not, be “fun,” though this has been a critique of many activist games to date. The term “activist game,” however, is meant to specify the game theme and sometimes-desired outcomes for playing the game, and only one of the desired outcomes would be entertainment.

Activist approaches to media are important to the study of digital culture precisely because of media’s inherent imbalances. Indeed, issues of gender, racial, ethnic, language, and class inequities and imbalances are also manifest in the historic imbalances with technology production and use. Take, for example, the fact that women constitute only 10 percent of the computer-game industry workforce, or that less than 10 percent of all programmers in the United States are women. These imbalances extend in a sometimes subtle fashion to who uses these tools and spaces on a daily basis. Even renowned media scholar Henry Jenkins, among others, noted over a decade ago that video game spaces are gendered spaces.⁴³ Gender imbalance in technical and visual culture triggered one of the most significant critiques of film and visual representation: Laura Mulvey, in her 1970s analysis of the visual representation of woman in cinema, inspired myriad progressive experiments calling attention to the representation

of women in commercial imagery and film.⁴⁴ In the area of video games, significant essays critiquing the continued problematic representation of gender in video games (Flanagan, Anne-Marie Schleiner) and race (Jennifer González, Lisa Nakamura) continue to call these issues into question.

Design Actions and Design Methods

One of the most important things *Critical Play* provides is a range of examples demonstrating what artists have done in their creation of games and play. These can inspire other artists, designers, and innovators. Some artists make instructions for actions, and even paintings; some playful disruptors use obnoxious language and make humans into puppets; while others write computer programs that write poems. Some even project their games onto bridges or have players dress up as chickens. Artists make words touchable, create palindromes, do street intervention, and even skywrite from airplanes to disrupt the everyday actions in the city. These activities are spurred on by the methods developed over the last century, including Simultanism, which means a telescoping of time; free verse/free visual verse; automatism and automatic writing; exquisite corpse; and the drift of psychogeography fame (all explained more fully in later chapters).

The Chapters

The games explored in the following chapters range from playing doll and playing house to board games, performative games, locative media games, and computer games. Each chapter explores historic instances of a particular game genre, as well as how art and social movements have engaged with it.

In chapter 2, I review the history of domestic play as particularly relevant to game design, especially given that the majority of contemporary computer-based games are experienced in domestic environments. I look at the resurgence of popular domestic play in games such as *The Sims* and artists' projects that function as critical play in domestic space, and I present a variety of forms of doll play, proposing the subversive methods of reskinning, rewriting, and unplaying.

In chapter 3, I examine the various ways in which board games have worked as critical documents and experiences, and discuss several artists' board games. I look at the spiritual practices of play and chance and how board games developed. I will also look at how board games reflect changes in society, for they also provide a window on the values, hopes, and beliefs of a given culture. The *Landlord* and *Anti-Monopoly* games, for example, showed how designers could invite player modifications to the games for mass-distributed, alternative game hacks.

I turn to language games in chapter 4. Puns and jokes, sound games, the historic methods of Simultanism and automatism, and the use of textual instructions and rules (including public disruptions) and embodiment are explored.

In chapter 5, I look at performative objects and games, including sculpture and photography, and study how critical game makers are approaching their games as physical interventions. Examining play that uses the body or the object in compelling ways, this chapter emphasizes collage, surrealist game methods, artists taking to the street with performative games, and the New Games Movement.

I explore locative games in chapter 6 as artistic practices expand to take play into environments in which player-participants can make meaning in public spaces. This chapter refers to play that is generally outside or in unusual locations, and examines the work of the Situationists and their method of the drift.

Chapter 7 focuses on artists' alternative computer-based games, including online and offline games. I provide an analysis of projects from Persuasive Games and those of Gonzalo Frasca, as well as other games created through the use of interventionist strategies in the design process.

To conclude, in chapter 8, I explore games for change, considering the ways in which activist concerns can be incorporated into game design. If a hypothesis for activist gaming is that a well-crafted approach to embedding certain ideologies (interventionist strategies) in design will have the capacity to alter the practices on both the part of conscientious designers and artists as well as the players, the goal of this chapter is to support makers who make real the systems that support an array of such choices. I conclude by discussing several methodologies for designing critical play as revealed in prior examples and analysis.

Rather than provide a comprehensive analysis of all games, this book aims to uncover some of the more interesting instances of artists' works where play and criticality manifest. Along the way, historical innovations in game play as they reflect social mores will be highlighted. The goal of *Critical Play* is to examine the ways in which individuals and groups involved in creating and playing games have worked, and are working within, social, political, and cultural systems. Their critical, radical play can be considered the avant-garde of the game as a medium.

imply. Rather, it is only through changing the *logic* of traditional relationships and categories—in Butler's specific case, categories such as gender—that larger systemic changes can be effected. Positions such as Butler's recognize the fact that social systems hold many fixed categories from gender to class, race, and economies and that these systems can only be challenged by examining the categorizations that sustain them.⁸¹ Players in these locative game systems also become players outside the system. In the next chapter, we will see further work in activist use of computer game systems. We will also look at ways in which some artists keep their messages on the screen to say what they need to say.

CRITICAL COMPUTER GAMES

Since the 1990s, the extraordinary impact of individuals affiliated with the arts starting “grassroots wildfires” and “building guerilla technologies” in their quest for creative intervention has flourished onscreen. That context is important for this phenomenon is obvious. Computer games are more profitable and popular than ever before and have become a major cultural medium crossing a wide range of social, economic, age, and gender categories. Indeed, from casual games played on the Internet to large-scale stand-alone games like *The Sims*, *Metal Gear*, *Bioshock*, or *Grand Theft Auto*, or the millions of players in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), the popularity of computer games suggests a “revolution” measurable in terms of financial, social, and cultural impact.¹ As a cultural medium, games carry embedded beliefs within their systems of representation and their structures, whether game designers intend these ideologies or not. In media effects research, this is referred to as “incidental learning” from media messages. For example, *The Sims* computer game is said to teach consumer consumption, a fundamental value of capitalism. *Sims* players are encouraged, even required, to earn money so they can spend and acquire goods. *Grand Theft Auto* was not created as an educational game, but nonetheless does impart a world view, and while the game portrays its world as *physically similar to our own*—setting one of its stories and action in the city of Miami, for example, and presenting humanoid avatars as characters—the game world’s value system is put forward as one of success achieved through violence, rewarding criminal behavior and reinforcing racial and gender stereotypes. Many scholars, game makers, and consumers observe that computer games can embody antagonistic and antisocial themes including theft, violence and gore, cruelty, problematic representations of the body in terms of gender and race, and even viciously competitive approaches to winning as a primary game goal.² While these practices are, of course, not the case for all games, related issues arise in a significant number of popular games and frequently overwhelm other,

subtler interactions and representations. At the same time, artists continue to use games to take on social and cultural issues. Although much of contemporary play takes place online and onscreen in commercial environments, an exploration of computer-based artists' games is essential to understanding the complete picture of contemporary critical play.

As mentioned earlier, the popularity of online networks, peer-to-peer exchange, and games have made playculture itself into a type of revolution. However, as formative cultural artifacts, games and game cultures are problematic. First, the computer games industry around the world is not inherently diverse. In the United States, for instance, the statistics in the game industry mirror those in other computer-related fields, and the demographic of the games workforce—the people who make the games—reflects the overall, limited expertise of the general public in computer languages and technologies. The number of women enrolled in computer science degrees has, surprisingly, declined considerably in the last twenty years.³ Black and Hispanic Americans represent a small percentage of all computer systems analysts and computer scientists working in the field, and well under 10 percent of programmers.⁴ The inequities that result are troubling, especially at a time when computers have become central to most disciplines and when computer games are emerging as a dominant medium. Researchers have described the dearth of diversity in technology professions as a social justice issue.⁵ As noted by many industry insiders, the vast majority of technology companies that produce games do not target women or people of color as players.⁶ Therefore, as gaming drives the development of new technology, and new technologies are made by a consistently similar demographic, the cycle of technological innovation and games entertainment remains fairly consistent. This has the unfortunate effect of keeping high-tech domains primarily white, primarily male, and primarily profit driven.

Therefore, commercial, masculine computer artifacts have taken pride of place in contemporary culture, whereas noncommercial technology tools, including artistic games, are relatively rare. Artist Martha Rosler argues, "Art with a political face typically gains visibility during periods of social upheaval."⁷ The information revolution continues to be a disruption of older, more traditional modes of production and labor. With this change have come both an inscription of new technologies across more traditional roles, and also a significant movement towards the monitoring and control of the individual. This technological adoption and *adaptation* creates a continued disparity in working conditions, privacy, privileges, and wages, even in Western high tech arenas.⁸ The computer is a portal to digital culture; however, it is more than a tool. Technological literacy and competence are essential to disadvantaged groups, which are once again in an unequal position in terms of experience and ranking in key

fields. Artists and activists tend to be the ones who uncover such realities experientially, sometimes by playfully making work that comments on technology itself.

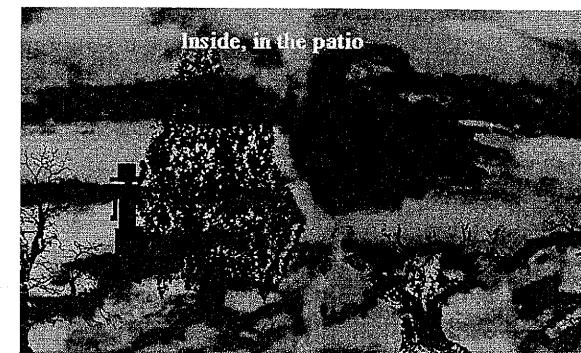
At the same time, within the culture of computer games, race, ethnicity, language, and identity relations including gender emerge as complex and contradictory. According to a recent Pew Research study, game playing is universal among young people.⁹ Women also do play games, yet this play emerges differently than the play of their male counterparts. Women are perceived to be the primary audience for casual games, for example. In Western countries, computer games are still perceived as an arena created by and for white men, with women comprising approximately 10 percent of the game development workforce in the United States.¹⁰ Current trends indicate that those who label themselves as gamers are moving out of the PC game market and onto consoles, while female players and those new to gaming, such as older age groups, may be migrating to the PC for casual games, to cell phones, Wii-style systems, and handheld devices for play across mobile technologies.¹¹ An entirely new group of adult female gamers emerged to play online social games such as *The Sims Online*, *EverQuest*, *Uru*, and *World of Warcraft*.¹² Games that depict everyday activities such as communication, social negotiation, caring for elements or characters that are part of a game world, or stabilizing precarious situations have become extremely popular with female players. In 2003, for example, it was a novelty to have more than one hundred thousand simultaneous players in an online game, but this happened in the game *EverQuest*; subsequently, the massive multiplayer *World of Warcraft* claimed a total of ten million users signed on in 2008 and broke *EverQuest's* simultaneous player records.¹³ Despite contradictions in data, there is evidence that women constitute either the largest, or second-largest, group of online gamers. The largest group has been cited as women aged thirty-five to forty-nine.¹⁴ Games journalist Kris Oser notes that women players, however, are still almost an invisible constituency to advertisers and game designers. While the statistics show us that women are increasingly playing games, few are envisioning and constructing these software environments.¹⁵ On top of these industry figures, few contemporary artists engaged with games are women.

Despite the probable social benefits that could result, game designers have yet to grapple with the full range of inequities ingrained in the player categories and game models exhibited in most of today's games. Possible overcategorization or reductionism from such classifications—for example, which designers are included under the rubric of "activist games"—is worth risking should such research provide for useful discussions, the design of alternate subject positions, new possibilities of agency, a revitalization of authorship, the promotion of equity, or other redefinitions of the cultural constructs currently embedded in digital environments.

In a further complication, the lack of diversity in the creative documentation by those at work in these movements makes it challenging to trace any historical practices that lie on the fringes of the accepted art world. Other than Alison Knowles's *House of Dust* (1967), for example, there may be no earlier accounts of the development of full-blown computer games by women until *Mystery House*, an interactive narrative game by Roberta and Ken Williams and the first computer game to incorporate graphics of any kind (1980).¹⁶ In addition, there is poor representation of artists of color in these art movements, and a lack of designers, scientists, and others of color in contemporary gaming culture.¹⁷ Female artists and scientists, as well as artists and scientists of color, have certainly been involved in the major art and technology movements in the twentieth century—or have worked in parallel to them. More documentation and inspection is needed to broaden the way in which their recorded histories are shaped. The dearth of women and people of color represented in art history needs to become part of the investigation in critical practice.

Given the limitations outlined, the artists' work explored here, historic and contemporary, responds to the commercial ubiquity of play. At the moment, computer and locative games are especially prominent aspects of playculture. From war simulations to Bulletin Board System style chess to 3D computer games, digital technology has been inherently bound with interactivity and diversion, and artists who engage in computer-based creation and critique represent the majority of contemporary examples of critical play. Questions surrounding participatory play and multiuser participation within the creation and reception of artistic, game-related works should, therefore, at least be introduced. Players of popular games may reskin, redesign, and indeed, reissue scenarios in online game environments such as *Second Life*. Music fans may download, upload, mix, and remix popular and independent music. The web can continue to provide a unique space where mainstream meets cult interests, creating subspecializations and massively multiplayer environs numbering in the millions of players. But, are artist-produced computer games, as systems, reinventing how these practices and their artifacts, how the culture, are constituted? What are the social ramifications of artist-produced computer games? How are these ramifications playing out? Above all, by what means do such works achieve in terms of critical discussion, dialogue, or interaction?

First, artists' games by definition take an "outsider" stance in relation to a popular, commercial games culture. This position itself suggests alternate readings of contemporary issues in electronic media and offers the possibility of commentary on social experiences such as discrimination, violence, and aging that traditional gaming culture either avoids or unabashedly marks with stereotypes.¹⁸ With her low-tech

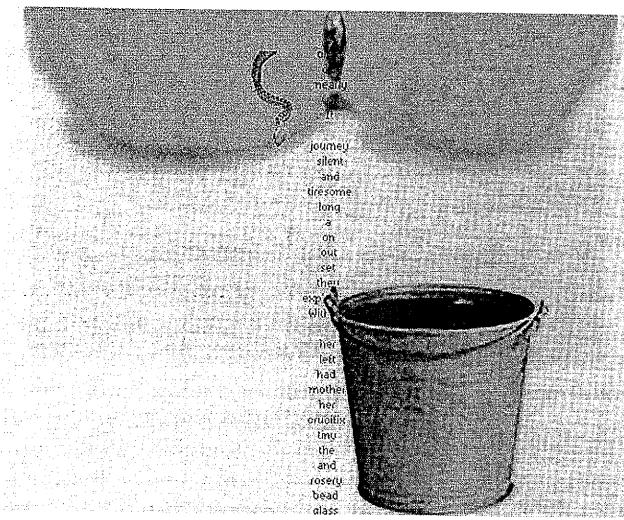


| Figure 7.1 |
Natalie Bookchin, *The Intruder*, 1998–1999.

game projects, California artist Natalie Bookchin uses humor, low-tech graphics, and juxtaposition to place the player in various difficult, challenging, or paradoxical situations. Bookchin's use of both political and personal stories emphasizes ideas about the exterior and interior worlds of a game.

Best known of Bookchin's gaming works is her influential narrative project *The Intruder* (1998–1999).¹⁹ Working from a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, "La intrusa," the game takes the participant through ten arcade-style games as a means of interactively conveying the narrative. Readers or "players" interact with the simple arcade puzzles to advance the plot. Text and spoken-word narration, of a sort, emerge as players engage in what presents itself as a classic arcade system.

"La intrusa" was first printed in the third edition of *El Aleph* (1966) and was later included the volume *El informe de Brodie* (1970). As in the original Borges story, the game too is set in the 1890s. Cristián and Eduardo Nilsen, two close brothers known for their fierce behavior, both fall in love with the same woman, and decide to share their intimate relationship with her. The woman, named Juliana, is later perceived to come between the violent brothers, causing emotional conflict. The narrative is distributed across a series of mini-games. Encountering and defeating, or outthinking, the small games that lie along the narrative path enables the player to move the story forward (figure 7.1). With each game move, the player earns a sentence or phrase. Players learn about the brothers' relationship, their history, and their fights over Juliana. As the narrative progresses, things become more complicated. When the brothers



| Figure 7.2 |
Natalie Bookchin, *The Intruder* trinkets collection game, 1998–1999.

decide that Juliana is getting in the way of their close relationship, they have her pack up her meager belongings in a bucket and sell her to a whorehouse.

This part of *The Intruder* may help game designers explore levels of abstraction and narrative that become a part of any critical game. Rather than set the game in the whorehouse, or depict the two brothers with Juliana's belongings, the image onscreen is abstracted in space and situation to feature simple elements of the narrative like the text, the belongings of the character, the props from the story, and the upfront images of a nude woman.

As *The Intruder* begins, players are presented with the image of a woman's bare underside situated over a bucket (figure 7.2). In this game, it is the woman's body that literally produces the story, as though the story was a kind of birth. The female body also produces trinkets the player must catch while maneuvering the bucket. This loaded image represents several narrative layers: Juliana's meager possessions, her own status as a possession of men, and the value of the woman's body as replaceable in the narrative, to be exchanged for her sales price to the whorehouse.

Rather than a celebration of the brothers' fraternity, or an inscription of a "cult of masculinity," a growing feeling of helplessness engulfs players of *The Intruder*. The narrative is dark, brutal, and compelling, but Juliana, so important to the story, is ripe with mystery. She cannot speak. Who is she? What does she look like? Bookchin removes the character's last name to further impersonalize her in the telling.

In another mini-game in the same story collection, Juliana emerges as a silent, pixelated figure. Players immediately know this figure to be Juliana, yet she is never given dialogue or a voice. As the story unfolds around her, the Juliana character becomes a mere blocky shadow produced by the men's desire. The game's aesthetic further supports this narrative evolution. While the background graphic is somewhat detailed, in a high-contrast photograph of a rustic street, the closer human figure is obliterated in chunky pixels. Game players maneuver Juliana down the street, causing her to run or jump, and eventually advancing the narrative when the character falls into the traps set for her. These are inevitable. Juliana's possible actions and the meaningful choices that players make along with this character are irrelevant. Participants must oblige this framework to continue the narrative.

The story and the interaction in *The Intruder* may appear at odds with each other until the players understand the futility of Juliana's agency. The set of games are designed to establish a gap between successfully advancing the story and compromising the safety and well-being of the character. The disjunction between interaction and narrative is deliberate, a gap that could be a site for critique or irony. To activist designers, irony is one of many strategies of critical play.

In *The Intruder*, Bookchin's low-tech graphic style and her narrator's solemn reading ironically subvert the arcade-game art concept. While the story itself is written by a Latino, the pieces excerpted into the games are narrated, when there is voice at all, by a Latina. Since the narrative involves the control of a Latina character, having a Latina both participate in the narrative and refute, or at least cause us to reflect upon the issue of voice by reading the text aloud, is an important aspect of the artwork. Here, Bookchin not only unplays game conventions—for example, the narrative advances when Juliana falls into the hole, which, in other games, would represent failure or restarting—she also rewrites questions of authority, identity, and representation in games through the confusion of narrative voice. This rewriting is particularly evident in the position of a game player versus that of a reader. Game players participate in the construction and evolution of narrative in different ways than in traditional textual forms. *The Intruder* narrative grows to become particularly effective and poignant because players, the once—"innocent" (perhaps) readers of text, now

find themselves actually *participating* in the abuse of Juliana in the interactive format of the game.

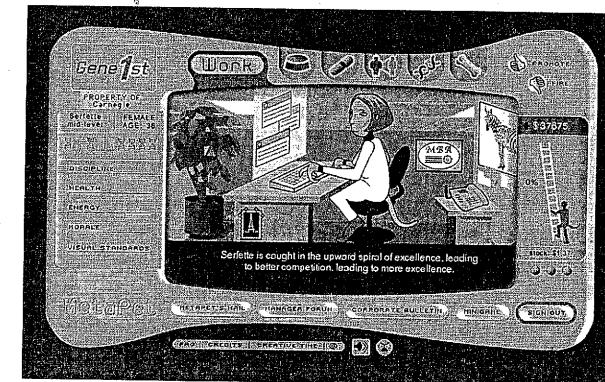
What is most striking about *The Intruder* as an interactive work is not the assembly of cute, fun games and their blatant, funny sound effects, but rather how those cute, fun games implicate the participant within what is actually a very dark narrative. The full implications of game interaction style in relation to the narrative become stronger when one takes an actual player into account. *The Intruder* positions users in a precarious and uncomfortable place, rather than the typical “command post” position of power most computer gaming examples provide for players. Software theorist Chris Chesher (2003) explores this unquestioned positioning of power in his work on game interfaces: “The cursor is not telling me something, but indicating that it is listening for my command.”²⁰ Players are almost always constructed as powerful agents, superheroes, or even gods. Additional implications of this positioning for the male player or, at least, a male gaze come to the fore given the current focus of much of the games industry. “Control,” Chesher notes, “undermines the liberal notions of privacy based on the inviolability of the subject. It changes what a subject is.”²¹

The complication of Borges’s text and the critique of woman’s position emerge from the “overpowering” control a player must enact to win in this system. The final game in the set transforms the implications of all of the previous games into an indictment. The player takes part in a “fugitive”-style scenario in which he or she guides crosshairs over a pixilated, natural landscape graphic (figure 7.3). The point of view from the crosshairs and the sound of a helicopter let us know we are indeed the hunters and that there is also someone or something to be hunted, in other words, a victim. To complete *The Intruder*’s disturbing narrative, we must aim and “shoot at” a fugitive figure below who, metaphorically at least, must be Juliana. In return, players earn their “reward,” the story’s end. Bookchin’s *Intruder* design invokes violence against the lone female character.²² Perhaps this paradoxical involvement is a stronger indictment of violence in computer games, or perhaps it should be read as a metaphorical critique of the larger technologically influenced culture to which women do not yet substantially contribute.

Bookchin’s next game, *Metapet* (2002), is an online simulation game that examines the line between work and play (figure 7.4). In the *Metapet* simulation, players create virtual workers of the future in biotech corporations, specifically one fictional company called STAR DNA. The player’s task is to try to help employee characters, who are seated at their desks in a work environment no doubt familiar to many of the game’s players. Employees who can be trained to work more efficiently are



yoking the oxen. Cristián said, "We have to



| Figure 7.3 |
Players hunt Juliana in Natalie Bookchin’s *The Intruder*, 1998–1999.

| Figure 7.4 |
Natalie Bookchin, *Metapet*, 2002.

allowed to climb the corporate ladder. As a tongue-in-cheek critique, this game allows users to examine worker roles within corporate hierarchies. The game also touches on the constant presence of the network, and the addiction to maintenance brought forth by email, online dating, blogging, social networks, instant messages, voicemail, news feeds, and games like *The Sims*. Activities in *Metapet* include the workers' constant checking, tweaking, and maintenance tasks as they care for workplace systems. These matters reflect the themes of networked culture inherited from both domestic practices and from the daily grind among the lower echelons of the information technology workplace. In *Metapet*, players are constantly reminded of the ubiquitous presence of the network and of the constant upkeep they themselves do at terminals throughout the day.

Manuel Castells, in his book *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), notes that the change in the ways technological processes have become organized originates at the shift from surplus value and economic growth to data and knowledge economies. Bookchin's work makes apparent this economic flow, and goes on to ask, "But at what cost?" The workers at STAR DNA are themselves products of genetic manipulation, optimized for multitasking performance. The network as a conceptual structure plays a vital role in the formation of Bookchin's work and in many other kinds of Internet art, engaging with systems of information and communication and allowing us to examine links and structures that shape our experience of computer-mediated culture.

In other examples of critical play, computer-based gaming projects may delve into the meaning of identity in culture or more concrete subthemes, such as "woman in games" or "human versus machine." The issues brought forth by the duality between body and mind are in some ways celebrated by games, where the agency of the physical body only now is beginning to approximate the agency of the virtual. Human computer-interface designer Joy Mountford observed that as "the computer stares back at you, it sees you as one eye and one finger."²³ In other words, computer interfaces are still designed as if players and users themselves are only partly bodied, or even disembodied. The relationship of the body to the mind, and now to the network, must be better articulated beyond various forms of utopian rhetoric, particularly in the era of the "social networks" frenzy, where ranges of intimacy and knowledge are set computationally, and often by systems designers, rather than by participants. Here, it is worthwhile to remind ourselves that, as architect Karen Franck notes, we "construct what we know, and these constructions are deeply influenced by our early experiences and by the nature of our underlying relationship to the world."²⁴ This is true for purely digital experiences as well as for hybrid or physical manifestations of play.

Games that Play Themselves

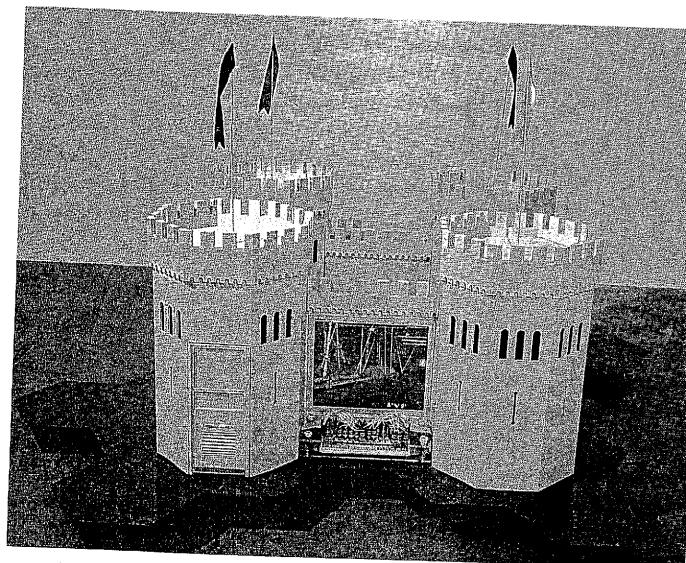
The computer game is the paradigm for the critical play of other artists as well. Eddo Stern's work flourishes at the intersection of game-related art and technology works. Dealing with system-on-system interactions and game-related interactions, Stern's remarkable range of projects has helped define the field of new media art, and larger art and technology practices. His *Dark Game* (2006) is a videogame prototype in which two rivals are deprived of their sight. Like his *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001), where the injuries of the virtual characters are translated to the physical players, *Dark Game* demonstrates the link between virtual actions and the players' own bodies. *Cockfight Arena* (2001), perhaps the most whimsical of Stern's works, consisted of a performance in which players work to control their avatar on the screen while wearing feathered chicken suits embedded with sensors. When Stern's work borders, or crosses into, the absurd, the resulting players' actions are most pleasing. The work unabashedly explores masculinity and power issues within commercial games, taking the manifestation of machismo posturing and "the fight" among players to their extremes.

In *Best . . . Flame War . . . Ever* (2007), Stern documented and interpreted heated online arguments as animated collaged characters speaking the dialog. In *RUNNERS: Wolfenstein* (2002), Stern inverted the destruction of World War II by allowing Israeli players to invade Nazi Germany. In addition to large-scale political issues, Stern investigates the mundane everyday experiences of his players. *Fort Paladin: America's Army* (2003) is a Fisher Price-styled castle that houses the game *America's Army* (figure 7.5). Robotic "fingers" play the game maniacally and repeatedly, like a human player might have to do to stay on top of the game. The game's play features a repetitive scene: the same character launches the same grenade attack on the same nonplayer characters, or NPCs, and then spawns the same new NPC soldiers to kill again, in an endless loop.²⁵ By letting the game play itself, Stern's theories on play and his practice highlight the futility of agency in closed systems. Stern also exposes the iconography of games as fetish items and as forms of cultural shorthand. Demonstrating technical, conceptual, and aesthetic aspects of the work at all times, Stern questions what it means to play critically, opting at times for a system to play itself, as it understands its own rules best.

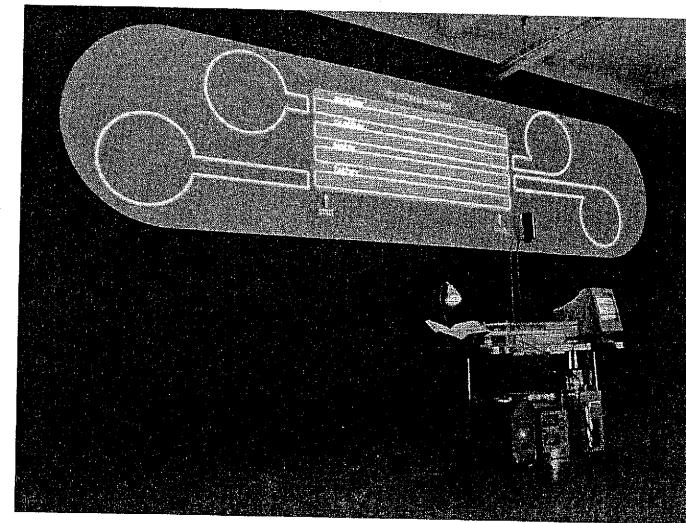
A Race of Races

In a comment on scientific perspectives and categorization, games and play are also used in the work of Paul Vanouse. One Vanouse work in particular, *The Relative Velocity*

Inscription Device (RVID) (2002) is particularly important (figure 7.6). In this installation, which consists of a computer-controlled separation gel and DNA and displays, Vanouse runs a live scientific experiment wherein four separate DNA samples from each member of his multiracial Jamaican American family are literally raced in a portable lab. The family members' DNA samples travel slowly, and in addition to the race action, viewers can read a eugenics treatise that explores the historic positioning of racial identification practices. Vanouse posits, "In 1960, my 'brown' mother emigrated to the US from Jamaica, and met my 'white' father. Why is my skin color lighter than my sister's?"²⁶ With this simple demonstration, Vanouse's project critically examines the genetics behind even small variations in skin color and the ways in which those variations are transmitted.²⁷ Vanouse's intention is not to literalize the genetic variations among mother, father, sister and brother, but to question the validity of such choice in what he calls "scientific spectacles." The project also brings forward our unease as spectators with regard to our own genetic and racial identity.

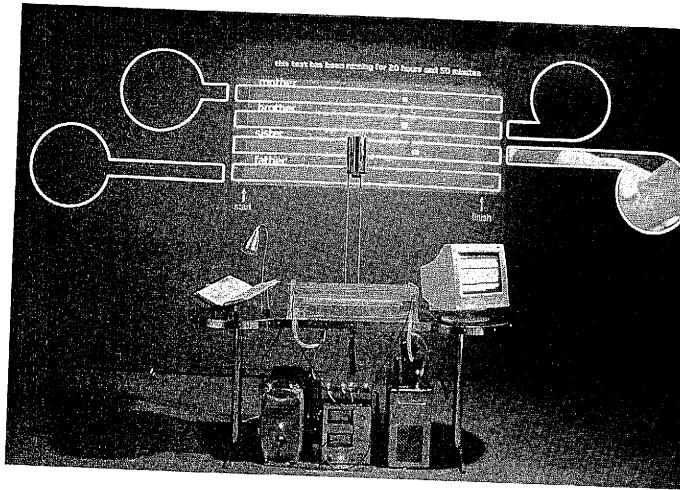


| Figure 7.5 |
Eddo Stern's castle-like *Fort Paladin*.



| Figure 7.6 |
Projection from Paul Vanouse's *The Relative Velocity Inscription Device (RVID)*, 2002, which displays a closeup of the live video image of the electrophoresis gel holding the individual DNA samples, with graphical overlays.

Citing the ambitious Human Genome project in his work, as well as past research artifacts like the 1929 tract "Race Crossing in Jamaica," a three-year study exploring the "problem of race crossing" during a time of racial separatist doctrines, Vanouse is keen to problematize the scientific process on a fundamental level. Vanouse's work then embodies critiques of science first launched by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his depiction of language as a game capable of representing a system of knowledge, which was later more specifically developed by the American Thomas Kuhn, whose ideas about the nature of the social knowledge produced by science, including the theory that science is inherently political, are well documented. Kuhn's belief is that science is a game, or is at least modeled on a game metaphor, and that this game, like other social practices, constitutes primarily a language game of power, legibility, and control in the Wittgensteinian sense.²⁸ If the very working of society is a network of language games, science, with its hyperspecialized language, its particular knowledge, and specific community of authority, must therefore be a subset of such a game, where truth is relative, and where what constitutes fact is instead relative to

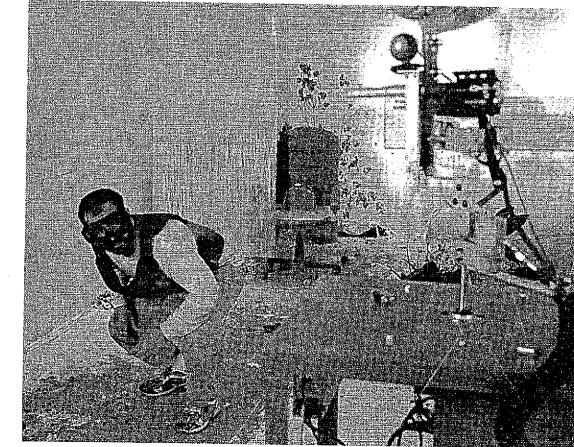


| Figure 7.7 |
Projection from Paul Vanouse's *The Relative Velocity Inscription Device (RVID)*, 2002. The samples glow because of the UV light irradiation below the gel.

one's subjectivity. Kuhn's creation of the concept of the "paradigm shift," a dynamic that models how scientists move from doubt, or even disdain, to consideration and finally acceptance and enthusiasm for new theories reveals the rules by which science operates and delineates how as a system of knowledge, science relies on social and psychological factors.

In terms of critical play, Vanouse reskins the simple interactive display of the race much like a game show from the 1970s invites players to guess the prices of goods or to wager on the success of randomly playable elements (figure 7.7). Even a scientific visualization would both simplify and posit as incorrect assumptions about content. He also unplays the "game" of science, questioning its validity.

Social and psychological factors are key to the work of Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi-born American artist and U.S. citizen. Bilal's work explores the position of the Iraqi civilian through technologically mediated games. In May 2007, Bilal confined himself in the Flatfile Galleries in Chicago for thirty days under twenty-four-hour webcam surveillance to raise awareness about the everyday life of Iraqi citizens and the home confinement they face on a daily basis due to violence and surveillance in their cities



| Figure 7.8 |
Wafaa Bilal, *Domestic Tension*, 2007. Photo from <http://media3.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/photo/2007/05/28/PH2007052801232.jpg>.

and towns. Titled *Domestic Tension*, this work allowed members of the public to visit Bilal's project website, watch him via webcam, and shoot him with a remote-controlled paintball gun (figure 7.8).

The work is one of the strongest anti-Iraq war statements made during the conflict, and was followed in over one hundred and thirty countries around the globe. During the month-long exhibition, the site received eighty million hits, and sixty thousand paintballs were shot. The work also featured various forms of player subversion, such as the ability to "unplay" the scenario overall. Several viewers acted by forming "protective groups like the VIRTUAL human shield [sic] SHIELD, who take turns aiming the gun away from Bilal around the clock."²⁹ Anonymous comments on popular aggregate sites such as Digg.com noted during the event that the exhibition was "one step closer to stabbing people in the face over the internet." Another commenter said: "I think the most disturbing part of this exhibit is one of the comments in the chat room. 'Do we get to shoot more if we donate?'"³⁰

Bilal's incorporation of a mediated-game interface provoked viewers to interaction, encouraging participants to "Shoot an Iraqi." Bilal, who left Iraq due to imprisonment

and torture during the last Iraq regime because he himself had made anti-Hussein artworks, would conceivably be the last person to face U.S. censorship due to questions of political loyalty. But this was not the case. In 2007, Bilal decided to recreate the 2003 game *Quest for Saddam* as a way to voice a critique of U.S. policies in the Middle East. The original game, using the *Duke Nukem* 3D game engine, asked players to fight generic "Iraqi" soldiers, and to find and kill Saddam Hussein, Iraq's leader from 1979 to 2003. The game was created by United American Committee Chairman Jesse Petrilla. This first *Quest for Saddam* was reskinned as a "hunt" for George H. W. Bush by the Global Islamic Media Front, a group said to be related to Al Qaeda.³¹ Their game, *The Night of Bush Capturing* was hacked by Bilal so that the artist could put his own, more nuanced spin on this epic conflict, in terms of both the actual war and the video game battle.

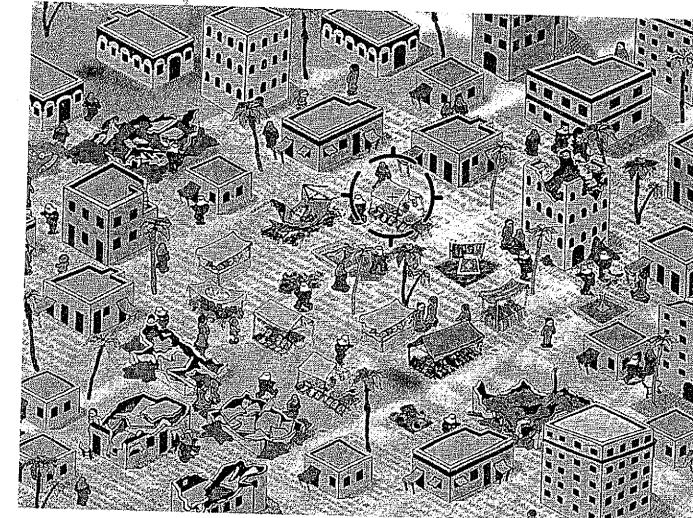
In *The Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi*, Bilal places himself as a character in the hacked Al Qaeda version of the Petrilla game. The Bilal game narrative is part autobiographical and part fiction: after learning of the real-life death of his brother in the Iraq war, Bilal is recruited by Al Qaeda to join the hunt for Bush. Bilal intends for the work to communicate both the racism and hatred embedded in U.S. games such as *Quest for Saddam* or *America's Army*. He also aims to demonstrate the difficulty Iraqi citizens face and their vulnerability during recruitment for violent groups such as Al Qaeda, maintaining that ordinary Iraqis have little to show for their "freedom" but incredible loss and violence. "This artwork is meant to bring attention to the vulnerability of Iraqi civilians, to the travesties of the current war, and to expose racist generalizations and profiling. Similar games such as 'Quest for Saddam' or 'America's Army' promote stereotypical, singular perspectives. My artwork inverts these assumptions, and ultimately demonstrates the vulnerability to recruitment by violent groups like Al Qaeda because of the U.S. occupation of Iraq."³²

Bilal undertook the game modification while a resident visiting artist at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. But close to the time of the scheduled exhibition opening, the school shut down the show. It moved to an alternate art space, and this too was shut down, by representatives of the city government for "code violations." Although Bilal's presence was welcome on campus, and his exhibition themes well known, suddenly the artist's work was perceived as too controversial to support. Bilal believes that during "these difficult times, when we are at war with another nation, it is our duty as artists and citizens to improvise strategies of engagement for dialogue."³³

September 12th

In 2003, the NewsGaming.com team lead by Gonzalo Frasca launched *September 12th: A Toy World* as a reaction to, and criticism of, U.S. policies in the fight on global terrorism (figure 7.9). Named to invoke the World Trade Center bombings of 2001, *September 12th* is a simulation that uses video game technology to model the obvious paradox in the American–Middle East conflict: the problematic inevitability of collateral damage suffered in the standard "combat models" of fighting terrorism. *September 12th* is an interactive toy world that provides "a simple model" players can use "to explore some aspects of the war on terror."³⁴ In some ways, the experience is a reskinned version of a classic *SimCity* game, with a highly reduced set of player options.

In *September 12th*, players are presented an isometric view of a bustling town and market, where terrorists and civilians intermingle, and a simple choice: fire or don't fire. The view offers a "big picture" of a presumably Middle Eastern city. The player's only available action is to manipulate crosshairs over the view, clicking to fire missiles from far away onto the village. If a player chooses to fire her missiles at the terrorists in the



| Figure 7.9 |
Gonzalo Frasca and Newsgaming.com, *September 12th: A Toy World*, 2003.

market, she will quickly find that it is nearly impossible to hit them. The missile will, however, destroy buildings and kill innocent civilians. Shooting again and again is permitted in intervals and only generates more rubble, more mayhem in the village, and more suffering. Civilians left alive after each missile attack weep and mourn the loss of the dead. Soon after, the embittered survivors become terrorists themselves through a shift in animation. If the player keeps firing, in just a few minutes the marketplace will be destroyed and only terrorists will be left to run through the ruins. Described as a simulation on its start page, *September 12th* has no win-or-lose state. Since there is no goal, there can be no obstacles to that goal and so the game has no inherent conflict, except that which might arise in players themselves. Even a simple illusion of a win state cannot be maintained in a game that openly declares it has no end and can't be won. The lack of an opponent makes conflict or balance irrelevant. The game does not involve any form of progression. There is no learning curve. However, *September 12th* possesses many qualities of both a game and an artwork: it has a clearly defined set of cause-and-effect actions the player can choose to pursue, and the world thoughtfully models a problematic situation that might also classify it as a game for social change. It is also successful at providing a safe way to experience reality, or in this case, a possible playing out of choices which might create a reality. Since the results of the simulation are less harsh than the real situation the game is modeling, with no actual lives lost and no actual terrorists created, the overall effect is what game scholar Chris Crawford labels emotional content: "A game creates a subjective and deliberately simplified representation of emotional reality,"³⁵ something easily accomplished in a simulation that draws its content from a current situation in the real world.

To game designer Frasca, the task was to demonstrate that destruction of cities and high civilian casualties can only cultivate a climate of resentment, vengeance, and hatred that can spawn new enemies. In short, violence breeds violence.³⁶ In this way, the *Sims* aspect of the work is rewritten into a futile cycle: players do not work for character happiness and can do nothing to make the lives of the characters better or more productive. Frasca explored different techniques to convey the act of turning regular villagers into terrorists. "What I wanted to show is simply this circle of terror that seems to not have an ending. We tried a traditional morph between the two characters, but we felt it was not clear enough. The technique that we ended up with flashes back and forth between the two characters, and I think it works pretty well."³⁷ Frasca noted that all the responses to the game were positive, even among Arabs in the United States.³⁸ Is the *September 12th* simulation a comment on the term "terrorism" itself? Absolutely. However, in *September 12th*, the message is not only that violence produces more violence but also that the work behind developing the software allows those who engage

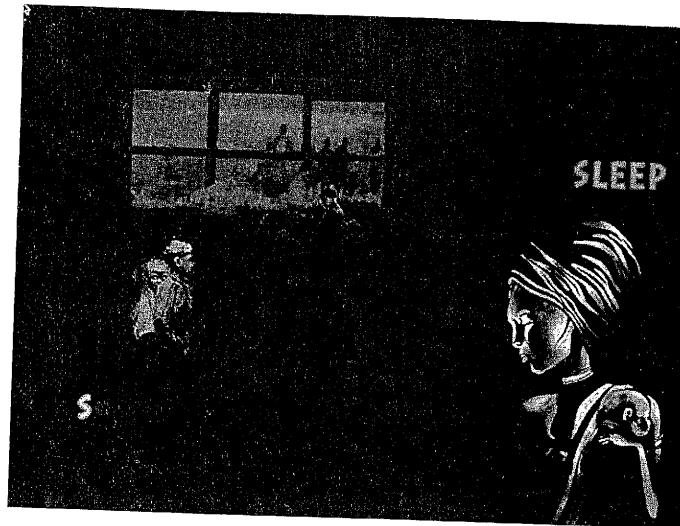
with the simple simulation to actively participate in creating meaning. This act, to players, is fundamentally different from reading a static text or visual representation.³⁹

Another project, Frasca's game *Madrid*, is a response to the Madrid bombings of 2004. During the rush-hour peak on March 11, three days before a Spanish general election, ten coordinated explosions went off on Madrid's commuter train lines, killing one hundred and ninety-one people and wounding over seventeen hundred and fifty-five others; responsibility for the event was attributed to an Al Qaeda-style terrorist group. Working as a memorial, Frasca's *Madrid* is subtle, using suggestion and simple design to attract players and open up the tragedy of the bombings for remembrance and dialogue. The instructions and the game play are simple: the player only needs to maintain the light of the candles held by drawn characters in an act of remembrance. *Madrid* includes a light meter that tracks player process, but, ultimately, the player cannot move back and forth quickly enough to keep all of the candles lit. In many ways the game starts off as a work of mourning, but works to question the very act of staging a memorial for a tragedy, as well as to comment on human memory itself. The game also serves the needs of an activist community around the world.

Jamie Antonisse, Devon Johnson, Chris Baily, Joey Orton, and Brittany Pirello created the game *Hush* in 2008 to explore the 1994 civil war and genocide in Rwanda. Called a rhythm game by bloggers, and a concentration game by players, *Hush* uses the 1994 Rwandan civil war as the setting for a challenging scenario. Players play as Liliane and the goal is to keep Liliane's baby quiet in order to prevent mother and child from being captured by the Hutu patrol (figure 7.10). The "lullaby" is appealing, consisting of falling letters of words related to the calming of the child. The letters of the word appear quietly on the screen, and must be matched on the keyboard by the player precisely at the point they appear their brightest.

The initial concept for the game was created in a critical play brainstorming exercise for the Values at Play project, an effort of artists and humanists to reflect further on human values in games. Antonisse and Johnson state: "The idea for *Hush* was actually born out of a Values at Play exercise:⁴⁰

We had to create a game from a randomly chosen game mechanic and game theme, and we drew "Singing" and "Human Rights." The contrast between these two cards posed a challenge and yielded many unconventional ideas, including the core concept for *Hush*. One of the things that attracted us to the concept is that the player isn't viewing this horrific event from a distance and attempting to "solve the problem"; they are immersed in the moment, experiencing the terror of a Hutu raid. It's also important that even though the player is not in a position of power, the player still has the noble goal of saving a child.⁴¹



| Figure 7.10 |
Jamie Antonisse, Devon Johnson, and USC team, *Hush*, 2008.

Game play in *Hush* is quick, but the experience is immersive, with the matching, timed game mechanic requiring full concentration. The game soundtrack convincingly conveys the conflict between staying calm and a surrounding world of mayhem and violence. To game scholar Ian Bogost, “*Hush* offers a glimpse, as it were, of how vignette might be used successfully in games . . . as a vignette of a situation in mid-90s civil war-torn Rwanda, the game is compelling,” for the “anxiety of literal death contradicts the core mechanic’s demand for calm, but in a surprising and satisfying way, like chili in chocolate. The increasingly harsh sound of a baby’s cry that comes with failure attenuates the player’s anxiety, further underscoring the tension at work in this grave scenario.”⁴²

Most important, *Hush* explores subjectivity. It is the strength of the belief in a position, from which an experiential “truth” emerges, that helps this game move from a broad statement to a personally moving experience. We can look to the ideas behind standpoint epistemology that open up the possibilities to use games as an approach against power and oppression.⁴³ Here, Braidotti’s notion of radical forms of reembodiment can work in a game; even though the body is not visibly acting a scene to

an observer, the participant is bodily engaged.⁴⁴ While lived experiences culminate in a variety of complex physical, social, and philosophical realities, even simple games such as *Hush* can provide an emotionally complex slice of an experience, and present a layered, “nomadic” perspective by shifting from player, to character, to world citizen and more.

The Rise of Serious Games

Artistic interventions in the form of games arise from a number of intentions, including social critique, a need for solidarity and action among participants, and the impulse to stage large-scale games in order to disrupt political scenarios or daily life. Some of those making video games, as we have seen, can be identified as artists. Bookchin, Stern, Vanouse, Bilal, and Schleiner have provided compelling activist models. Bookchin reskins games in light of critique by using existing narrative. Stern rewrites how games work and adds to their complexity. Vanouse brings in a critique of larger epistemological concerns through a look at scientific discourse and classically styled games. Bilal changes the stakes of a game, crossing lines not only in representation but also in national and international comfort levels, ethnic stereotypes, and the power of institutions and the state. Even earlier examples such as Schleiner offer historical precedents for projects that move primarily into the realm of activism. In all cases, digital worlds are enormous sites for the import of content from the real world. These can include social interactions and social constructions like racism and sexism, which can prevail inside particular types of game frameworks.

The examples discussed in the rest of this chapter are described by the terms *serious games*, *games for change*, or *social impact games*. The debate regarding the general use of these terms must be noted. Different groups favor different categorical labels. Games scholar Woods argues that serious games are the goal of those within the game industry for the future of games, noting that many developers wish to create “serious” content or experiences that are typically represented within traditional narrative forms such as books or film.⁴⁵ Though these lines are not fixed and easily definable, most in the community understand serious games to be those primarily within the domain of education or military applications. Such games might focus on training for service, disaster relief, hazardous occupations, crime, the redesign of public spaces such as transit systems and parks, or the creation of frameworks for team building.

On the other hand, games for change or social impact games are understood as those that address social concerns more broadly. These might include poverty, racism, bias and discrimination, war and peace, or human rights through education and outreach. There is a fast-growing collection of computer-based games designed to

educate on matters relating to environmental concerns, human rights abuse, worker's issues, land use, and other social ills. These games are often created to address real-world issues or to raise awareness and foster critical thinking. Both categories of games integrate real-world data and stories, focus on education and public opinion, and aim to provide an alternative to existing media on such issues.⁴⁶

Many social impact games use video game technology in innovative and novel ways in order to convey their messages, but in the end bear little resemblance to existing mainstream video games. This relationship is an interesting one to explore. In his 1984 book, *The Art of Computer Game Design*, Chris Crawford, perhaps prematurely, provided a definition of what games are and how they should be designed. He identifies four elements common to all games: representation, interaction, conflict, and safety. Of the four, the ideas of conflict and safety are the most useful in distinguishing a game from a simulation or other interactive media forms. To Crawford and other game designers, even a social impact game would require conflict:

Conflict arises naturally from the interaction in a game. The player is actively pursuing some goal. Obstacles prevent him from easily achieving this goal. If the obstacles are passive or static, the challenge is a puzzle or athletic challenge. If they are active or dynamic, if they purposefully respond to the player, the challenge is a game. However, active, responsive, purposeful obstacles require an intelligent agent. If that intelligent agent actively blocks the player's attempts to reach his goals, conflict between the player and the agent is inevitable. Thus, conflict is fundamental to all games.⁴⁷

The absolute insistence on conflict can emerge to be more interesting and subtle. The conflict in *Madrid*, for example, lies in the player's abilities given an impossible task. In *September 12*, conflict is in the player choice itself. Primarily in reference to social activist games, game scholar Shuen-shing Lee refers to these as "you-never-win" games. Lee's theory would be extraordinary familiar to a Fluxus game maker, for art games have a long history of circumventing win and loss states for other themes. Yet in games that attempt to appeal to the vast majority of conventional game players, or those interested in activism without a radical edge, Lee builds on notions from scholars like Janet Murray and offers literature for a model, connecting games for change to the dramatic form of tragedy, where the player is not meant to win because that is what maintains the tragic form.⁴⁸ This idea builds on Frasca's approach. In his now classic "Video Games of the Oppressed," Frasca points to the playwright Bertolt Brecht's critical play with Aristotelian drama, insisting that actors and audiences remain aware that what they see and engage in is a simulation and that they are

present to provide a critical view. Frasca also mentions Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," which strove to tear or break down the fourth wall between subject and viewer.

These theories are important to understanding the strategies behind social impact games. The simulative nature of a game creates an environment where a game becomes a venue for those otherwise uninterested in experimental art per se to think through and challenge the heady ideas of society and culture.

In 2006, MIT and other organizations launched a nationwide student competition with the goal of linking technology to the genocide in Darfur, Sudan. The winning entry, *Darfur Is Dying*, was conceived and developed by a group of students from the University of Southern California and was launched to critical acclaim. *Darfur Is Dying* is an online game designed to raise awareness of the three million people in refugee camps. The game is intended to function as a call for aid, intervention, and progressive legislation. The game is also designed to empower students and others to become involved in actions that could stop an international crisis.⁴⁹ Players in the game, described by the makers as "a window" onto the experience of the refugees, must keep their refugee camp functioning in light of the danger of invasion by Sudanese government-backed militia, the Janjaweed.

A simulation-style game, *Darfur Is Dying* places the player in the perspective of a displaced Darfurian refugee. Initially, players each choose a character from a wide range of age and gender, and then begin to forage. The first goal is to leave camp and fetch water. But it is a long run to get water in the barren desert—five kilometers—and the magnitude of the mission soon becomes clear to the player. Armed militia groups patrol the land, and players must guide their game characters to hide when appropriate behind scrub or boulders. If the character is caught, a text screen ends the play and makes a point on the crisis: "You will likely become one of the hundreds of thousands of people already lost to the humanitarian crisis" or "Girls in Darfur face abuse, rape, and kidnapping by the Janjaweed. If she succeeds in fetching water, the girl can bring more water back than a smaller boy, but less than an adult."⁵⁰ If the players' characters survive this game level, they move on to help the camp manage small plots of land and gardens by collecting water, building shelters, and harvesting food.

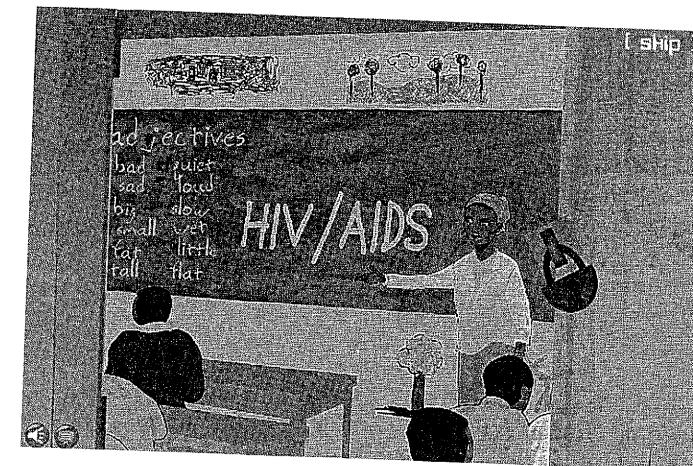
Darfur Is Dying plays much like a traditional action game. The refugee characters negotiate danger, forage for water, and rebuild their village in order to accomplish a clearly defined goal: survival for one week. The game's players become steadily more skillful at guiding their characters to avoid and prevent danger as time progresses, so the game has a smooth learning curve. The challenges that are presented entail

relatively simple navigation and limited artificial intelligence. Game enemies exist in endless numbers and will deliberately move toward their intended targets via the shortest possible route. Conflict emerges as the player's Darfurian refugee struggles to avoid capture or murder by the Janjaweed militia. The game maintains the illusion of winnability by defining a reasonable win state and providing a means to this end.

The complication comes in when the camp is successfully established, for a healthy camp attracts raiders. Given this event, the player must pay for her own success, rebuilding the village after attacks, and continuing to collect water, harvest gardens for food, and stave off disease by visiting the clinic when it receives new supplies. Exploring the village reveals information about the general state of the Darfurian people and the tragic events that lead a refugee to the camp in the first place. While *Darfur Is Dying* allows players to safely experience the trauma of being a displaced Darfurian refugee, the game is so closely tied to real people and events that it unsettles the player and disturbs her sense of comfort. Hovering over huts in the refugee camp, text reveals chilling personal accounts of real refugees. The *Take Action Now* button on the interface has a real-world effect by offering players the chance to write or email the U.S. president, petition Congress to support the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act, or email the game to others to spread information about the Darfur situation.

Unlike mainstream games, *Darfur Is Dying* sobers feelings of accomplishment, and allows players to feel the distance between a game and the real-world situation. It can be argued that *Darfur Is Dying* is another "you-never-win" game, for surviving for one week does not resolve the conflict in the game or in the world around us. If one survives the game in character, he or she will succeed in the digital version of the Darfur universe, but no further. Games that inform do not end the real conflict. Perhaps, we may design games that have more and more global influence or even enact changes in education, fundraising, or work through play.

Other artists and activists have looked to games as a means to building support for a cause. The *Peter Packet* game was created by NetAid, a nonprofit organization whose aim is to eliminate poverty, and by Cisco, a technology company (figure 7.11). NetAid designed *Peter Packet* so that U.S. players could learn about children in less developed countries, and send superhero Peter Packet to move messages on the Internet to those in need. The game explores issues of education, clean drinking water, and AIDS in net. Players help Peter Packet dodge viruses and hackers in order to help in-game characters communicate with international contacts such as teacher organizations. By



| Figure 7.11 |
A scene from NetAid and Cisco's *Peter Packet* game.

interacting, these players not only learn about computer networking such as routing messages but also gain awareness about contemporary situations regarding technology, education, health, and poverty around the world. The game also offers players and their friends a chance to learn more about fundraising and taking action to help in the related causes.⁵¹

If games are supposed to be a source of entertainment, should they also attempt to enhance critical thinking as well as address social and political issues? *Peter Packet* has critical content, with relatively straightforward arcade game play, but games such as *Darfur Is Dying* and *September 12th* appropriate or alter established gaming models in an effort to send a message or affect change.⁵² These games are infused with socio-political criticism in their quest for digital activism.⁵³ They challenge the notion that games must be only entertaining and fun, and offer alternative goals such as meditative play or, as in the case of these two examples, out-of-game engagement, with or without the often trivial pleasures offered by industry standards.⁵⁴ In his article "Videogames of the Oppressed," Frasca writes, "The goal of these games is not to find appropriate solutions, but rather to trigger discussions. . . . It would not matter if the games could not simulate the situation with realistic accuracy. Instead, games would

work as metonyms that could guide discussions and serve to explore alternative ways of dealing with real life issues.”⁵⁵

Along these lines, Persuasive Games created the “game for change” or a game engaged in raising awareness about social or political issues titled *Oil God*, which puts the player in the position of a god, complete with a moveable “God-hand” as the cursor, in a simplified version of the popular PC game *Black and White*. Players attempt to raise the price of oil to a certain level by starting wars, causing natural disasters, and altering national political and economic systems through political change and civil war (see figure 7.12).

Presuming that many players wish to be god, the game is predicated on the perhaps cynical belief that players will subscribe to the favored game strategies for the subversive pleasure of profit, endorsing military coups for financial gain, and even directing aliens to kill and probe large segments of the civilian population. In *Oil God*, information about how various stimuli will affect oil prices is withheld, and it appears impossible for the player to discern which nasty actions benefit prices more than others. Starting wars usually seems to increase oil prices, and it is clear that directing damage at regions and nations with oil seems to keep oil prices at a premium. While Persuasive Games calls this work a “news” game, *Oil God* in fact abstracts the factors



| Figure 7.12 |
Persuasive Games, *Oil God*, 2006.

that influence oil prices in order to make critical comments on the potentially devious strategies of oil cartels and corporations. *Oil God* aims to educate players about complex economic systems through simulation, fantasy, and humor, and while it succeeds in fulfilling fantasy and providing humor, it is not the equivalent of a “news” game, where at least factual elements or systems would function, and while *September 12th* is an example of Lee’s “you-never-win” concept, *Oil God* is a cynical “you-always-win” game, proving games for change can relate closely to artists’ game work, while strategies among artists and activists can diverge dramatically.

Whatever their message, serious games are among the most challenging games to design. These play spaces must retain all the elements that make a game enjoyable while effectively communicating their message. Either component can be lost in the attempt to manifest the other, resulting in a game that is dull and didactic, or entertaining but hollow. In the worst case, the results are both dull and hollow. Games are frameworks that designers can use to model the complexity of the problems that face the world and make them easier for the players to comprehend. By creating a simulated environment, the player is able to step away and think critically about those problems. Frasca refers to these games as a “trigger of discussion,” and existing social activist games work largely on that level. They are not necessarily meant to be fun, though fun may be a side effect, and are rather meant to make people think. Like other designers of critical play, social activist designers can approach serious issues through games. In some cases, a game may provide the safest outlet available for exploring devastating problems and conflicts.

DESIGNING FOR CRITICAL PLAY

Play is grounded in the concept of possibility.

—Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett, “An Exploratory Model of Play”

Whether it is their capacity to stimulate participation in an Internet-connected age or their role as a platform for entertainment, intervention, authorship, and subversion, computer games—indeed, all games—are highly relevant to the twenty-first-century imagination. Games have also constituted a significant component of arts practice for almost a century. While the central parts of this book engaged with historical questions surrounding critical play and artistic approaches to play and game design, an investigation of the design methodologies informing critical play should begin by defining the context in which many games are now made.

If, as according to Bennett and Csikszentmihalyi, “Play is grounded in the concept of possibility,”¹ then critical play is the avant-garde of games as a medium. But *where* is play critical? When assessed in terms of criticality, a wealth of questions arises concerning the way games actually function. The last chapters have provided theories, approaches, and examples to help address some important questions: Can games be activist? Does play raise critical awareness or does it minimize its effects? What is the role of the arts in games, and can methods derived from artists make a difference? Can the various methods of creation followed by the artists discussed in prior chapters offer novel approaches to actively reshaping everyday playculture?

Marshall McLuhan was ahead of his time in understanding that “Art, like games or popular arts, and like media of communication, has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures.”²² From doll play to wordplay, from Simultanism to various Surrealist games, there is a good deal of evidence that the processes of artists in pursuit of critical play can offer research methods, actions, and play situations, whether sites or collections of one of

more actions, that are adaptable to present concerns. The critical play method I propose here should provide an effective model for designers and artists to use to engage in, and encourage, critical play in both game making and game playing. Critical play can and should be included in the traditional game design process. By proposing this design model and creating games with this set of strategies, it is hoped that other practitioners, artists, designers, scientists, and researchers will be able to question and elucidate many of the so-called “norms” embedded in our current play frameworks and technology practices, ultimately including a more diverse set of voices in the game design community and a wider spectrum of game experiences.

Why Care about Methods?

On first glance, it can be difficult to see how artists working in a very different place and time would have significant manners, modes, and processes that inform game making today. Computer games are often discussed as an exciting new medium, but its ties to prior forms of play are not automatic. To the typical gamer, computer games are not obviously aligned with such concerns as ancient divination, psychoanalysis, utopian tax laws, environmentalism, or social protest. In the case of activist gaming, perhaps it is thought that the goals of the designer are “real,” and therefore can be best achieved with more direct approaches to the making. For example, a designer may wish to make a project concerning a local food bank. Typical disciplinary research would encounter particular truths and strands of information, rather than an artistic aesthetic.

However, if we look to the fundamental reasons for *why we play*, the connection between artistic methods, activism, and game design becomes clear. There is something about designing play, especially the process of conceptualizing and making games, that requires an attention to possibility. As in art, the creation of play and games necessitates rule making at a fundamental level. Even simple role-playing activities, or playing house, both seemingly limitless open-play scenarios, include implicit or explicit rules that establish behavior, possible actions, environments, and the safe zone for play itself. Due to the systemic nature of both the product and the process, game makers use particular repeatable processes, or methods. Like activists, game designers also follow an overall scheme of investigation or research, creating processes to address specific concerns and ideas. In addition, the creation of rules of operation makes interesting constraints to provoke innovation in both the designer’s process and the player’s role.

As game design matures, and as games themselves become more ubiquitous and more meaningful to culture, there is a growing need for designers to approach the

Designing for Critical Play

creative process with increased awareness and responsibility to be inclusive, fair, and cater to a variety of play styles. Computer games, especially networked computer games, have become often-used and “public” social spaces. As such, they must be seen as spaces of translation, already transformed by game designers and the growing numbers of game players: international, transbordered, fluid. However, this international significance brings ever more importance to what those games are designed to be, what one does in them, and how play is constructed within them. Political change once occurred in the public space of the street, town square, and the plaza. Many games, some of the type geographer Gillian Rose labels “non-real,” are significant because now, more than ever, electronic games constitute cultural spaces.

Furthermore, as a site for production and consumption of culture, community, language, commerce, work, and leisure, playculture is what can be termed a “thirdspace,” which Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* calls the space of subversion, hybridity, and blasphemy. In fact, Bhabha argues that hybridity and cultural translation are in themselves subversive ideas, and therefore must be the place where binary divisions are challenged.³ Urban planner Edward Soja argues that all spaces are “thirdspaces” which are lived and imagined spaces in between empirical or the previously understood geographies and physical forms of “firstspace” and the conceptual, ideological, or semiotic spaces of representation and mental forms of “secondspace.” Thirdspace is the site for play and struggle. Players may eschew binary oppositions and allow for the possibility of a subject to be simultaneously in several spatialities. As Soja points out, spaces are socially produced (1996) and thirdspaces are the only sites that contain the possibility for social and political transformation (1999). As Anne-Marie Schleiner notes, “Instead of replicating the binary logic of the shooter genre, of Cowboys and Indians, of the football game, if the US government borrowed tactics from real time strategy gamers or RPGers, we might be looking at a different global response.”⁴

If we think of games as presenting the possibility of the thirdspace, a social space with its own social relations, struggles, and symbolic boundaries, it is within this thirdspace that we must envision the more diverse and equity-promoting style of activity I call critical play. Following the line of work inspired by Langdon Winner’s well-known assertion that artifacts “have” politics, and building on my own theory-practice research in this area, I’ve come to realize that the methods followed by practitioners, whether consciously evaluated or not, are key to the meaning emerging from a game.⁵ Researchers studying social and philosophical dimensions of technologies have used a variety of terms to label and extend Winner’s ideas, such as the “embeddedness” of values in technology, or the “play” of the values in a game.⁶ Systems other than games

are influenced by ideology as well: technologies such as search engines, medical systems, and file-sharing software are designed with different models of human behavior, motivation, privacy of information, and the like. Perhaps even more than these "tools," games are simultaneously systems of information, cultural products, and manifestations of cultural practice. On some level, systems such as games must, due to the conditions of their creation, represent cultural norms and biases in their realization. These results can go, and have gone, completely unacknowledged. Game makers and artists work in a certain time, place, and situation. Many work in a particular medium and genre. Others must contend with definite pressures and practical realities. In a further complication of these realities, what is distinctive about play is that one cannot always easily see that a clear boundary exists between it and social reality, or rather, see that play uses the tools of everyday reality in its construction.

Although artists' play continues to create new meaning, to challenge existing power relations, and to align with activist/interventionist strategies, postmodern culture and the technological revolution may have changed histories, social relations, markets, and home life in deep and profound ways. Globalization and its effects may produce or reinscribe problematic ideologies into technological artifacts such as computer games.⁷ Given these conditions, along with the fact that any creative act is complex and usually generates unintended consequences, the game creation process must mature to allow constant review and much more "reflection."

The Critical Play Method

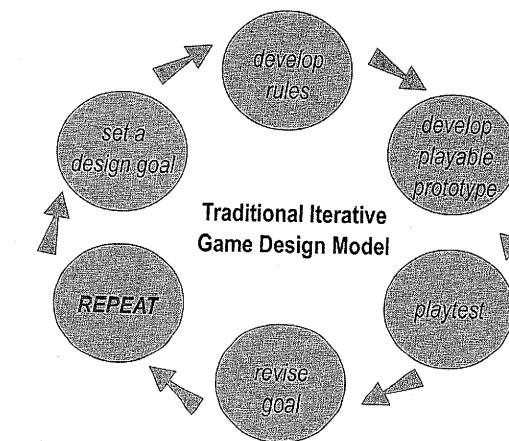
Based on the needs of game design and the importance of iteration, the ideas from over a century of artists' games can prove useful to making radically different games. But first, it is important to see how designers are making games today. Here are the rough steps in the cyclical development process called "iterative" design:⁸

- *Set a design goal* (also known as a mission statement). The designer sets the goals necessary for the project.
- *Develop the minimum rules and assets necessary for the goal*. The game designers rough out a framework for play, including the types of tokens, characters, props, and so on.
- *Develop a playable prototype*. The game idea is mocked up. This is most efficiently done on paper or by acting it out during the early stages of design.
- *Play test*. Various players try the game and evaluate it, finding dead ends and boring sections, and exploring the types of difficulty associated with the various tasks.

- *Revise*. Revising or elaborating on the goal, the players offer feedback, and the designers revamp the game system to improve it.
- *Repeat*. The preceding steps in the process are repeated to make sure the game is engrossing and playable before it "ships" or is posted to a website.

The traditional model contains concrete steps toward realizing a particular design by iterating it until core elements and concepts have been adequately matched by game elements and mechanics. Generally, a designer or a design team may choose to iterate one small design goal, a subset of a particular game, or they may choose to iterate the entire game system in some skeletal form (see figure 8.1). The model is scalable to many types of play and development.

I wish to appraise this process in light of the myriad critical approaches to projects included in this book. Part of this process is a constant reflection on the humanistic themes, or values, during design. At least one designer, Donald Schön, refers to a "reflective practice" as a methodology and encourages makers to step outside their processes to "see the big picture." For Schön, it is important that the experiments do



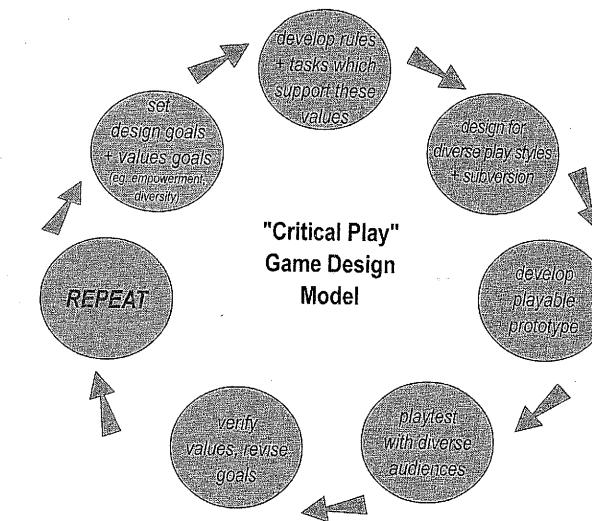
| Figure 8.1 |
Mary Flanagan, model of iterative design process.

not “confirm” an “answer” to a challenge, but affirm that challenge instead. Schön’s approach avoids the traditional goal of a final, or definitive, resolution and involves shaping and altering priorities as a result of findings. Schön notes, “It is the logic of affirmation which sets the boundaries of experimental rigor.”⁹ Other reflective frameworks, such as the “critical technical practice,” which is advanced primarily by computer science practitioners working on artificial intelligence, have similar aims. A growing number of designers are committing to the notion of a continuing dialogue between values and practice.¹⁰ In sum, reflective practice encourages designers and technologists to verify that both their design goals and their values goals are supported.

Any game design heuristic, however, would be ill conceived without either accompanying an existing creative process or being able to conceivably work in an existing design context. If many game designers practice an iterative model of design, then these ideas must integrate. The critical play process might therefore look like this:

The iterative cycle would do better to become more open, more reflective at this point in the evolution of playculture, given the long history of the technical benefits, increases in inclusion, and widening of social discourse achieved by alternate design methods. For example, in my own research into play systems, I have noted a number of ways in which girls participating in play environments, such as their long history of doll play, worked against these systems, and how players in popular computer culture use intervention or subversion in games as a play method. Feminist criticism and practice has played an important role in informing such disruptions with technology, as well as examining how power relationships are upheld and how intervention is orchestrated. Leading technologist and game designer Brenda Laurel has noted, “Culture workers at their best make just such conscious interventions—mindfully creating technologies that cause us to produce new myths, and mindfully making art that influences the shape of technology.”¹¹ The disruption of contemporary games, whether through play, or preferably, through original designs that eschew the embedded interaction styles of current computer games may offer models for other emerging practices in playculture. Designer actions are powerful sites of empowerment for giving a voice to marginalized groups.

But a critical design methodology requires the shifting of authority and power relations more toward a nonhierarchical, participatory exchange. While the games made might disrupt the existing social realities offered by most popular games, they also disrupt the design process itself. Instead of compliance to a pattern whereby the usual designers develop the usual ideas through the usual stages for the usual players, what is needed now is a model that will augment these practical but limited stages of the design process in a way that addresses intervention, disruption, and social issues



| Figure 8.2 |
Mary Flanagan, model of critical play method.

and goals alongside of, or even *as*, design goals embedded into the mechanic and game elements.

Here I would like to propose a different model, one that approaches critical play. The critical play method (figure 8.2) introduces several crucial elements into the iterative model.¹² Human concerns, identifiable as principles, values, or concepts, become a fundamental part of the process. While moving through the stages of the Critical Play Method, the artist, activist, or designer can reflect upon the state of his project and see if the design continues to meet the base goals set initially for the research:

- *Set a design goal/mission statement and values goals.* The designer sets the goals necessary for the project to create meaningful play, and sets one or more equally weighted values goals.
- *Develop rules and constraints that support values.* The game designers rough out a framework for play, including the types of tokens, characters, props, etc. necessary to support the game’s values and play.

- *Design for many different play styles.* The designer could, for example, provide for a noncompetitive type of play alongside a competitive play scenario. The designer should design for subversion of the system and other means by which play can emerge.
- *Develop a playable prototype.* The idea is mocked up on paper or by acting it out during the early stages of design.
- *Play test with diverse audiences.* Designers need to get out of the studio or laboratory and play test with a wide-ranging audience, making sure to play with nontraditional gamers. Various players test the game for dead ends and dull sections, and types and levels of task difficulty.
- *Verify values and revise goals.* Designers evaluate the game through the play tests and player comments. They verify that the values goals emerge through play, and revise goals and add or drop options based on feedback to ensure an engaging game and support the project values.
- *Repeat.* This process is repeated to make sure the game supports the values it set out to frame and support, as well as provide an engrossing and playable experience. These two criteria for success must be measured in each iterative cycle.

Within the critical play method, difference and value are fundamental concerns. Testing with paper, performance, or electronic prototypes should prove to be an especially important means of verifying that design decisions agreed upon during the process, such as equity in power relations or enhancing diversity; the system should adequately handle the complexities of critical play principles. In such testing, it is necessary to determine not only that a particular feature or idea was successfully implemented in a technical component but also that its implementation did not detract from prior decisions that were functional, interactive, or conceptual in nature.

The iterative design process is well known; research has shown that iterative cycles can help designers facilitate feedback, including the discussion and evaluation of embedded social issues, while keeping the creation of a game more dynamic.¹³ For artists making games, this approach is useful too. The cyclical nature of the creative process can serve as a parallel studio practice and involve the community with which the artist wishes to engage. After all, games are dynamic systems.

In making anything, however, there tends to be a gap between what was intended and what actually is created. Here, a critical play perspective engages a diverse audience of testers to ensure that the particular aspects of the project that are informed by conceptual, thematic, and technological factors continue to “say the same thing” once the project is finished. This agreement to examine the “doing” of “practice” can be of

use in the laboratories of artists as well as those of independent designers interested in politics or social justice.

The critical play method may also assist those in mainstream game development innovate by suggesting radical, fresh ways of playing. Significant innovations in the design of games can be made by changing design and development methodologies currently used by companies, teams, and individuals and by incorporating artists' and activist approaches along with methods such as iterative design. Games are artifacts of historic and cultural importance, but they are also something *beyond artifact* in that games also function as a set of activities that carry conventions like audience role, interaction, currency, and exchange. There are systematic causal correspondences between particular design features in games that indicate specific social conceptualizations and outcomes.

Design Actions and Design Methods

Deleuze argues that as people, we “normally perceive only clichés. But, if our sensory-motor schemata jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, brings out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character.”¹⁴ For art to move beyond cliché, Deleuze believes it must engage with a set of strategies “to show how and in what sense” an image means *x* or *y* to wrest the image away from the danger of cliché.¹⁵ Therefore, one of the most important frameworks critical play can provide is a range of examples that show what artists have done in their creation of games and play. Throughout this book, I’ve examined the ways artists have used doll play, instructions, obnoxious language, tactile letters, street text, and maps in their games to pose questions. Other practices, like Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed,” offer further insights on ways to move both the game developer and the game player beyond “normalcy.” Each chapter of this book can be used to generate strategies meant to inspire other artists, designers, and innovators. From chapter 4 alone, the tactics include:

- writing commands or instructions
- using obnoxious language
- making humans into puppets
- making computer programs that write poems
- making words tactile
- creating instruction paintings
- making palindromes

- shifting points of view
- creating sound poetry
- making text that is a street intervention
- skywriting

I also have explored some noteworthy methods for the production of games. These have included:

- Simultanism, a method defined as a telescoping of time
- free verse/free visual verse
- automatism
- the drift, derive, détournement, and psychogeography

These methods preserve what has been accomplished in critical play and will, in turn, help designers examine “what’s out there” in contemporary circles, providing a vocabulary for existent techniques that risk going unnoticed. But while play, art, and politics are intertwined, the ways in which designers and artists can intervene currently remain in the affordances of these fields. As Jacques Rancière notes, “The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and invisible.”¹⁶

Shifts in Play

In addition, criticality in play can be fostered in order to question certain aspects of game content, or certain aspects of play’s scenario function, many of which might otherwise be simply assumed necessary. Guattari, for one, calls on the arts to produce a “refounding of the problematic of subjectivity,” wanting to bring to forward “a partial subjectivity—pre-personal, polyphonic, collective, and machinic.”¹⁷ In a similar vein, Yale professor James C. Scott writes about subjugated persons and how the subjugated public resists power (1990). He examines the spaces where those dominated can express their “hidden transcript,” or offset narrative, one that serves to critique those in power.¹⁸ It is easy to see that games provide one such outlet. An effort to reveal or make visible these “hidden transcripts” that often lie among the “official transcripts” of power relations parallels the investigations of many players and artists in a variety of milieus. Is this not the essence of unplaying? If Sutton-Smith is correct in asserting that much of what children do in play serves as compensation for

their general life conditions, then the hidden transcript played by those who are far from empowered can perhaps communicate to game designers important strategies through which games can expose, validate, or celebrate these equally valid modes of discourse.¹⁹ In turn, players may use this information and their experiences to alter the social institutions we live by. Using the critical play method, the role of the designer can widen to include an analytical framework for comprehension or analysis, characterized by a careful examination of social, cultural, political, or even personal themes that function as alternates to popular play spaces.

The challenge, then, is to find ways to make interesting, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking and to encourage designers to offer many possibilities in games, for a wide range of players, with a wide range of interests and social roles. We can manifest a different future. It is not enough to simply call for change and then hope for the best; we need interventions at the level of popular culture.²⁰

Too often social challenges are presented in overwhelming or depressing ways. Most players are not attracted to overly didactic communication. After all, play occurs only when players feel comfortable. Play is, by definition, a safety space. If a designer or artist can make safe spaces that allow the negotiation of real-world concepts, issues, and ideas, then a game can be successful in facilitating the exploration of innovative solutions for apparently intractable problems. Play offers a way to capture player interest without sacrificing the process of thinking through problems that are organized subjectively. Games engineer subjectivity because they create, or rather they are, both affective and relational systems, both for the designer and for the player. Critical play is not about making experts, but about designing spaces where diverse minds feel comfortable enough to take part in the discovery of solutions. Derived from artists’ creative processes, investigations, and practical work, critical play is to popular computer games what performance art once was to the traditional, well-made stage play. As in that earlier shift, critical play demands a new awareness of design values and power relations, a recognition of audience and player diversities, a refocusing on the relational and performative as opposed to the object, and a continued and sustained appreciation of the subversive. Critical play is also a new discipline of theory and practice that embodies a set of methods and actions. The critical play method is intended as a tool for future game makers, play designers, and scholars. The desired results are new games that innovate due to their critical approach, games that instill the ability to think critically during and after play.

Just as artists have long experimented with such transcripts and have worked to integrate social concerns in their work, game designers have the option to open up,

experiment with, unplay, reskin, and rewrite the hidden transcripts so tenaciously rooted in the systems of our world. As we have seen, social climates and technological changes have greatly affected play environments on an everyday level. Shifts in play have historically mirrored shifts in technology and these shifts in technology signal shifts in societal norms. With groups tired of isolation and longing for community, the rise of massively multiplayer online role-playing games and social networks have provided a few ways to relink communities. The continuing popularity of Come Out and Play events in major global cities demonstrates that the public wants to play, and play outside, because of what games are: creative, collective, and social reactions to the dominant practices and beliefs of any culture.²¹ From these simple examples, it is possible to see how games in and of themselves function as a *social technology*. Games distill or abstract the everyday actions of players. Games also imprint our culture with the motives and values of their designers. Above all, a game is an opportunity, an easy-to-understand instrument by which context is defamiliarized just enough to allow what Huizinga famously refers to as his “a magic circle” of play to occur.

Notes

1 Introduction to Critical Play

1. Computer games constitute a massive cultural form internationally, have special relevance in the United States: retail sales of video games in the United States in 2004, for example, exceeded \$6.2 billion, not including hardware, peripherals, and related products, on par with much-studied and theorized media such as film.
2. Duchamp, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, 123.
3. This phrase being of course a play on John Cage's famous saying, “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” Even if Cage refused the idea of the lone expressive artist expressing himself to the masses, his framework of chance operations and contextual participatory art expresses and values a different system of creativity, and thus a game-like system of priorities and values.
4. Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 174.
5. Pellegrini, *The Future of Play Theory*.
6. Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 87, 107, 107, 50, and 49, respectively.
7. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*; Csikszentmihalyi, “Some Paradoxes in the Definition of Play”; Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*; Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*.
8. Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 91.
9. Sutton-Smith, interview by E. Zimmerman.
10. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 25.
11. Ibid., 32.
12. Ibid., 36.
13. Ibid., 38–39.
14. Blanchard and Cheska, *The Anthropology of Sport*; Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*; Pellegrini, *School Recess and Playground Behavior*; Pellegrini, *The Future of Play Theory: A Multidisciplinary Enquiry*; and Pellegrini and Smith, *The Nature of Play*.
15. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 39.
16. Costikyan, “I Have No Words,” par. 28.
17. Ibid., par. 15–16.
18. Ibid., par. 20.